



**NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEAN PAINTINGS  
AT THE STERLING AND FRANCINE CLARK ART INSTITUTE**

**VOLUME TWO**

Edited by Sarah Lees

With an essay by Richard Rand  
and technical reports by Sandra L. Webber

With contributions by Katharine J. Albert, Philippe Bordes, Dan Cohen,  
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James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

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## 227 | Tulip Fields at Sassenheim 1886

Oil on canvas, 59.7 x 73 cm  
 Lower left: Claude Monet 86  
 1955.615

In ways that may have surprised Monet himself, *Tulip Fields at Sassenheim* was to become a standard-bearer for Impressionist art at the turn of the twentieth century. First shown in public within weeks of its completion in the spring of 1886, it was also to appear in the historic Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900 and the pioneering display of Impressionism at the Grafton Galleries in London in 1905, as well as in important early shows in Berlin and Zurich. During these same years, the painting was mentioned or illustrated by a number of leading writers, who criticized it with other “outrageously gaudy” and “literally blinding” views of Holland by Monet, or welcomed its “dazzling feast of color.”<sup>1</sup> Belonging for much of this period to the Durand-Ruel family, it was published as an etching in 1892 and frequently loaned and exhibited until 1933.<sup>2</sup> In May of that year, *Tulip Fields at Sassenheim* was acquired by Sterling Clark, who soon afterward bought Monet’s *Cliffs at Étretat* (cat. 226), a vividly hued landscape completed shortly before the artist’s journey to the tulip fields.

Monet made his first visit to Holland in 1871, executing some twenty canvases of waterside motifs in and around Zaandam, near Amsterdam.<sup>3</sup> Consistent with his pictorial interests at this date and with the weather he encountered was an emphasis on light, windswept skies and brisk shipping, as well as his generally subdued palette. A second trip in 1874 resulted in a dozen paintings of Amsterdam itself, but it would be more than a decade before he returned to the country.<sup>4</sup> Unusually, Monet was prompted by a stranger to set out in April 1886: “I came here at the invitation of a gentleman I did not know,” he wrote to the critic Théodore Duret: the gentleman, he explained, was “an admirer of my paintings, who intended to show me the bulb cultivation, the enormous fields in full flower: they are quite admirable, but drive the poor painter mad; it cannot be conveyed with our poor colors.”<sup>5</sup> The individual in question was Baron d’Estournelles de Constant de Rebecque, a senior member of the French delegation at The Hague who had seen two of Monet’s paintings at the home of his wife’s family. The precise nature of his arrangement with Monet is not known, but he is recorded as

the first owner of one of the pictures made on this expedition, a variant of the Clark composition.<sup>6</sup>

If the suggestion that Monet should see and paint the bulb fields seems banal today, it was far from predictable at the time. Tulips were produced on a large scale in the region west of Leiden, where they were planted in repetitive lines in the “enormous fields” mentioned by Monet and where their colors were often arranged at random. Lacking the picturesque qualities of a conventional garden or landscape, these vistas had been largely ignored by previous generations of painters, though the young Vincent Van Gogh made one study on a similar theme in 1883.<sup>7</sup> In later life, Monet remembered that he was actually attracted by the regular lines of the bulb beds, as well as by the petals floating past on the small intervening canals at flower-harvesting time, “like rafts of color, yellow splashes arriving in the blue reflection of the sky.”<sup>8</sup> During his ten-day stay in the area in 1886, Monet made five attempts to depict this novel sight, choosing locations near Leiden that have subsequently been identified with some precision.<sup>9</sup> For the Clark canvas, he selected a traditional farmhouse “at the southern edge of the village of Sassenheim . . . [that] was demolished before 1900. Willem van Zonneveld, its proprietor, was a horticulturist.”<sup>10</sup>

To cope with the challenges of the terrain, Monet opted for two pictorial strategies. In all five cases, he broke the monotony of the horizon by introducing



Fig. 227.1. Detail from the lower left of *Tulip Fields at Sassenheim*



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man-made structures: windmills in three works, and a traditional farmhouse and trees in the Clark picture and its companion scene. Second, he contained the dense, almost overwhelming colors of the flower beds within a strictly defined horizontal band, which was counterbalanced by a lofty sky and pale clouds. The paint surface of *Tulip Fields at Sassenheim* indicates that this design was established at the start and was developed rapidly and vigorously thereafter.<sup>11</sup> After lightly brushing in the upper part of the rectangle, Monet used progressively broader and more loaded touches of oil color as he moved from middle distance to foreground. Much of the latter was applied wet-into-wet, with strokes of his brush modeling the rhythms of vegetation and even the physical relief of the forms. Color followed a similar pattern, from the grays and purple-browns of the farm to the green of the tulip leaves, then to the saturated crimsons, yellows, and whites of the blooms themselves, with the final flourish of a dense blue footbridge at the left-hand corner.

Contrasting with the neutral darkness of the building, the swathes of flower heads seem nearly incandescent, as if floating in their brightness above the fields and even away from the canvas itself.

Every aspect of *Tulip Fields at Sassenheim* suggests a forceful account of a specific site and of momentary sensations experienced by Monet at first hand. His painting trips to Normandy and the Mediterranean in previous years had focused on the artist's response to local light and color, along with the mastery of his physical means for portraying them. By the mid-1880s, however, Monet privately acknowledged his occasional need to integrate the process of open air painting with additional work in the studio, as both motif and pictorial ambitions demanded. It was by no means a routine matter, however, and continued to cause him anguish. Four months earlier, frustrated by the weather while struggling to complete *Cliffs at Étretat* and other canvases, he angrily expressed his reluctance to leave the village while the pictures

remained unfinished. The extent to which the Dutch pictures of 1886 were completed on the spot, or after his return to Giverny, has been the subject of speculation.<sup>12</sup> In support of completion in Holland is the sheer vividness and particularity of the canvases as statements about a known location, and the fact that the majority of color was applied wet-into-wet, rather than in successive stages. This immediacy is evident in the superbly preserved surface (fig. 227.1), now cleaned of later varnish and revealing much of the sensuousness of Monet's paint manipulation.<sup>13</sup>

The passages of pure, unmixed color in the lower section of *Tulip Fields at Sassenheim* are extreme even by the standards of Monet's densely chromatic works of this decade. Despite complaining to Duret of the limitations of his "poor colors," Monet was clearly pleased with his accomplishment, choosing to include the spectacular Clark canvas—its paint barely dry—in the *Fifth International Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture* at Georges Petit's gallery in June 1886. Either during or after the exhibition, the picture was purchased for the sum of 1,500 francs by the prominent collector of Impressionist art, Léon Clapisson, the owner of Edgar Degas's *Entrance of the Masked Dancers* (cat. 112), which is also in the Clark's collection.<sup>14</sup> Many critics registered the exceptional vividness of Monet's submissions, Paul Katow complaining of his "exaggeration of reds and blues" and Auguste Dallery remarking on the "extraordinary intensity of colors."<sup>15</sup> Félix Fénéon devoted several evocative lines to the paintings of Holland and "their yellows, their varied whites, their violets," and Joris-Karl Huysmans summarized them as "stupefying . . . a real feast for the eyes."<sup>16</sup> More surprisingly, discreet reservations were expressed by Monet's colleagues from the early Impressionist years, Félix Bracquemond and Camille Pissarro, the former objecting to the "crude execution" of one of the canvases and noting that the impasto was so thick that "an unnatural light" was cast on the scene.<sup>17</sup> Modern scholars have noted that *Tulip Fields at Sassenheim* would have been among the first works by Monet to have been seen by Van Gogh when he arrived in Paris in 1886.<sup>18</sup> Though no record of his response survives, it is not difficult to imagine the attraction of such a subject, handled in this unconstrained fashion, for the still unknown Dutchman. RK

**PROVENANCE** The artist, sold to Clapisson, 1886; Léon Clapisson, Paris (1886–91, sold to Durand-Ruel, 19 May 1891, as *Champ de tulipes, Harlem*); [Durand-Ruel, Paris, from

1891]; Paul Durand-Ruel, Paris (by 1901–d. 1922); estate of Paul Durand-Ruel (1922–33, transferred to Durand-Ruel, New York, 1 May 1933);<sup>19</sup> [Durand-Ruel, New York, May 1933, sold to Clark, 22 May 1933, as *Champ de tulipes à Sassenheim près Haarlem*]; Robert Sterling Clark (1933–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

**EXHIBITIONS** Paris 1886b, no. 86, as *Champs de tulipes aux environs de La Haye*, or no. 87, as *Champs de tulipes à Sassenheim, Hollande*; Paris 1889c, no. 84, as *Culture de tulipes, Hollande*, lent by Clapisson; Paris 1899, no. 25, as *Champ de tulipes à Haarlem*; Paris 1900a, no. 485, as *Champ de tulipes à Sassenheim, Hollande*, lent by Mlle Lefébure;<sup>20</sup> London 1905a, no. 130, as *Tulip Fields at Sassenheim, Near Haarlem*, lent by Durand-Ruel; London 1905b, p. 19, ill.; Berlin 1905, no. 36;<sup>21</sup> London 1908, pt. 2, no. 351, as *Champs de tulipes en Hollande*, lent by Durand-Ruel; Zurich 1917, no. 130, as *Le champs de tulipes*, lent by D[urand]-R[uel]; Possibly Paris 1924a, no. 44, as *Champ de tulipes*; New York 1933b, no. 3, as *Champs de tulipes à Sassenheim près Haarlem*; Williamstown 1956b, no. 147, pl. 12, as *Tulip Fields at Sassenheim, Near Haarlem*; Williamstown 1985c, no cat.; Amsterdam 1986–87, pp. 168, 170, no. 38, ill., as *Bulb Fields at Sassenheim*; Williamstown 1988c, no cat.; Paris 1989–90b, pp. 88, 140, 142–44, 146, no. 14, ill.; Liège–Balingen 1992, pp. 86–97, no. 19, ill., as *À Sassenheim, près de Haarlem, champ de tulipes* (German ed., pp. 70–71, no. 14, ill.); Williamstown–New York 2006–7, pp. 77–79, fig. 73; New York 2007, pp. 200–201, 203, 255, 314–15, no. 38 (withdrawn early, 10 May 2007); Passariano di Codroipo 2009–10, p. 66.

**REFERENCES** Fénéon 1886b, p. 346; Fouquier 1886b; Frémine 1886; Lecomte 1892, pp. 69, 245–46, ill. (print by A.-M. Lauzet after the painting), as *Champ de tulipes en Hollande*; Alexandre 1908, p. 97, ill.; Grappe n.d., pp. 35, 74, ill.; Geffroy 1922, p. 109; Trévisse 1927, p. 124, ill.; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 89, ill.; Wechsler 1965, p. 159; Rewald 1974, p. 18, ill. (installation view of London 1905a); Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, pp. 192–93, no. 1070, ill., as *À Sassenheim près de Haarlem, champ de tulipes*; Mukherjee 1982, p. 42, ill.; Stuckey 1985, p. 125, pl. 72; Myers 1990, p. 11, ill.; Patin 1991, pp. 86–87, ill.; Alphant 1994, pp. 78–80, ill.; Russell 1995, p. 27, ill.; Wildenstein 1996, vol. 3, pp. 404–5, no. 1070, ill., as *À Sassenheim, près de Haarlem, champ de tulipes*; Williamstown 1996–97, p. 23, fig. 15; Ottawa–Chicago–Fort Worth 1997–98, p. 353; Russell 2000, p. 58, ill.; Mancoff 2001, pp. 34–35, ill.; Shimada and Sakagami 2001, vol. 2, pl. 168; Savannah and others 2009–11, pp. 52–53, fig. 24.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The support is very finely woven linen (28 threads/cm), glue-lined to lower quality coarse fabric (13 threads/cm), which has created a weave impression on the surface in the horizontal direction. The stamp "H. Helfer, 1938" on the stretcher may identify the restorer and the date of the lining. It is likely that only the sky was cleaned at this

time and that additional natural resin varnish was added to the whole surface, embedding the aerial impastos. There is little flattening of impasto work, which suggests that care was taken to minimize heat and pressure during the lining of this extremely three-dimensional surface. The painting was cleaned under the microscope in 1985 to remove thick, discolored varnish layers using solvents, dental tools, and resin soaps, after which the surface was left unvarnished. Several broken, looped impastos were also reattached after they floated out from between the varnish layers. There are some fine age cracks in the upper portion of the thicker impastos, and under magnification, broken loops of paint can still be found. Although some old natural resin is still visible under low magnification, there is no detectable varnish in ultraviolet light. The top edge was inpainted to accommodate the frame fit.

The ground is a cool white, commercially applied layer. Flaking of this thin ground in the left sky was consolidated locally in 1985. No underdrawing was detected with either infrared or microscope examination. There may be thin washes of color laid on the canvas as a sketch to indicate the placement of the thick final colors of the tulip rows. These washes can be seen in the few areas where impastos do not completely cover the ground layer. The sky, which was painted before the trees, is executed in the traditional technique of blending colors on the palette before applying them with wide stiff brushes. The lower half of the image is created using very little blending brushwork, with many pure colors, possibly taken directly from the tubes or with a small addition of linseed oil or resin vehicle added for ease of handling.

1. Wolff 1886, p. 2; translation from Stuckey 1985, p. 125; Frémine 1886; Lecomte 1892, p. 246: "éblouissante fête de couleur."
2. The etching, by A.-M. Lauzet, was included in Lecomte 1892, p. 69, where the picture was titled *Champ de tulipes en Hollande*. When the painting was first shown in 1886, it was probably no. 87 in Paris 1886b: *Champs de tulipes à Sassenhem (Hollande)*. It was subsequently exhibited under a number of titles, which variously linked the site to The Hague, Haarlem, and Sassenheim.
3. W 170–91.
4. W 298–309. This visit is undocumented, and the works in question are undated: it remains possible that Monet made this trip in 1873.
5. Claude Monet to Théodore Duret, 30 Apr. 1886, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, p. 274, letter 671: "Je suis venu ici invité par un monsieur que je ne connaissais pas, un ami de Deudon, admirateur de ma peinture, qui tenait à me faire voir des cultures, des champs énormes en pleines fleurs; c'est du reste admirable, mais à rendre fou le pauvre peintre; c'est inrendable avec nos pauvres couleurs."
6. W 1071.
7. F 186.
8. Trévisé 1927, p. 127: "des radeaux de couleurs, des taches jaunes arrivant dans le reflet bleu du ciel."
9. W 1067–71. For a map of the area with the sites marked, see Amsterdam 1986–87, p. 166.
10. Amsterdam 1986–87, p. 170.
11. A long, broad stroke of paint indicating a line within the flower bed, for example, had clearly dried before this passage was developed in richer color. Most of the central area lacks pentimenti, though peripheral surfaces may have been retouched by the artist.
12. In Amsterdam 1986–87, p. 168, it is asserted that four of the group of five paintings show evidence that "Monet worked them up away from the motif, partly in Holland, and partly on his return to Giverny," though no detailed evidence is given. Given Monet's account of painting trips to other sites in these years, it is clear that he was more than capable of completing five canvases during a ten-day visit.
13. Examination of the canvas edges suggests that the paint may have been still wet when it was framed.
14. See Anne Distel's "The Notebooks of Léon Clapisson," in Ottawa–Chicago–Fort Worth 1997–98, p. 353, where Clapisson's ledger indicates that the work was bought from Monet himself, not from Petit. It was sold to Durand-Ruel in 1891.
15. Paul Katow, "L'Exposition Internationale," *Gil Blas*, 16 June 1886, quoted in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, pp. 48–49: "l'exagération des rouges et des bleus à un degré extrême"; A. Dalligny, "Exposition Internationale," *Le Journal des Arts*, 18 June 1886, quoted in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, p. 49: "extraordinaire intensité de couleurs."
16. Fénéon 1886b, p. 346: "leurs jaunes, leurs blancs panachés, leurs violets"; J[oris]-K[arl] Huysmans to Odilon Redon, 28 June 1886, in Redon 1960, p. 108: "Stupéfiants . . . une vraie fête des yeux!" For other critical responses to Monet's submissions, see Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, pp. 48–49.
17. Camille Pissarro to Lucien Pissarro, 15 May 1887, in Bailly-Herzberg 1980–91, vol. 2, p. 167: "l'exécution grossière"; "lumière factice."
18. Amsterdam 1986–87, p. 168.
19. Information from Durand-Ruel Archives, New York. See correspondence of 24 Apr. 2001, in the Clark's curatorial file.
20. Miss Lefébure was a sister of Mary Jenny Lefébure, who married Joseph Durand-Ruel (Paul's son) in 1896. Records in the Durand-Ruel Archives do not record the painting as being owned by Miss Lefébure, so it is not clear why her name is listed with this 1900 loan. See correspondence of 24 Apr. 2001, in the Clark's curatorial file.
21. Catalogued in Wildenstein 1996, vol. 3, p. 405.