

## "RESEARCH ON TRICHINA" (1885): AN UNUSUAL FRENCH PAINTING BY STANISLAS TORRENTS

### « RECHERCHES SUR LA TRICHINE » (1885) : UNE PEINTURE FRANÇAISE INHABITUELLE DE STANISLAS TORRENTS

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#### ABSTRACT

Using new historical research and unfamiliar documents, the following study argues that this rather spectacular painting is not what it appears to be at first, but that a new meaning and its historical significance can be established with some confidence. The work *"Recherches sur la trichine"* (1885) by Stanislas Torrents, a leading Marseille artist of the late-19th century, should be regarded, not simply as an impressive painting that perhaps merits an enlarged presence in the world of museums and art history scholarship, but as an unusual confirmation from the art world of just how much the trichina parasite and its investigations by medical scientists were widely familiar to the French public as early as the 1880s. Rich in messages and meanings both for art and science, the painting offers a new window into the awareness in French society of research in veterinary parasitology.

**Keywords:** Stanislas Torrents, trichinosis, *Trichina*, science in art, history of veterinary medicine, Musée des Beaux Arts de Marseille

#### RÉSUMÉ

S'appuyant sur de nouvelles recherches historiques et des documents inédits, l'étude suivante soutient que ce tableau plutôt spectaculaire n'est pas ce qu'il paraît à première vue, mais qu'une nouvelle signification et sa portée historique peuvent être établies avec une certaine confiance. L'œuvre « *Recherches sur la trichine* » (1885) de Stanislas Torrents, artiste marseillais majeur de la fin du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle, doit être considérée non seulement comme une peinture impressionnante méritant peut-être une plus grande présence dans le monde des musées et des études en histoire de l'art, mais aussi comme une confirmation inhabituelle, par le monde de l'art, de la familiarité du public français avec le parasite trichine et ses recherches par les scientifiques médicaux dès les années 1880. Riche de messages et de significations tant pour l'art que pour la science, ce tableau offre un nouvel éclairage sur la sensibilisation de la société française à la recherche en parasitologie vétérinaire.

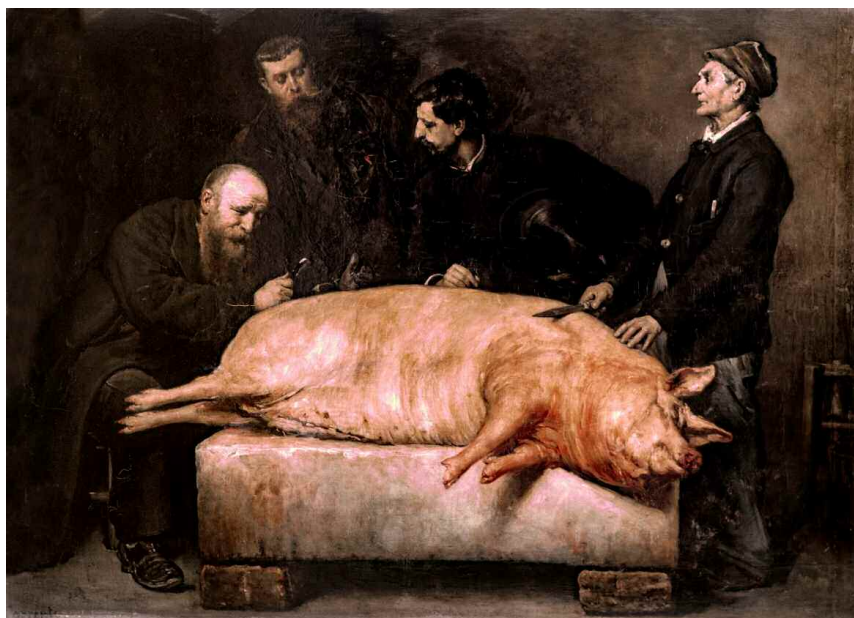
**Mots-clés :** Stanislas Torrents, trichinose, *Trichina*, science dans l'art, histoire de la médecine vétérinaire, Musée des Beaux Arts de Marseille

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## AN UNKNOWN CANVAS OF VETERINARY SCIENCE AND ITS PAINTER

The painting entitled “*Recherches sur la trichine*” (1885), sometimes called “*L’expérience de la Trichine*,” is a large, engaging canvas by Stanislas, or Estanislau, Torrents y de Amat (Marseille 1839; Cannes 1916). It is held in the collection of the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Marseille<sup>2</sup>. This painting appears to be an early artistic representation of research in the veterinary and medical sciences (Figure 1). The museum received it after the artist’s death along with about 150 other paintings by the artist. Not currently on display, it is held in museum storage, where the *Conservateur en chef* of the museum, Luc Georget, kindly called it to my attention during my visit on 10 March 2025.



**Figure 1.** Stanislas Torrents, “*Recherches sur la trichine*” (1885). Oil on canvas. © Marseille, Musée des Beaux-arts/Claude Almodovar-Michel Vialle. Used with permission

Although information about Torrents is limited, a sketch will be helpful to our analysis. Born in Marseille to Catalan parents, Torrents was orphaned at a young age, but attended a drawing school in Marseille from 1851 to 1856, and then lived in Barcelona, where he was a student at the School of Fine Arts (La Llotja), probably from 1857 to 1861. He was in Paris from 1861 to 1864, where he worked in the studio of Thomas Couture. He may have been acquainted with Gustave Courbet. It is reported that while in Paris, museums allowed him to study the Spanish masters, especially Velázquez, and that “their influence is clear in his work.” He undertook a multi-year sojourn in Rome until 1871 to learn engraving, sponsored by the Provincial Council of Barcelona, and may have worked in the studio of Mariano Fortuny there. A work by Torrents was accepted into the Paris Salon as early as 1864. He was awarded a Bronze Medal in 1875 by the Salon judges for “*Un mort*” (sometimes called “*Le mort*” or “*La mort du moine*”), and the painting was purchased by the State for the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Marseille. He regularly participated in Paris Salons in the 1870s and 1880s, as well as in several exhibitions in Barcelona. During the 1870s, he settled in Marseille. In addition to painting, he participated in group projects with other artists, taking special interest in the local École des Beaux-Arts. In 1914, he moved from Marseille to Cannes, where he died two years later. No personal information, such as his marriage and children, has been found. We do know that a son, named Pierre, survived him by a few years and handled his father’s gift of hundreds of his works to the Marseille art museum and a bequest to the city, with two-thirds of the estate going to the hospitals and one-third endowing a substantial annual prize to the best student of painting at the local École des Beaux-arts.<sup>3</sup>

Because only a few of Torrents paintings have been published and most are held in storage, a full assessment of his œuvre remains out of sight.<sup>4</sup> His paintings were briefly characterized this way by Soler-Àvila.

2- This article uses the title *Recherches sur la trichine* because it was exhibited under that name in the Paris Salon of 1886. See Anonymous (1886), p. 190. Although some writers date the work to 1886, I prefer 1885 because this large canvas was apparently completed before a review was published on 4 March 1886.

3- Alauzen (2006), p. 434; this brief article, as revised by Noet, provides the clearest account of the sequence of schools and teachers in Torrents’ early career. Giber (1932), p. 15 (for bequest); Maseres (1935), pp. 344–349. Masson (1913), pp. 526–527, for the quotation about the influence of Velázquez. Servian (1924), pp. 91–98, for idea that he studied with Courbet, p. 9; Soler Àvila (2018), pp. 1–3.

4- Titles and locations of over 300 artworks by Torrents are recorded in the Joconde database, although only a few entries include an image. See POP (la plateforme ouverte du patrimoine). Accessible at <https://pop.culture.gouv.fr/search/list?base=%5B%22Collections%20des%20mus%C3%A9s%20de%20France%20%28Joconde%29%22%5D> (consulted 13.10.2025).



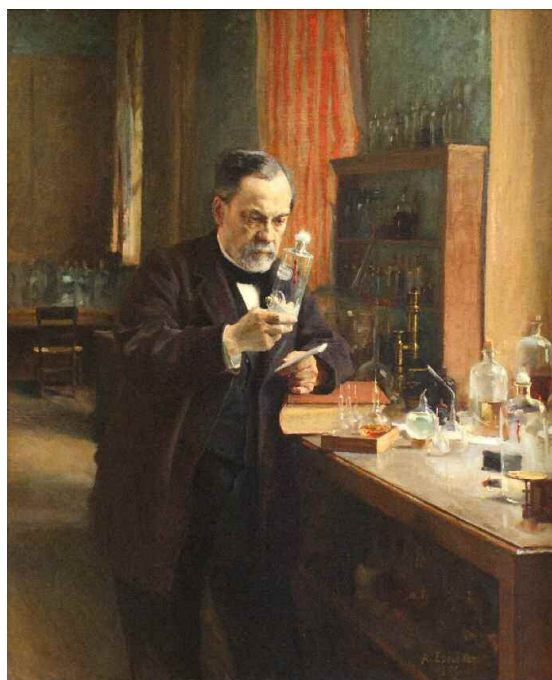
Torrents d'Amat cultivated different genres with his paintings: history, religion, customs, and landscape. His realism, sometimes with a more tortuous brushstroke (approaching some kind of expressionist realism), sometimes more photographic or documentary in its definition, has a great strength and quality. His full immersion in French artistic life brought him closer to the tendencies that prevailed there, from Gustave Courbet—his thick and pasty brushstrokes are evident—and the *École de Barbizon* to the painters of southern France (Soler-Àvila 2018, p. 2).

Servian (1924) reported that Torrents held anatomy in high regard, collecting cadaver parts to use in painting “*Un Mort*.” And when showing a skeleton and an “*écorché*” to a studio visitor, he proclaimed “These are my enduring models.” The story is also told that following this painting’s success, it was suggested that he could build a reputation by sending a painting of the same subject to the Salon each year. He would thus hold the public in suspense, waiting “impatiently for each new revelation of the artist who became the painter of the dead. Torrents responded that an artist should not copy himself” (Servian 1924, p. 93). And while our later painting is hardly a copy of this monk lying on his bier, both scenes are centered on a prone cadaver surrounded by dark-coated figures paying it serious attention. A photograph of “*Un mort*” was published by Masere (1935, p. 346).

## INITIAL HYPOTHESIS: A PAINTING OF DOCTORS AT WORK

“*Recherches sur la trichine*” is an accomplished piece with four male portraits in the style of 17th-century masters like Velázquez, Hals, and Ribera. Equally notable is the sensitive handling of the color variations in the skin of a very large pig. Given the size of the canvas at nearly two by three meters (199.5 × 275.5 cm) and the professional workmanship, such a piece likely represents a dedication of several months’ effort by the artist. That substantial commitment and the title he gave it support the notion that it is a portrait of scientists or physicians depicted at work in their milieu, perhaps a work commissioned by one of them.

Such at-work portraits, emerging as a new genre in France in the mid-1880s, included both single and group portraits. These were quite different from traditional portraits in which the sitter’s expression acknowledges the viewer. These portraits of celebrated individuals were more like history paintings in which the viewer is positioned as a bystander, unregarded by the participants. Famous early examples include Albert Edelfelt’s “*Louis Pasteur*” (1885), Henri Gervex’s “*Dr Péan*” (1887), and Léon Lhermitte’s “*Claude Bernard*” (1889).<sup>5</sup> (Figures 2–4) Torrents’ painting was exhibited in the Paris Salon of 1886, the same exhibition where Edelfelt’s “*Pasteur*” caught the favorable attention of many reviewers. But note that in all three of these examples, the setting is accurately depicted with significant details of the workspace, unlike the empty, dark background in the Torrents painting. As explained below, this difference is significant.



**Figure 2.** Albert Edelfelt, “*Louis Pasteur*” (1885). Oil on canvas. Musée d’Orsay. Cliché Ondra Havala, Wikimedia Commons

5- I have discussed the Edelfelt and Gervex paintings in Weisberg & Hansen (2015) and Hansen (2021). There is a new, comprehensive examination of the Bernard painting by van Wijland (2025). Two large paintings by the American Thomas Eakins, who had studied in Paris with Jean-Léon Gérôme and Léon Bonnat, are very familiar today as examples of doctors at work: the “*Gross Clinic*” (1875) and the “*Agnew Clinic*” (1889). But since they were not widely known in that era, even in the United States, they had no role in the emergence of this trend.







**Figure 3.** Henri Gervex, “Avant l’opération” (1887). Oil on canvas. Musée d’Orsay. Wikimedia Commons



**Figure 4.** Léon Lhermitte, « La Leçon de Claude Bernard » (1889). Oil on canvas. © Bibliothèque de l’Académie nationale de médecine, photographie studio Sébert. Used with permission

## THE SCIENTIFIC CONTEXT

In the 1880s, the parasite in question, a nematode whose life-cycle includes a cyst stage that enables the encysted larvae, when ingested, to avoid destruction by stomach acid and make their way into the muscles, was generally called “trichinae,” “la trichine,” or “les trichines.” Only later was the official name changed to *Trichinella spiralis* and the disease designated as trichinosis or trichinellosis. The parasite was first described by James Paget and Richard Owen, young English scientists in 1835. Over the next thirty years, its natural history, life-cycle, and transmission among animals through the consumption of infected flesh, or among humans by the consumption of insufficiently cooked pork, were worked out in a series of studies by European and American scientists, most notably in Germany by Rudolf Virchow and Friedrich Albert von Zenker.<sup>6</sup> Virchow published a comprehensive study in 1864 that was immediately translated into French (Virchow 1864a and Virchow 1864b).

6- The renaming of this parasite by Alcide Railliet (1885 and 1895) is explained in Dupouy-Camet (2015), which also demonstrates that a rise in frequency of publications in the 1860s was due to Virchow’s and Zenker’s explication of the parasite cycle with its connection to human disease and that a second rise in the 1880s was a result of the trade war between Europe and the United States over American pork.

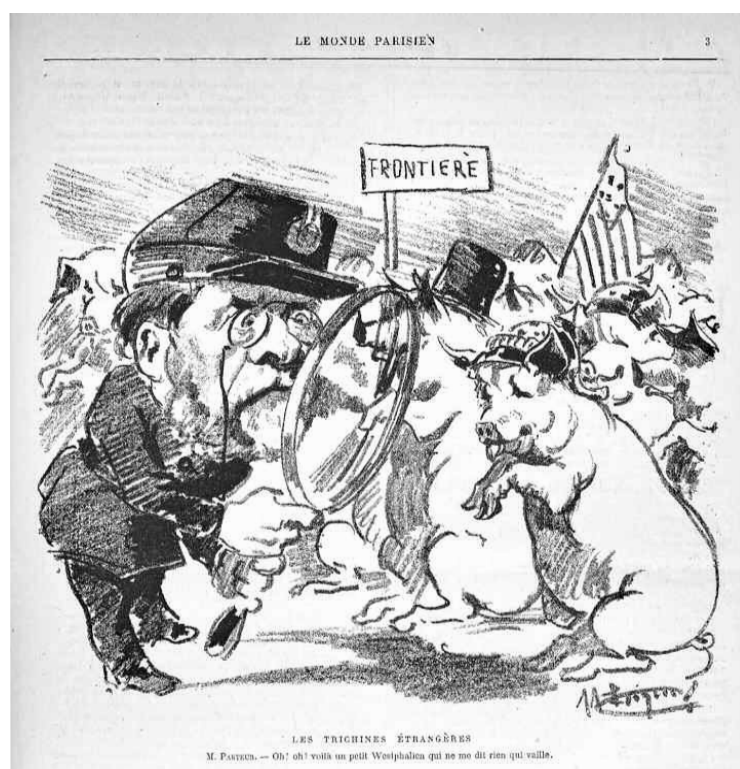
From the 1860s onward, the public health authorities, especially in Germany and France, investigated intense, if highly localized epidemics in Germany. In 1866, a French physician (Auguste Louis Delpech) and a French veterinarian (Jean Reynal) traveled to Germany to study the problem and meet with leading scientists there. The first major outbreak in France was in 1878. An epidemic in Emersleben in 1883 prompted the French Minister of Commerce to send two leading French physicians, Paul Brouardel and Jacques-Joseph Grancher, to Saxony to investigate (Dupouy-Camet 2021).

But concern for the disease extended beyond the world of science and medicine, becoming a political issue in France and the United States. On many occasions, the French National Assembly debated whether to inspect, restrict, or prohibit the importation of American pork<sup>7</sup>. These debates and investigations were widely reported not only in scientific and medical journals, but also in general newspapers and government publications, ranging from “*La Gazette de France*” to “*Le Monde Pittoresque*.”<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, the question of how best to combat the risk of trichinosis became a concern for the general population, and it was much discussed in the popular press. At times, France and some other European countries resolved to ban the import of any pork from the United States (Spiekermann 2010). Such a policy had major effects on French consumers and on American agriculture. In 1880, for example, France imported 34,200 metric tons of salt pork from the United States, accounting for 89% of its total salt pork imports. In 1882, this collapsed to 4 metric tons (Zylberman 2004, p. 7).

Given the strength of agriculture in both France and Germany, the huge imports of American pork may seem odd. After all, pigs can be raised with little work or investment since they eat everything and can feed themselves on fallen acorns or apples, food scraps, fecal matter, and any kind of food crop that's not protected with a fence. In some 19th century cities like New York, pigs roamed freely. Yet, pigs that forage for themselves usually do not fatten themselves well for slaughter, partly because they burn calories as they wander and partly because they do not necessarily overeat, despite their reputation for gluttony. Fattening pigs successfully for the commercial market requires providing a large amount of high calorie food and keeping them in small, but clean pens to minimize exercise. Their feed is costly, and it was only a very large supply of cheap corn in the Midwestern United States starting in mid-century that made it feasible to raise pigs for a commercial market (Mandravelis 2018, pp. 165-166).

In the United States, many farmers, newspaper editors, and legislators demanded that President Arthur take action against France, leading to an exclusion of French wine. Such bans and tariffs raised anger in both countries and generated not only headlines, but also many examples of political cartoons and caricatures.



See, for example, Louis Pasteur with a magnifying glass at the German border checking a group of marching pigs for trichinae, captioned “The foreign trichinae. Pasteur, oh! oh! there’s a little Westphalian who tells me nothing worthwhile” (“*Les trichines étrangères. M. Pasteur, ‘Oh! oh! voilà un petit Westphalien qui ne me dit rien qui vaille’*”) in “*Le Monde Parisien*” of 6 May 1882 (Luque 1882, p. 3) (Figure 5). It seems possible that Torrents or one of his friends might have seen this very caricature and even had it in mind when planning the trichina painting’s composition, but evidence for this would be hard to find. The plausibility is enhanced if we keep in mind that Torrents had a special interest in pictorial magazines, as he had studied wood engraving during his years in Rome and had produced drawings for the magazine “*L’Art : revue hebdomadaire illustrée*” in 1880. Additionally, he might well have been personally acquainted with the artist of this caricature, Manuel Luque de Soria, from common artistic circles, since both had family origins in Spain and long careers in France.

**Figure 5.** Manuel Luque de Soria, “Les trichines étrangères,” printed caricature in “*Le Monde Parisien*,” 06.05.1882 (p. 3). Crédit Gallica, Bibliothèque nationale de France

7- For more on the scientific and public-health policy developments, see the following publications, listed in chronological order: Chatin (1883); Stanziani (2003); Zylberman (2004); Olmstead & Rhode (2018); Dupouy-Camet & Hueber (2021); Dupouy-Camet (2022); Dupouy-Camet (2024).

8- Rambosson (1881, p. 3), and Simplicie (1884) in the sensationalist weekly, *Le Monde pittoresque* (27 July 1884, pp. 52–53). The name *Le Monde pittoresque* appeared in some issues of this newspaper, which the BnF catalogues under the more common title of *Le Monde inconnu*.

The essay in “*Le Monde Parisien*” (Du Bareau 1882) that presents this cartoon is a typical exercise in the satire of politicians. It uses Pasteur’s elevation among the immortals of the French academy simply as an opening hook to mock ailments that spread among politicians, such as “electoral fever” (*la fièvre électorale*) and “leprosy of radicalism” (*la lèpre radicale*), some of them caused by contagions with microbes such as “typhus of secularization” (*le typhus laïcisateur*) and “priestophobia” (*la prêtrephobie*). The large drawing fills the upper two-thirds of page 3, full width. “Du Bareau” has not been identified and is probably a pseudonym.

On the very same day, another popular French weekly, “*La Caricature*,” ran a satirical cartoon in color about trichina epidemics on its cover, “The large pornography epidemic: Male trichinosis” “*La grande épidémie de pornographie : La trichinose de l’homme*,” drawn by the famous caricaturist Albert Robida<sup>9</sup>. The cartoon features four fashionably dressed pigs. Here, “pornography epidemic” refers to the proliferation of filthy journals due to a recent liberalization of restrictions on the press. Trichinosis, “the virus of pornography,” has now infected men, but pigs resist the accusation that they have caused the epidemic (Robida 1882). Neither of these caricatures had anything to say about Louis Pasteur or about trichina. Yet, because both the man and the ailment were so often in the news, their names could be used to launch social commentary on other subjects.

Although Pasteur’s contributions to germ theory were both significant and well known, he did not undertake any research on trichina. He did, however, use it for an analogy in some speeches in 1877 and 1878. In a presentation at the Academy of science on anthrax and septicemia, he said<sup>10</sup>:

*En résumé, le charbon doit être appelé aujourd’hui la maladie de la bactériémie, comme la trichinose est la maladie de la trichine, comme la gale est la maladie de l’acarus qui lui est propre.*

In short, anthrax must today be called the disease of the bacteridia, like trichinosis is the disease of the trichina, like scabies is the disease of the acarus which is specific to it.

Pasteur’s phrasing shows that as early as the 1870s, he regarded the causal association between the cysts found in meat and a specific human illness as a common fact well known to the general public. Another indication of the public’s awareness of scientific attention to trichina, even as early as the 1860s, is that French instrument makers sold basic microscopes, which they advertised as “*Le trichinoscope*.”<sup>11</sup>

## ANOMALIES THAT CHALLENGED THE HYPOTHESIS

Yet, despite the painting’s apparent relationship to these artistic, scientific, and cultural contexts, it presented several anomalies that puzzled me. First, if painted in 1885, it predated the innovative painting that I believe created an opening for creating large canvases of a scientist at work, Edelfelt’s “Pasteur” (Weisberg & Hansen 2015). Second, I could identify no physician or veterinary surgeon in Marseille who had written about trichina, let alone made a discovery worth celebrating. Third, trichinae were known to be visible only under a microscope, not through a magnifying glass, nor were they found on the skin. Surely any researcher who had to sit posing for the artist for many hours would have insisted (as did Pasteur to Edelfelt) on choosing accoutrements for the image that made scientific sense. Furthermore, the magnifying glass is so puny and impotent when juxtaposed to the glowing pinkish-gold skin of the corpulent cadaver that it risks prompting a smile or even a laugh from viewers.

One aspect of the painting that might seem anomalous to some today is that the researchers do not wear laboratory coats. That judgment, however, would be anachronistic. In the 1880s, both in the laboratory and in the clinic, professionals were still wearing dark frock coats or sack suits, the near-universal non-formal attire for a wide range of business and professional men, as seen in the paintings of Pasteur, Péan, and Bernard above. Generally, it was only technicians, artisans, and tradesmen who wore white coats before the 1890s when some surgeons and chemists began to wear whites. Similarly, in many paintings of artists in the studio, the artist wears a dark suit even if his assistants, who might be cutting or polishing marble for example, wear light-colored jackets<sup>12</sup>.

## WHAT THE CRITICS WERE SAYING

In this era, the Paris Salon, held each spring, was the major fine arts event in all of Europe. This very large exhibit with thousands of works of art generated catalogues and other publications, notices in the weekly pictorials like “*L’Illustration*,” as well as lengthy reviews in the magazines of art such as “*L’Art*,” “*L’Artiste*,” “*Gazette des beaux-arts*,” and even “*Revue des deux mondes*.”

9- As editor, Robida sometimes published drawings by Luque in this journal (Doré 2014, p. 297).

10- Pasteur, *Œuvres* 6, « Charbon et septicémie » séance du 9 juillet 1877, pp. 172-188, with quotation on p. 174. He used the same analogies in comments at the Academy of Medicine in March 1878 (*Œuvres* 6, p. 194).

11- A promotional booklet from the manufacturer is illustrated in Dupouy-Camet (2015, p. 417); and a photograph of such a device may be found at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.26403273> (accessed 13.10.2025).

12- In American painting, the change in attire is exemplified in the two great paintings by Thomas Eakins of students in an amphitheater observing a surgeon perform an operation. In the 1876 *Gross Clinic*, Dr. Gross and all his assistants wear dark suits with no lab coat or apron; in the 1889 *Agnew Clinic*, the operators all wear white coats.





In the art journals, I found only a single review of this painting in “L’Artiste” (quoted below). It was mentioned or briefly discussed, however, in Salon reviews of at least four general Parisian newspapers. The comments in “Gil Blas” are quoted shortly below (Fouquier 1886). “L’Écho de Paris” simply listed it among paintings in Salle VIII (Georget 1886). “Le Rappel” listed it with a simple description, “Again, a very fat pig, killed, lying on a table. Four men are looking at it” “Encore un cochon fort gras, tué, étendu sur une table. Quatre hommes le contemplant.” This article noted that the exhibit included 4,600 works of painting and sculpture, and that perhaps 5,000 other submissions had been refused (Gautier 1886). “Le Voltaire” mentioned it only in a list (Marx 1886). The comments published in two Marseille newspapers will be discussed below. “Gil Blas” commented as follows.

*Certains portraits composés nous serviront de transition naturelle pour arriver aux tableaux de genre. Recherches sur la trichine, de M. Torrentz [sic], est une grande toile, pleine de mérite, où l’on voit des savants en train d’expérimenter sur un porc. Le diable est que ce porc, par son ton adorable, rose tendre, tire à lui l’œil et remporte je ne sais quelle victoire de coloris sur les humains qui l’entourent. Il eût fallu cacher à moitié cette belle nature morte pour garder l’intérêt aux figures (Fouquier 1886).*

Some group portraits will serve as a natural transition to arrive at the genre paintings. Research on Trichina by M. Torrentz [sic] is a large canvas, full of merit, where we see scientists experimenting on a pig. The devil is that this pig, with its adorable, soft pink tone, draws the eye to itself and achieves with its color a kind of dominance over the humans who surround it. It would have been necessary to cover half of this beautiful still life to keep the interest in the figures.

Comments by famous art critic Charles Ponsonailhe in “L’Artiste” similarly indicate that Parisians took the canvas and its title at face value as a sincere display of painterly skill. None of these critics shows any suspicion that the work does not portray actual men of science. Furthermore, trichina, the subject of the research, receives no comment or explanation from them, thereby acknowledging that scientists’ concern for trichinae in pork was a familiar topic of public discussion at the time. Here is what Ponsonailhe wrote.

*Je rencontre du cirage, mais aussi de jolis tons roses, de la brutalité, mais rachetée par une grande fierté de brosse dans les Recherches sur la trichine, de M. Stanislas Torrents. Et puisque j’en suis aux maîtres qui aiment à jouer avec le noir, à étudier sa gamme de valeurs, à le dégrader, à le doser de lumière, je parlerai tout de suite de Ribot, Henner et Louis Deschamps (Ponsonailhe 1886).*

I discern black shoe polish—but also pretty pink tones—brutality—but redeemed by a great pride of brush in Research on Trichina by M. Stanislas Torrents. And since I am talking about masters who like to play with black, to study its range of values, to degrade it, to dose it with light, I will speak immediately of Ribot, Henner, and Louis Deschamps (Ponsonailhe 1886)

A modern scholar of Provençal art, Jean-Roger Soubiran, offered similar praise of Torrents’ work and called attention to some characteristic features of his paintings. Given the dearth of other scholarly discussion of Torrents, a few passages may be quoted at length, including text he recovered from historical sources (Soubiran 1995). The first paragraph here is quoted by Soubiran; it was written by Louis Brès and appeared in 1880 in a Marseille newspaper (Brès 1880, p. 55).

*“M. Torrents n’est l’élève de personne [...]. Il pourrait, comme Courbet, s’intituler élève de la nature [...]. Nous croyons d’ailleurs que c’est dans la fréquentation des vieux maîtres espagnols qu’il a appris à voir la nature. Il y a acquis une harmonie forte et fière, une énergique sincérité, une ampleur magistrale d’exécution, une admirable entente de l’effet. De la partie littéraire de son sujet, M. Torrents se soucie médiocrement. Ce qui lui importe, c’est le motif pittoresque, c’est le choix des figures et leur fidèle interprétation, c’est la qualité des fonds, c’est l’éclairage. Ne voulant peindre que ce qu’il a sous les yeux, que les modèles qui s’offrent à lui, il nous montre des ouvriers dans leur milieu habituel, et il le fait en artiste pour qui la figure humaine, quelque humble et déshéritée qu’elle soit, est un motif suffisamment intéressant.”*

“Mr. Torrents is not the student of some teacher [...]. He could, like Courbet, call himself a student of nature [...]. We believe, moreover, that it was in his encounters with the old Spanish masters that he learned to see nature. There he acquired a strong and proud harmony, a forceful sincerity, a masterful breadth of execution, an admirable understanding of effect. Mr. Torrents cares little for the literary part of his subject. What matters to him is the pictorial elements, the choice of figures and their faithful interpretation, the quality of the backgrounds, the lighting. Wanting to paint only what he has before his eyes, only the models that present themselves to him, he shows us workers in their usual environment, and he does so as an artist for whom the human figure, however humble and disadvantaged it may be, is a sufficiently interesting subject.”



Here are Soubiran's own comments on Torrents.

*Né à Marseille d'une famille espagnole, Stanislas Torrents (1839-1916) est une des figures les plus originales de la scène artistique locale. Un séjour à Barcelone [...] ranime l'instinct de sa race. Ce peintre a l'âme ardente, brosse des loqueteux comme Ribera et vit comme un ascète dans une remise transformée en atelier encombré de squelettes et d'objets religieux. Du recueillement dans ce sanctuaire surgissent des confréries entières de moines et de capucins peints d'un seul jet, d'un pinceau décisif. Torrents semble d'un trait joindre le naturalisme moderne à l'art des vieux maîtres et restaurer la continuité de la tradition. La puissante âcreté de sa peinture déconcerte, étonne puis ravit ses contemporains. À ce Marseille habitué aux marines ensoleillées de gaieté, aux touches chatoyantes, il oppose la funèbre autorité des noirs couleur de suie, il ose montrer des constructions solides, des plans simples, d'une armature presque brutale. La facture fougueuse et la pâte nourrie, empruntées à Franz Hals, le modelé heurté, l'éclairage frontal accusent les tourments de psychologies nerveuses, de natures emportées (p. 56). Plus insoutenable nous apparaît aujourd'hui Recherches sur la trichine, exposé au Salon de 1886 (p. 56).*

Born in Marseille to a Spanish family, Stanislas Torrents (1839–1916) was one of the most original figures on the local art scene. A stay in Barcelona [...] rekindled the instinct of his race. This painter had a fiery soul, painted ragged people, as Ribera did, and lived like an ascetic in a shed transformed into a studio cluttered with skeletons and religious objects. From meditation in this sanctuary emerged entire brotherhoods of monks and Capuchins, painted in a single stroke, with a decisive brush. Torrents seemed to combine modern naturalism with the art of the old masters and restore the continuity of tradition. The powerful acidity of his painting disconcerted, astonished, and then delighted his contemporaries. To this Marseille, accustomed to seascapes sunny with gaiety and shimmering brushstrokes, he contrasts the gloomy authority of soot-colored blacks, daring to show solid constructions, simple plans, with an almost brutal framework. The fiery style and rich texture, borrowed from Franz Hals, the jerky modeling, and the frontal lighting reveal the torments of nervous psychologies and impulsive natures (p. 56).

*Research on Trichina*, exhibited at the 1886 Salon, today seems less bearable to us [than to viewers at that time] (p. 56).

At this point, Soubiran quoted a passage from a Paul Bélière article of 1886, discussed below, about the identities of the figures. Then he continued as follows.

*Torrents s'inscrit ici dans le courant de scènes réalistes présentées dans les intérieurs d'hôpitaux pour montrer une des formes de l'activité scientifique. À la suite de Feyen-Perrin qui, se souvenant de La Leçon d'anatomie de Rembrandt, avait réuni les images des internes de la Charité dans leur salle de garde, il groupe des portraits à la manière des tableaux de corporation, fort en usage dans la Hollande du siècle d'or. Avec leurs habits sombres et sévères, ces hommes rapprochés, qui ceinturent la truie rose et nue, offerte sur cet autel sacrificiel, sous-tendent, dans le malaise du rapport nu/vêtu, la morbidité d'un érotisme obscène. La postérité d'une telle œuvre se trouve—l'indécence en moins—au Salon de 1890 dans Une Leçon de manipulations chimiques à la faculté de Médecine par Laurent-Gsell ou Après l'opération, exécuté par Bisson pour l'hôpital Necker.*

Torrents is here part of the movement of realistic scenes presented in hospital interiors to show one of the forms of scientific activity. Following Feyen-Perrin who, remembering Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson*, had gathered images of the Charité's interns in their on-call room, he groups portraits in the style of guild paintings, very common in Holland during the Golden Age. With their dark and severe clothes, these men, who move in close to encircle the pink and naked sow offered on this sacrificial altar, underline, in the unease of the naked/clothed relationship, the morbidity of an obscene eroticism. The posterity of such a work can be found—minus the indecency—at the Salon of 1890 in *A Lesson in Chemical Manipulation at the Faculty of Medicine* by Laurent-Gsell or *After the Operation*, executed by Bisson for the Necker Hospital.

When Soubiran writes of “the unease of the naked/clothed relationship, the morbidity of obscene eroticism,” we cannot help wondering if he might have in mind Gervex's 1887 canvas shown above in Figure 3, or perhaps “The Anatomist” painted by the Austrian Gabriel von Max in 1869 (Munich: Neue Pinakotek) or the 1890 painting of a *post-mortem* examination by the Spaniard Enrique Simonet, sometimes titled “And she had a heart?” (Museo del Prado, on deposit at Museo de Málaga). For more on these paintings and others, see Jordanova (1989), Ferrer Álvarez (2009), Danzker (2011), and Hunter (2016).

## A DISCOVERY SOLVES PROBLEMS AND SUPPORTS A NEW INTERPRETATION

Eventually, my investigation paid off when I found key new information in one of the two Salon reviews published by Marseille newspapers, a discovery that resolved the puzzling anomalies in ways far different from what I might have suspected. One article devoted a section to very brief listings of the Salon's artists from southern France, including “M. *Torrents*, Stanislas, né à Marseille,



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<http://www.academie-veterinaire-defrance.org/>



*Recherches sur la trichine et Tête d'homme*" (Anonymous 1886b, Les méridionaux).

But far more significant are the comments published in early March in a longer article by an unknown art critic about a number of works that he had seen before they were sent to Paris for exhibition in the Salon in May. This review, "Submissions to the Salon," was published in a local newspaper "*Le Sémaphore de Marseille*" (Bélière 1886). The article was signed by Paul Bélière, a name I have not been able to find in any other newspaper or library catalogue, which suggests it might be a one-time pseudonym. This reviewer praised the Torrents canvas, but then commented on the men's identities, offering a completely different reading of the painting—one that rings true, even if it does not tell us all we might want to know. His remarks contain a key to unlock the puzzle of this painting.

*Dans les ateliers, nous avons eu la bonne fortune de voir quelques ouvrages dont notre public se fut certainement régalé aux vitrines de la rue Saint-Ferréol<sup>13</sup>. Mais le temps pressait et les artistes ont dû brûler cette première étape. Le tableau de M. Torrents, « Recherches sur la trichine, » ne peut manquer d'avoir un vif succès auprès du public et des artistes. Imaginez une arrière-boutique de charcutier où git sur une table de pierre un énorme cochon éventré, le groin barbouillé de sang. Autour de l'animal, des messieurs en paletots de fourrures et chapeaux de soie se pressent curieusement. L'un d'eux tient une loupe sur la partie la plus charnue de l'animal. N'oublions pas le charcutier debout, le couteau à la main. Ainsi s'explique le titre du tableau. La lumière tombe en nappe sur l'animal et le fait en quelque sorte, par le contraste avec les tons sombres des vêtements des personnages, jaillir de la toile. On sait d'ailleurs comment peint M. Torrents, on connaît ce faire puissant, large et tout d'une coulée. La toile est vaste et il y a de l'air autour de ces figures grandes comme nature. Un curieux et fier tableau. Détail piquant! les trois observateurs si attentifs autour du cochon sont les portraits de trois artistes marseillais, un sculpteur, un peintre d'animaux et un peintre de paysages. Devinez? (Bélière 1886).*

In the workshops, we were fortunate enough to see some works that our public would certainly have enjoyed in the windows of Rue Saint-Ferréol<sup>13</sup>. But time was pressing, and the artists had to rush this first step. Mr. Torrents' painting, "*Research on Trichina*," is sure to be a resounding success with both the public and the artists. Imagine a butcher's back room where an enormous, disemboweled pig lies on a stone table, its snout smeared with blood. Around the animal, gentlemen in fur coats and silk hats are examining it with curiosity. One of them is holding a magnifying glass over the meatiest part of the animal. Let's not forget the butcher standing there, knife in hand. This explains the painting's title. The light falls in a sheet on the animal and, in contrast with the dark tones of the figures' clothing, makes it, as it were, leap out from the canvas. We know how Mr. Torrents paints, we know this powerful, broad, flowing style. The canvas is vast and there is air around these life-size figures. A curious and proud painting. A piquant detail! The three attentive observers around the pig are the portraits of three Marseille artists, a sculptor, an animal painter, and a landscape painter. Are you guessing? (Bélière 1886).

Since the writer seems to be sharing information, not offering just a hypothesis, his assertion that the portraits show artists, not doctors or scientists, needs to be taken seriously. I find it compelling because it largely resolves the observed anomalies. If we have a playful group portrait of fellow artists, the magnifying glass no longer needs explanation because it is simply a handy prop to reinforce the title "*recherches*." If this is an intentionally amusing depiction of *Recherches sur la trichine*, we no longer need to identify scientists in Marseille who worked on trichines. If this is a painting celebrating friends rather than a commissioned portrait, it is no longer surprising that the artist did not sell it, but kept it for himself. In his studio or home, it may well have remained an endearing joke with his friends.

This new interpretation completely changes all assumptions about the intentions of the artist and the meaning of the painting. In my view this is not a medical scene that happens to use artist friends as models for the scientist portraits. It is an artistic tour de force, in the manner of a Spanish "*bodegón*" with human figures that are joined to an impressively painted still-life. It is a virtuosic painted joke that pretends to render a scene taken from contemporary news. This is not to say the title is false or that the artist had no concern for the study of the trichina parasite, but rather that the newsworthy public health issue justified a dazzling still life of this pig and added another level of interest to the fanciful painting. We might call it a "*caprice*" or "*capriccio*," borrowing the term from music, where it indicates a work of light-hearted fancy. And, as explained below, the painting also makes a number of clever and irreverent references to famous masterpieces of the Baroque era.

Reflecting on the ways that the painting referred to contemporary life in playful or humorous ways, it should be acknowledged that according to a dictionary of French slang published in 1866, "*une trichine*" could also mean "*une petite dame naturellement mêlée à toutes les cochonneries sociales, et qui peut empoisonner les imprudents qui la consomment la trouvant appétissante*" ("a little lady naturally mixed up in all the social filth, and who can poison imprudent men who, finding her appetizing, devour her") a possible connection first mentioned by Dupouy-Camet (2015, p. 413). Because it is hard to know when and where this usage was common, it might not have been familiar to Torrents and his circle. Additionally because none of the visible elements in the painting

13- Displaying a new painting in a shop window on a popular street was a common form of publicity at the time. While do I not know of any visual record of the shops on rue Ferréol in Marseille, this kind of display was illustrated in a contemporary Catalan painting, "*Exposición pública de un cuadro*" (1888) by Joan Ferrer Miró. An image is accessible at <https://www.museunacional.cat/es/coleccion/exposicion-publica-de-un-cuadro/joan-ferrer-miro/010798-000> (accessed 13.10.2025).



offers any clue to support this interpretation, I do not think it is plausible to regard it as relevant.

My interpretation of the painting's playfulness, it must be acknowledged, differs from the view of the art historian Jean-Roger Soubiran, an expert on Provençal art, whose essay included the comments by Bélière quoted above. Notably, Soubiran likened this painting to two sober depictions of doctors at work, "*Après l'opération*" by Édouard Bisson and "*Une leçon de manipulations chimiques à la Faculté de médecine*" by Lucien Laurent-Gsell (both in the 1890 Salon). For Soubiran, this canvas was simply a naturalistic depiction of a medical scene—even if artist friends had been used as models for the portraits.

## A LIGHT-HEARTED HOMAGE TO TWO BAROQUE MASTERS



del Prado. Used with permission

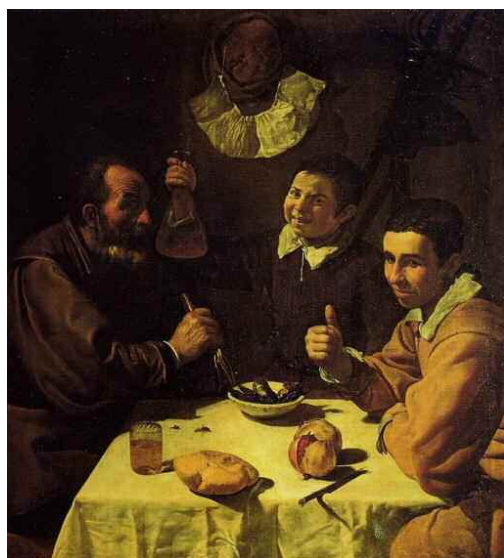
In contrast, I argue that, slyly masked by its scientific title, the canvas was not only a group portrait of Torrents with his friends but also a playful homage to two great painters, incorporating echoes and evocations of their paintings. Not simply depicting a gathering of friends as in many paintings of his era, Torrents made painterly references to two of the most famous group portraits of all time. Both of these large canvases were done two centuries earlier in the Baroque era. Consider first "*Las Meninas*" (1656) by the great painter of the Spanish Golden Age, Diego Velázquez (Verdi 2023) (Figure 6). Just as our painting, where the subject announced in the title "*La trichine*" cannot be seen in the painting (even with the magnifying glass used by the man on our left), "*Las Meninas*" has a title, "*The Maids of Honor*," which does not describe its main subject, namely the Infanta Princess Margaret Theresa, who is large and brightly lighted in the lower center. In our painting, the light shines strongly on the pale, but colorful skin of the pig. The pig and the princess are each the painting's center of attention for viewers, the bright object that seems almost to project itself out of the canvas.

**Figure 6.** Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez, "*Las Meninas*" (1656). Oil on canvas. 320 by 279 cm. (P001174). Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado © Photographic Archive Museo Nacional

In the 19th century, "*Las Meninas*" had become a very famous painting, known far beyond its home in Madrid, and many French artists like Édouard Manet knew it well, often making direct reference to it in their own paintings. Given its high reputation, sometimes regarded as the single greatest painting of all time, artists could refer to it, even humorously, without being disrespectful. And as a man from a Spanish family, Torrents must have known this painting very well.

Further echoes can be discerned between these two works. In both, the subject, a pig or a princess at the center, is left out of the title, which refers to people whose attention is focused on the visual center. Hence, we must think less about "*les recherches*" than about "*les chercheurs*," and thus the men portrayed. We must also note that, just as Velázquez famously included a self-portrait in "*Las Meninas*," it seems likely that Torrents has painted himself in this painting.

Although "*Las Meninas*" has more figures than our painting, they are all oriented to the bright centerpiece down in front, just like the men in Torrents' painting, and the back and sides of both rooms are painted obscurely in dark browns and blacks.



**Figure 7.** Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez, "*Tres hombres sentados a la mesa*" (1617). Oil on canvas. St. Petersburg, The Hermitage. Wikimedia Commons

Lastly, Torrents' work seems to be making direct reference to another group of works by Velázquez known as "*bodegones*" paintings which combine a still-life arrangement of foods and familiar objects with a group of figures who are connected by some unspecified narrative, like those observed in genre paintings. These paintings often carried allegorical, indirect, or amusing meanings. One useful example of a "*bodegón*" is "*Three Men at a Table*" (1617–1618) (Figure 7). Still-life paintings typically included pottery, glassware, metalware, and pieces of food—all objects that display the painters' skill in creating the illusion of varied surface textures and colors, the sheen of metal, and even the faint distortions and reflections created by water held in a glass. In a *bodegón* painting, the figures usually hover in the space between the inchoate darkness behind them and a spotlighted bright table in the foreground. Our trichina painting has the men engaged together in an investigation with the slaughtered pig as the still life, a genre called "*nature morte*" in French and "*bodegón*" in Spanish. Torrents has provided a wondrous illusion of its skin, hooves, and bloody snout all lying on a stone table, which is itself a tour de force of color variation revealing the slight translucency of the marble.



In a group portrait that Rembrandt painted in the time between Velázquez's "bodegones" and his "Las Meninas," we find another precedent for aspects of Torrents' trichina composition. Again, the work is by a Baroque master renowned for his use of the play of light and shadow. I am convinced that this painting was in the mind of Torrents and his friends when arranging themselves for their reiteration of Rembrandt's great and famous "Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Tulp" (1632) (Figure 8). It cannot be trivial that both groups show men leaning forward to direct their medical gaze at a well-lighted cadaver. The "Anatomy Lesson" is not only a superior work, it is also more elaborate with more figures than in our painting, and it depicts a specific moment of anatomical exploration. Still, they both show men in black (with one holding his hat against his body), posed against a vague background, and the men's attention is directed at the cadaver down front. Like the "Las Meninas," the "Anatomy Lesson" was widely known in France in the 19th century through engravings and even painted replicas. For example, in 1845, the Parisian artist Pierre-Félix Cottrau was commissioned to travel north and paint a large replica of this masterpiece. The painting arrived at the French Academy of Medicine in 1846, and it was prominently displayed in their assembly room in Paris (van Wijland 2020, pp. 18 and 163–165). Another indication of public awareness of this Rembrandt work is a second replica of the painting made by Léon Bonnat, the leading portrait painter in Paris, and exhibited in a short-lived museum of copies. This painting was also reproduced in a weekly, "Le Monde illustré." The magazine offered no information beyond this caption, "Beaux-Arts. Le musée européen au Palais de l'Industrie. La Leçon d'anatomie, tableau de Rembrandt, de Musée de La Haye, copie de M. Bonnat. Reproduction de M. Duwivier" (Bonnat 1873). For more about this new museum, see Auvray (1873).

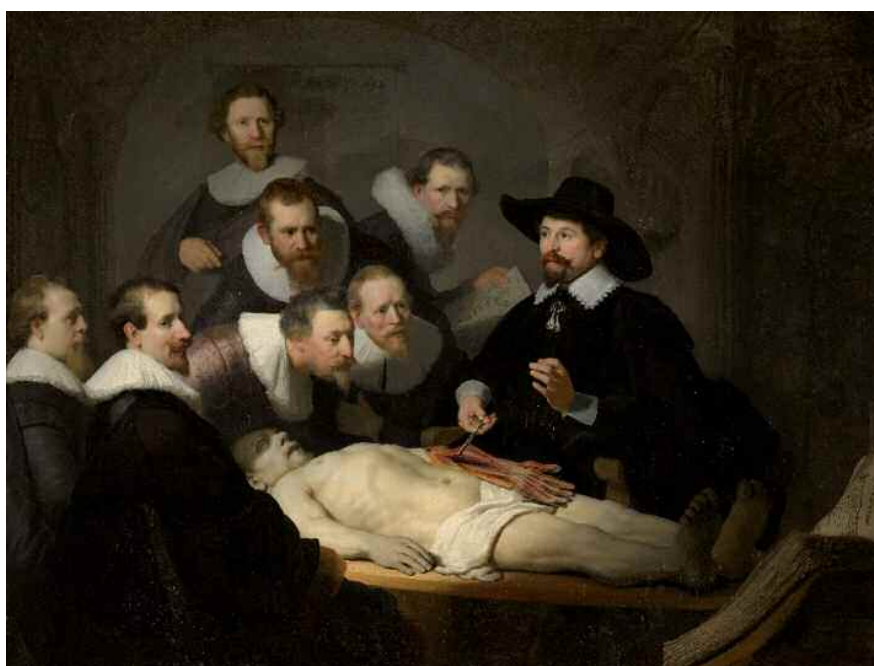


Figure 8. Rembrandt van Rijn, "La Leçon d'Anatomie du docteur Nicolaes Tulp" (1632). Oil on canvas. The Hague, Mauritshuis. Used with permission

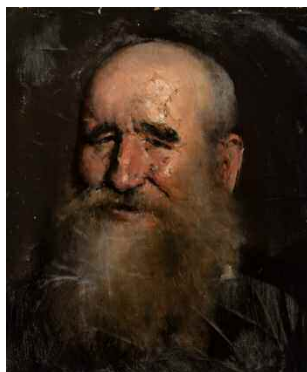
Another work by Rembrandt that is possibly relevant to our painting could have been known to Torrents or even studied by him. Yet it is hard to confirm that he was aware of an etching and drypoint, often called "Le Cochon" (1643), which is known to have been in the Louvre in his era, with original prints also found in collections of the Rembrandt House Museum in Amsterdam and the National Gallery in Washington, DC. (See Figure 15 below). Torrents had studied painting in Paris and printmaking in Rome, and, like most artists of the time, he undertook close study and copying of works of the old masters. This print might have been known to him, especially because Rembrandt's reputation experienced a surge in popularity in 19th century France (McQueen 2003). As seen below, the postures of Rembrandt's pig and Torrents' pig are similar, if reversed. Nonetheless, they differ in important ways that reflect the fact that breeding had changed domestic pigs' appearance in the three centuries between these portrayals. Probably reflecting the animals, they were observing first-hand, Rembrandt's creature is long, hairy, dark and alive; Torrents' is fatter, hairless, pink and dead.

## HYPOTHESES ON THE MEN IN THIS PAINTING

To complete an analysis of the canvas requires that we link the portraits to known artists in Marseille in that era. Although I must leave it to scholars with ready access to local sources and archives to confirm or correct the identities of the artists portrayed here, I am taking the liberty of suggesting some Marseille artists for consideration. Studies and exhibits of painters from Provence, including Marseille, are numerous. For an introduction, see Jirat-Wasiutynski (2007).

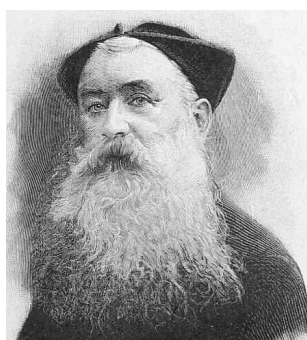






These identifications follow the order given by the reviewer, namely sculptor, animal painter, and then landscape painter, in a reading from left to right. First, on the far left, I believe we have a portrait of Philippe Poitevin, a Marseille sculptor (Saint-Maximin, Var, 1831; Marseille, 1907). (Figure 9) The portrait shown here was painted by Torrents himself.

**Figure 9.** Stanislas Torrents, “Le sculpteur Philippe Poitevin” (date unknown). © Marseille, musée des Beaux-arts/Claude Almodovar-Michel Vialle. Used with permission



The second figure from the left looks like it might be Auguste Nicolas Stanislas Vimar (Marseille 1851; Marseille 1916), renowned for paintings of animals, even if he portrayed many other subjects as well. I have not been able to find an image of him from the 1880s or one of any era that shows how his hair and his forehead meet. A widely reproduced photograph from about 1908 (Mariani 1893–1913, Tome XI) has his hair covered, but the eyes, the eyebrows, and the beard have some similarities to the second face in Torrents’ group portrait (Figure 10).

**Figure 10.** “Nicolas Stanislas Auguste Vimar.” Engraving from a photograph in *Figures contemporaines Album Mariani*, tome XI, Paris, 1908. Unsigned print. Public domain

For the third figure, the youngest of the three, leaning to our left and holding his hat under his arm, I have no confident identification to offer. If the order suggested by the critic Bélière holds, this man with a bushy moustache will be a landscape artist. The third figure has some resemblance to Torrents himself, but I believe that the fourth figure is much more likely to be a self-portrait of the artist.



The butcher on the far right is in my view an image of Torrents himself. Consider two of his many self-portraits<sup>14</sup> (Figures 11 and 12) This identification might be made with more confidence if one could find a photograph or depiction of Torrents without facial hair. Yet, I do not regard it as beyond the artist’s talent or inventiveness to paint his own face without a moustache for the key generative figure in the painting, the man who made the whole scene possible for the other three by slaughtering the pig and thus creating for them—and for us—the impressive “*nature morte*,” which is the focus of everyone’s attention. Additional support for the idea that the far-right figure is the artist comes from the fact that in the Velázquez painting, “Three Men at a Table” (Figure 7 above), the far-right figure in semi-profile with a finger extended (like the butcher’s knife here) is said to be a self-portrait.

**Figure 11.** Left-facing profile, Stanislas Torrents y de Amat, “Self-portrait of the Artist” (date unknown). Oil on canvas. Sold by the Galerie Tristan Le Pors in Rouen. Now in the collection of Matthieu Pierre. © Photo credit Matthieu Pierre. Used with permission



**Figure 12.** Stanislas Torrents, “Autoportrait.” (date and location unknown). Sold at auction 29.06.2013. It was listed as “Estanislao Torrents y de Amat. Lot 28: Stanislas Torrents (1836-1916) Autoportrait. Huile sur toile marouflée sur panneau. Signée en bas à droite. 19,5 x 14,5 cm.” by Leclerc-Maison de ventes, Marseille, France.

14- Both paintings seem to be in private collections. Fig. 11 is reproduced through the kindness of its current owner, Mr. Matthieu Pierre. Fig. 12 was listed as “Estanislao Torrents y de Amat. Lot 28: Stanislas Torrents (1836-1916) «Autoportrait. Huile sur toile marouflée sur panneau». Signée en bas à droite. 19,5 x 14,5 cm » by Leclerc-Maison de ventes, Marseille, France, June 29, 2013. The listing remains accessible at <https://www.invaluable.com/auction-lot/stanislas-torrents-1836-1916-autoportrait-huile-s-28-c-eb5e265f78?srltid=AfmBOorn-yaLNyuoLjpo7WL6amYQt8V3lwWjxPd5czygXf5a9hTeqiTo> (accessed 13/10/2025).





While it is possible that trichinosis research was never recorded in a painting, there is at least one realistic magazine illustration of this era (1881) that shows both the work of inspectors and their essential microscope. The image bears the title, “*Auf dem Fleischschau-Amt*,” or “At the Meat Inspection Office.” It appeared on the cover of a supplementary issue of “*Daheim: Ein deutsches Familienblatt mit Illustrationen*,” a general interest weekly published in Leipzig.<sup>15</sup> (Figure 13) The related story, which begins just below the image on p. 1 is entitled “*Der Kampf gegen die Trichine*” or “The Battle against the Trichinae” (Anonymous 1881)<sup>16</sup>.

**Figure 13.** Anonymous, “*Auf dem Fleischschau-Amt*,” or “At the Meat Inspection Office.” A newspaper woodcut illustration. Published in 1881 (probably during August) on the cover of a supplementary issue of “*Daheim: Ein deutsches Familienblatt mit Illustrationen*” (Leipzig). Public domain.

### HOW IT WAS DONE.



A quite different presentation of German meat inspectors was published by the American magazine of social and political humor, “*Puck*,” in a small anti-German cartoon (Anonymous, 06.02.1884). The caption reads, “How It Was Done. The style of microscopic investigations which must have been adopted by the Bismarckian examiner who found trichinae in American pork.” The cartoon mocks “Dr. Schweinkopf, Professor of Analysis” as a doddering figure, looking through a wine bottle at a small pig carcass on a laboratory bench (Figure 14). Of course, the name “Schweinkopf” is an expression in German slang for a foolish or pig-headed person.

**Figure 14.** Anonymous, “How It Was Done.” A newspaper woodcut cartoon. *Puck*, 06.02.1884, New York, p. 355. Public domain.

The style of microscopic investigations which must have been adopted by the Bismarckian examiner who found trichinae in American pork.

### OTHER PIGS IN THE FINE AND GRAPHIC ARTS

While living pigs were not rare in European paintings, appearing early as illuminations in medieval bestiaries, scenes of the months or seasons of the agricultural year, Books of Hours, and books on hunting. Later they made appearances in genre paintings and some landscapes. Some of these were wild boars being hunted, and some were farm-yard animals, yet both are similar in appearance, lean and hairy, with tall and narrow bodies, since domestication had not yet given them the familiar smooth, rounded shape of an animal that is fatter, shorter, less muscular, with little hair. In works of art, slaughtered pigs are far less common. Of the examples I have found, most of them hang with the ventral side completely open, and the inside of the rib cage is spread wide

<sup>15</sup>- I learned of this image from an article by Dupouy-Camet (2024).

<sup>16</sup>- The story is completed on p. 2. The exact date of this issue is uncertain, but it probably appeared in August 1881, since this is the cover of the First Daheim Supplement for Issue No. 31 in that year.



for the viewer. That is also the common arrangement for portraying slaughtered cattle—a view that emphasizes the object as butchered meat, rather than a formerly living animal. In the 19th century, formal animal portraits became popular, especially in the Anglo-American world, and many featured pigs. These are portraits of individuals and types, not action scenes, and for this reason, none seem to show slaughtered animals (Moncrieff 1996 and Mandravelis 2021).

I know of only two works of art with a pig lying on its side as in the Torrents painting, either butchered or readied for it. The earlier one is an etching and drypoint by Rembrandt van Rijn, 1643, found in the Rembrandt House Museum, Amsterdam, and in several other museums. This pig is lying quietly on its side with its legs tied; the lightly sketched farmer in the background is preparing to slaughter it. The print is usually called “*De Zeug*” (“*The Sow*,” or “*La Truie*”), but sometimes “*Le cochon*” or “*The Hog*” (Figure 15).



**Figure 15.** Rembrandt van Rijn, “*De Zeug*” (1643). Etching and drypoint, sheet (trimmed to plate mark): 14.5 x 18.1 cm. Credit Rosenwald Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Public Domain.

Early in the 20th century, the German artist Lovis Corinth created a small drawing in chalk and pastel on paper, “*Geschlachtetes Schwein*” or “*Slaughtered Pig*” in 1906-1907. Apart from the title, his drawing betrays no violence; the pig is benignly lying on a table with its head to our right like Torrents’ painting. This drawing is owned by the Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

Because it seems possible that Torrents met Courbet in Paris and might have studied with him, I note a few of his paintings that feature pigs. In the foreground of a large canvas, “*Les Paysans de Flagey revenant de la foire*” (ca. 1850, Musée des Beaux-Arts et d’Archéologie de Besançon), we see a small pig on a leash walking like a pet dog alongside the peasants returning from the market. In two small portrait-like works, Courbet painted a pig’s severed head resting upright on a tabletop, facing us as if nothing was odd. An undated painting by Courbet of the hairy head of a wild boar with its snout to the left is owned by the Brooklyn Museum, New York City. In another painting (location unknown), we encounter a wider, less hairy, pinkish pig’s face with its floppy ears falling forward partly covering its eyes. A color photograph was published by Mizelle (2011, p. 179), but with no further information than “*Gustave Courbet, A Pig’s Head*, 1869, oil on canvas.” The book’s list of photo acknowledgements omits this item. Notably, in the 1860s Thomas Couture, a major art teacher in Paris, created a small painting as a satire on realism, perhaps to mock Courbet as the most notorious realist painter in Paris. In “*La Peinture Réaliste*” we observe an artist drawing a pig’s head facing him, in the manner of students who learned to draw by rendering a piece of antique sculpture (1865, oil on panel, 56 x 45 cm, in the National Gallery of Ireland). With its pale skin and floppy ears, the head is not unlike the one in the unidentified Courbet painting in Mizelle’s book (just mentioned).

For the 19th- and early-20th-century graphic arts, both French and American, examples of pig imagery have been discussed at length in Garval (2015) and in Mandravelis (2018, Chapter 4). Neither work, however, records either a comic or a serious illustration of a slaughtered pig lying on its side. The paucity of artistic precedents for an image like ours suggests that Torrents probably worked on this canvas in a butcher shop.





## CONCLUSIONS

First, although some identification questions remain for further investigation, the general meaning and the historical significance of this canvas have been established. Second, while our historical research clearly shows that the men pictured in “*Recherches sur la trichine*” were not physicians and the scene is not a realistic portrayal of laboratory work on the parasite, we still have, nevertheless, a large, impressive work of art that was encountered in Paris by tens of thousands of viewers at the Salon and discussed by several art critics, all of whom beheld it as a scene of medical science. This public presence offers an impressive confirmation from the art world of just how much both the trichine parasite itself and its investigations by medical scientists were widely known to the French public in the mid-1880s.

Far more recently, the painting was chosen by a contemporary Marseille artist, Ali Cherri, for display among his own works at the Musée d’art contemporain in Marseille in an exhibition called “*Les Veilleurs*” (Figure 16). Its inclusion presents an amusing irony in the fact that this is indeed a painting of Marseille artists (though not recognized as such by Cherri or the museum). The catalogue states that “Humor is often present in the work of this Marseille painter of Catalan origin” (“*L’humour est souvent présent dans l’œuvre du peintre marseillais d’origine catalane*”), calling this a parody of Rembrandt’s “Anatomy Lesson” and claiming that “*Recherches sur la trichine*” gestures also to the work on infectious diseases being done in Torrents’ era by Louis Pasteur (Cherri 2025). At least two reviews of this exhibit singled the work out for its evocation of the Rembrandt work with no awareness that the true humor of the painting resides not in the enormous pig, but in its portrait of the Marseille artworld of 1885 (Anonymous 2025a; Anonymous 2025b).



**Figure 16.** Location photograph of Torrents’ “*Recherches sur la trichine*,” 09.09.2025, at the Musée d’art contemporain, Marseille, indicating visitor interest and the size of the canvas. © Cliché B. Hansen.



Because of this exhibition viewers are now able to discern what appears to be a microscope on a small table or stool at the right edge of the canvas, partly covered by the frame (Figure 17). This area is indistinct in the official photograph (above in Figure 1). But with strong gallery lighting, or perhaps some cleaning of the canvas for this display, one can make out a vertical brass tube mounted on a stand. If indeed this is a microscope, the device needed for seeing trichinae in slices of pork meat unlike the useless magnifying glass held by one of the men, it supports the painting’s title “*Recherches sur la trichine*.” Yet if that was Torrents’ intention, it is still puzzling why the instrument was left obscurely at the side rather than integrated into the composition. Such a detail reminds us that despite all we have learned about this fascinating painting, the work invites further study and analysis, as well as new research in archives to learn more about Torrents and his fellow artists. Perhaps it will be possible for someone to name the unidentified man.

**Figure 17.** Detail of lower right corner of Torrents’ “*Recherches sur la trichine*,” 09.09.2025, at the Musée d’art contemporain, Marseille, perhaps showing a microscope. © Cliché B. Hansen.



The continuing interest of Torrents' trichina painting about 140 years after it was painted lies not only in its substantial esthetic and cultural value as a striking and unique work of 19th century art, but also in reminding us how professional artists sometimes include jokes, personal relationships, and hidden references, even in such an expensive piece as this nearly life-size group portrait. This canvas, rich in messages and meanings both for art and science, clearly demonstrates the wide popular awareness of veterinary parasitology research in French culture as early as the 1880s.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

*The author declares he has no conflict of interest.*

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