

# Some Notes on *The Pardon in Brittany* by Dagnan-Bouveret

GRETCHEN WOLD

Research Associate, European Paintings, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

WHEN PASCAL-ADOLPHE-JEAN<sup>1</sup> Dagnan-Bouveret (1852–1929), the French naturalist painter, exhibited *The Pardon in Brittany* (Figure 1) at the Salon of 1887, it met with almost universal acclaim. When the picture was included at the Exposition Universelle two years later, it was among the works that won the artist a medal of honor. Often praised was Dagnan's success in revealing the true Breton character.<sup>2</sup> In fact, some of the figures depicted in the painting are not based on Bretons at all, and other aspects of the work might also have surprised Dagnan's contemporaries, if they had known of them.

The cool, silver-gray light employed by Dagnan in the painting reveals a solemn procession of people exiting the doors of a church and wending their way around the corner of an exterior wall toward the viewer. Most hold long, slender, lighted white candles. The women wear elaborate, starched white headdresses and collars, and the men carry round black hats and wear baggy knee breeches and long, fitted vests. The procession passes by two seated figures, their backs to the viewer and dressed in ragged clothing, who beg for alms by extending small plates. The setting of the painting is limited to the walls of the church and a patch of bare ground, which concentrates attention on the figures of the participants in the procession, on their costumes, and especially on their faces.

Pardons are religious events that have been held for centuries in various parts of Brittany, at which indulgences for remission of sins are granted. The ceremonies generally include a mass followed by a procession around the church, which is the part of the event that Dagnan has chosen to depict here. Beggars are apparently a common sight. Pilgrims arrive from throughout the region and can be identified by the details of their costumes, which vary from parish to parish;<sup>3</sup> participants and spectators even come from other parts of France. In Dagnan-Bouveret's day Brittany was a popular destina-

tion for artists, who regarded the area as primitive and exotic; the Breton pardons in particular were seen as living remnants of the distant past, and many artists and other outsiders were fascinated by their mysticism and spectacle.<sup>4</sup>

Dagnan-Bouveret himself first traveled to Brittany in 1885, returning often over the next several years. He painted several Breton-themed works during his career, including a second major composition on the subject of the pardon: *Breton Women at a Pardon*, 1887, exhibited at the Salon of 1889 (Figure 2). This second work depicts a different aspect of the pardon: a group of women sit on the ground waiting for the ceremonies to begin, and two men stand to the side, looking on. The men wear the same type of hat seen carried in the Metropolitan picture, and the women wear a variety of white head-dresses, as do the women in the New York painting. These traditional costumes are especially associated with pardons, although they are also worn at a few other special events such as weddings. The church in the Lisbon painting has been identified as the one at Rumengol, in the department of Finistère, in Brittany. Three major pardons take place at Rumengol each summer. The strange protrusions seen on the steeple in the painting are also faintly visible in a photograph of the site taken during Dagnan's stay there in 1886—perhaps they were associated with some aspect of the pardon ceremonies.<sup>5</sup>

On the back of the Metropolitan canvas are two drawings and inscriptions never before published. In the upper right quadrant formed by the crossbars of the stretcher is a drawing depicting the head of the young woman third in line, just behind the elderly man, in the painting on the front of the canvas (Figure 3). Below the drawing is the inscription: "MARIA WALTER, MA FEMME. / ORMOY H<sup>te</sup> Saône / Juillet—Novembre 1886 / PAJ. DAGNAN." In the lower right quadrant is a drawing depicting the head of the older woman in the foreground of the painting (Figure 4). Below this drawing is the inscription: "Jeanne Claude Jobard mère de mon ami Gustave COURTOIS."

Dagnan-Bouveret and Anne-Marie-Marceline Walter, called Maria, married in 1879. They were

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Figure 1. Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret (French, 1852–1929). *The Pardon in Brittany*, 1886. Oil on canvas, 114.6 x 84.8 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of George F. Baker, 1931 (31.132.34). See also Colorplate 5



Figure 2. Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret. *Breton Women at a Pardon*, 1887. Oil on canvas, 125.1 x 141 cm. Museu Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon, inv. 206 (photo: Museu Calouste Gulbenkian)

introduced by Dagnan's friend Gustave Courtois, whom Dagnan had met while they were art students together in Paris. Dagnan met Walter, a cousin of Courtois, during a visit he made with Courtois to the latter's family home in the Franche-Comté, the area of northeastern France that includes the department of Haute-Saône. After their marriage, Dagnan and Walter often spent time with her family in the same region, and later settled there permanently.<sup>6</sup>

Careful measurement reveals that each of the two drawings on the back of the Metropolitan Museum canvas is exactly the same size as the corresponding head in the painting on the front of the canvas. The inscriptions identifying the figures are in Dagnan-Bouveret's distinctive handwriting, as can be demonstrated by comparing

them with the signatures and inscriptions on others of his works. The simple linear quality of the drawings, coupled with the fact that their dimensions exactly match those of the two heads in the painting, leads to the conclusion that the artist used either a photograph or a drawing to create the two heads in the painting, and then used that same photograph or drawing to reproduce the heads on the back of the canvas. Gabriel Weisberg has discussed the role of photographs and drawings as aids in the creation of Dagnan's compositions.<sup>7</sup> Dagnan either copied the figures from a photograph or a drawing onto tracing paper, cut out the silhouettes, and then traced them onto the canvas; or, more probably, rubbed charcoal across the back of the drawings, placed the drawings on the canvas, and then traced the outlines.

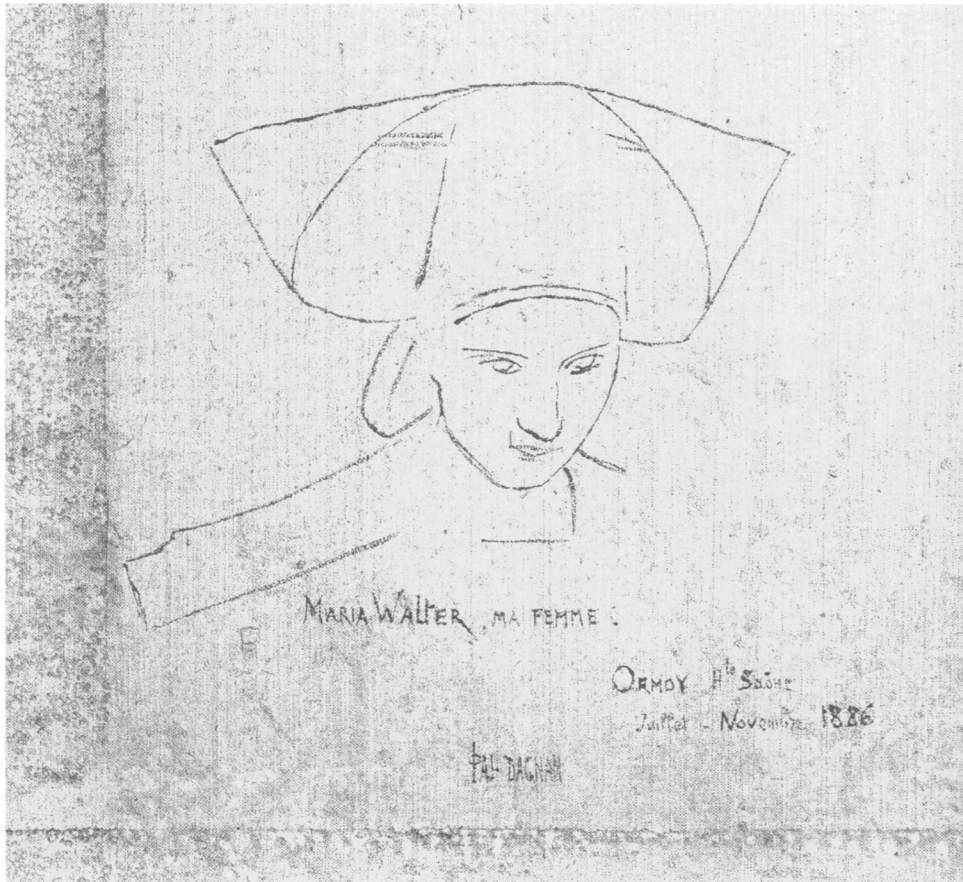


Figure 3. Inscription and drawing on upper right quadrant of verso of Figure 1



Figure 4. Inscription and drawing on lower right quadrant of verso of Figure 1



Aside from the question of exactly *how* the two tracings were created, it is interesting to consider the question of *why* the artist would have repeated the tracings on the back of the canvas. Any experimentation with the process of transferring the two figures from one surface to another seemingly could have been carried out more conveniently on a sheet of paper. In fact, the best explanation for the existence of these two rather mysterious but touching images may be that it was important to Dagnan-Bouveret to record the identities of the sitters: Maria Walter, his wife, and Jeanne-Claude Jobard, the mother of his close friend and a connection of his by marriage.<sup>8</sup>

Though sentiment may explain why Dagnan-Bouveret went to the trouble of including these two tracings on the back of the canvas, their presence serendipitously helps to explain the artist's working method, and specifically the process of creation of *The Pardon in Brittany*. It is unlikely that these two figures are the only instance of Dagnan's employing tracings to create figures or other elements in his paintings. The technique was used successfully for *The Pardon in Brittany* and was probably repeated for subsequent works and perhaps introduced in earlier compositions as well. Weisberg has already reported that Dagnan used multiple pieces of tracing paper to arrange the figures in his second pardon painting, and that he squared photographs into grids to transfer figures to canvas;<sup>9</sup> now we see further evidence of Dagnan's creativity and the various methods through which he achieved the desired final composition.

The date July–November 1886 in the first inscription on the back of the Metropolitan Museum painting records the span of time during which Dagnan-Bouveret worked on the composition. In July, the time of year when many of the pardons are held, he was in Brittany, but we know that he had recently returned home to the Franche-Comté, on the other side of France, by September 1.<sup>10</sup> So although he may have made preliminary studies on the spot in Brittany, the final canvas was undoubtedly painted at his country home in Ormoy, as the inscription in fact records. We do not know if Walter went with Dagnan to Brittany, but it is very possible that she remained at home, so that Dagnan could only have begun to include her in the composition after he returned from Brittany. The identification of the two models makes it clear that it is not Breton peasants whose features appear on the faces in Dagnan's painting (no matter how his figures were interpreted by the contemporary press<sup>11</sup>). As a naturalist painter, a close friend of Jules Bastien-Lepage (by whom he was heavily influenced), it was evidently more important to Dagnan to depict real



Figure 5. Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret. *Woman from Brittany*, 1886. Oil on canvas, 36.9 x 28 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, Mr. and Mrs. Potter Palmer Collection, 1922.442 (photo: The Art Institute of Chicago)

individuals than stock depictions of Breton types, so he used models who were near to hand, available to pose at home in his studio.<sup>12</sup> These are the only two figures who have been identified (Walter often posed for her husband throughout his career), but others probably also reflect the features of his friends and family at home in the Franche-Comté.<sup>13</sup>

There is in the Art Institute of Chicago a painting entitled *Woman from Brittany* (Figure 5); it is dated 1886, the same year as the Metropolitan picture.<sup>14</sup> The features of the young woman in the Chicago painting are the same as those of the young woman in the New York painting; both works depict Maria Walter, the artist's wife. She wears the same costume in both pictures, undoubtedly brought to her from Brittany by her husband: elaborate, highly starched white head-dress with delicate flowered insert; plain white blouse with broad collar lying like wings across the shoulders; dark bodice; and fitted jacket with decorative border.<sup>15</sup> Walter is even wearing the same necklace in the two



Figure 6. Dagnan painting at his easel while Walter poses, 1886. Photograph. Archives de la Haute-Saône, fonds Dagnan-Bouveret, Vesoul, France (photo: Phox Photo Simon)



Figure 7. Dagnan and Walter in front of Dagnan's easel, 1886. Photograph. Archives de la Haute-Saône, fonds Dagnan-Bouveret, Vesoul (photo: Phox Photo Simon)

pictures. Although the costume and model are the same, the pose varies: the head in the New York picture is bowed, whereas in the Chicago work, Walter's gaze engages us directly. She is watching her husband as he paints her.

Despite the Breton subject matter, the Chicago picture, like the Salon painting, was probably painted in the Franche-Comté rather than in Brittany. Dagnan-Bouveret certainly took home with him at least Walter's costume, since it appears in photographs taken in the artist's improvised outdoor studio at Ormoy.<sup>16</sup> The two photographs of Maria are anecdotal in character, one showing her posing in her costume while her husband works on the Salon painting on his easel at left (Figure 6), and the other showing her wearing the costume while standing with Dagnan in front of the unfinished painting on its easel (Figure 7). Walter's costume is described in more detail than those of the other women in the painting; this may be due to the fact that Dagnan could work from the actual clothing, whereas for the others he had to rely on studies made in Brittany.

A third photograph depicts Jeanne-Claude Jobard

posing in Dagnan's studio in an attitude almost identical to that of her figure in the finished painting (Figure 8). Unlike the two photographs of Walter, this one must have played an important role in the creation of the Salon painting, probably being used by the artist as a study when the model was not available to pose (as Weisberg has pointed out).<sup>17</sup> In the photograph, Jobard wears a plain dark dress similar to the one seen in the painting and holds a long white candle, but she does not wear the distinctive collar and headdress of the pardon costume. In fact, Jobard's own discarded bonnet, adorned with flowers, appears on the chair behind her. If Dagnan had brought back from Brittany the headdress and collar Jobard wears in the painting (as he did Maria's costume), he would probably have posed her in them in this study photograph. We know that there must have existed a study, probably a drawing as opposed to a photograph, that did include the collar and headdress, since its outlines appear in the tracing on the back of the Metropolitan Museum canvas (Figure 4). Walter was presumably always available to pose for her husband; a study photograph of her figure is not known. A painted study



Figure 8. Jeanne-Claude Jobard posing, 1886. Photograph. Archives de la Haute-Saône, fonds Dagnan-Bouveret, Vesoul (photo: Phox Photo Simon)

for Jobard's figure is likewise not known. The Chicago painting may have been begun as a study for the figure of Walter in the Salon painting, but somewhere along the way it was given a finish beyond the need of a mere study and also acquired a context separate from that of the pardon painting.<sup>18</sup>

An interesting relationship also exists between the Metropolitan painting and a study recently discovered in the Musée Jacquemart-André, Abbaye Royale de Chaalis, near Ermenonville, northeast of Paris (Figure 9). The Chaalis work depicts an elderly man closely related to the one in the Metropolitan picture: each wears the same pardon costume and holds a cane in the right hand, a candle in the left, and a hat in the crook of the left arm. Each is barefoot and elderly, with a wrinkled face and long, sparse white hair. The facial features in the two works may differ, and the figure in the Chaalis study is turned at an angle, unlike the figure in the Metropolitan painting. Dagnan apparently had trouble with this figure, which might explain in part the differences between the study and the final Salon painting.<sup>19</sup>



Figure 9. Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret. *Study of an Elderly Breton Man at Pont-Croix*, 1886. Oil on canvas, 84 x 41 cm. Musée Jacquemart-André de l'Abbaye Royale de Chaalis, Fontaine-Chaalis, France (photo: Photographie Bulloz, Paris)

The Chaalis picture is signed and inscribed at bottom left: "A [mon cher?] HENRI AMIC. P.A.J. DAGNAN B." Above this is an inscription including the word "Pontcroix" and a date of 188[6?] preceded by the word "Juillet" or "Juin."<sup>20</sup> Pont-Croix is a village in Brittany; as already noted, the costume depicted in the New York painting (and thus in the Chaalis study) is



Figure 10. Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret. *Head of a Woman in Breton Costume*, 1887. Pastel on canvas (?), 31.5 x 27 cm. Musée Jacquemart-André de l'Abbaye Royale de Chaalis, Fontaine-Chaalis (photo: Photographie Bulloz, Paris)

identical to that worn by men in Pont-Croix.<sup>21</sup> This study must have been painted in Brittany, unlike the other works discussed here. Henri Amic was a collector and friend of Dagnan and other artists; he owned numerous works by Dagnan.<sup>22</sup> Dagnan frequently corresponded with Amic during the time he was working on *The Pardon in Brittany* and often discussed his progress with his friend; Amic must have especially enjoyed owning a study for the work in whose creation he had been vicariously involved. Amic bequeathed his home and collection to the Académie Française in 1924, and the collection has been displayed at the Abbaye de Chaalis (like the Académie, part of the Institut de France) since 1996.<sup>23</sup>

A date of 1886 for the Chaalis study is supported by several facts: the work is closely related to the Metropolitan Museum painting of that year; we know Dagnan was in Brittany in the summer of 1886; and in the 1930 catalogue of Dagnan-Bouveret's oeuvre there is a work entitled *Etude de vieux breton à Pont-Croix*. It is

listed with the works of 1886 (immediately preceding the Chicago picture) and can almost certainly be identified with the Chaalis study.<sup>24</sup> Summer is the season of pardons, so the appearance of either "June" or "July" in the inscription also makes sense.

Another picture by Dagnan in the Amic collection at Chaalis that relates to his second pardon painting, *Breton Women at a Pardon* (Figure 2), illustrates yet another type of study made by the artist for a finished painting. It is a work (unpublished, as far as I know), squared for transfer, of a woman wearing a Breton headdress and collar (Figure 10). It appears to depict the same model as the second figure from the right in the finished painting,<sup>25</sup> and even though the position of the head shifts slightly from the drawing to the painting, the Chaalis work must be a study for the Lisbon canvas.

In spite of the way his work was perceived by nineteenth-century reviewers, Dagnan's pardon paintings were more than simple depictions of authentic



Breton customs and characters. He used a complexity of means to achieve the results he desired. It has been shown that at least two, and probably more, of the figures in *The Pardon in Brittany* are not Breton. He did not paint the picture in Brittany, nor did he make all of the studies—painted, drawn, or photographed—for this work in Brittany. He must have made other preparatory studies in all media for such a major composition. If they still exist and can be located, they would undoubtedly reveal additional information about the working method of this naturalist painter.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article would not have been possible without the pioneering work of Gabriel Weisberg in the field of nineteenth-century French naturalist painting. Thanks are also due Mme Anne-Marie Bautier, at the Musée Jacquemart-André de l'Abbaye Royale de Chaalis, Fontaine-Chaalis, France; M. Georges Rech, Directeur des Archives Départementales de la Haute-Saône, Vesoul, France; Mme Pauline Grisel, formerly of the Archives Départementales de la Haute-Saône; and Adrienne Jeske, at the Art Institute of Chicago, for their kind assistance with various aspects of this work. Katharine Baetjer provided encouragement in the final stages. Without the support and enthusiasm of my husband, Thomas Martin, this article would never have been completed.

## NOTES

1. This is the name order always used by the artist in signing his works, although the order given on his birth certificate (Archives Départementales de la Haute-Saône, Vesoul) is Jean-Adolphe-Pascal.
2. See, for example, Maurice Hamel, "Le Salon de 1887," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, ser. 2, 35 (1887), p. 486; and G. Ollendorff, *Salon de 1887* (Paris, 1887), p. 73.
3. Charles Sterling and Margaretta M. Salinger, *French Paintings: A Catalogue of the Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, vol. 2, *XIX Century* (New York, 1966), p. 221, have pointed out that the costume of the young woman third in line is similar to that depicted in plate 37 of the book *Costumes et coiffes de Bretagne: Cent photographes d'après les compositions de Hippolyte Lalaisse*, preface by Louis Hourticq (Paris, [1932?]). Plate 37 depicts a woman from Saint-Thégonnec, in the department of Finistère, which is at the tip of the Breton peninsula. Plate 35 shows a costume from Rosporden, also in Finistère, which is even closer to that of the young woman. Plate 27 depicts a man from Pont-Croix in Finistère—his costume is identical to that worn by the elderly man in the center.

4. For other artists who depicted these pardons, see Gabriel P. Weisberg, "Vestiges of the Past: The Brittany 'Pardons' of Late Nineteenth-Century French Painters," *Arts Magazine* 55 (November 1980), pp. 134–38.
5. Gabriel P. Weisberg, "P. A. J. Dagnan-Bouveret and the Illusion of Photographic Naturalism," *Arts Magazine* 56 (March 1982), pp. 103, 105 n. 26, fig. 13.
6. Walter was related to the Courtoises on her mother's side of the family. Jeanne-Claude Jobard, Gustave Courtois's mother, was not married to Étienne Courtois, Gustave's father. Catherine Boisset, "Dagnan-Bouveret peintre (1852–1929): Répertoire numérique de la sous-série 12J" (Archives Départementales de la Haute-Saône, Vesoul, 1994), p. 6.
7. Weisberg, "P. A. J. Dagnan-Bouveret and the Illusion of Photographic Naturalism," pp. 100–105; and idem, "Making it Natural: Dagnan-Bouveret's Constructed Compositions for the Paris Salon of the 1880s," *Scottish Art Review* 15 (November 1982), p. 13.
8. The identity of the two figures in the painting has already been established by Weisberg from photographs at the Archives Départementales de la Haute-Saône. See Weisberg, "P. A. J. Dagnan-Bouveret and the Illusion of Photographic Naturalism," p. 102.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 103, figs. 17, 18.
10. Letter to Henri Amic, September 1, 1886, Archives Départementales de la Haute-Saône, inv. no. 860901.
11. See note 2.
12. This is in direct contrast to an artist such as Augustin-Théodule Ribot (1823–1891), who in paintings such as his *Breton Fishermen and Their Families* (MMA, acc. no. 48.187.736), was concerned with depicting the Breton peasant "type."
13. Dagnan may have used a Parisian model for the figure of the elderly man in the foreground of the picture. This suggestion was made to me by Pauline Grisel, formerly of the Archives Départementales de la Haute-Saône, Vesoul, in a letter of September 18, 1999, on the basis of a letter from Dagnan to his friend Amic of October 29, 1886. Grisel also states that Walter posed for a second figure in the painting, that of the seated female beggar seen from the rear; see Pauline Grisel, "P. A. J. Dagnan-Bouveret à travers sa correspondance," mémoire de D.E.A., Université de Lyon 2, 1987, p. 54.
14. The Chicago painting must have been bought soon after it was painted by Jules Roederer of Le Havre (he died on February 6, 1888). Roederer's collection was sold at the Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, on June 5, 1891, where this work was included as lot 7, *Bretonne*.
15. Another painting in The Metropolitan Museum of Art depicts the same costume, but the headdress is not as stiffly starched: *Breton Brother and Sister*, 1871, by Adolphe-William Bouguereau (acc. no. 87.15.32). Because the girl in the Bouguereau is not wearing a jacket, one can see that the striped material is an apron; the same fabric in both paintings by Dagnan-Bouveret probably represents an apron, as well.
16. Published first in Weisberg, "P. A. J. Dagnan-Bouveret and the Illusion of Photographic Naturalism," p. 102, figs. 9, 11.
17. See *ibid.*, pp. 102–3, fig. 10.
18. In the Chicago painting, Walter is seated in an interior, holding scissors and with a bundle of cloth in front of her; in the *Catalogue des oeuvres de M. Dagnan-Bouveret (Peintures)* (Paris, 1930), p. 24, the title of the work is given as *Couturière (bretonne)*.
19. Grisel, "P. A. J. Dagnan-Bouveret à travers sa correspondance," p. 53.

- In the letter to Amic of October 29, 1886 (see note 13 above), Dagnan mentions that he had originally envisioned the figure as a blind beggar. This aspect of the figure is not immediately apparent in either the study or the Salon painting, but such an idea makes sense if, as Sterling and Salinger (*French Paintings*, p. 221) suggest, Dagnan meant specifically to suggest the pardon of Saint-Jean-du-Doigt, in Finistère. This pardon was especially known for miraculous cures of eye diseases (Weisberg, "Vestiges of the Past," pp. 136–37).
20. The inscription is almost indecipherable in places. Mme Bautier, at the museum in Chaalis, recorded the inscription as "Ponteroi. juillet 1890" in a letter to me of July 25, 1999.
21. See note 3.
22. Grisel, "P. A. J. Dagnan-Bouveret à travers sa correspondance," p. 138, lists nineteen works. Eleven pictures by Dagnan are included in the Henri Amic collection at the Abbaye de Chaalis; not all of these correspond to works on Grisel's list. The study of the old man was reproduced in the article "Dagnan-Bouveret," a sentimental appreciation of the artist by his friend Prince Bojidar Karageorgevitch, in the *Magazine of Art* 16 (1893), p. 122, with the caption: "A Study / (By Dagnan-Bouveret. By Permission of Monsieur Amie.)." It is not mentioned in the text of the article. "Amie" must be a typographical error for "Amic."
23. This information was provided by Mme Bautier at the Musée Jacquemart-André, Chaalis.
24. *Catalogue des oeuvres de M. Dagnan-Bouveret (Peintures)*, p. 24.
25. Weisberg publishes other studies for this figure in "Making It Natural," p. 14, figs. 18, 19.