

The vanishing of an artist: exploring the career of Giuseppe De Nittis

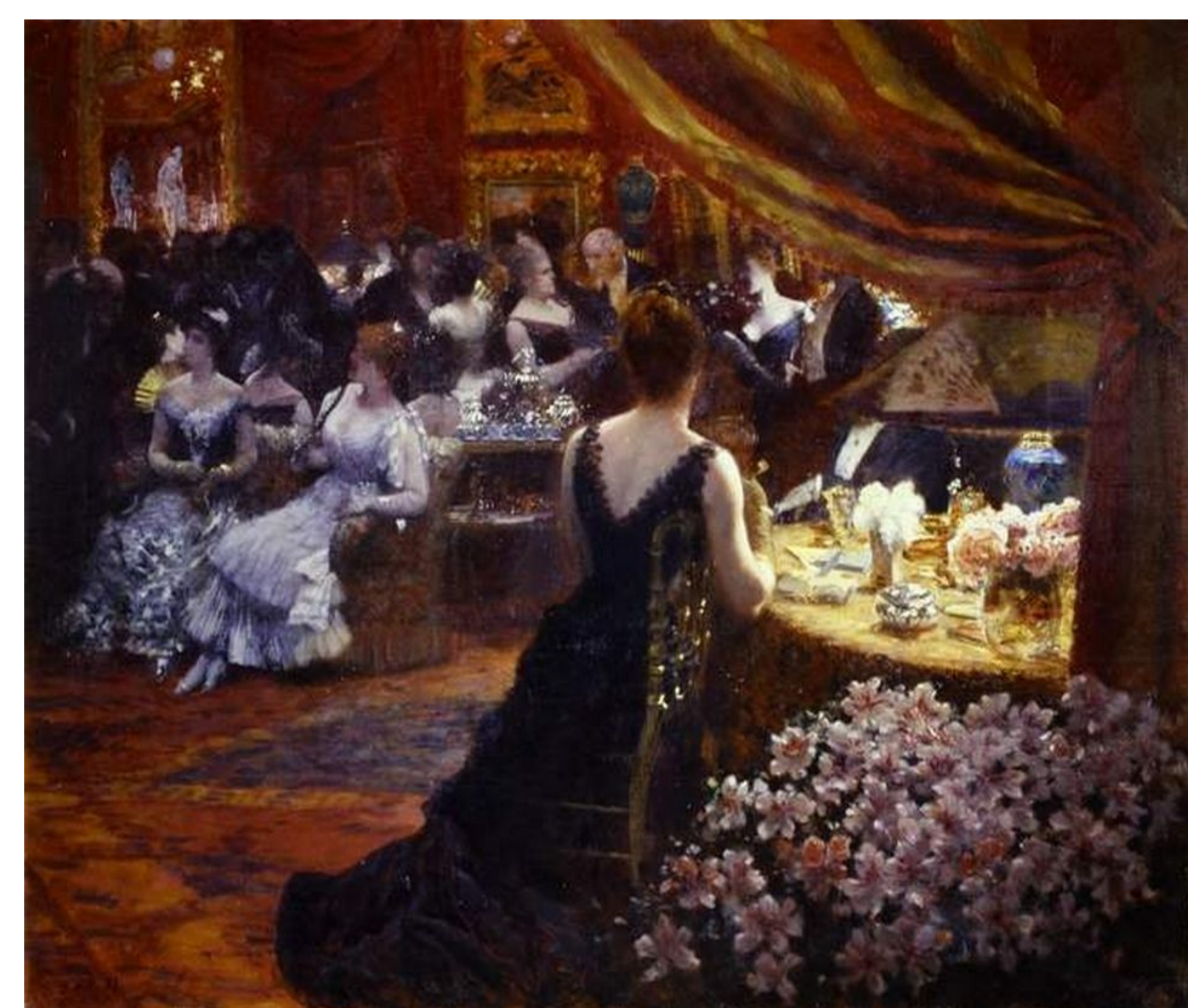
Aim: to expand the information available on the artist's career and life, and make it accessible in English to a wider audience.

The man, the artist

- ❖ "I was born in 1846 in Barletta, in the *Pouilles*." ¹ This is the first line of Italian painter Giuseppe De Nittis' memoirs *Notes et Souvenirs du Peintre Joseph De Nittis*. A key work for understanding the life of the artist, it was first published in 1894, and probably written by his wife, Léontine Gruvelle, who published many novels under the pseudonym of Olivier Chantal. Since 1913, the journal and the artist's correspondence are held in the archives of the Pinacoteca De Nittis, in Barletta, along with 146 paintings, 65 etchings and 150 books. This comprehensive collection is where I conducted my research.
- ❖ The choice of donating everything Léontine possessed by her husband to his native town shows the strong connection the painter and his family had with his homeland, also evident when looking at his production. The Apulian landscape was for De Nittis an endless source of inspiration. As art historian Christine Farese Sperken states, 'he can be considered the pioneer of a regional landscape art school', along with another Apulian painter, Francesco Netti from Santeramo in Colle, a school that flourished in the 1920s and survived until the end of the WWII.²
- ❖ De Nittis studied for less than two years, from 1861 to 1863, at the Istituto di Belle Arti in Naples. The turbulent relation with his professor and his strong and rebellious personality caused him to leave the school and spend some months in Calvizzano. There, he had the chance to study nature and colors *dal vero* and improve his drawing.
- ❖ In 1864, he exposed two works, both titled *L'Avanzarsi della Tempesta*, at the III Mostra della Società promotrice di Napoli. There he met the sculptor Adriano Cecioni, a lifelong friend, who described the painter as 'a short young man, smartly dressed, with quite a ugly face, but refined manners and look'.³



Autoritratto, Barletta, Pinacoteca De Nittis, 1883-4, pastel, 116x88 cm



Il Salotto della Principessa Matilde Bonaparte, Barletta, Pinacoteca De Nittis, 1883, oil on canvas, 73x91 cm

The Parisian *société*

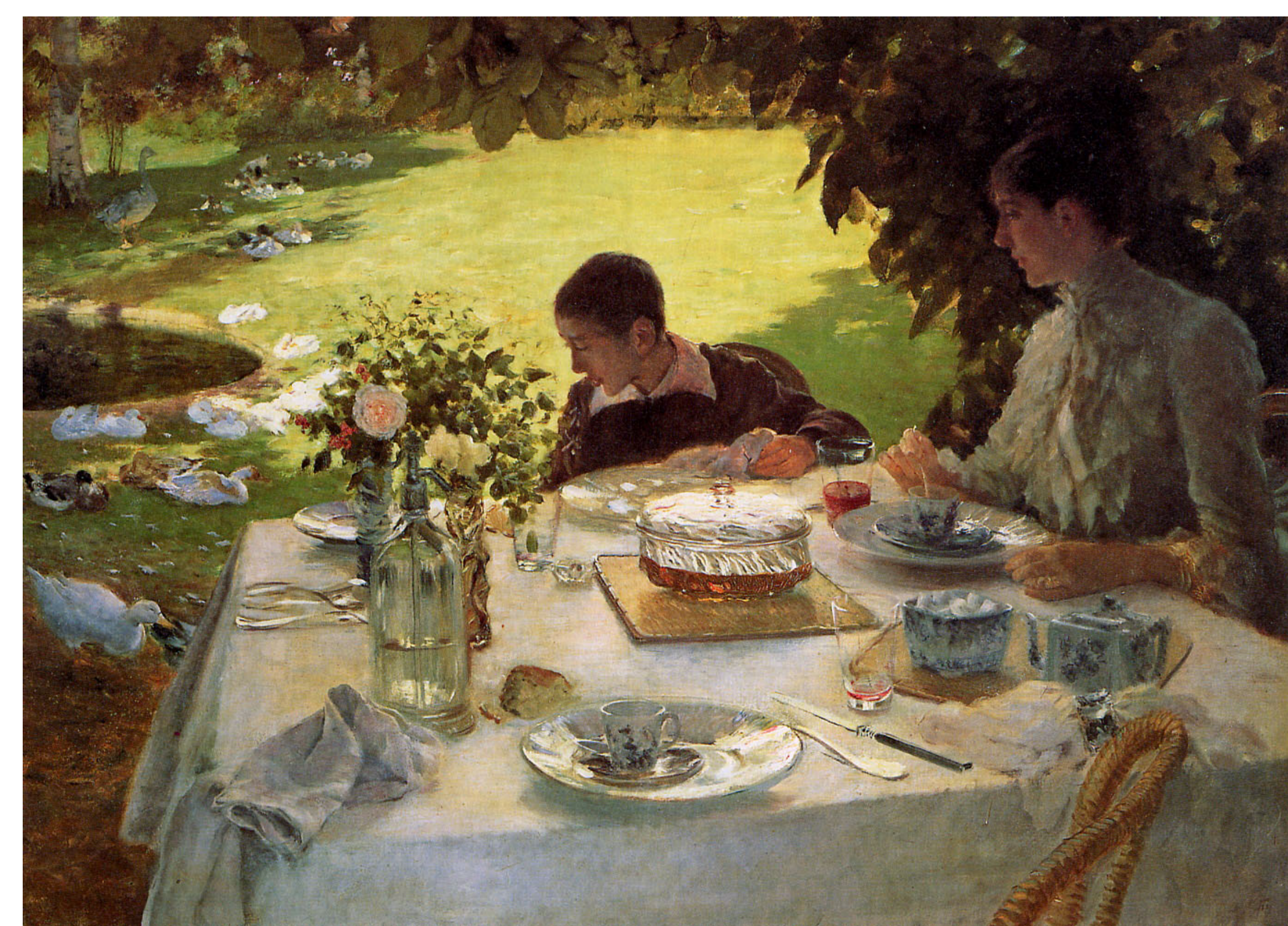
- ❖ In 1867 he travelled for the first time to Paris, where he stayed during August and September. He was immediately captured by the charm of the city, its richness and society. Thanks to his wit and charisma, De Nittis promptly managed to establish relationships with the most fashionable painters and art dealers, like Meissonier, Reitlinger and Goupil. The writer and author of the famous *Journal*, Edmond de Goncourt, also became a fundamental figure in the artist's life.
- ❖ In 1868, De Nittis established himself permanently in Paris. At first he considered Meissonier his role model, a painter who found his fortune as official artist of the Second Empire. Cecioni strongly criticized this decision, but it was not meant to last. It mainly seemed a way to introduce himself in the Parisian *société*, where De Nittis and his wife ultimately became prominent figures, as '*inviti del sabato*' show.
- ❖ The '*inviti del sabato*', or Saturday guests, saw some of the most illustrious personalities of the time. Dumas son, Zola, de Maupassant, Manet, Tissot, Degas, princess Mathilde Bonaparte, they all sat at the table of the Apulian artist, who loved to cook for his guests typical Italian dishes. De Goncourt writes that some collectors were willing to pay over fifty thousand Francs for one of his works, not so much for the inner pleasure of owning a painting, but to be obtain the privilege of being admitted to his house.⁴

- ❖ De Nittis married Léontine on the 29th April 1869.⁵ In 1905, Vittorio Pica, De Nittis main biographer, reported Léontine's words about her first meeting with the painter. She said: 'One day, in 1868, Peppino came to the Morins'. He had some trouble being understood. I could speak Italian, although not so perfectly, however it was enough to understand each other with joy [...]. When he went back to [...] Bougival, he said: today I met a young lady and, if I do not marry her, I will not marry at all.'⁶

- ❖ Reading De Nittis' journals in the archives of the Pinacoteca De Nittis it becomes apparent that the relationship between the two was intense and lively at the same time. In fact, he described it with the following words: 'We were two kids without any experience. We understood each other immediately. [...] I kept her all to myself; my love is jealous. But I also managed to be all to her. [...] She has been my companion, friend, model and wife. [...] I think she was entirely satisfied of her place in my life. And if I demanded that for her nothing could exist apart from me, I believe I made her happy anyway; and that's all that matters'.⁷

- ❖ On the 19th of July 1972, Léontine gave birth to Jacques, their only child, in the house of Vincenzo, De Nittis' eldest brother, in Naples. At his christening Gustave Caillebotte became Jacques' godfather.⁸ He would be the one to introduce the artist into the Impressionist circle, allowing him to show five of his works in the famous 1874 Nadar exhibition at Boulevard de Capucines.⁹

The loved ones



Colazione in Giardino, Barletta, Pinacoteca De Nittis, 1883-4, oil on canvas, 81x117 cm

Conclusion: the private aspect of De Nittis' life was strongly intertwined with his career. The artist, an especially clever and charismatic man, managed to find success everywhere along his path. His personality certainly facilitated the process, and it often got more recognition than his art. Nevertheless, the great esteem his colleagues had for him and the appreciation of the audience earned him a place in history.

References:

1. Giuseppe De Nittis, *Notes et Souvenirs du Peintre Joseph De Nittis*, p. 1
2. Christine Farese Sperken, *Giuseppe De Nittis, Da Barletta a Parigi*, p. 14
3. Farese Sperken, p. 21
4. Piero Dini, Giuseppe L. Marini, *De Nittis, la vita, i documenti, le opere dipinte*, p. 208
5. De Nittis, p. 30
6. Vittorio Pica, *Giuseppe De Nittis, l'uomo e l'artista*.
7. De Nittis, pp. 32-33
8. Michele Cristallo, *Giuseppe De Nittis, dall'ofanto alla senna*, p. 45.
9. Cristallo, pp. 49-50

(All translations are my own)