



Giovanni Boldini (1842-1931)

Ladies of the First Empire

1875

Oil on panel

33.3 x 27.3 cm

signed 'Boldini' and dated '75' (lower left)

Provenance:

William Henry Vanderbilt, New York (from 1879)

George Washington Vanderbilt II, New York (by descent from the above, his father)

Brigadier General Cornelius Vanderbilt, New York (by descent from the above, his uncle; and sold: Parke-Bernet Galleries, New York, April 18-19, 1945, lot 126, illustrated)

Millicent Rogers, New York and Taos (until 1953)

Private collection, USA (by descent from above)

Exhibited:

New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, circa 1902-1914 (on loan from George W. Vanderbilt II)

New York, Adelson Galleries, *Inaugural Exhibition, One Hundred Years of American and European Art*, November 1-December 15, 1990, no. 6 (as *Les Parisiennes*)

Literature:

The Private Collection of W. H. Vanderbilt, New York, 1879, p. 28, no. 72

W. H. Vanderbilt's Collection of Paintings, 640 Fifth Avenue, (Entrance to the Galleries, No. 1. West 51st Street), New York, New York, 1883, p. 1, no. 8

Edward Strahan, *Mr. Vanderbilt's House and Collection, New York, circa 1883-84*, vol. 4, pp. 12, 13

Collection of W. H. Vanderbilt, New York, 1884, p. 10, no. 8

Edward Strahan, ed., *The Art Treasures of America*, Philadelphia, 1879, vol. II, p. 114, in the 1977 facsimile edition, vol. III, p. 108

Catalogue of the Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1905, p. 200 (Gallery 16, no. 4)

David Charles Preyer, *The Art of the Metropolitan Museum of New York*, Boston, 1909, p. 111

Bryson Burroughs, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Catalogue of the Paintings*, New York, 1914, p. 19 (B632-3, Gallery 16)

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Notes:

Ladies of the First Empire belongs to a series of small scale, intricately detailed paintings completed soon after Boldini's visit to Versailles in May of 1875 (Piero Dini and Francesca Dini, *Giovanni Boldini 1842-1931*, Catalogo Ragionato, Turin, 2002, vol. I, p. 157). Enamored by the extravagant palace with its overwhelming architecture and rococo decoration, Boldini rented a house nearby, eager to work "from reality" on a series of eighteenth-century subjects. The expansive, manicured grounds and Versailles' seemingly endless number of fantastically appointed chambers provided infinite settings for the artist's courtly costume dramas played out by a large cast of noble figures, or in more intimate scenes such as the present work. Barbara Guidi writes: "In these paintings, with rococo atmosphere, suspended between a dream and an image of modern life, the models almost always the blonde Berthe, Boldini's lover sometimes appear dressed in period costume" (Barbara Guidi, "Arrival in Paris and the Search for Success," *Giovanni Boldini in Impressionist Paris*, Ferrara Arte S.p.A. and Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2009, p. 96). Here two beautiful, elegantly-dressed young women appear to be casually passing the afternoon, one writing letters at a guéridon, her rejected notes lying conspicuously on the floor beside her and the other slouched against a vibrant red satin pillow in a gilt and white painted armchair, studying her needlework. A Napoleon III Empire revival settee, upholstered to match the armchairs, completes the setting.

The narrative and aesthetic appeal of *Ladies of the First Empire* is immediately evident, and contemporary critics could not help but use equally florid language to describe such works. In his *Art Treasures of America*, Edward Strahan noted that Mrs. A. T. Stewart's Boldini painting *The Park of Versailles in the Eighteenth Century* was replete with "gallants making a leg to fine ladies in sedan chairs... the décolleté necks and pinchable little arms of these microscopic puppets show great mastery in flesh painting of the snuff box-lid scale" (facsimile edition, New York, 1977, vol. I, p. 37). In *Ladies of the First Empire* the elongated, sinuous form of the woman in pink is particularly compelling; the artist even takes care to render the soft musculature of her back peeking above her off-the-shoulder dress.

Boldini's move to Paris in 1871 coincided with a series of decisions that would propel him onto an international stage and prompt the exodus of many of his important paintings, such as *Ladies of the First Empire*, to prestigious private collections in America. Within a month of arriving in the French capital, Boldini switched dealers, from Reilinger to Adolphe Goupil, and ceased exhibiting in public venues, intent on only producing art to be consumed by the buying public. Wealthy Americans in particular were building ambitious collections with tremendous speed and resources, and Boldini was connected to them through a network of influential dealers such as Goupil, Samuel Putnam Avery, Knoedler & Co., and George A. Lucas. Works such as *Ladies of the First Empire* were precisely what such American collectors desired. Barbara Guidi writes: "These modern tableaux vivant pictures enjoyed enormous success because, as the artist Francesco Netti acutely observed: 'the wealthy bourgeoisie discovered themselves in these works...It was their portrait, their apotheosis'" (p. 96). *Ladies of the First Empire* was acquired by William Henry Vanderbilt who built a vast collection during his lifetime, totalling over 200 paintings, which he housed in his palatial Fifth Avenue mansion. The painting next entered into the collection of George Washington Vanderbilt II, William Henry's youngest child and allegedly his favourite and constant companion. George Vanderbilt is perhaps best known for the 125,000 acre estate he built in North Carolina called The Biltmore modelled after the great French Chateaux of the Loire Valley.

Medium Oil on canvas Dimensions 67.3 x 86.2 cm. 37336. Back of body. mk124 45.7x33cm About 1888. 37343. Blue Kimono. Monterey California. kr01 1914 Oil on panel 15x20inches. 37367. Near the beach. The lady wear white shawl. mk124 190.5x132.1 About 1893. 39288. The Leader. mk146 ca.1875 Oil on canvas. 71360. The Moorish Warrior. between 1875(1875) and 1880(1880) Oil on canvas 150.4 x 239.9 cm (59.21 x 94.45 in). 38796. The Open-Air Breakfast. mk141 1887 Oil on canvas 95x144cm. 37363. The still life of fish. mk124 8.6x100.5cm 1912. 37350. A mountainous landscape with travellers seated around a camp fire oil on panel 27.8 x 40cm (10 15/16 x 15 3/4in. Los #: 132. Schätzpreis: 0 £. Circle of Giovanni Battista Crosato (Treviso 1697-1756 Venice). An Allegory of the Triumph of the Word of God, a sketch for a ceiling oil on canvas 44.5 x 60.5cm (17 1/2 x 23 13/16in. Los #: 139. Schätzpreis: 0 £. Paul Louis Narcisse Grolleron (1848-1901) 'Cuirassier français' signed P. Grolleron , on panel 27 x 16 cm Price: NLG4,000 - NLG6,000 ca. Us\$2,081 - us\$3,122. Paul Louis Narcisse Grolleron French, 1848-1901 Patience Signed P. Grolleron and dated 1875 (lr) Oil on panel 10 5/8 x 8 1/4 inches C Estate of Judith Kreston Frame rubbing. Scattered inpaint Price: US\$1,000 - US\$1,500. Violet Sargent, c. 1875, oil on panel, 27.7 x 23.5 cm (10 1/2 x 9 1/4 in.), private collection. Originally inscribed across the top "Violet" but removed in a later cleaning. The sitter was the artist's youngest sister (1870-1955). Resting, c. 1875, oil on canvas, 8 1/2 x 10 9/16 in. The painting was Sargent's first full length portrait. Robert de Cœuvres, 1879, oil on canvas, 84.5 x 48 cm (33.25 x 18.875 in.), inscribed lower L: John S. Sargent, 1879. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Salon of 1879 was a watershed for J.S.'s artistic career. Below: detail of the right hand Louise Burckhardt (or, Lady With a Rose), 1882. Daughters of Edward D. Boit, 1882, oil on canvas, 221.9 x 221.6 cm (87 3/8 x 87 5/8 in.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1882. (33 x 27.8cm.) Circle of Enoch Seeman Portrait of a Gentleman, bust length, in a green Jacket and white Shirt oil on canvas, in a painted oval 13 x 11in. (33 x 27.8cm.) Estimate GBP 300 - GBP 500. Circle of Alexander Nasmyth Portrait of The Honourable Charles Hope Weir, Lady Christian Graham, and Lady Charlotte Erskine, small full length, seated in an Interior oil on canvas 34 x 26 1/4in. (86.4 x 66.8cm.) Circle of Alexander Nasmyth Portrait of The Honourable Charles Hope Weir, Lady Christian Graham, and Lady Charlotte Erskine, small full length, seated in an Interior oil on canvas 34 x 26 1/4in. (86.4 x 66.8cm.) Circle of Walter Williams Cattle Watering in a river Landscapewith initials 'WW'; oil on canvas 8 x 12in. (20.3 x 30.5cm.) Estimate GBP 300 - GBP 500. Price realised GBP 338.