

## Curator's Corner

### Family Comes Forward to Claim Melchers' *St. Genevieve*

The most important long term project to which I've devoted myself in the last twenty years is the compilation of a catalog raisonné or complete listing of Melchers' body of work. Out of some 2000 paintings, studies and drawings, I'm still unable to locate at least a dozen or more significant examples. Chief among them was the soulful portrait of *St. Genevieve*, whose image, reproduced in an old sepia-toned photograph, has mocked me from a perch above my desk. Painted around 1901, it is a work by Melchers at the very height of his powers, which made its "missing" status all the more maddening.



I posted the photograph of *St. Genevieve* on our website, waiting for someone to come forward as the owner. That day finally came this week. Until now, my research provided a rather muddled provenance (history of ownership). The painting first appeared in a 1901 exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, where it was reportedly purchased by a Mrs. Caton or Catain. In 1908 it was listed in a New York exhibition as being from the collection of Mrs. Marshall Field of Chicago department store fame. To add to the confusion, it is also listed among Melchers' possessions stored in Weimar, Germany, around 1915. Next, my records document it changing hands again in 1928 when it was purchased by a Detroit collector (name protected here) from a sale through Melchers' principal New York dealer, Albert Milch.

I provided this collector's name to staff at the Detroit Institute of Art, hoping they might recognize it or the painting. No one knew a thing. As it turns out, the painting has remained with the same family, passed down to future generations, in whose possession it is kept safe and well loved.

## The Religious Life in Melchers' imagery

In the 1880s and 90s, Melchers was the leading American proponent of a popular European-based art movement called *naturalism*. One of the themes adopted by the Naturalists was contemporary working class piety. The message their pictures convey echoed the popular belief that those who work closest to the land, who live simply and honestly, enjoy the greatest communion with God. Melchers' first great success in Holland, *The Sermon*, 1886, portrayed this type of pre-modern, God-centered world.

Other popular topics were scenes drawn from the Bible and images of celebrated saints. But the scriptural episodes and portrayal of saints had a new twist. The characters were depicted within the context of contemporary country life and always with a combination of factual realism and overt or disguised religious symbolism. The formula for this type of picture was established by the pioneer of naturalism, painter Jules Bastien-Lepage, who was wildly popular in his native France about the time Melchers was getting his career off the ground in Paris. It was Lepage's famous *Joan of Arc* that would serve as the inspiration for Melchers' *Joan of Arc* (Indianapolis), *St. Gudule* (private) and *St. Genevieve*.

Observing the devout faith of their rural Dutch neighbors against the backdrop of an emerging industrial world, Melchers and his colleague there, American George Hitchcock, went "anti-modern," finding their ideal models in the wholesome, guileless faces of goat girls and shepherdesses, painted appropriately with sunbaked and sporting picturesque, but coarse native costumes.

That Melchers should choose to portray St. Genevieve is no surprise really. According to legend, the Fifth century Saint Genevieve was a shepherdess before she took her holy vows (she is commonly depicted with a crook or a lamb). She was the patron saint of Paris, the center of Melchers' creative life, and was the subject of a series of murals painted at the Pantheon in Paris by Melchers' older mentor, Puvis de Chauvannes.

Melchers' portrait of *St. Genevieve* is small, roughly 12 by 16 inches, the intimate scale here inspired by the private devotional paintings of the High Renaissance. Its

composition is tightly restricted to the saint's head and shoulders rather than appearing in full-figure, this in order for the artist to put greater emphasis on the purity and perfection of her profile. But it is the look of spiritual transport in her raised eyes, and the insertion of a finely-inscribed halo, that designates the subject as more than just a lovely face. It is Melchers' rarified ability to combine palpable life with spiritual mystery that creates a picture to stop you in your tracks.

JDC

July 2011