

The Art Institute of Chicago

A Late Renoir Recently Added to the Institute's Collection

Author(s): Florence Hope

Source: *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago (1907-1951)*, Vol. 39, No. 7 (Dec., 1945), pp. 97-102

Published by: [The Art Institute of Chicago](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4114262>

Accessed: 01/07/2014 15:07

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Art Institute of Chicago is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago (1907-1951)*.

<http://www.jstor.org>



"BOUCHER'S DIANA AT THE BATH WAS THE FIRST PICTURE THAT TOOK MY FANCY, AND I HAVE CLUNG TO IT ALL MY LIFE AS ONE DOES TO ONE'S FIRST LOVE." THIS PAINTING IS ONE OF THE PRIZED POSSESSIONS OF THE LOUVRE IN PARIS.

A LATE RENOIR RECENTLY ADDED TO THE INSTITUTE'S COLLECTION

RENOIR never painted winter, for he liked the sun beating down on warm, green countrysides humming with spring and abundant life. He was incapable of painting towering mountains or thundering storms; look at his *Marine: The Wave* in the Art Institute—it is agitated, but pretty; certainly not a frightening storm. And flipping through the pages of any illustrated book on this nineteenth

century artist, you will find few portraits of elderly people; he painted children with their natural charm—beautiful girls—mature women in full bloom. But he seldom painted men and he seldom painted old age, for Renoir is the painter of spring and summer, of curvaceous nudes. "A nude woman will come out of the sea or get out of her bed; she'll be called Venus or Nini," Renoir once said; he added thoughtfully, "Nobody

Published two issues bi-monthly September-October, April-May, five issues monthly, November-December, January, February, March, by The Art Institute of Chicago at 1009 Sloan Street, Crawfordsville, Indiana. Correspondence pertaining to subscriptions may be sent to 1009 Sloan Street, Crawfordsville, Indiana, or to the Chicago office at Adams Street and Michigan Avenue. Entered as second class matter January 17, 1918, at the Post Office at Crawfordsville, Indiana, under the Act of August 24, 1912. Acceptance for mailing at special rate of postage provided for in section 1103, Act of October 3, 1917, authorized on June 28, 1918. Subscription included in membership fee; otherwise \$1.00 per year. Volume XXXIX, Number 7.

BULLETIN OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

DECEMBER

NINETEEN FORTY-FIVE



SEATED NUDE, OIL BY AUGUSTE RENOIR (FRENCH, 1845-1919). MR. AND MRS. LEWIS LARNED
COBURN MEMORIAL COLLECTION.

VOLUME XXXIX

NUMBER 7

THIS ISSUE CONSISTS OF THREE PARTS OF WHICH THIS IS PART I

will ever invent anything better than that.”

Perhaps the proportions of this Seated Nude¹ will startle some people—not quite correct anatomically. But gradually she seems to pulsate with life. Her heavy thighs, columnlike arms, supple body, warm flesh, her soft round face and pouting lips make a gloriously alive woman. Here is the personification of all lushness and fertility, earthiness and love; here is summer, full maturity, exuberant health, all expressed through one nude painted by an artist in his seventy-third year. She may be sensual, but this lushness of hers is so forthright that her beauty and sensuality become elemental, basic things; there are no sly innuendos to mar or cheapen her earthy beauty.

When Renoir is mentioned, his name automatically calls color to mind. No avail to describe it, for words fail utterly to recreate the visual effect of his paintings; they must be seen. He said that there were some colors an artist liked better than others, that he ended up by adopting them, and he once described a slight sketch of roses on his easel as an experiment in flesh tones for a nude; so he introduced a whole new range of colors to oils. Said Renoir, “The palette of a painter doesn’t mean a thing; it’s his eye which counts above all.” And Renoir saw color everywhere. “My greatest surprise at Venice was the discovery of Carpaccio with his fresh and gay colors . . . How superb the Doge’s Palace is! That white and rose marble may have been rather cold when it was first built, but it was enchanting to me, made golden as it was by several centuries of sunlight!” And when he didn’t find colors, as at Florence in Italy, then he was really disgusted: “I don’t know when I’ve been so annoyed by a place. It’s such a mournful city with its black and white buildings. I felt as if I

were walking about among chequerboards.” What a range of colors he has found for our Seated Nude!—from the delicate pastellike tones he used in the nacreous flesh to the brilliant jewellike tones which color the summer foliage.

Renoir’s works have a great appeal in the sensuous quality of their surface. The very paint on the canvas glistens and gleams in the light; it is satin-smooth on the Nude’s rippling flesh, pleasingly rough in the sketchy background of trees and grass. This is how Renoir described the surfaces he preferred: “I like a painting that’s oily, unctuous, and as sleek and glossy as possible . . . I’ve tried painting in little dots . . . but this method makes a painting look harsh and—I don’t like that very much. I’ve got my little whims, I like to get friendly with a painting, caress it; and good Lord, when I see those canvases painted in little dots, I must admit I’m very much tempted to light my matches on them.”

Of one thing we are always certain with Renoir, and that is that he loved his work. Even when he was old and crippled, so crippled that each movement hurt and his



RENOIR, WITH CRIPPLED LEGS AND GNARLED HANDS, AT ABOUT THE TIME HE PAINTED OUR SEATED NUDE.

¹ Oil on canvas, 34 x 27½ inches (86.4 x 70 cm.). Acquired in 1945 from Durand-Ruel and Company in New York City for the Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Larned Coburn Memorial Collection. Durand-Ruel had bought the painting directly from the artist in 1917. It has been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City (*Art in Progress*, 1944, reproduced on page 23 of the catalogue), at the Worcester Art Museum (*The Art of the Third Republic—French Painting 1870-1940*, 1941, No. 11 in the catalogue). An 8 x 10 color print will soon be available.



BACKGROUND DETAIL OF RENOIR'S SEATED NUDE WHICH SHOWS HIS FLUID BRUSHSTROKES, AMAZING FOR HANDS AS CRIPPLED AS HIS.

brush had to be strapped to his poor deformed hand, Renoir painted—and he kept on painting right up to his death in 1919. He was pained when people didn't understand this absolute passion of his: "One would think the only way of giving pleasure was to be tedious. . . . The public insists on an artist's sweating blood over a thing before they'll even look at it." And this was his answer to that falsely stoic attitude: "Painting's done in order to decorate walls, isn't it? Well then, it's got to be as rich as possible. For me a painting . . . must be friendly, happy, and pretty—yes, pretty!" Perhaps his best known remark explains Renoir and his work better than anything else. Gleyre, his first teacher, asked him rather sarcastically if he painted just to amuse himself. "I most certainly do, and believe me, if it didn't amuse me, I wouldn't be painting."

Renoir was conscious of breaking from tradition and realized the failure of academicians to erect a fool-proof theory of art. He complained to his dealer-friend, Vollard: "In painting, as in the other arts, there's not a single process, no matter how insignificant, which can reasonably be made into a formula. . . . You come to Nature with your theories and she knocks them all flat." It is easy to see in our Seated Nude where Renoir has intentionally neglected academic rules. She would be a sad disillusion if she ever stood up: her thighs would look very disjointed, her neck would be out of kilter, her arms would dangle awkwardly. But Renoir knew she would never stand up. She lives and breathes, with her two graceful companions, in a warm space shut in by the picture frame, but limitless behind the figures.

His early apprenticeship work as a porcelain painter surely influenced the aspiring young artist. For one thing, the very colors he worked with and learned to love were the light, bright ones common to porcelain painting, but not so common to oil. Another important early influence was his constant study at the Louvre where he found the Fragonards, Watteaus, Lancret's he needed for subjects. Renoir was unashamedly sin-

cere in his admiration for Boucher, that artist who so excelled in painting women; as late as 1914, more than fifty years after his first encounter with this gracious eighteenth century French painter, Renoir still shows his influence in our magnificent Seated Nude. Her pearly, glistening skin and the delicate rainbow of colors which build up her translucent flesh recall Renoir's Rococo master. He himself was the first to admit frankly his indebtedness to this gracious school of painters: "I was brought up on the eighteenth century French masters."

Renoir was steeped in tradition in spite of the fact that he broke from it, and he humbly confessed: "As for me, I've always contradicted those who called me a radical painter. I've always thought and I still think that I've done nothing but continue that which others did, and a lot better, before me." Even of his student days he recalled: "My friends reproached Corot for working over landscapes in his studio. They were sick and tired of Ingres. I let them talk on, but I agreed with Corot and secretly I admired the pretty little stomach of Ingres' La Source and the neck and arms of his Portrait of Madame Rivière." Corot, Ingres, and Boucher were not his only gods, for his tastes were wide-spread and generous. Renoir admired Titian and Velazquez and Raphael and Goya, many contemporaries. He did not like Turner, "luminous?—just like bon-bon colors." But Manet certainly had an effect on him and so did Monet. He was a great admirer of Rubens. In our Seated Nude, the remarkable way with which the landscape fits, sets off the figure, and yet combines with it to form a unified composition is something which Renoir learned from Rubens. The figure's ample form and almost heroic stature are partially due to his study of this Flemish Baroque painter.

Strangely enough, Renoir tried on several occasions to deny Rubens' importance in his own work. He once compared him with Titian, very much to the detriment of Rubens whom he called "just a shell beside Titian, nothing but surface." And another



OF THIS RUBENS, HELENE FOURMENT AND HER CHILDREN, RENOIR SAID: "THERE'S PAINTING FOR YOU! NOTHING CAN SPOIL SPLENDID COLORS."

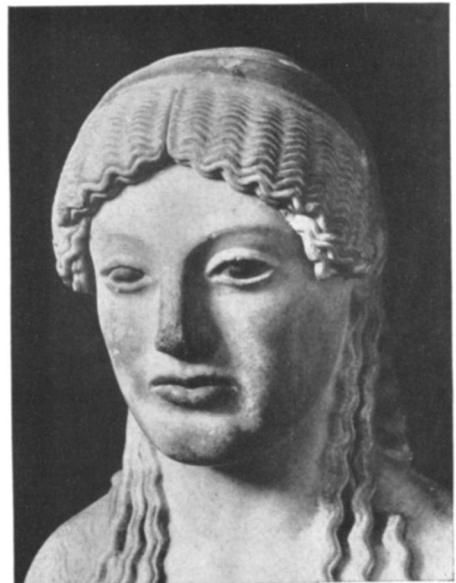
rather provocative remark, "One day at the Louvre, I noticed that Rubens had obtained more by a simple rubbing than I did with all my heavy layers. Another time, I discovered that Rubens produced a silver with black. I learned my lesson, of course; but does that necessarily mean that I was influenced by Rubens?" However, Rubens' influence on Renoir is certainly not to be denied.

There is a richness of tradition that Renoir's works connote—memories of Corot, Rubens, Poussin, Boucher, Ingres. But his paintings cannot be picked apart analytically into individual influences, for they are the sum total of his work. And to what do they build up? A Frenchman. "Certain critics are beginning to claim me as a true member of the French School," said Renoir towards the end of his life. "I am glad of that, not because I think that that school is superior to the others, but because, being a Frenchman, I ought to represent my own country."

FLORENCE HOPE



RENOIR WAS VERY FOND OF THE GREAT FRENCH DRAUGHTSMAN, INGRES, AND CALLED MADAME DE SENONNES HIS MASTERPIECE.



THIS ARCHAIC GREEK HEAD OF A WOMAN IS SIMILAR TO OUR LATE RENOIR; IN BOTH, THE FEATURES ARE GENERALIZED INTO IDEAL SHAPES.