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A Painting Misattributed to Frank O'Meara 1853-1888

On the **9th June** 2021, I received the following notification of a painting due for auction by Sabourin S.A.R.L. Châtellerault, France:

>>Frank O'MEARA (1853-1888). Jeune femme lisant en sous-bois. Huile sur toile, dédicacée et signée « A l'Ami Sal. Souvenir d'O'Meara ». 32,5 x 46 cm. Rentoilé et griffures. Biographie : Frank O'MEARA naît à Carlow (Irlande) en 1853. A 19 ans, il part étudier à Paris et entre dans l'atelier de Carolus-Duran. Après avoir visité Barbizon, il découvre, avec d'autres apprentis de l'atelier, Grez-sur-Loing près de Fontainebleau et s'y établit en 1875. Frank O'Meara est avec son ami John Lavery une des figures centrales de la colonie d'artistes américains, anglais et irlandais de Grez. Il y restera jusqu'à la fin prématurée de sa vie en 1888, à l'exception de quelques voyages dans sa ville natale, à Paris ou à Glasgow. Il peint en plein air, souvent une figure solitaire, ses œuvres sont assez poétiques et mélancoliques. Note : Notre tableau est probablement dédicacé à Rodolphe Salis; avant d'être le fondateur du célèbre cabaret du Chat Noir, l'enfant de Châtellerault était parti à Paris suivre les cours de l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts, peintre de paysages, nous le retrouvons en 1875-76 à Grez-sur-Loing avec Frank O'Meara. Tableau visible sur rendez-vous au Cabinet Maréchaux, 75 rue Vaneau 75007 PARIS. Expert : Cabinet MARECHAUX - Philippine Maréchaux : 06.88.59.89.41 ou 01.44.42.90.10 <<

On the **18th June** 2021, I received the following information from the expert who catalogued the painting:

>>CABINET MARECHAUX, Expertise, Tableaux, dessins, sculptures des XIXe et XXe siècles; Grande Vente Mobilier & Objets d'Art, 26 et 27 juin 2021 à 14h30, 86130 Saint-Georges-lès-Baillargeaux, Maître SABOURIN;

Frank O'Meara, *Jeune femme lisant en sous-bois*, Huile sur toile, dédicacée et signée « A l'Ami Sal... Souvenir d'O'Meara » en bas à gauche. 32,5 x 46 cm.

Notre tableau est probablement dédicacé à Rodolphe Salis; avant d'être le fondateur du célèbre cabaret du Chat Noir, l'enfant de Châtellerault était parti à Paris suivre les cours de l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts, peintre de paysages, nous le retrouvons en 1875-76 à Grez-sur-Loing avec Frank O'Meara.<<

{Our painting is probably dedicated to Rodolphe Salis; being the founder of the famous cabaret du Chat Noir, born in Châtellerault, he went to Paris to attend the courses of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Painter of landscapes, we find him in 1875-76 in Grez-sur-Loing with Frank O'Meara}

On the **19th June** 2021, I requested photographs and provenance from the expert and was told that:

>>This painting was found in an attic in Châtellerault (Vienne).<<

Now where had I heard that same provenance before? From the photographs I received, it was clear that the painting was not by Frank O'Meara.

On the **24th June** 2021, I replied to the expert in the following terms:

>>I am obliged to request a re-assessment of the painting to be auctioned by the Hôtel des Ventes de Châtellerault on the 27th June 2021. While undoubtedly a Barbizon painting of the period, the work bears no resemblance in style, technique, manner or subject matter to the work of the Irish artist, Frank O'Meara 1853-1888. Furthermore, there is a critical question mark over the provenance, which

relies on a connection to Rodolphe Salis and Châtellerault, his birthplace. The inscription reads Sa-co, which cannot be regarded as an abbreviation of 'Salis', no matter what the missing letter might be. Without the connection to Salis, there is no provenance.

Apart from this, a dedication such as this is entirely alien to O'Meara. Of the twenty-four recorded works by him, only six are signed; none bear a dedication or inscription. One is signed 'O'Meara'; two 'Frank O'Meara' and three 'F O'Meara', the lettering of which does not match the style of the signature on the current work. Moreover, it is clear from the UV photographs that the various paint layers in the area of the dedication and signature are not consistent with the main body of the painting.<<

The expert replied:

Merci pour vos remarques et l'attention que vous avez portée à notre tableau.

Je regrette que vous n'ayez pu le voir de vos propres yeux.

Il est vrai que je me suis posée la question de savoir si la dédicace était de la main de l'artiste ou de l'un de ses amis. Vous me dites qu'il signait rarement ses tableaux, il est possible, étant donné la tournure de la dédicace, qu'elle ne soit pas de lui, mais de l'un de ses proches.

Cela étant dit, je reste toujours très circonspecte sur les expertises d'après photographies.

Restant à votre disposition pour tout renseignement complémentaire, veuillez agréer, Monsieur, l'assurance de ma considération la meilleure.

{It is true that I wondered if the dedication was by the hand of the artist or one of his friends. You tell me that he rarely signed his paintings, it is possible, given the turn of the dedication, that it is not of him, but of one of his relatives. That being said, I always remain very circumspect about the expertise based on photographs.}

I replied

>>The camera doesn't lie! I'm sure you have the same expression in French. The dedication cannot be Sal or Salis. Do we really need to look any further? Frank O'Meara is regarded in Ireland as a very special painter. To add this alien painting to his catalogue will cause considerable upset and it will be contested. Send the painting to a laboratory for analysis and they will confirm what I have written.<<

On the **25th June** 2021, I wrote to the auctioneer, Christophe Sabourin as follows:

>>I refer to two previous emails addressed to Cabinet Maréchaux. Clearly, they also have doubts about the authenticity of the painting:

"Il est vrai que je me suis posée la question de savoir si la dédicace était de la main de l'artiste ou de l'un de ses amis. Vous me dites qu'il signait rarement ses tableaux, il est possible, étant donné la tournure de la dédicace, qu'elle ne soit pas de lui, mais de l'un de ses proches."

I investigated this painting as a potential buyer. I remain interested in the painting but I sincerely believe that there is little chance of it being an authentic work. There is no provenance, no record of the work and a complete mismatch in style, technique and manner. I suggest that you postpone the sale of the painting and send it to a laboratory for analysis. If the laboratory proves that that painting is authentic, I will lead the bidding at the next auction.<<

The auctioneer replied:

>>Monsieur, Il semblerait que vous ayez mal compris les propos de Philippine Maréchaux, qui voulait juste dire que la dédicace « à l'ami Sal... Souvenir d'O'Meara » pouvait être de la main d'un proche de l'artiste.

Quoiqu'il en soit, nous avons modifié la description au catalogue, le tableau sera vendu dimanche prochain ainsi décrit :

Frank O'MEARA (1853-1888) attribué à. Jeune femme lisant en sous-bois. Huile sur toile, dédicacée « A l'Ami Sal. Souvenir d'O'Meara » en bas à gauche. 32,5 x 46 cm. Rentoilé et griffures.

Bien cordialement, Anne-Laure Tricoche, HOTEL DES VENTES DE CHATELLERAULT, SARL SABOURIN (SVV Agrément N° 2002-331), 6, rue du Cognet - 86100 CHATELLERAULT,<<

{It seems that you misunderstood the words of Philippine Maréchaux, who just meant that the dedication "to the friend Sal... Souvenir d'O'Meara" could be from the hand of someone close to the artist. Anyway, we have changed the description in the catalogue, the painting will be sold

next Sunday as described: Frank O'MEARA (1853-1888) attributed to. Young woman reading in the undergrowth. Oil on canvas, dedicated "To the friend Sal. Remembrance of O'Meara"}

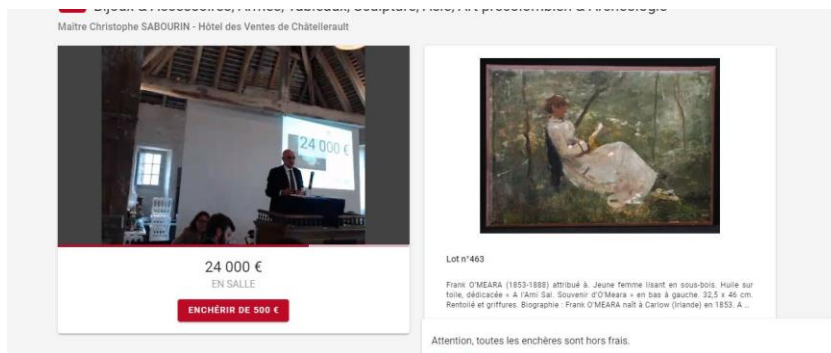
I replied:

>>It is a mistake to associate O'Meara's name with the painting. It should be described as Barbizon School, bearing an inscription. However, I acknowledge the revision.<<

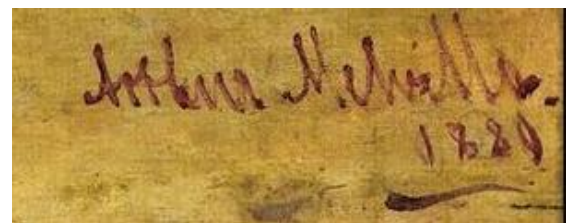
Summary

Any suggestion that the painting is by O'Meara or that it can be attributed to him defies logic; if he did in fact paint it, why has his friend Sa-co not been identified and why would he dedicate the painting in remembrance of himself?

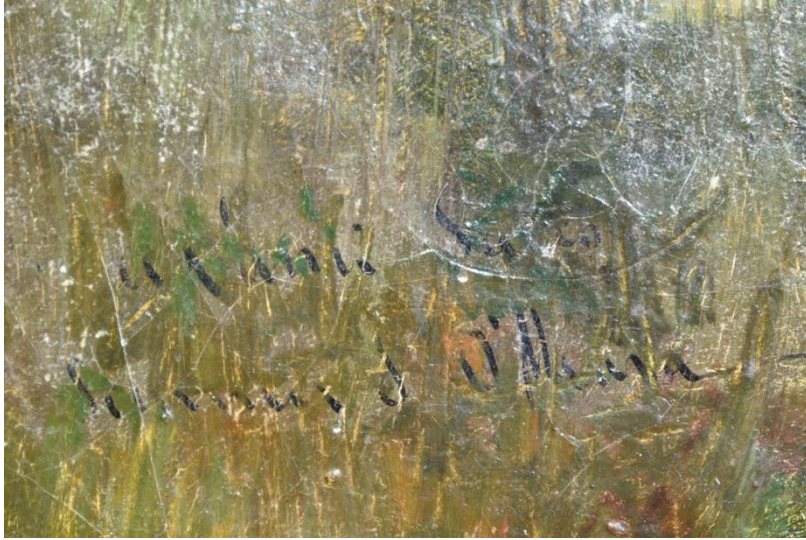
I assumed that the affair was at an end but discovered later that the painting is recorded as a bona fide work in spite of the reservations of the expert and the undertaking of the auctioneer to not to sell the painting as an autograph work. In any event, apart from the fact that the dedication cannot be to Salis, the second part of the inscription 'Souvenir d'O'Meara' has been misunderstood. It is abundantly clear that the work is by a painter in O'Meara's circle who dedicated it to an unidentified friend (Sa?co) in memory of Frank O'Meara after his death.



On the 27 June 2021, I emailed the screenshots above to a friend with the caption: >>A very expensive Louis Weldon Hawkins!!!<< Rather than identifying the actual painter, I was making the point that the work is by one of O'Meara's circle and chose Hawkins as the most likely. However, as it became clear that the painting was not by Hawkins, curiosity prompted a look at the rest of his relatively small circle. By process of elimination and the chance discovery of a related work, it is now possible to identify the actual artist. The Scottish painter, Arthur Melville, became a close ally of O'Meara through their mutual friend, John Lavery. Comparisons to Melville's hand show incontrovertibly that 'Girl Reading' is the work of Arthur Melville 1855-1904.



Compare Melville's signature to the inscription reproduced below.



Compare the inscription to the Melville signature above.



Arthur Melville 1855-1904: *Girl Reading*.