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Sketch For The "Outpost Of The Hussars," Ca. 1868

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JEAN-LOUIS-ERNEST MEISSONIER
French, 1815–1891

50 *Sketch for the "Outpost of the Hussars,"* ca. 1868

Signed, lower center: monogram *E* (reversed) *M*
Oil on panel. 12¼" × 9⅛" (31.1 × 23.2 cm)
Museum Works of Art Fund. 54.174

PROVENANCE: Hôtel Drouot, Paris, Sale M. L. Tabourier, June 20–22, 1898, no. 39; H. M. Calmann, London, 1954.

EXHIBITION: New York, Shepherd, 1975, pp. 187–89 (no. 78, ill.).

PUBLICATION: RISD, *Museum Notes*, 1955, p. 15 (fig. 7).

RELATED WORKS: *Outpost of the Hussars* (first study for full composition), 1868, oil on panel, 11½" × 14" (29 × 36 cm), private collection. *Outpost of the Hussars (Petit poste de grand'garde)*, 1869, oil on panel, 10¼" × 14¾" (26 × 37.5 cm), Tarbes, Musée International des Hussards.

Meissonier first exhibited at the Salon of 1834. He specialized initially in small-scale, meticulously rendered genre scenes of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century gentlemen and cavaliers, typically reading, smoking, or playing cards in a tavern. Described enthusiastically by critics like Théophile

Gautier and purchased by financially and politically powerful collectors during the July Monarchy (until 1848) and Second Empire (1852–70), these works brought Meissonier considerable fame and prosperity. However, he aspired to paint significant history and in 1859 persuaded the government to convert a commission for a genre work into one for a military painting depicting the current emperor's campaign in Italy. The experience of producing *Napoleon III at the Battle of Solferino* (1864, Compiègne, Musée National du Château), however, disillusioned Meissonier about his ability to apply his method of careful research and exhaustive detail to contemporary events.¹ It would be for his pupil Edouard Detaille (1848–1912) and junior colleague Alphonse de Neuville (1835–1885) to record the life of modern French troops, creating battle paintings and military genre scenes whose popularity derived in part from French nationalist sentiment in the aftermath of the defeat by the Prussians in 1870.

Meissonier was an even more eminent contributor to the tradition of nationalist military painting, but he turned his talents almost exclusively to visualizing imagined moments from past French history. During the second Empire and then the Third Republic, he painted major scenes from the military career of Napoleon I (d. 1821), notably 1814, *The*



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Campaign of France (1864, Paris, Musée d'Orsay), 1807, *Friedland* (1875, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art), and 1805, *The Cuirassiers Before the Charge* (1878, Chantilly, Musée Condé). As well as these many-figured epic paintings he also produced smaller works depicting one or a few ordinary soldiers on guard or relaxing off duty.

The 1869 *Outpost of the Hussars* (fig. 1),² shown at the Universal Expositions of 1873 and 1878, in Meissonier's 1884 retrospective, and finally his posthumous exhibition of 1893,³ is one of the most important of such military genre paintings. Exhibiting the artist's celebrated skill at individualizing the character and mood of his figures, it focuses on four of Napoleon I's cavalymen as, dismounted but still encumbered by sabers and rifles, they savor a brief rest. One, leaning casually against his white horse, talks reflectively with a companion, while a third, his horse grazing, concentrates on lighting his pipe; farther back a fourth hussar leads his mount away. Meissonier, who was an avid horseman, paid particular attention not only to the poses and gestures of the men, but to rendering the horses accurately, working from models in his own stables. He was equally painstaking with military attributes: the uniforms are those of eighth regiment hussars around 1804, and featured are their distinctive dangling pouches (sabretaches) and sheepskin-covered saddles, and the mustaches and before-the-ear braids that were essential to the hussars' dashing appearance.

The Museum's panel, preparatory for the figure on the right and his horse, is the earliest surviving sketch for this painting. It exemplifies Meissonier's typical practice of making separate studies of individual figures, later copying them into the final composition. Here he defined the position of the horse generally, leaving the early outline of another leg centered between the final front and back pairs. He posed the hussar, shown three-quarters from the back, with his left hand resting backwards on his hip and grasping the hilt

of his long sword. He devoted his greatest effort to the brown horse's saddle, with its sheepskin cover and green roll, and the dark green uniform, trimmed in white, the pants striped with red and studded with glinting buttons. He gave special care to the cumbersome gear, notably the wide, buckled leather straps, the sabretache hanging from the belt, and great saber. Only dabs of brown in the lower right corner and a white smear setting off the horse suggest an environment.

The lower two-thirds of the panel is ruled into horizontal zones, numbered from one to six along the left edge. This sectioning facilitated Meissonier's copying the hussar and his horse to the first version of the full composition, a panel dated 1868 (fig. 2).⁴ The hussar and his horse appear on the right, slightly reduced in size and somewhat sketchier, especially the horse, but with identical pose and details. In the finished version, signed a year later, Meissonier recast the activity and position of the center figure and horse in the trio, thereby shifting the emphasis from the pipe-lighter to the comfortable conversation between the center and right hussars. Like the pipe-lighter, however, the right hussar and his horse remain little changed. Meissonier substituted a different hat, completed the horse's harness, and refined various details, but otherwise essentially recopied the Museum's sketch, in which the key features of the figure were already announced so representatively. C. C. H.

1. See Hungerford 1980.

2. *Petit poste de grand' garde* or *Halte de Hussards*, 1869 (Tarbes, Musée International des Hussards, no. D. 56.4.2; bequest of Alfred Chauchard to the Louvre, 1910, R. F. 1865; dépôt 1957). Illustrated in Gréard 1897, opp. p. 316.

3. Vienna, *Exposition Universelle*, 1873, no. 481; Paris, *Exposition Universelle*, 1878, no. 631; Paris, Georges Petit, 1884, no. 80; Paris, Georges Petit, 1893, no. 903.

4. Paris, Hôtel Drouot, sale Meissonier, May 13–20, 1893, no. 97; New York, Sotheby Parke Bernet, May 4, 1979, no. 282, and October 12, 1979, no. 321.



Fig. 1 Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier, *Outpost of the Hussars* (*Petit poste de grand' garde*), 1869, oil on panel, 10¹/₄" × 14³/₄" (26 × 37.5 cm), Tarbes, Musée International des Hussards. Photograph by Lapeyre.



Fig. 2 Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier, *Outpost of the Hussars* (first study for full composition), 1868, oil on panel, 11¹/₂" × 14" (29 × 36 cm), private collection.