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# A Technical Study of Henry Lerolle's *Organ Rehearsal*

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In 2006 the expansion of the nineteenth-century European paintings galleries at the Metropolitan Museum afforded the opportunity to display Henry Lerolle's *Organ Rehearsal* (Figure 1) for the first time in roughly seventy years. Lerolle (Figure 2) was born in 1848 to a devout Catholic family living in Paris, where his father and uncle operated a bronze sculpture foundry. As a young man he studied with Louis Lamotte, a former pupil of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, copied French and Italian paintings in the Musée du Louvre, and attended the Académie Suisse, drawing from the model.

Independently wealthy, Lerolle collected works of art by, among others, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, Edgar Degas, and Auguste Rodin. He was among the first to champion Maurice Denis and other members of the Nabis.<sup>1</sup> He was also deeply interested in music and with Vincent d'Indy and others was involved in founding the Paris music school La Schola Cantorum. Among the painters, writers, and musicians who were his guests were Degas, Paul Claudel, Stéphane Mallarmé, André Gide, and Claude Debussy.<sup>2</sup> Lerolle first exhibited at the 1868 Salon. He was a jury member at the 1889 Exposition Universelle and was awarded a gold medal at the Exposition Universelle of 1900.<sup>3</sup>

*The Organ Rehearsal* was shown at the 1885 Salon as *À l'orgue*.<sup>4</sup> It depicts a young woman singing, her voice filling the empty space of a church. The singer and nearly all the figures behind her seem to have been members of the artist's family, and Lerolle himself stands second from the left. The singer is Marie Escudier (born 1865), the youngest sister of Madame Lerolle and the wife of Arthur Fontaine (1860–1931), a minister of labor in the French government.<sup>5</sup> A portrait of Marie Escudier by Odilon Redon belongs to the Metropolitan Museum (Figure 3).<sup>6</sup> Her sisters Madeleine (born 1856) and Jeanne (born 1862) are seated in the left foreground, though which figure is Madeleine and which Jeanne is not certain.<sup>7</sup> Madeleine Escudier had married Lerolle in 1876,

and they had four children by 1884.<sup>8</sup> Jeanne had married the composer Ernest Chausson, a friend of Lerolle's, in 1883.

The figure standing behind the organist has been identified as the artist's mother, née Amable de La Roche, by her grandson Guillaume Lerolle, who also recalled that the young man in the background, behind the painter, was an unidentified family member.<sup>9</sup> Technical evidence confirms that these two figures were late additions, which would explain why the Salon reviews failed to mention them. The organ player could be either Chausson or the organist Albert Renaud, who had been appointed to the Church of Saint-François-Xavier, Lerolle's neighborhood church, which is the setting for the painting. The thirty-two-foot pipe organ, which was premiered in 1879, is installed on a narrow tribune above the main entrance to the church.<sup>10</sup>

The canvas was exhibited in 1885 *hors concours*, which meant that Lerolle himself selected it, without the approval of the jury.<sup>11</sup> One reviewer states that it was unfinished, and the various contemporary accounts, while not always consistent, indicate that Lerolle must have modified his composition later.<sup>12</sup> Two sources fail to mention either the woman standing behind the organ player or the young man at the far left.<sup>13</sup> One catalogue of the Salon describes all the figures except the standing woman.<sup>14</sup> Both figures had been added by December 1886, when an engraving of *À l'orgue* by Rousseau was printed in *L'Illustration*.<sup>15</sup>

Preliminary examination revealed that the picture was essentially well preserved and had remained virtually untouched. Given the large format (the painted surface measures approximately 7½ by 12 feet), the painting showed normal signs of its age, primarily concentrated along the edges. Due to gravity and natural oxidation, the heavy canvas was sagging, splitting, and tearing along all the edges and pulling away from the stretcher. Rather than the more commonly used linen canvas, Lerolle employed a hemp canvas for this painting.<sup>16</sup> Hemp's shorter fibers and weaker structure have embrittled and discolored the canvas over time. In addition, some tide-line staining revealed along the bottom inner side of the stretcher suggested that



1. Henry Lerolle (French, 1848–1929). *The Organ Rehearsal*, 1885. Oil on canvas, 7 ft. 9¼ in. x 11 ft. 10¾ in. (2.37 x 3.63 m). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of George I. Seney, 1887 (87.8.12)

the painting had been exposed to water in the past and explained why the canvas was noticeably more degraded along the bottom. The compromised attachment of the canvas to the stretcher had also caused pronounced distortions across the surface. The conservation treatment involved locally repairing the tears along the tacking edges and reinforcing them by attaching new strips of linen, refurbishing the stretcher, surface cleaning, and minor retouching. This process allowed further insights into Lerolle's technique and the materials he used.

Lerolle painted his composition on a single piece of medium-weave canvas. The canvas was commercially prepared with a light gray ground, which was commonly used in the late 1880s. Such a large prepared canvas was probably specially ordered. Two stencils partly obscured by the stretcher bars on the canvas's reverse show that the supplier was Hardy-Alan, a well-known Parisian color man whose store was located at 56, rue du Cherche-Midi. A minute sample of the preparation layer taken from the tacking edge

and mounted as a cross section revealed the presence of two distinct ground layers of different thicknesses and colors.<sup>17</sup> While both layers were made of the same components—lead white in linseed oil—the top layer is somewhat thicker and also includes tiny amounts of black and reddish pigment particles that give the ground its light gray tonality.<sup>18</sup> For reasons of economy, the bottom ground layer would have been more diluted with oil and turpentine, and it was applied somewhat unevenly, causing some penetration through to the reverse of the canvas. The prepared canvas was then nailed onto the stretcher, a slot mortise-and-tenon type modified to accept a double key, which was also specially ordered. A handwritten inscription, "Lerolle / Tableau Chant d'Eglise" (Lerolle / Singing in Church Painting), was revealed only after the canvas was removed from the stretcher, confirming that the stretcher had been custom-made for this painting.<sup>19</sup>

Lerolle scrupulously planned his large composition. Sequentially numbered horizontal pencil markings were





2. Henry Lerolle. Photograph: Braun et Cie. Archives of the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, Exposition Dossier 7



4. Detail of Figure 1, showing the pencil drawing of the architecture visible through the paint layer



3. Odilon Redon (French, 1840–1916). *Madame Arthur Fontaine (Marie Escudier)*, 1901. Pastel on paper, 28½ x 22½ in. (72.4 x 57.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Mr. and Mrs. Henry H. L. Hunt Purchase Fund, 1960 (60.54)

discovered along the right-side tacking edge, indicating the presence of registration lines under the composition. This suggests that Lerolle probably worked from a smaller study that he expanded on this large canvas, using squaring lines, although no preparatory study for this painting has yet materialized.<sup>20</sup> Numerous pencil lines showing through the paint layer are clearly visible to the naked eye. They are especially evident in the rectilinear forms defining the architecture, which Lerolle depicted with minimum means yet to great effect (see Figure 4). He drew the outline of the nave's inner walls, pilasters, cornices, and Corinthian capitals with pencil directly on the ground layer, at times going over some lines to emphasize them. He then painted over this with a thin layer of lead white paint so that the pencil lines show through, creating a grisaille effect.

The oil paint layer is overall in remarkably good condition. Lerolle's paint layers are for the most part very fluid and painterly, even washlike in certain passages. He applied the lead white paint more thickly in order to imitate the varied colors of the limestone blocks as well as the light reflecting off their surfaces. Over time, pronounced sharp-edged cracks developed in the light-colored and thinly painted church background. This phenomenon appears to be a consequence of the use of lead white pigment, which commonly becomes brittle with aging. Fortunately, only a few minor paint losses have occurred, mostly along the edges. Some of the dark pigments have become increasingly transparent over time, which has affected a clear



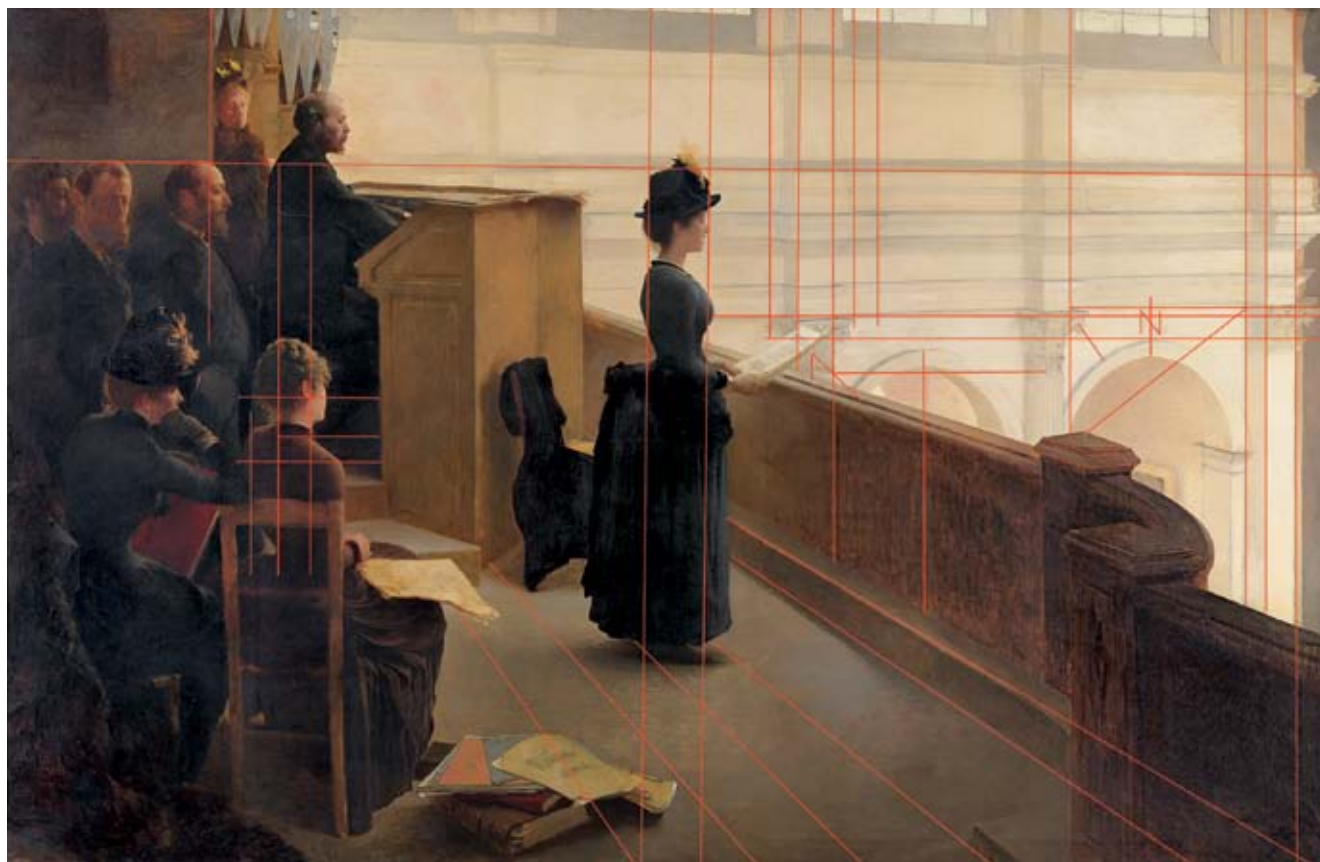
5. Infrared reflectogram of a detail of Figure 1, showing the underdrawing of the singer's face, the lines framing her profile, and the architectural lines behind her

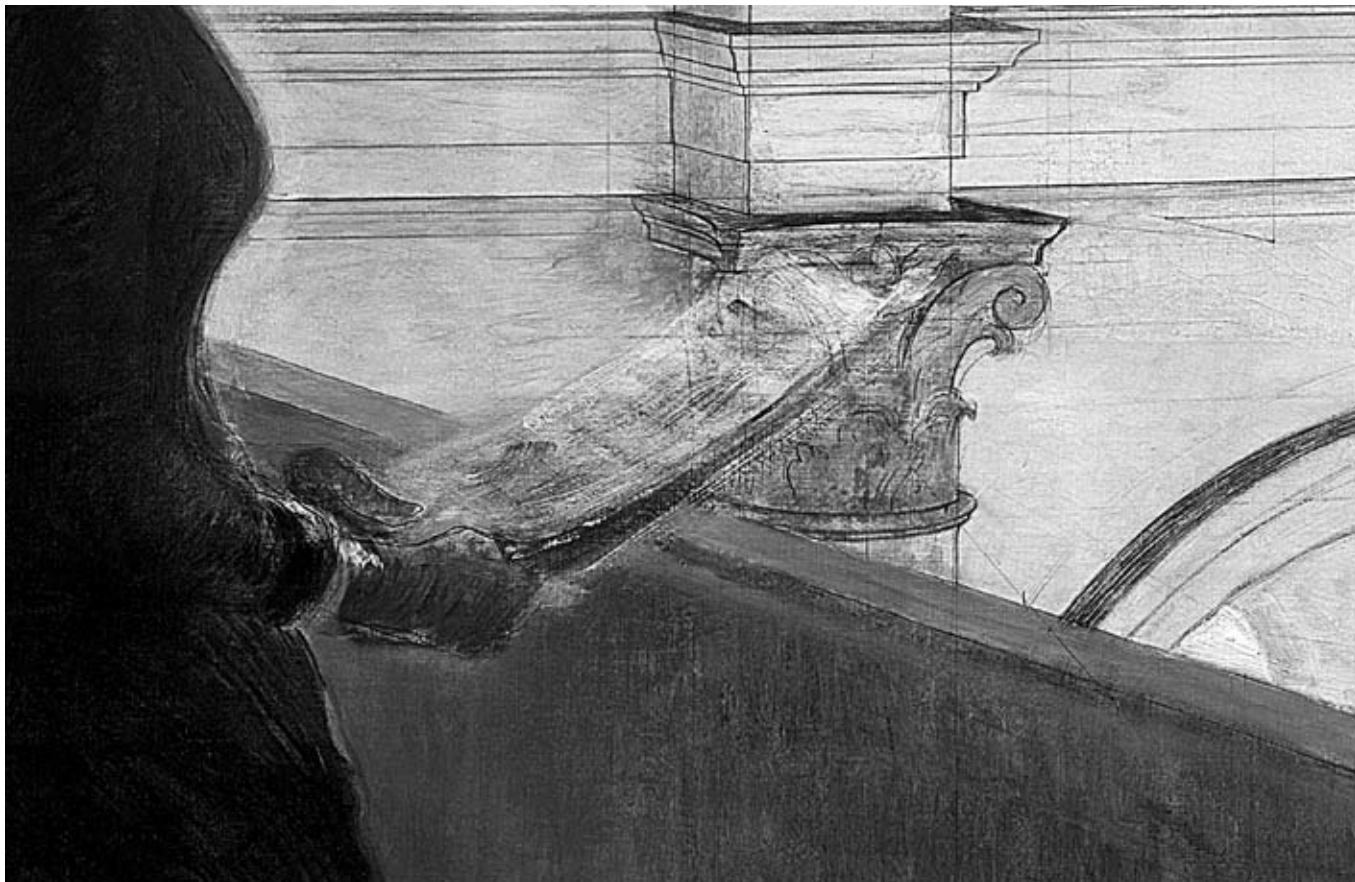


reading of form in certain areas. Analysis confirmed that Lerolle achieved his muted coloring using a limited but typical palette: lead white, chrome yellow, vermilion, yellow ochre, umber, cobalt blue, and ivory black.<sup>21</sup> The particularly glossy and deeply cracked appearance of the singer's and her sister's hats, as well as some details on the sister's coat, indicates that Lerolle may have used bitumen, a transparent brown-black pigment used for glazing. Despite its popularity, bitumen is notorious for its poor drying qualities. The thin varnish layer appears to be original and exhibits only slight discoloration.<sup>22</sup>

Lerolle's deceptively simple composition required careful planning. Examination of *The Organ Rehearsal* with infrared reflectography, a nondestructive method used to image underdrawing, confirmed that the artist had used squaring lines to transfer his composition. These are lightly drawn pencil lines (not visible under the paint layer), verticals, diagonal lines, and registration marks that Lerolle used to lay out the composition before he drew the figures. The infrared reflectogram detail of the singer's face (Figure 5) illustrates this process. Horizontal lines delineating the wall moldings pass through her profile from her mouth through the nape of her neck, midway through her neck, and at nose level. These lines are rather faint, probably because the artist partly erased them so they would not show through the light skin tone of the singer's face. Two fine vertical lines

6. Tracing (in red) of a partial diagram of the grid lines in Henry Lerolle's *Organ Rehearsal* (Figure 1) that show with infrared reflectography





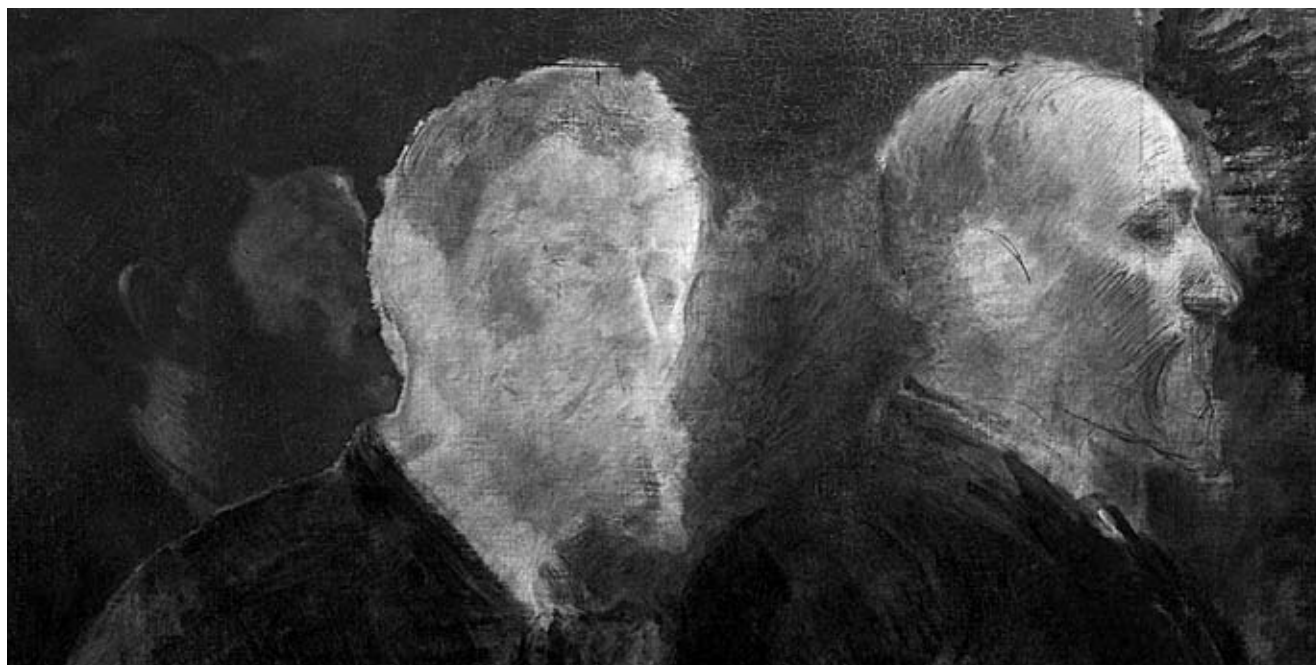
7. Infrared reflectogram of a detail of Figure 1, showing the architecture, the squaring lines, and part of the singer



8. Infrared reflectogram of a detail of the two women seated in the foreground of Figure 1, showing the underdrawing, the squaring lines, the various opacities, and the changes made on the figures



9. Infrared reflectogram of a detail of the three standing men in Figure 1, showing the various styles of underdrawing and the squaring lines and registration marks



10. Detail of Figure 1, showing the face of the woman standing behind the organ, where the organ shows through the transparent paint layer



delineating the singer's profile place it at the center of the composition (see Figure 6).

Infrared reflectography also reveals Lerolle's different styles of underdrawing, as well as the sequence in which he depicted the figures. The underdrawing of the singer (see Figures 5, 7) shows smooth, sinuous, and elegant contour lines freely drawn with pencil. The organ player, the two seated women, and Lerolle and the man to the right of him, whose identity remains uncertain, also show some

underdrawing, suggesting that these figures were part of the early arrangement of the composition. Infrared examination revealed no sign of underdrawing, however, for Lerolle's mother and the young man standing directly behind the artist. Furthermore, these figures were painted over the organ pipes and the brown background, showing that Lerolle added them after completing the initial composition. These observations concur with reviews of the 1885 Salon, in which critics described only four figures listening to the singer and the organ player.

The underdrawing of the young woman seated at the right (either Jeanne or Madeleine) reveals the same delicate contour lines as in the figure of the singer, as well as the hatching technique often observed in Lerolle drawings. The squaring lines clearly visible through her back and her cheek (see Figure 8) also suggest that the artist probably worked from a preparatory drawing. Infrared confirmed a significant *pentimento* partly visible to the naked eye: Lerolle painted out this figure's black-rimmed hat, which was identical to the one her sister is wearing. This appears to be a deliberately bold decision, for depicting a bare-headed woman inside a church would have been unconventional and rather provocative in the 1880s.<sup>23</sup> Other visible signs of reworking include the shifting forward of the right ear of the sister on the left and some paint scraping marks in the back of her hair. These observations confirm the artist's own account. In a letter dated May 2, 1885, after he had seen the painting at the Salon, Lerolle wrote to Chausson: "You must have noted that Jeanne changed position and that she even became Madeleine."<sup>24</sup>

Infrared examination confirmed that Lerolle and the man standing to the right of him were both part of the original

composition (Figure 9). Both figures were precisely outlined and painted before the background. A squaring line along the top of both men's heads and a registration mark indicating the center of Lerolle's face are clearly legible. The drawing of the two men's features is quite different. Lerolle drew the standing man's face with a combination of his familiar sinuous contour lines and hatching, capturing the strong features of the profile, yet for his self-portrait he loosely drew some thin and discontinuous lines, only vaguely indicating the contours of the face. He then defined his own features in paint, which he applied rather thinly. Due to the increasing transparency of the thin paint layer over time and the lack of strong drawing lines, his features, and especially the direction and expression of his eyes, have become difficult to read. Infrared reflectography revealed that Lerolle adjusted the position of his right eye and that his gaze was directed into the distance.

Conversely, infrared examination of the younger man standing behind Lerolle shows no underdrawing, and the darker tone showing under his face demonstrates that he was painted on top of the brown background. His features appear blurred, and his face seems to have been "squeezed in" around Lerolle's clearly outlined contours. Evidently the initial composition did not leave many options for later additions. The figure of Lerolle's mother is nearly transparent when viewed using infrared reflectography, allowing the organ beneath her to be fully revealed. The increased transparency of the paint used for her flesh tones has allowed underlying elements to show through her face (Figure 10). These observations confirm the hypothesis that the two figures were added after the painting was shown at the 1885 Salon.

Other pentimenti are visible to the naked eye. Most prominently, the organ player was shifted to the left. Lerolle also painted out the music sheets that were once propped up on the keyboard and instead depicted them lying flat (see Figure 1). Their original position would have disrupted the spatial unity of the open white background, weakening the lyrical impression of the empty space being filled by the singer's voice.

Music and painting were forever connected for Lerolle in *The Organ Rehearsal*. To a dealer who was interested in purchasing his painting at the 1885 Salon on condition the artist cut it in half, discarding the part "where there is nothing," Lerolle responded: "I would rather cut the other half away, where there is something; because my painting is precisely about where there is nothing. . . . The fact is that the whole empty side of the church is where I attempted to depict the voice of a singer vibrating in the air."<sup>25</sup>

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## NOTES

1. Lerolle bought *Catholic Mystery* (1890) by Denis. From Pierre Bonnard, he bought *L'après midi au jardin* in 1891 and *La femme au canards* in 1892. See Terrasse 1999, pp. 21–28. After reading Denis's 1890 article "Définition du néo-traditionnisme," Lerolle wrote to Denis: "I read [it] with interest and even more than interest" (Groom 2001, p. 42).
2. Denis 1932, p. 6.
3. In 1900 Lerolle exhibited *La toilette* and three portraits, one of which represents an older woman, possibly his mother, in an arrangement reminiscent of his earlier portrait of her that dates from about 1895, now in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris. See Exposition Universelle 1900, pp. 92, 142.
4. See Lafenestre 1885, p. 46, no. 1553. The painting was given various titles after it came to the MMA: *Rehearsal in the Choir Loft*, *The Organ Rehearsal*, *At the Organ*.
5. Arthur Fontaine collected the works of numerous modern artists and friends, among them Bonnard, Denis, Eugène Carrière, Odilon Redon, Pierre Auguste Renoir, and Édouard Vuillard. He owned two oil paintings by Lerolle: *Jeunes femmes au bord du chemin* and *Vase of Flowers* (dates unknown). His collection was sold in Paris in April 1932 at the Hôtel Drouot; see Fontaine sale 1932. By 1905 the Fontaines were divorced; Marie later married Abel Desjardins.
6. She was also the subject of Vuillard's *Madame Fontaine au Piano* (1904, private collection) and Denis's *Maternité au lit jaune* (1896, collection G. Rau).
7. See note 24 below.
8. Madeleine's portrait was painted by Henri Fantin Latour (*Madame Lerolle*, 1882) and Albert Besnard (*Madeleine Lerolle and Her Daughter Yvonne*, ca. 1879–80). Both paintings are in the Cleveland Museum of Art; see Weisberg 1977.
9. A hypothesis is that he could be the brother of the Escudier sisters.
10. Numerous maintenance and restoration campaigns have been undertaken since it premiered, most recently in 1992 by Bernard Dargassies.
11. Lerolle's third-class medal in 1879 and his first-class medal in 1880 entitled him to this privilege (White and White 1965, p. 31). À l'orgue was entered as no. 1553, "H.2m35–L.3m60, Fig. de grandeur naturelle, en pied" (Lafenestre 1885, p. 46).
12. Michel 1885, p. 495: "Le tableau de M. Lerolle A l'orgue est malheureusement incomplet."
13. Ponsonailhe 1885, p. 11; Énault 1885, p. 11.
14. Lafenestre 1885, p. 46, no. 1553.

15. *L'illustration (journal universel)*, no. 88 (December 25, 1886), pp. 438–39.
16. Fiber analysis was performed by Maya Naunton, assistant conservator, MMA Textile Conservation Department.
17. The canvas was first sized with a layer of glue, a standard preparation procedure isolating the canvas fibers from the oxidation of drying oil contained in both the ground and subsequent paint layers.
18. Ground layer analysis was performed by Julie Arslanoglu of the MMA Department of Scientific Research using Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy and pyrolysis gas chromatography mass spectrometry (PyGC/MS). No traces of chalk and/or quartz were detected. Pigment analysis carried out by Silvia Centeno of the Department of Scientific Research using Raman spectroscopy confirmed the presence of lead white; the black pigment is a carbon-containing material, and the red is an iron oxide containing pigment, such as a red earth pigment.
19. The printed label of another artists' supplier, "Pottier, emballleur de Tableaux et Objects d'art," and the name "Lerolle" handwritten in ink were discovered glued onto the reverse of the stretcher (the side in direct contact with the canvas). While the stamp indicates that this individual's main business was the packing of artworks, it is possible that like other Parisian color men and dealers at the time, he would also have facilitated special orders of materials for artists.
20. The only known related drawing is a printed illustration of the singer drawn by Lerolle after his painting for *La gazette des beaux-arts* (Michel 1885, p. 489). Lerolle is known to have used less traditional procedures. For *L'Adoration des Bergers* (1883, Musée de Carcassonne), he squared his composition using a photograph rather than a drawing, as was more customary. The photograph, which has remained in the family, shows an interior view of an underground cowshed with Lerolle himself standing in the foreground. The dark numbered squaring lines were traced directly on the emulsion side. Lerolle sketched some figures with pencil on the emulsion as well, thus working out his composition. See Weisberg 1985.
21. The paint layer was analyzed with portable X-ray fluorescence (XRF) instrumentation by Mark Wypyski and Julie Arslanoglu of the Department of Scientific Research. XRF allows nondestructive analysis of nonorganic pigments.
22. Some dark brown tide-lines were present mostly in the upper half of the picture, disrupting the unity of the light background. Such lines could possibly be remnants of the vernissage, or varnishing day, when a varnish layer was traditionally, and often hurriedly, applied before opening day at the Salon. They were reduced and retouched during the conservation treatment.
23. I am grateful to Jean-Michel Nectoux for having brought this observation to my attention.
24. My thanks to Jean-Michel Nectoux for sharing this information with me. The letter belongs to the Lerolle family archives.
25. Lerolle's autobiographical notes (author's translation); see Nectoux 2005, p. 67.

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