

CHRISTIAN MOURIER-PETERSEN

1858–1945

96. *Ironing Room in an Old Country Mansion*, 1891

(*Strygestue i en gammel gård på landet*)

Oil on canvas, 25½ x 19½ in. (65 x 50 cm)

Signed lower right with monogram and dated: 91

PROVENANCE: Arne Bruun Rasmussen, Auction 497, 1987, lot 75, ill.; Jane Abdy, London (2000); Bruun Rasmussen, Auction 688, 2000, lot 1486, ill. (described as *Strygestuen på Holbækgaard. Interiør med ung pige, der stryger, i baggrunden sidder en pige ved vinduet og syr*).

EXHIBITED: Den Frie Udstilling, 1891, no. 34; Kunstforeningen, Copenhagen, *Christian Mourier-Petersen 1958–1945, Malerier*, 1950, no. 13; Scandinavia House, New York, *Danish Paintings from the Golden Age to the Modern Breakthrough, Selections from the Collection of Ambassador John L. Loeb Jr.*, 2013, no. 30.

The motif derives from the mansion of Holbækgaard, which stands with a view across Randers Fjord on the border of the eastern Jutlandic peninsula of Djursland. The building has a history going back more than eight hundred years. In the second half of the 19th century, the place was in the possession of the artist's father, Adolph Tobias Herbst Mourier-Petersen.

On various occasions, the first being as early as 1880 while he was still at the Academy, Christian Mourier-Petersen used the rooms in his childhood home as subjects for his paintings. However, most of the interior portrayals from Holbækgaard were made at the beginning of the 1890s, when the impressions from the artist's extended visit to France were still fresh in mind.

The inspiration from Impressionism is clearly seen. Women ironing and sewing were a much-loved motif, especially by Edgar Degas (1834–1917). This influence is also seen in the numerous light reflections, the asymmetrical composition, and the daring, almost photographic way in which the picture is cut,¹ which Degas and those of like mind learned from Japanese woodcuts. Even during his stay in Arles, Mourier-Petersen was already acquainted with the works of the Impressionists, as van Gogh made plain in a letter to his brother Theo:

... I talked to him a lot about the Impressionists; he knew them all by name or from having seen their pictures, and he is very much interested.²

In Paris, Christian Mourier-Petersen associated regularly with the Impressionist artists. He lived at the home of the art dealer Theo van Gogh in Montmartre and bought his paints from the renowned art dealer Père Tanguy.

In a letter written from Holbækgaard to his friend Johan Rohde 12 March 1889, he makes the following comment:

... In the "Café des nouvelles Athènes" in Paris I sometimes met a group of artists, some young and some old, among whom there were several famous figures, for instance Degas and Pissarro. The latter was born under a Danish flag, that is to say on St. Thomas. Van Gogh had introduced me, and they were very courteous, sometimes even convivial...³

Edgar Degas normally stayed outside the circle of Impressionists, and he consorted with only a small number of people, but Mourier-Petersen was fortunate enough to make his acquaintance. Perhaps the Holbækgaard interior in the Loeb collection is the result of his remembering the master's sharpness of observation and his talent to sum life up "in its essential aspects," as he himself⁴ put it.

The Danish artist has perhaps tried to live up to this in his portrayal of two young women busy ironing and repairing the laundered clothes in the mansion. We see a simple whitewashed room with a lofty ceiling, the only decoration being the gilt rococo mirror on the wall, reflecting the tall window and the winter landscape outside. The ironing hangs from a hook beside the mirror to avoid creasing and becoming dirty from falling on the floor. For the same reason, the black coal scuttle has been left at a safe distance from all the white linen. Every object in the bare room has a practical use, from the clothes basket between the girls to tables and chairs and the cupboard in the corner. Only the mirror stands out like the princess in a fairy tale, presumably placed in this position by the painter as a space-expanding accessory used in an age-old European painting tradition.

The exquisite portrayal is underlined by a gentle, soft light and a limited but dense and rich use of color running through a gamut of whites mixed with gray, gray-blue, ice blue, violet, and the most delicate pink shades set against olive, ochre, brown, and gold.

On 18 February 1891, about the time when Christian Mourier-Petersen was working on this picture, he wrote in a letter to Johan Rohde:

Incidentally, I have had sad news. My Parisian patron, the art dealer van Gogh has died scarcely six months after his brother, the painter. I have just received a message from his wife, whom, incidentally, I do not know at all. It will be a great loss to me and surely to many other painters in the future . . .⁵

S.L.

¹Here an American might use such photographers' words as "framed" or "cropped." At that time (1891) the methods and aesthetics of photography had made their impact on the painters, who now chose a section of nature as a motif, walking out in nature with an imaginary camera in their hands. They didn't any more compose the picture, they *cut* it, so to speak, out of reality, deciding freely where the "cuts" should be made.

²*The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, third printing, 1988. Letter no. 488.

³H.P. Rohde, *Van Goghs Verden*, Copenhagen 1964, p. 253.

⁴Michael Levey, *Malerkunstens Historie. Fra Renaissance til Impressionisme*. Copenhagen 1963, p. 296. Original English edition: *The Concise History of Painting from Giotto to Cézanne*, London 1963.

⁵H.P. Rohde. *Ibid.*