

In 19th century Paris the salon painter [Alfred Stevens \(1823-1906\)](#) was more in demand than his friend Edouard Manet. King Leopold II of his native Belgium was a patron, the Vanderbilts snapped up his sumptuous oils of ladies in haute-couture dresses. "**He was kind of a bridge painter between the 19th century & Impressionism,**" It's not his style, which is academic, but choice of subject that makes him modern. Instead of portraying female figures from either mythology or history, as was traditional, he drew attention to contemporary women & their personal dramas.



In 1880 William Kissam Vanderbilt (one of Cornelius Vanderbilt's grandsons) visited Stevens' studio & saw *Le salon du peintre*, which shows three ladies in conversation in the artist's drawing room. He bought it on the spot. Over the next century the painting changed hands privately — Lisa Schiller, of Schiller & Bodo European Paintings, NY, recalls selling it for \$200,000 in 1980 — until 1998, when it appeared at Sotheby's NY & achieved \$1.65 million — still the artist's auction record. In 1999 *Le salon* was resold privately for \$2 million.



Between 1845 & 1857, by mixing his Flemish roots & their private interiors with the **influence of Gustave Courbet**, Stevens' work tends toward a Realist style. In the *Paying Condolences* (1857, private collection) one finds both the Realist vein in a scene of condolences to a young widow & the graciousness of three young women in a gold-panelled salon.



Décor is always an important element in Stevens' compositions. He pays close attention when reproducing the luxurious interiors of the salons of the grande bourgeoisie. The painter himself lived in a magnificent 18th century private residence in the rue des Martyrs, at the beginning of the Troisième République. *The Painter's Salon* (1880, private collection) depicts the reception room in his house. The richly decorated setting forms a sumptuous background for the three elegant young ladies busy in conversation.



"The Duchess" (or "The Blue Dress"), 1865-67. Sterling & Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass.



in collaboration with Henri Gervex, this section from the **Panorama du Siecle (Panorama of the Century)** created for the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1889 shows **Sarah Bernhardt**. Unable to secure a permanent installation for the painting at the conclusion of the Exhibition, Stevens cut it into sections



Memories & Regrets (1875) once owned by Peruvian poet Gabriel Yturri, companion of Count Robert de Montesquieu, model for **Marcel Proust's** Baron de Charlus in Remembrance of Things Past. In 1900 Montesquieu wrote a detailed analysis of *Memories & Regrets* that linked Stevens' painting with a Proustian sense of memory & of the relation of character to physical things