

French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945

The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, Editor



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Gustave Courbet, *Jo, the Irish Woman*, ca. 1866–1868

Artist	Gustave Courbet, French, 1819–1877
Title	<i>Jo, the Irish Woman</i>
Object Date	ca. 1866–1868
Alternate and Variant Titles	<i>La Jo, femme d'Irlande; La Belle Irlandaise; Portrait of Jo</i>
Medium	Oil on canvas
Dimensions (Unframed)	21 3/8 x 25 in. (54.3 x 63.5 cm)
Signature	Signed lower left: G. Courbet.
Credit Line	The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 32-30

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Catalogue Entry

Citation

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In September 1865, Gustave Courbet left Paris for a two-month stay in Trouville, a popular resort town on the Normandy coast. To his surprise, he immediately

attracted wealthy clients who commissioned portraits while relaxing at the seaside. Yet, as he would write to his patron Alfred Bruyas, "Of the two thousand ladies who came to my studio . . . I admired the beauty of a superb redhead whose portrait I have started."¹ That striking redhead was none other than Joanna (Jo) Hiffernan (1839–1886), a well-known artist's model who was vacationing in Trouville with her lover, the American painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903).² The three became fast friends, spending evenings together during which Hiffernan serenaded the painters with songs from her native Ireland.³

Courbet painted two images of Hiffernan stemming from that time in Trouville, both testaments to their friendship and his longstanding affection for her. Dated 1865, the first is a small bust-length portrait that presents her in three-quarter profile, her famous copper hair casually gathered over her shoulder (Collection of Karen B. Cohen, New York). Probably dashed off from life, this diminutive, sketchlike work may well have served as a study for the second, better-known composition of her that Courbet originally titled *La Jo, la femme d'Irlande (Jo, the Irish Woman)*,⁴ a larger-format painting that exists in four similar autograph versions,

including the present work.⁵ In all four, Hiffernan is shown in bust-length and three-quarter profile, wearing a white blouse with delicate lacework and posing before a table. In one hand, she holds a mirror into which she gazes intently. In the other, she runs thick strands of hair through her fingers, perhaps admiring them in the mirror's reflection. Hiffernan's face, calm if not inscrutable, is at the center of the composition, but it is her hair that commands the attention of the viewer. Unbound, it cascades over her shoulders in fiery waves of auburns, coppers, and browns.



Fig. 1. Gustave Courbet, *Jo, La Belle Irlandaise (Jo, the Beautiful Irish Woman)*, 1865-1866, oil on canvas, 22 x 26 in. (55.9 x 66 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929, 29.100.63



Fig. 2. Gustave Courbet, *Jo, the Beautiful Irishwoman*, 1866, oil on canvas, 21 1/4 x 25 5/8 in. (54 x 65 cm), Nationalmuseum, Stockholm. Gift 1926 Nationalmusei Vänner, NM 2543

The first rendition is generally accepted today as being the one housed in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, titled *Jo, La Belle Irlandaise (Jo, the Beautiful Irishwoman)*, 1865-1866 (Fig. 1).⁶ The most refined and delicately rendered of the four compositions, it is also unique in its detailed treatment of the lace and buttons on Hiffernan's blouse as well as the articulation of her hair, particularly in the wisps that radiate from her hairline. Signed and dated 1866, this prime version may well have been started in Trouville and finished in Courbet's studio.⁷ Courbet is thought to have made the first variant of the original version, now in the collection of the Nationalmuseum of Stockholm (Fig. 2), when the earlier painting sold. Less detailed and of a slightly different tonality, this second version was in Courbet's possession at the time of his death in 1877. It was this more simplified variant that served as the model for the two subsequent paintings: the present picture and another in a private collection (Fig. 3).

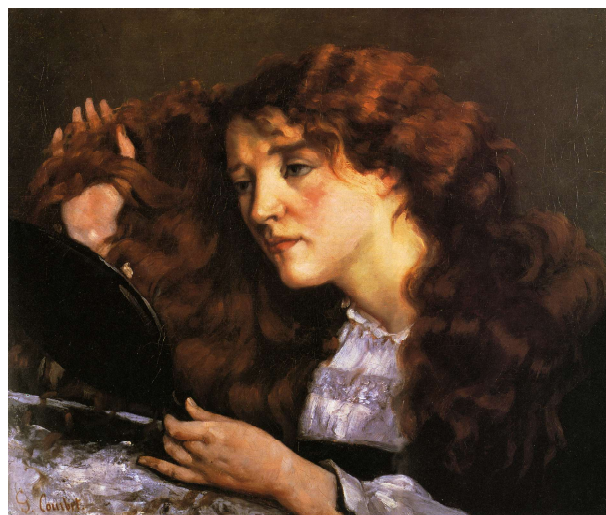


Fig. 3. Gustave Courbet, *Jo, the Beautiful Irishwoman*, 1866, oil on canvas, 21 1/4 x 25 1/8 in (54 x 63.8 cm), private collection, Australia. Reproduced in *19th Century European Paintings and Sculpture* (New York: Sotheby's, November 2, 2001), 120-21

Neither pure portrait nor genre scene, *Jo, the Irish Woman* belongs to a group of intimate, bust-length paintings produced by Courbet in the 1860s that depict women lost in reverie. Although the details change from one painting to the next, the group is generally characterized by the presentation of a fair-skinned young woman, frequently shown in profile and in varying states of undress, set within a nondescript private space.⁸ With their rich hues, painterly brushwork,

and emphasis on feminine sensuality, Courbet's contemplative women bear certain affinities with eighteenth-century French portraits or fantasy busts, such as those by Jean Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805; see *Head of a Girl*) and Jean Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806).⁹ Indeed, Courbet was particularly attracted to the loose, gestural handling of paint by these French Rococo masters as well as the more hedonistic aspects of their imagery, such as their intimate, frequently erotic depictions of women.¹⁰

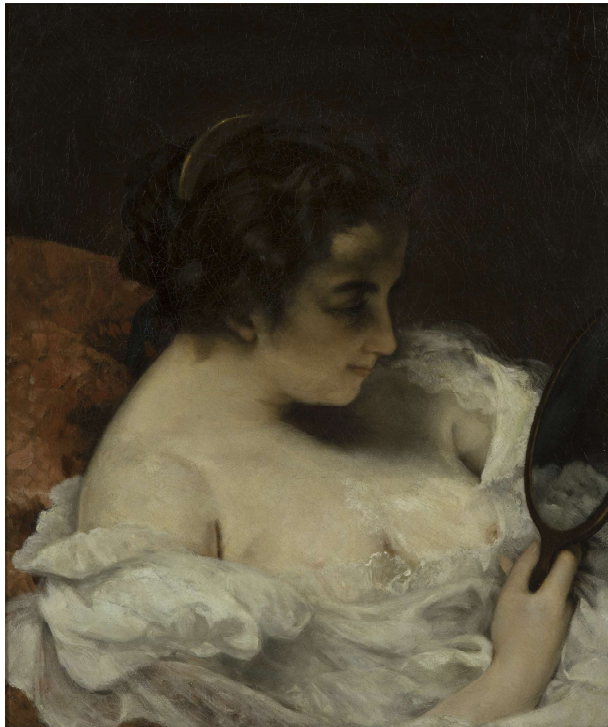


Fig. 4. Gustave Courbet, *Woman with a Mirror*, 1860, oil on canvas, 25 3/8 x 21 1/4 in. (64.5 x 54 cm), private collection.

As he did throughout his career, Courbet drew inspiration from a variety of high and low artistic sources, combining them seamlessly in his paintings into something utterly novel. Such was the case with *Jo, the Irish Woman*, which was itself a demure reworking of a more sensual motif that he first painted six years earlier. In *Woman with a Mirror*, 1860 (Fig. 4), Courbet shows a seated woman in profile looking contemplatively into a hand mirror, her slipping nightshirt providing a tantalizing glimpse of her left breast. The subject of an ordinary woman posed with a mirror was popular in seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting, where the iconography symbolizes vanitas and lust. By the eighteenth century, however, it came to more generally

symbolize the morning toilette, a subject not without erotic connotations, which appeared with great frequency in popular prints during that century and the following one.¹¹ Courbet drew inspiration from contemporary renditions of this motif, such as Charles Bargue's *Pensées Intimes*, 1851 (Fig. 5). Itself a pastiche of prevalent eighteenth-century gallant themes, such as *le coucher* (bedtime), *le lever* (waking up), and *la toilette* (getting ready), Bargue's lithograph updates the subject through contemporary clothing, accessories, hairstyle, and facial type.¹² It was this model that Courbet followed, transforming traditional iconography into avant-garde painting through his Realist style and depiction of modern subjects drawn from everyday life.¹³



Fig. 5. Charles Bargue (1826–1883), *Pensées Intimes*, 1851, lithograph on paper, image: 7 1/16 x 9 3/4 in. (18 x 24.8 cm); sheet: 11 1/16 x 15 3/4 in. (28.1 x 40 cm), Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des estampes et de la photographie, Paris. DC-282 (1)-FOL

Courbet's incorporation of eighteenth-century imagery in his series of female busts was geared toward the growing market for Rococo-inspired artwork in the mid-1800s, an aspect of the more holistic marketing and exhibition strategy that he developed at that time.¹⁴ Such moderately scaled, subtly sensual paintings were regularly included with Courbet's monumental paintings in his self-mounted retrospectives or in group exhibitions such as the Salons in Paris or in Ghent. Whether positive or negative, the critical reception of his frequently controversial Salon submissions often drove the sales of smaller, more affordable paintings with similar subjects that could be bought directly at exhibitions, made to order, or selected from ready-made stock in the artist's studio.¹⁵ It is plausible that Courbet painted the original version of *Jo, the Irish Woman* in

anticipation of the success he intended to achieve at the Paris Salon of 1866 with the exhibition of *Woman with a Parrot*. As he began the latter sometime in 1865 and completed it in the spring of 1866, it is likely that he worked on both paintings at the same time.¹⁶

Monumental in scale and highly refined, *Woman with a Parrot* features a languorous nude with pearly skin, shown reclining on a bed, her wavy auburn locks reminiscent of Hiffernan's. It would become one of Courbet's most critically acclaimed paintings, attracting buyers from an emerging class of wealthy bankers and dandies eager to acquire pleasing images of female subjects.¹⁷ This context may have created the conditions in which Courbet produced and/or sold the first version of *Jo, the Irish Woman*, retaining a variant for himself to prompt further sales.

Indeed, by March 1867 a version of *Jo* and another half-length female bust titled *The Dutch Woman* were on view in the gallery of the Paris dealer Bardenet.¹⁸ Frequently confused in the historical record,¹⁹ the two paintings can in fact be seen as a kind of before and after. While *Jo, the Irish Woman* can be viewed as a Rococo-inspired morning scene associated with the imagery of *le lever* and *la toilette*, *The Dutch Woman* is the erotic evening counterpart reminiscent of *le coucher*. The picture of Hiffernan at Bardenet's gallery, which Courbet retrieved in March 1867, was most likely the Stockholm version included in the retrospective he opened on May 30, 1867, at the Rond-Point du Pont de l'Alma. There, it hung alongside several half-length female busts, sparking a vogue for this imagery that stretched into the early 1870s.²⁰ Driven by his desire to have a permanent installation of his work, Courbet decided to reopen his exhibition on May 1 the following year.²¹ The Stockholm version of *Jo* presumably went back on view, generating more interest among collectors.²² Perhaps this is where the first owner of the Nelson-Atkins painting, the Parisian painter Paul-Désiré Trouillebert (1829–1900), took notice of the composition. Though little is known of the circumstances of Trouillebert's purchase, by September 19, 1868, he had picked up his version of *Jo* from Courbet's Paris studio.²³

Overall, in comparison to the Stockholm version, the Nelson-Atkins painting is less detailed, as mentioned earlier. The cursory treatment of Hiffernan's blouse, hair, and proper right hand retains the appearance of spontaneity associated with a sketch, suggesting that the painting was rapidly executed rather than painstakingly reproduced. Indeed, Courbet did not make use of traditional methods such as tracing or a drawn

grid to precisely transfer the composition. Rather, he freely painted the composition from the Stockholm model in a confident hand, relying upon a few incised lines in the imprimatura to loosely block in the placement of Hiffernan's profile and her eyes, nostrils, and lips.²⁴ Handling aside, perhaps one of the greatest differences resides in the subtle change Courbet made to her countenance. The model's expression in both the prime version and first variant is one of intense, even anxious concentration, as suggested by the furrowed brow and subtly downturned mouth.²⁵ In the Kansas City variant, Hiffernan's physical and psychological presence is greatly softened, producing a predominant sense of tranquility.

It is important to note that the surface appearance of the Nelson-Atkins painting has been greatly altered in certain areas of the composition. Prior to the Museum's acquisition in 1932, the canvas was punctured in the middle of the composition. The resulting Y-shaped tear extends into Hiffernan's chin, jawline, and the hair that envelops the left side of her face. In addition to areas of loss associated with the tear, a past overcleaning stripped the midtones and highlights from substantial areas of hair and the proper right side of the figure's face, producing a flattened and distorted effect. A significant and sensitive restoration campaign, completed in 2015 by Mary Schafer, Nelson-Atkins painting conservator, resulted in the successful reconstruction of lost and damaged elements, returning a sense of depth, subtlety, and volume to the painting.²⁶

Despite these past damages, what remains of Courbet's original handling of hair and skin reveals the genius for which he is known. Using a technique learned from studying Old Master paintings, Courbet began by covering the white-primed canvas with a reddish-brown imprimatura that gives an overall warmth to the palette and, when left exposed, serves as a midtone in areas such as Hiffernan's hair. Employing a variety of brushes and his trademark palette knife, Courbet constructed forms by applying thin layers of paint in a limited range of colors. To render Hiffernan's pale complexion, he used a blue-gray undertone to suggest both contours and delicate veins running beneath her translucent skin. It is Courbet's Realism—his unrivaled ability to render the appearance of living, breathing skin and touchable, silky hair—that ultimately makes his figures so desirable.



Fig. 6. Eugène Cheron, plate 12 in *Album de l'exposition des œuvres de Gustave Courbet à l'École des Beaux-Arts, 1882*, photograph, album: 10 1/4 in. (26 cm), Bibliothèque de l'Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art, collections Jacques Doucet, Paris. NUM 4 PHOT 20

The Nelson-Atkins *Jo* was included in the monumental posthumous exhibition of Courbet's works that opened at the École des Beaux-Arts, Paris, in May 1882.²⁷ Lent by a member of Trouillebert's family, it is recognizable in an installation photograph (Fig. 6), thanks to the distinct signature and placement of tendrils in the lower left corner of the canvas.²⁸ The Stockholm painting of Hiffernan was added later to the show.²⁹ The public presentation of these two versions of *Jo, the Irish Woman* revealed for the first time Courbet's willingness to make autograph variants of popular works. Nevertheless, this particular subject held greater sentimental than monetary value for the artist. Exiled in Switzerland following his involvement in the Paris Commune of 1871, he refused to sell the painting for 5,000 francs, despite the crushing financial woes that led him to flee France.³⁰ He wrote to his old friend Whistler in what would be the last year of his life: "Where is the time, my friend, when we were happy and with no other cares but those of art? Do you remember Trouville and Jo who clowned around to amuse us? . . . I still have the *Portrait of Jo*, which I will never sell. Everyone admires it."³¹

Nicole R. Myers
July 2018

Notes

1. Pierre Borel, *Lettres de Gustave Courbet à Alfred Bruyas* (Geneva: Pierre Cailler, 1951), 116n1. English translation from Gary Tinterow et al., *Gustave Courbet*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), 332–33.

2. Joanna Hiffernan's family name appears frequently misspelled in Courbet scholarship as both Heffernan and Hifferman. Following the publication of Margaret Macdonald et al., *The Woman in White: Joanna Hiffernan and James McNeill Whistler*, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2020), and the extensive research done by those authors, this catalogue's editors updated Hiffernan's life dates from "b. 1842/43" to "(1839–1886)." This change was made July 29, 2022.
3. Courbet to James Abbott McNeill Whistler, February 14, 1877, letter 77-9, in Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, ed. and trans., *Letters of Gustave Courbet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 601.
4. See *Exposition des Œuvres de M. G. Courbet*, exh. cat. (Paris: Lebigre-Duquesne Frères, 1867), no. 91, as *La Jo, femme d'Irlande* (Trouville, 1866) [repr., in Theodore Reff, ed., *Modern Art in Paris: Two-Hundred Catalogues of the Major Exhibitions Reproduced in Facsimile in Forty-Seven Volumes*, vol. 38, *Exhibitions of Realist Art I* (New York: Garland, 1981), unpaginated].
5. Throughout this essay, the four paintings of *Jo, the Irish Woman* are referred to as versions or variants, as they are not exact copies or replicas in the strictest sense of the terms.
6. Sarah Faunce can be credited with the proposed sequencing of the four versions. See Sarah Faunce, *Gustave Courbet* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 108, and *19th Century European Paintings and Sculpture* (New York: Sotheby's, November 2, 2001), 118–21.
7. Courbet may have done this with other portraits begun in Trouville, such as those of the Nodler brothers that he described in fall 1865. Like his painting of Hiffernan, when Courbet exhibited them in his 1867 private exhibition, they appear in the catalogue with the caption "Trouville, 1866." See note 4 and *Exposition des Œuvres de M. G. Courbet*, 20.
8. See Petra ten-Doesschate Chu's essay, "Courbet and the Rococo: 'Packaging' and Marketing the Female Figure," in Juerg Albrecht and Kornelia Imesch, eds., *Horizonte: Beiträge zu Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2001), 117.

9. Jörg Zutter and Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, *Courbet: Artiste et promoteur de son œuvre*, exh. cat. (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), 142–43; Tinterow et al., *Gustave Courbet*, 325.
10. On Courbet and the Rococo, see Nicole Myers, “Courbet and the Realist Nude” (PhD diss., Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 2015), especially chapters 1 and 2.
11. See Beatrice Farwell’s essay in Thomas B. Hess and Linda Nochlin, eds., *Woman as Sex Object: Studies in Erotic Art, 1730–1970* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), 65–79.
12. Beatrice Farwell, *The Cult of Images: Baudelaire and the 19th-Century Media Explosion* (Santa Barbara: University of California, 1977), 101–02, 111–12.
13. See Myers, “Courbet and the Realist Nude,” especially chapters 1 and 2.
14. Chu, “Courbet and the Rococo: ‘Packaging’ and Marketing the Female Figure,” 118; Myers, “Courbet and the Realist Nude,” 75–109.
15. Zutter and Chu, *Courbet: Artiste et promoteur*, 101–27. See also Fabrice Masanès, *Gustave Courbet, 1819–1877: The Last of the Romantics* (Cologne: Taschen, 2006), 20; and Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, *The Most Arrogant Man in France: Gustave Courbet and the Nineteenth-Century Media Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 138.
16. Courbet to the comte de Nieuwerkerke, June 27, 1866, Chu, *Letters*, letter 66-15, p. 283.
17. These new buyers included a French stockbroker, Michel Lepel-Cointet, and a wealthy Turkish diplomat from Egypt, Khalil-Bey.
18. Bardenet to Courbet, March 21, 1867, Recueil. Papiers de Courbet, YB3-1739 (1)-4, Département des estampes et de la photographie, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. The painting is referred to as *La femme Hollandaise*. Today the painting is in the collection of the National Museum of Western Art, where it is called *Woman with Bared Breast*.
19. Confusion over the identities of these paintings appears as early as the catalogue accompanying Courbet’s estate sale at the Hôtel Drouot. Lot 10 is titled *La Belle Hollandaise*, but the entry clearly describes *Jo, the Irish Woman*. Bought at the sale by Hubert Debrousse, this was in fact the Stockholm version of *Jo, the Irish Woman*. *Catalogue de trente-trois tableaux et études par Gustave Courbet et dépendant de sa succession: vente, Hôtel Drouot, salles nos 8 et 9, le vendredi 9 décembre 1881 à trois heures précises; catalogue de tableaux, études, esquisses et dessins par Gustave Courbet, dépendant de sa succession et ayant en partie figuré à l’exposition de l’Ecole de beaux-arts* (Paris: Hotel Drouot, December 9, 1881, repr. Paris: Phénix éditions, 1999), 10. See also Isolde Pludermacher’s essay, “La Société des amis des arts: Amateurs et expositions d’art moderne au Havre dans la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle,” in Annette Handiquet and Géraldine Lefebvre, *Le cercle de l’art moderne: Collectionneurs d’avant-garde au Havre*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée du Luxembourg, 2012), 32–33, 37n42.
20. Myers, “Courbet and the Realist Nude,” 116–17.
21. Patricia Mainardi, *Art and Politics of the Second Empire: The Universal Expositions of 1855 and 1867* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 188, 224n7; “Nouvelles,” *La Chronique des arts et de la curiosité*, no. 21 (May 24, 1868): 83; and Courbet to Jules Castagnary, [April 28, 1868], letter 68-12, in Chu, *Letters*, 336, 336n2–3.
22. The painting seems to have remained with Courbet in Paris until the fall of 1868. Although it was once believed that Courbet included *Jo, the Irish Woman* in the *Exposition maritime internationale du Havre* in 1868, recent research has revealed that the painting exhibited there was *The Dutch Woman*. See Pludermacher, “La Société des amis des arts,” 32–33, 37n42. Likewise, Stockholm’s *Jo* was not included in the *4e Exposition des amis des Beaux-arts de Besançon* in 1868, as listed erroneously in Robert Fernier, *La vie et l’œuvre de Gustave Courbet: Catalogue raisonné* (Lausanne: Bibliothèque des arts, 1978), no. 537, p. 2:12. See *Catalogue: Société des amis des Beaux-arts de Besançon* (Besançon: Dodivers, 1868), 16.
23. Gustave Chaudey to Courbet, September 19, 1868, in “Trois lettres inédites de Chaudey adressées à Courbet,” *Bulletin: Les Amis de Gustave Courbet*, no. 50 (1973): 8–9. Trouillebert’s painting must have been completed no later than August 1868, as Courbet left Paris for Le Havre on September 11, and the painting had to be dry enough to be safely transported.

24. See technical notes by Mary Schafer, NAMA paintings conservator, June 22, 2009, NAMA conservation files.
25. Faunce, *Gustave Courbet*, 108.
26. See painting report of examination, May 15, 2002, and painting technical record of treatment, February 2, 2015, by Mary Schafer, NAMA paintings conservator, NAMA conservation files. Schafer's study and treatment of this painting from 2012 to 2015 was undertaken in close collaboration with this essay's author during her tenure at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art as associate curator of European Painting and Sculpture.
27. The Nelson-Atkins version is listed as no. 51 in the catalogue as belonging to "Mme Veuve Trouillebert." *Exposition des œuvres de G. Courbet à l'École des beaux-arts*, exh. cat. (Paris: Émile Martinet, 1882), 51.
28. In *19th Century European Paintings* (2001), 121, Jean-Jacques Fernier is cited as questioning whether the version included in the 1882 exhibition was the Kansas City painting and whether the Trouillebert provenance was assigned to the correct picture. Cheron's installation shot resolves any outstanding doubts.
29. The Stockholm version was lent by Hubert Debrousse, who bought the painting for 8,000 francs in 1881; the sale is recorded in Paul Eudel, *L'Hôtel Drouot en 1881* (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1882), 384. It appears in the supplement to the 1882 catalogue as no. 162, *Jo, femme d'Irlande* (lent by Debrousse). *Exposition des œuvres de G. Courbet à l'École des beaux-arts, Supplement*, 7. See also note 28, above.
30. Chu, *Letters*, 602n2. Courbet had gone into self-imposed exile in 1873 after being sentenced to pay roughly 323,000 francs for the reconstruction of the Vendôme Column.
31. Courbet to James Abbott McNeill Whistler, February 14, 1877, letter 77-9, in Chu, *Letters*, 601.

Technical Entry

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Among the four versions that Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) painted of Joanna (Jo) Hiffernan (b. 1842/43), *Jo, the Irish Woman* is considered to be either the third or fourth painting in the sequence, executed quickly and likely on commission.¹ While the other versions of *Jo* are well-preserved, there is a significant amount of retouching present on the Nelson-Atkins painting due to a large, central tear repair and extensive paint abrasion. The amount of non-original paint on the surface of *Jo, the Irish Woman* is readily apparent in the ultraviolet-induced visible fluorescence photograph of Figure 7, in which the retouching material appears very dark in color.

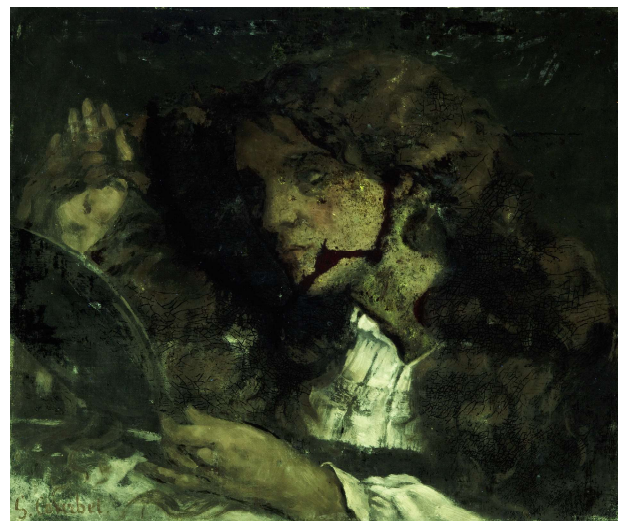


Fig. 7. Ultraviolet-induced visible fluorescence photograph of *Jo, the Irish Woman* (ca. 1866–1868), revealing areas of retouching that are very dark in color

The glue-lined, plain weave canvas is attached to a six-member stretcher with mortise and tenon joinery. The stretcher is close in size to the no. 15

figure standard-format canvas and may be original.² Although the tacking margins were removed, the dimensions of the painting do not appear to have been substantially altered. Radiography reveals a cusping pattern at the perimeter of all four edges, and the current dimensions of the painting are consistent with those of the other versions.³ The radiograph also reveals numerous slubs and irregularities in the canvas, a common feature among Courbet's canvas supports.⁴

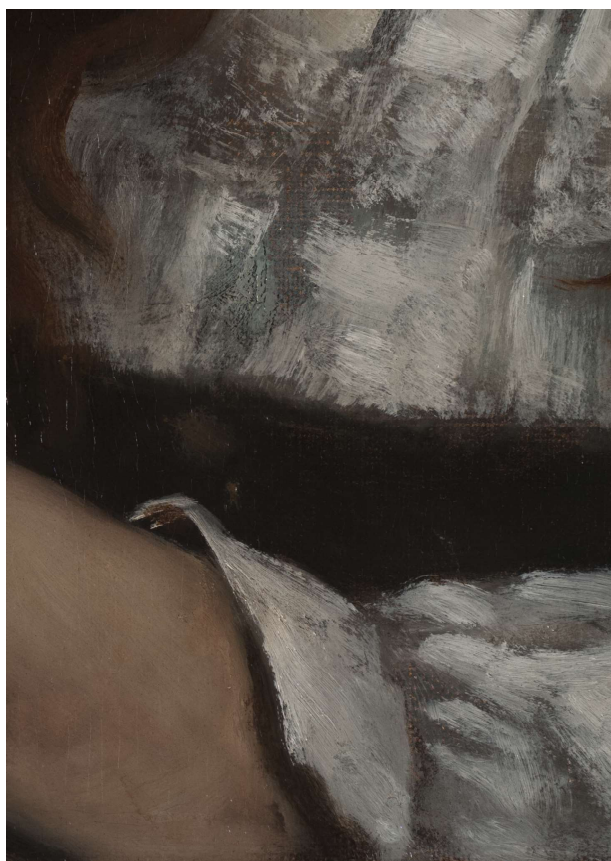


Fig. 8. Detail of the blouse and sleeve of *Jo, the Irish Woman* (ca. 1866–1868), showing glimpses of the reddish-brown imprimatura and light gray underpainting

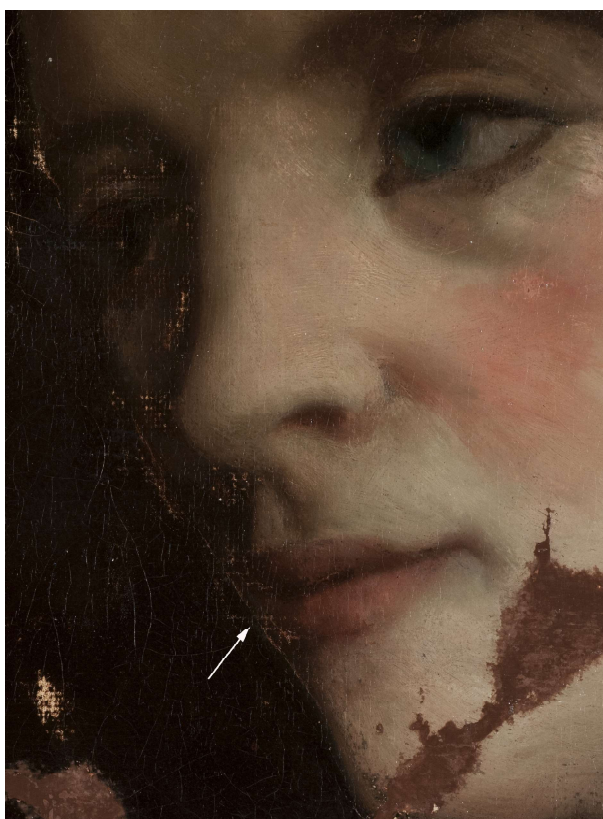


Fig. 9. Detail of an incised line along the contour of the sitter's face, *Jo, the Irish Woman* (ca. 1866–1868). This image was captured during the 2012 treatment.

Above an opaque, white ground, Courbet applied a medium-toned reddish-brown imprimatura, imparting a warm tonality overall. The imprimatura remains visible throughout the final composition and is prominent in the blouse (Fig. 8) and palm of the proper right hand. When the painting is studied using infrared reflectography or examined under the stereomicroscope, there is no sign of an underdrawing. Instead, Courbet appears to have loosely marked a few elements with incised lines drawn through the wet imprimatura: the contour of Hiffernan's face (Fig. 9), eyelid, nostril, lips, and a few tendrils of hair on the forehead.⁵ Additionally, four small dabs of bright red paint, now covered by retouching, were observed in the central shadows of the hair during the 2012 treatment (Fig. 10). Given that these marks are located roughly equidistant to the sitter's profile and neck, they may have guided the placement or angle of the figure in the early stages of painting.

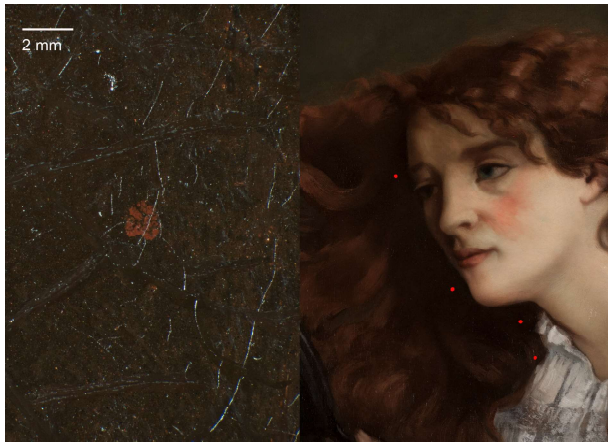


Fig. 10. On the left: photomicrograph of *Jo, the Irish Woman* (ca. 1866–1868), showing a bright red dab of paint near Hiffernan’s lips. This image was captured during the 2012 treatment. On the right: a detail of the painting annotated to show the location of these marks.

Over the reddish-brown imprimatura, Courbet laid in the upper background with gray-green paint and a palette knife, eventually modifying this color with a thin overlying layer of dark green, applied by brush. The characteristic marks associated with a palette knife remain visible above Hiffernan’s head and in the upper right corner. Hiffernan’s blouse was also underpainted with light gray paint, some of which the artist scraped with his palette knife, and in doing so, exposed the reddish-brown imprimatura at the high points of the canvas weave texture (Fig. 8).

Wet-over-wet painting and broad, energetic brushwork indicate that *Jo, the Irish Woman* was executed quickly. Paint application varies across the surface, ranging from thin scumbles to somewhat thicker paint with a fluid paste consistency. Overlapping paint strokes between the background and hair indicate that these elements were painted concurrently. Courbet blocked in the general shape of Hiffernan’s curling locks of hair with loose, confident strokes of medium and dark brown paint. Using a ½” wide brush, he added a series of short curving parallel strokes, forming blocks of mid-tones and highlights that create volume and the appearance of soft undulating curls.

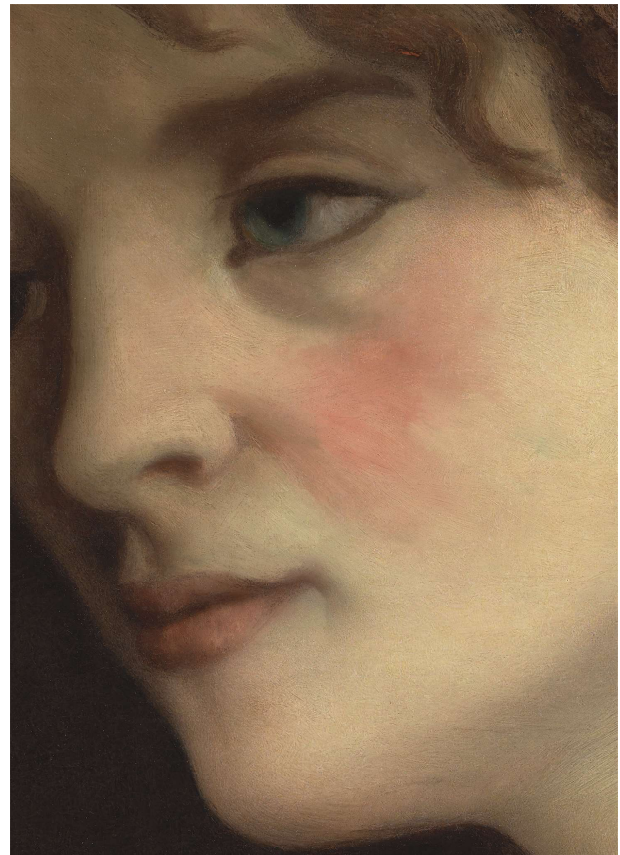


Fig. 11. Detail of the sitter’s face, *Jo, the Irish Woman* (ca. 1866–1868)

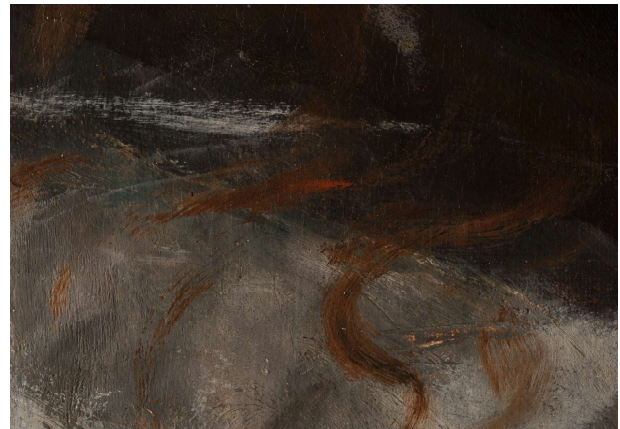


Fig. 12. Raking illumination detail of the table in *Jo, the Irish Woman* (ca. 1866–1868), showing gouges in the wet paint and linear marks that were formed by a palette knife

Individual paint strokes are less pronounced in the face than other passages of the painting, although some intermixing of wet paint is present on Hiffernan’s rosy cheeks and the shadows of the forehead. Beige paint with a slight greenish cast above her lips and around her eye (Fig. 11) as well as a short dash of pale green paint on the proper left cheek contribute to Hiffernan’s olive

complexion. Courbet loosely constructed the blouse using a flat brush and horizontal strokes. With light stippled touches of the brush, he suggested the open-work lace across the blouse while also allowing the scraped underpainting to remain visible (Fig. 8). In addition to the scrape marks on the background and blouse, Courbet's palette knife left a few gouge marks in the wet paint of the table. He also lightly pressed the edge of this tool against the canvas, on the upper left side of the table, transferring gray paint and forming several distinct, linear marks (Fig. 12).

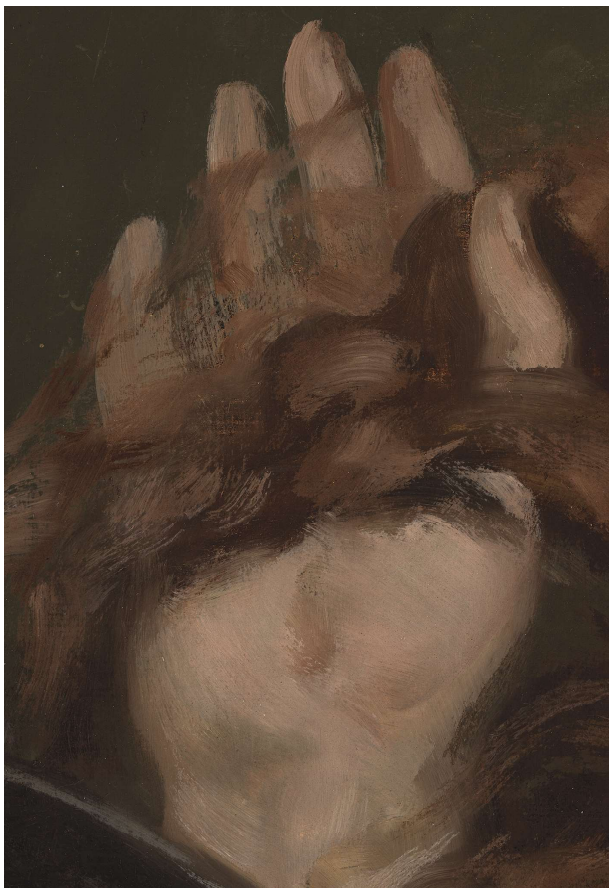


Fig. 13. Detail of the raised hand of *Jo, the Irish Woman* (ca. 1866–1868)

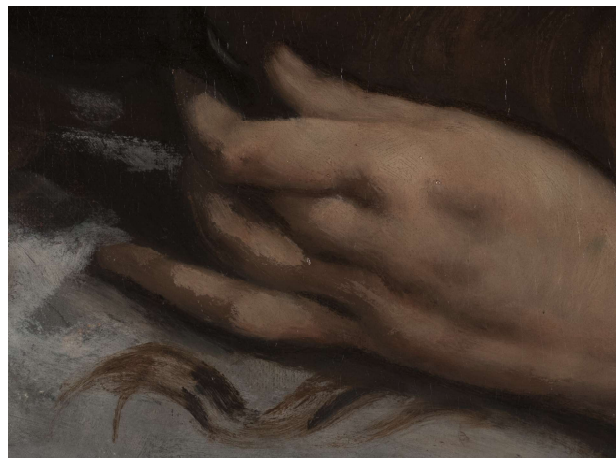


Fig. 14. Detail of the proper left hand of *Jo, the Irish Woman* (ca. 1866–1868)

Thin scumbles, many of which were removed or disrupted during a past cleaning, once formed subtle transitions in the shadows of the hair at the center of the painting.⁶ As the composition progressed, Courbet added a few strokes of green to establish glimpses of the background through the hair, near the upraised hand and mirror. In his rendering of Hiffernan's proper right hand, he worked efficiently. Instead of painting the entire hand, he left a reserve of reddish-brown imprimatura exposed in her palm and simply added paint strokes on top to delineate the tendrils of hair (Fig. 13). Many of the highlights, like those on the proper left fingers, were dryly painted, creating strokes with indistinct edges (Fig. 14).



Fig. 15. Normal illumination photograph of *Jo, the Irish Woman* (ca. 1866–1868), captured before loss compensation during the 2012 treatment

Jo, the Irish Woman contains a large “Y”-shaped compound tear that begins near the raised hand and extends down to the sitter’s chin and jaw, continuing upward to the proper left ear. The central damage spans roughly 28 x 25 centimeters, and paint losses on the chin and cheek measure up to 1.3 centimeters at the widest points. The damage and subsequent lining occurred before the painting entered the Nelson-Atkins collection in 1932. During this early treatment, a few holes were made along the edges of the canvas tear, piercing through the paint, ground, and canvas, in an effort to align the tear edges. Tack holes at all four corners may also correspond to this structural treatment. The lining process caused some canvas weave interference and created smooth, irregular paint textures along the tear edges. The painting was treated once more in 1944.⁷ In 2012, discolored materials associated with the 1944 treatment—synthetic varnish, overpaint, and retouching—were removed to reveal the condition of the painting (Fig. 15). The most severely overcleaned passages include the proper right side of Hiffernan’s face, ear, neck, and tendrils of hair that frame her face. To unify these damages and reveal the artist’s intentions as much as possible during the reconstruction, decisions were guided by a number of resources, first and foremost what remained of the original paint visible under the stereomicroscope. Retouching decisions were made in concert with former associate curator Nicole R. Myers and with reference to imagery of the other versions as well as an 1882 photograph of the Nelson-Atkins painting (see Figure 6 in the catalogue entry).⁸ The synthetic varnish layers applied during the 2012 treatment are in good condition with an appropriate level of saturation.

Mary Schafer
September 2020

Notes

1. Sarah Faunce, *Gustave Courbet* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 108; *19th-Century European Paintings and Sculpture* (New York: Sotheby’s, November 2, 2001), 120. For an overview of the sequence and a description of the variation that exists among the four paintings of Hiffernan, see the accompanying curatorial essay by Nicole R. Myers.
2. David Bomford, Jo Kirby, John Leighton, and Ashok Roy, *Art in the Making: Impressionism* (London: Yale

University Press, 1991), 45.

3. See x-radiograph film, no. 442, Nelson-Atkins conservation file, 32-30.
4. Stéphanie Constantin, “The Painters of the Barbizon Circle and Landscape Paintings: Techniques and Working Methods” (PhD diss., Courtauld Institute of Art, 2001), 147. Constantin notes that Courbet’s canvases were often of poor quality “with missing stitches, threads of irregular thickness, knots, and irregularities, as in *The Mill at Orbe* (1865–1870), NMGW, Cardiff.”
5. Many of the incised lines are evident with infrared reflectography using the Hamamatsu vidicon camera.
6. Mary Schafer, February 2, 2015, treatment report, Nelson-Atkins conservation file, no. 32-30.
7. Forrest R. Bailey, conservator of paintings, to Roger Ward, curator of European art, July 14, 1988, Nelson-Atkins conservation file, 32-30.
8. Imagery related to the other versions was generously provided by Kenneth S. Moser and Richard Este (Brooklyn Museum); Charlotte Hale (Metropolitan Museum of Art); Britta Nilsson (National Museum of Stockholm); and Seth Armitage and Polly Satori (Sotheby’s).

Documentation

Citation

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Provenance

Purchased from the artist, through Gustave Chaudey (1817–1871), by Paul-Désiré Trouillebert (1831–1900), Paris, by September 19, 1868–1900 [1];

Possibly inherited by his wife, Marie-Joséphine Trouillebert (née Lambert, 1845–1921), Paris, June 28, 1900–1921 [2];

A. de Lavit, Paris, by 1928 [3];

With Alex Reid and Lefèvre Ltd., London, by December 1928–1929 [4];

Purchased from Alex Reid and Lefèvre by Scott and Fowles, New York, stock no. 833, July 11, 1929–April 1, 1932 [5];

Purchased from Scott and Fowles, New York, through Findlay Galleries, Kansas City, through Harold Woodbury Parsons, by the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, 1932.

Notes

[1] See letter from Gustave Chaudey, Paris, to Gustave Courbet, Ornans, September 19, 1868, published in “Trois lettres inédites de Chaudey adressées à Courbet,” *Les amis de Gustave Courbet*, no. 50 (1973): 8–9. Chaudey reports taking Trouillebert to Courbet’s atelier to retrieve the painting. Furthermore, in the Trouillebert catalogue raisonné, the authors state that Chaudey facilitated the sale of the Nelson-Atkins painting to Trouillebert: “This transaction was arranged through their joint friend Chaudey and took place in the Cabaret Dinocheau.” See Claude Marumo, Thomas Maier, and Bernd Müllerschön, *Paul Désiré Trouillebert, 1831–1900: Catalogue Raisonné de l’œuvre peint* (Stuttgart: Edition Thombe, 2004), 54. In his 1978 Courbet catalogue raisonné, Robert Fernier mistakenly stated that our picture was sold by Durand-Ruel, Paris, in 1881, citing information he had received from NAMA curatorial staff. However, Durand-Ruel has no record of having owned the painting. See email from Flavie Durand-Ruel to Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, NAMA, November 16, 2017, NAMA curatorial files.

[2] “Madame Veuve Trouillebert” is listed as the owner of the painting in both the *École des Beaux-Arts* exhibition catalogue (1882) and Alexandre Estignard’s monograph on Courbet (1897). Confusion exists over who “Madame Veuve Trouillebert” is. In the Courbet catalogue raisonné, Robert Fernier assumed she was Paul-Désiré Trouillebert’s widow, but Trouillebert did not pass away until 1900. This has led some to suggest that

“Madame Veuve Trouillebert” was Paul-Désiré’s mother, Louise Trouillebert (née Robert, b. 1788); see Sotheby’s sales catalogue, *19th Century European Paintings and Sculpture*, November 2, 2001, cat. 101. Although Louise was a widow by 1855, she would have been approximately 109-years-old in 1897, making it unlikely that she was still the owner of the painting. The owner might have been another female relation, although not a sister since Paul-Désiré was an only child. Trouillebert was married twice: his first marriage to Clémentine-Louise Legoussat Saint-Edmé (1850–1930) on January 30, 1868 lasted only 18 months, though their divorce was not finalized until July 28 (or possibly August 1), 1885. (For the second date, see *Le Radical*, August 2, 1885). Trouillebert took Marie-Joséphine Lambert (1845–1921) as his second wife on August 3, 1885; see Georges Lanoë, *Histoire de l’Ecole Française de Paysage depuis Chintreuil jusqu’à 1900* (Nantes: Société Nantaise d’Éditions), 202n3. Since Paul-Désiré Trouillebert was alive until 1900, and there is no evidence that he gave the picture to anyone, it is most likely that his second wife inherited the work when he passed away in 1900. Indeed, at her posthumous sale in 1921, she still had some of his property, although the Courbet painting was not sold at this time. See *Tableaux par Paul-Désiré Trouillebert et provenant de son atelier, objets d’art et d’ameublement anciens et modernes ... meubles et sièges dont la vente, par suite du décès de Madame Trouillebert* (Paris: Hôtel Drouot, November 23–24, 1921).

[3] According to a paper label on the backing board, “M. de Lavit” loaned the painting to Galerie Bernheim-Jeune in 1928 for the *Exposition G. Courbet*. When the Nelson-Atkins purchased the painting in 1932, Scott and Fowles indicated that the painting had previously belonged to “Mr. A. de L., Paris.” One possibility for this constituent is Alexandre de Lavit (1862–1932), the head counsel for the state railway. His wife was Jeanne-Augustine-Alexandrine-Léonie (née Trouillebert, 1871–1919), but research has not uncovered any familial relationship between Jeanne-Augustine-Alexandrine-Léonie Trouillebert and the painting’s first owner, Paul-Désiré Trouillebert.

[4] Alex Reid and Lefèvre is listed as the owner of the painting in “Notable Works of Art Now on the Market,” *Burlington Magazine* 53, no. 309 (December 1928).

[5] See correspondence from Ernest A. Lefèvre to Stevenson Scott, Esq., July 11, 1929, NAMA curatorial files. See correspondence from Harold Woodbury Parsons, NAMA art advisor, to R. A. Holland, Director, Kansas City Art Institute, April 14, 1931, NAMA curatorial

files. A paper label on the backing board records the Scott and Fowles stock number.

Related Works

Gustave Courbet, *Jo, La Belle Irlandaise*, 1865–1866, oil on canvas, 22 x 26 in. (55.9 x 66 cm), H. O. Havermeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H.O. Havermeyer, 1929, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Gustave Courbet, *Portrait of Jo, the Beautiful Irish Girl*, 1866, oil on canvas, 21 1/4 x 25 5/8 in. (54 x 65 cm), Nationalmuseum, Stockholm.

Gustave Courbet, *Portrait of Jo, the Beautiful Irish Girl*, 1866, oil on canvas, 21 1/4 x 25 1/8 in (54 x 63.8 cm), private collection, Australia.

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De David à Courbet, Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, Paris, January 1928, no cat., as *la Belle Irlandaise*.

A Century of French Painting: Exhibition Organised for the Benefit of the French Hospital of New York, Knoedler and Company, New York, November 12–December 8, 1928, no. 6, as *La Belle Irlandaise*.

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