

Published on the occasion of the exhibition
A Romance with the Landscape: Realism to Impressionism
Organized by Janie M. Welker and Linda Stratford

EXHIBITION DATES

University of Kentucky Art Museum
Lexington, Kentucky
September 10–December 10, 2006

Huntington Museum of Art
Huntington, West Virginia
January 13–April 1, 2007

First printing
August 2006

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ISBN: 0-9779541-1-0
Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 2006903276
Distributed by the University of Washington Press, P.O. Box 50096, Seattle, WA 98145-5096
www.washington.edu/uwpress

Editor: Gerald Zeigerman
Design: Amy Berger, AB Graphics
Scans: Edgian Press, Inc.
Printed by API, Lexington, Ky.
Photography Credits: Michael Cavanagh, David Fattaleh, Kevin Montague, Mary Rezny

This exhibition and catalogue were made possible by a generous grant from the
Institute of Museum and Library Services, a federal agency.



Cover: Julien Dupré, *The Harvester* [detail], c. 1880–81, oil on canvas, 27½ x 21¼". Huntington Museum of Art, Huntington, W.Va.; Gift of Herbert Fitzpatrick.

Back cover: Julien Dupré, *In the Pasture (The Milk Maid)* [detail], 1883, oil on canvas, 54 x 79". University of Kentucky Art Museum, Lexington, Ky.; Transfer from the Carnahan Conference Center, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry H. Knight.

A Romance with the Landscape

REALISM TO IMPRESSIONISM



Organized by Janie M. Welker and Linda Stratford

UK UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY ART MUSEUM
Lexington, Kentucky

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FIGURE 10. Joseph-Louis-Hippolyte Bellangé, *The Return to the Village*, 1834, colored chalk on paper, 16¼ x 12¾". Courtesy of the Wenneker Collection.

French Identities in Landscape Imagery

LINDA STRATFORD

Given the range of pictorial motifs that are historically suggestive of political and social concerns, landscape would appear as rather *neutral* a subject. Trees, horizon, water, and sky suggest no overt programs of political action or social reform. In fact, the very absence of recognizably revolutionary messages may account for the genre's wide appeal. Landscape imaging in nineteenth-century France was provocative enough, however, to raise questions central to both artistic theory and practice, as well as national cultural identity, for the next century. Paintings of the French countryside that suggested an array of identities with the land and the figures within it lent to the national discourse a complexity grasped best in retrospect. In addition, images of the countryside evoked a sensuous response to nature that would challenge long-standing notions associated with fine art. The range of approaches found in French landscape painting reveals the lingering cultural weight of an *ancien régime*—aristocratic, agrarian, and Catholic—alongside newer social orders, and evinces emblematic associations with Old France pitted against impressions of this new sensuous immediacy. The coexistence of traditional, classical portrayals of French soil and inhabitants with more modern treatments may now be appreciated for the knotty discourse represented. Rising to the level of national cultural identification, it makes French landscape painting, in its various nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century manifestations represented in *A Romance with the Landscape: Realism to Impressionism*, more provocative and controversial than might be supposed, and more weighty in implications for French cultural identity and twentieth-century artistic practice than previously assumed.

French landscape painting at the beginning of the nineteenth century carried no exceptional promise; in fact, from its origins it had experienced a somewhat dubious reception. First taken up in the hexagon¹ in the seventeenth century by Nicolas Poussin (fig. 11) and Claude Lorrain, it was considered a "minor" genre, justified as an acceptable medium on the basis of what were viewed as suitably ennobling practices borrowed from such Italian masters as Annibale Carracci. As John Varriano has described, in comparing the work of seventeenth-century French landscapist Poussin to such works as Carracci's *Flight into Egypt*, 1603, French landscape painting was born out of convention and artifice, resting on the notion of civilizing attributes enhanced by classical and religious subjects.²

¹ France is often referred to as the "hexagon" because of its six-sided shape.

² John Varriano, "Landscape Painting before Valenciennes," in Michael Marlais et al., *Valenciennes, Daubigny, and the Origins of French Landscape Painting*, ex. cat. (South Hadley, Mass.: Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, 2004).



FIGURE 11. Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with a Calm*, 1650–51, oil on canvas, 49½ x 63¼". The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Calif. 97.PA.60

Thus, a French tradition of idealized landscape emerged, demanding historical, allegorical, or religious content and classicizing pictorial form, its appearance and validation as an art form enjoying official sanction because of practices borrowed from Italian masters and the mediating, "civilizing" influence of a heavy-handed state art bureaucracy aligning classical to national taste.³ The stylistic and referential requirements established for the arts by Louis XIV's seventeenth-century Academy, and based on Francis I's earlier efforts to "make Paris the new Rome,"⁴ were maintained under the jurisdiction of what was to become the École des Beaux-Arts, which carried out its classical mandates in fairly unaltered form as late as May 1968. This "persistence of classicism"⁵ evoked periodic outbursts well into the twentieth century, including a 1959 strike at the school. As Annette Michelson reported in the June 1959 issue of *Arts*, students demanded, in a letter to Minister of Culture André Malraux, "no more Monts des Martyrs, Acropolises or Pantheons."

³ Patricia Mainardi, *The Persistence of Classicism*, ex. cat. (Williamstown, Mass.: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1995).

⁴ Herman Lebovics, *Mona Lisa's Escort* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), 90.

⁵ Mainardi, *Persistence of Classicism*.



FIGURE 12. Jean-Victor Bertin, *Paysage d'Italie avec une fête au Dieu Pan (Arcadian Landscape)*, c. 1796, oil on canvas, 15 x 18¼". University of Kentucky Art Museum, Lexington, Ky.; Purchase: Gaines Challenge Fund.

Strikes were assuredly *not* under way when Jean-Victor Bertin (fig. 12) arrived as a student at the school (then still known as the Royal Academy of Painting) in the late eighteenth century, soon to study under landscape painter Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes. Valenciennes's own work incorporated draped figures with narrative references to the ancient Greco-Roman world or to the Bible, wedded to *plein air* sketches brought back from Italy. Ties to what were perceived as suitably ennobling narratives had allowed history painting to gain royal status within Louis XIV's Academy. In its wake, landscape painting had gained the approbation of polite society as well; no resistance would soil the status to be accorded landscape following the publication of Valenciennes's 1800 text *Eléments de perspective pratique*, in which Bertin's teacher laid out dignified themes and practices to be taken up within the genre. By 1816, what was once considered an unimportant practice was added to the range of entries making up annual Prix de Rome competition at the École des Beaux-Arts.



FIGURE 13. Eugène Isabey, *Low Tide, Honfleur*, 1827, oil on canvas, 28½ x 36¼". Courtesy Private Collection, Louisville, Ky.

The Prix de Rome competition had been originally instituted by Louis XIV to allow young French artists to develop classical style through a sojourn of study in Rome. Students brought back to France not only suitably Italian taste and approaches but copies of ancient statues, vases, and classical paintings, which were housed at the school to further Italian disposition.⁶ The propagandistic practices of the Prix de Rome competition at the prestigious national school appear to have worked. Classical norms for painting adopted over the course of the next century endured as late as the competition's demise, in 1968. A review of winning entries for the annual prize, in fact, reveals classically draped, allegorical figures throughout the 1950s. Not until 1961 did an abstract, nonfigurative entry win the competition. The status accorded classical norms for painting appears to have segued from royal to *national* rank, enduring well past the mid-twentieth century.

⁶ De la Souchère referred to the weight of classical norms in the competition as "un rocher tel qu'il ne peut être déplacé," until André Malraux canceled the competition in 1968; de la Souchère, Prologue, *Les Cinquantes Derniers* (Antibes: Musée Picasso, 1977). The 1961 winning entry was the first abstract, nonfigurative entry to win in the history of the prize: Joel Moulin, *Marriage du ciel et de la terre*.



FIGURE 14. Eugène Isabey, *Fishing Village*, 1856, oil on canvas, 36¼ x 54¼". University of Kentucky Art Museum, Lexington, Ky.; Transfer from the Carnahan Conference Center, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry H. Knight.

The human figure as a facet of classical idiom had long been established when Bertin arrived to study with Valenciennes; the presence of human figures in landscape was seen as an elevating force "ennobling" natural scenery. Bertin's *Paysage d'Italie avec une fête au Dieu Pan* (*Arcadian Landscape*), 1796 (fig. 12), features just such figures enjoying an Arcadian idyll in an idealized, Italianate space. They raise their heads, bow arms, and join hands, all in a manner worthy of a dignified race. Graceful movement, in a decorum that appears to be innate, points to the instinctual elegance of the Latin temperament. The work serves as a supreme example of the conventions for landscape, associating the Italian countryside and the figures within it with the fruits of civilization.

Compositionally, as well, Bertin's *Paysage d'Italie* exemplifies the Latin spirit embraced by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authorities. The work is stylized and premeditated in form, systematically guiding the viewer through Euclidian space in its use of receding diagonals. This sort of premeditated, formal arrangement of space, "as Cartesian as Descartes's own explanations of natural phenomena,"⁷ is joined to

⁷ A phrase borrowed from John Varriano, "Landscape Painting before Valenciennes," 13.

elegance of finish and moderation of tone. Therefore, nature in Bertin's work is thrice civilized: first, through narrative reference to the classical world; second, through the courtliness of graceful figures; third, through a synthetic, geometric ordering of space. Each acts as a proviso for engaging the spectator in a refined manner, a prime requirement for painting worthy of the title of "fine" art in late eighteenth-century France.

In a different motif yet similar fashion, Eugène Isabey's *Low Tide, Honfleur*, 1827 (fig. 13), provides the formal harmony and classical finish associated with cultivated French taste. Nature is presented to the viewer as mastered, managed, and controlled by the artist. This work, which won for Isabey the Gold Medal at the Salon of 1827, evinces the precision and rarified treatment esteemed by the official Salon juries in a presentation highly polished and intelligent in tone, perfectly suiting the jury's elite taste. Isabey was, obviously, quite capable of creating a very different maritime image, as seen in *Fishing Village*, 1856 (fig. 14). This image is anything but calm and cerebral, using deep tonal contrasts and daring diagonals to create a work entirely romantic rather than classical in tone. In the aesthetic hierarchy of the time, such a work would have been reserved for a venue other than the Salon—commissioned, perhaps, for an upper-class home. The state-run Salon, representing the collective effort of officially sanctioned French art, exhibited, almost exclusively, works self-consciously intellectual rather than sensual or expressive in tone.

The tendency for the Salon to censure overly expressive treatments is an important consideration in an exhibition displaying disparate tendencies in nineteenth-century French landscape painting. Patricia Mainardi has described the ways in which the Salon, whose composition was controlled by the elitist Academy, acted as a vehicle to maintain old-regime aesthetic values, paradoxically those identified with aristocratic elites in postrevolutionary, postmonarchical France. These values—of glory, nationalism, and order—were supported by subsequent bourgeois governments and maintained throughout the century.⁸ Mainardi attributes much of this phenomenon to the power of the Salon, which acted as a bastion of aesthetic conservatism.

Jane Mayo Roos, in her essay "Herbivores versus Herbiphobes: Landscape Painting and the State,"⁹ has explained the way in which an officially condoned, conservative aesthetic hierarchy continued to affect the reception of landscape painting. Under Napoleon, the Ministry of Fine Arts was a tightly structured bureaucracy with little tolerance for paintings that depicted beauties of the natural world, the Academy was an elite corps dedicated to absorbing landscape painting into the more heroic realms of narrative and figural work, and the Salon was an apparatus that assured continuity with the artistic traditions of the past. Like Mainardi, Roos discovered only nominal aesthetic reform taken up by postrevolutionary govern-

⁸ Patricia Mainardi, *The End of the Salon: Art and the State in the Early Third Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁹ Jane Mayo Roos, "Herbivores versus Herbiphobes: Landscape Painting and the State," in *Landscapes of France: Impressionism and Its Rivals*, John House, ed., ex. cat. (London: Hayward Gallery, 1995).

ments. As a result, the state continued to encourage ancien regime standards in painting years beyond its survival.

Tracing the perseverance of preindustrial, prebourgeois values in nineteenth-century European society in his landmark text *The Persistence of the Old Regime*, Arno Mayer warned historians not to underplay old forces and ideas stemming from the aristocratic past. He claimed that many have often "overdrawn the decline of land, noble, and peasant," and warned against treating preindustrial interests and elites as "expiring remnants," an argument especially compelling in the present exhibition.¹⁰

As this exhibition demonstrates through its range of figures in landscape, social identity in France remained traditional, marked less by a path to modern, middle-class ascendancy than, as Mayer has described, the persistence of elites who drew their identities and reputations from old-regime practices and associations. The lingering presence of a peasant class unaffected by industrial capitalism furthered traditional social identity, signified by strong associations with the Catholic Church and a former old-regime hereditary nobility as well. The range of identities strikingly displays the realities of French society in a manner truer to the century than exhibitions dominated by Impressionist imagery, in which the middle classes figure more prominently.

Joseph-Louis-Hippolyte Bellangé's *The Return to the Village*, 1834 (fig. 10), is one such work, testifying to the largely peasant economy of France. At the time the painting was completed, and over subsequent decades, France maintained its agrarian status, failing to undergo the sort of economic modernization that would have brought about significant industrialization. By the end of the First World War, the French population remained fifty percent rural, and many, like the figure in this painting, continued to practice nonmechanized farming.¹¹ Here, an individual moves forward heavily, making his way home—his deeply bent knee, ponderous stride, and ample boots indicating burden. A peasant, he is identified by the sickle at his waist, the sheaf he bears, and his laboring body. But larger identities are indicated. He is returning home from the Napoleonic Wars and still wears his soldier's coat, situated in the center of a work completed in a purposefully tricolor palette of blue, white, and red. The smoke and haze of battle surround him, but he is resolute to defend both his homeland and his agrarian interests. Against the hues of the national flag, the piece conveys the integration of peasant and soldier, peasant and Frenchman.

Eugen Weber's landmark study *Peasants into Frenchmen* addressed the political realities indicated in this painting. Weber's discovery of an array of regional identities

¹⁰ Arno J. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

¹¹ Tom Kemp, *Economic Forces in French History* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1971); Clive Trebilcock, *The Industrialization of the Continental Powers, 1780–1914* (New York: Longman, 1981).



FIGURE 15. Jehan Georges Vibert, *Returning from the War*, undated, oil on panel, 6 7/8 x 4". Courtesy of the Wenneker Collection.

in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries countered the potent myth of a single, unitary "French identity." Analyzing French infrastructure and demographics, he found that despite the rhetoric of the French Revolution, little cohesive national consciousness could be found in the hexagon. This was especially true given the preponderance of rural communities, the localized nature and traditional detachments of which nurtured little interest in national affairs. What can be recognized as patriotic sentiment in these communities existed only as a result of such innovations as national transportation, national education, and, importantly, mili-



FIGURE 16. Jean-Baptiste Edouard Détaillé, *The Charge*, undated, oil on canvas, 21 1/4 x 25 1/2". Courtesy of the Wenneker Collection.

tary service. Peasant patriotic attachment to the Republic had to be inculcated, and military service, as envisioned in *The Return to the Village*, drew local farmers into national participation, making of them Frenchmen.¹²

There are a number of other works referencing military service in this exhibition. Jehan Georges Vibert's *Returning from the War* (fig. 15) centers on a veteran huddling in his wraps as he makes his way home through a snowscape. The veteran's face is turned from us; no clues to his identity, other than weapons, are given. Sublimated as such, he appears as a Gallic soul, at once representing the nation and service to it. Jean-Baptiste Edouard Détaillé's *The Charge* (fig. 16) similarly focuses on patriotic sacrifice. The painting is believed to depict a scene from the Battle of Worth, a particularly bloody conflict of August 6, 1870, in which French cavalry under General Michel charged Prussian forces at Morsbronn, engaging the

¹² Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1976).

Prussians to support infantry retreat. The story of General Michel's cuirassiers is one of heroism, as the French brigade sacrificed itself to allow other French forces to continue. *The Charge* serves as an example of the continued practice of "ennobling" the outdoors with heroic narrative, giving to landscape suitably dignified worth. Both works further notions of French patriotic sentiment and carry weighty overtones of glory, nationalism, and practices worthy of the nation.

French patriotic sentiment and preoccupation with military readiness continued in the period following the disastrous defeat of the French army in the 1870 Franco-Prussian War. The newly created Third Republic placed great emphasis on military education, and post-1870 republicans and monarchists rallied together in a desire to rebuild and strengthen France. Détaille contributed significantly to the zeal for things military during this period, instilling French patriotic fervor and desire for revenge against Germany in such works as *The Charge*. The history of the Third Republic showed, however, that its early spirit of unity was marred by the bloody suppression of the 1871 Paris Commune and by internal divisions that continued to plague the nation.

The clerical issue proved especially fragmenting. Although republicans and monarchists initially strove for a solidarity based on mutual interest in peace and order, eventually conservative, Catholic France and liberal, republican France polarized. Republicans distrusted the power of the Catholic Church in state affairs, and by 1879 that distrust won for the republicans a coalition victory, which marginalized monarchists; however, strong feelings linking traditional French identity to the Catholic Church remained. Jehan Georges Vibert's *Viewing the Garden* (fig. 17), depicting a member of the French clerical hierarchy, is one of many images created during the Third Republic that point to the continuing Catholic associations of the French. A nationally divisive incident to call further into question unitary French identity was under way in 1895, the year that Etienne-Prospere Berne-Bellecour painted *The Scout* (fig. 18), when a highly suspicious letter written to the Germans came into the possession of French intelligence. Shortly after this discovery, Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish captain in the French army, was arrested on charges of spying. In the years that followed, the country split into two camps—the anti-Dreyfusards, who supported the army, right or wrong, and the pro-Dreyfusards, who cried foul in the name of the Rights of Man. In this crisis, known as the Dreyfus Affair, divisions between what were viewed as the "two Frances" proved so bitter that many expected the Republic would not survive. *The Scout*, with its unmistakably promilitary imagery, conveyed deep political sentiment. Following the 1870 loss to Prussia, all things military had become a great preoccupation, hence the enthusiasm for soldiering in paintings from the period. More important, in the context of the arrest



FIGURE 17. Jehan Georges Vibert, *Viewing the Garden*, undated, gouache on board, 12¼ x 8¼". Courtesy of the Wenneker Collection.

of Alfred Dreyfus, imagery favoring military security over individual human rights also appeared increasingly plausible and, indeed, laudable. In the eyes of anti-Dreyfusards, whose biases favored national preparedness over individual human rights, a reconnaissance figure in a landscape background carried unmistakably heroic overtones. The figure in *The Scout* served as much more than a soldier in a natural setting. He represented homeland defense and patriotic sacrifice, a lookout-at-large for the nation in the context of the humiliating 1870 defeat.

In hindsight, historians recognize that the war was lost largely because of the comparative industrial weakness of the French.¹³ Failing to make this connection at the time, though, greater emphasis was placed upon the French military than the French economy. The relative backwardness of that economy (in regard to England and Germany, for instance) continued, and lingering cultural values assigned status in French society to scorn for commercial practices; because of this, the French business sector failed to develop more significantly. The prejudice of aristocratic norms remained, resulting in the perceived social inferiority of the businessman and the conspicuous consumption of luxury goods that distinguished the noble lifestyle.¹⁴ Noble families and the *grands bourgeois* who absorbed and practiced principles of capitalism did so without “derogating their aristocratic world-view, bearing, and connections.” They “bought landed estates, built country houses, sent their sons to elite higher schools, and assumed aristocratic poses and life-styles.”¹⁵

Two works by Berne-Bellecour point to the lingering preoccupation with genteel, aristocratic culture in the first years of the Third Republic. *The Pet Bird*, 1870 (fig. 19), and *Impatience*, 1871 (fig. 20), harken back to the rococo manner of Watteau, whose paintings celebrated the life of ease enjoyed by hereditary elites. *Impatience* features a noble gentleman dressed in silk finery. He clutches flowers intended for a love interest. Leaning absently against a tree, he is distracted enough to have forgotten the cultivated gestures and mannerisms of his class. In the forest setting, he broods over affairs of the heart. In an amusing connection, *The Pet Bird* features a well-dressed gentleman eyeing a feathered creature held prisoner in a cage. Long a symbol of entrapment, the caged bird may well represent romantic pursuit, suggesting that this gentleman’s amorous adventures have left him more successful than those of his counterpart! Both paintings depict gentlemen at leisure and exemplify the lingering spirit that especially manifested itself in the fine arts in French society.¹⁶ Testifying to the lasting cultural impact of prerevolutionary France, such works point to the continued display of elements within French society that resisted forces of modernization.

The persistence of such norms was nowhere more staunchly displayed than in the annual Salon exhibition. Throughout the better part of the nineteenth century, the Salon jury rewarded adherence to tradition, affirming in this government-sponsored exhibition a national artistic identity constituted centuries earlier by the Royal Academy as a suitably “heroic” identity—one self-consciously classical in nature, rewarding “l’expression” while maintaining a certain official distance from “l’expressivité.” The Salon exhibition system thereby assured a lingering aristocratic taste in art, meeting overly expressive, romantic challenges to classical sensibility with effective disciplinary rebuff.

¹³ Kemp, *Economic Forces in French History*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Mayer, *Persistence of the Old Regime*, 13.

¹⁶ Debora L. Silverman has explored the social meaning of taste, describing, in her study of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century art nouveau, the link to prerevolutionary elite culture made via the decorative arts in Third Republic France; Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).



FIGURE 18. Etienne-Prospere Berne-Bellecour, *The Scout*, 1895, oil on canvas, 9¼ x 13½". Courtesy Private Collection.

Part of the Salon’s rebuff to landscape painting involved a censoring distinction between “pictures to see” and “pictures to sell,” as Mainardi has described.¹⁷ During the reign of Louis XIV, via the creation of the Royal Academy, the status of painters had risen above that of artisans in their link to the learned liberal arts, and to the court. The Royal Academy established a bond between elite, noncommercial taste and what came to be known as “fine” art. Outside of this sphere were to be found

¹⁷ Mainardi, *End of the Salon*.



★ FIGURE 19. Etienne-Prospere Berne-Bellecour, *The Pet Bird*, 1870, watercolor on paper, 15½ x 10½". Courtesy of the Wenneker Collection.

the commercial elements of ancien regime society: the bourgeoisie, guilds, and trades. As an annual exposition without cash prizes, the Salon continued in the nineteenth century to serve as a venue for "dignified" practices in painting against those of the more "commercial" variety. Landscape painting, to the degree it cultivated norms associated with state-sanctioned practices, therefore maintained a certain dignity of association. Fronia Wissman has noted the distinction between



★ FIGURE 20. Etienne-Prospere Berne-Bellecour, *Impatience*, 1871, watercolor on paper, 14¾ x 10¾". Courtesy of the Wenneker Collection.

¹⁸ Fronia Wissman, "The Generation Gap," in Kermit S. Champa et al., *The Rise of Landscape Painting in France: Corot to Monet*, ex. cat. (Manchester, N.H.: Currier Gallery of Art and New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991).

landscape painting sanctioned by the state and what was to be found in the private market.¹⁸ More so than in other genres, the gap between the classical, academic landscapists and those—most notably, the Impressionists—who pioneered nontraditional approaches amounted to state-sponsored versus private-market work. As Wissman discovered, the "Men of 1830"—as such Barbizon painters as Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, Théodore Rousseau, and Charles-François Daubigny came to be called—regu-

larly exhibited in the Salon but, simultaneously, explored the private market, something less true of the Impressionists. The problem was, private commercial galleries did not make a great impact in France until the 1890s; thus, it was vital to landscapists that they continue to show in the annual state-run exhibition. This routinely encouraged landscapists who wished to show in the prestigious Salon to complete works with suitably classical motifs and to demonstrate approaches conforming to elitist notions of art held by Salon jury members.¹⁹

Corot was one such landscapist. He bridged both classical and more naturalistic approaches and successfully exhibited at the Salon. While he generally rejected synthetic, Italianate compositions, exercising freedom to include broken branches and otherwise untidy depictions for a greater sense of site (fig. 32),²⁰ he also remained faithful to classical tradition. He developed pictures with literary and biblical themes²¹ and cultivated a nostalgic, poetic mood. In *Le Matin au Bord du Lac*, 1865–70 (fig. 32), Corot presents a goatherd playing a flute. The environment, while natural, is modulated by the implied presence of a gentle, lilting melody from the instrument; and the landscape, while remote, is conditioned by the presence of an aesthetically cognitive human being. In this painting as in many others, Corot engaged directly with nuances of site, but, at the same time, accommodated classical sentiment, affirming this continuum in French painting.

Although the Salon jury continued its work of effecting a classical “call to order” for the better part of the century, authoritative voices in the French art world still worried that the higher, morally elevating aims of fine art were being compromised by paintings—particularly those of the Barbizon painters—that were beginning to function as mere “portraits” of particular places.²² Corot, Rousseau, and Daubigny, so-called “independent artists” in their day because they did not complete the official course of study at the École des Beaux-Arts nor conform fully to Salon standards, exercised this independence by choosing faithfulness to nature over erudite figural narratives.²³ A comparison of Rousseau’s *Landscape* (fig. 30) from the Huntington Museum of Art with the work of Bertin (fig. 12) demonstrates this divide between classical sensibilities and a more expressive, experiential orientation. Rousseau’s *Landscape* offers an engaging panorama. A storm descends moodily over a luminous sky with force as natural, impetuous, and irresistible as the piece itself. Brushed out in a visually instinctive manner, the painting enables one to enter into Rousseau’s on-site response. Drawn in, the viewer is subject to the strength of the painter’s marks, which unfurl a fierce, bold sky. Rousseau’s *Landscape* aesthetically arrests the spectator, introducing an experiential component less didactic than visually instinctive.

¹⁹ T. J. Clark explored why postrevolutionary state patronage failed to modernize, to a greater degree, over the course of the nineteenth century, citing the conservative nature of the Salon jury and the state’s Bureau of Beaux-Arts, both of which remained vulnerable to pressures from counterrevolutionary cultural elites; Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France, 1848–1851* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1973).

²⁰ Michael Marlais, “Charles-François Daubigny and the Traditions of French Landscape Painting”, in *Valenciennes, Daubigny, and the Origins of French Landscape Painting*.

²¹ Kermit S. Champa, “The Rise of Landscape Painting in France,” in Champa, *Rise of Landscape Painting in France: Corot to Monet*.

²² John House, “Framing the Landscape,” in *Landscapes of France*, 10.

²³ Wissman, “Generation Gap.”



FIGURE 21. Charles-François Daubigny, *Château Near Tours*, 19th century, crayon on cream wove paper, 9 7/8 x 14 1/4". University of Kentucky Art Museum, Lexington, Ky.; Bequest of Gertrude E. Straus.

Choosing an appeal to the senses over erudite conventions for landscape, Rousseau’s work challenged treatments sanctioned as national artistic idiom. At the same time, he exhibited a new fidelity to the hexagon by depicting recognizably French land. Magdalena Dabrowski has discussed this transition in French landscape painting, whereby the Barbizon painters took up greater physical exploration of the French countryside.²⁴ Painting en plein air in the Forest of Fontainebleau (the subject of Rousseau’s *Landscape*), Barbizon painters began to move away from seventeenth-century models to depict the homeland more accurately, seeking in their native France “the charms that their teachers had found principally in Italy.”²⁵

As the subject of national self-definition was taken up with mounting seriousness across Europe, and distinctions characterizing *la patrie* were represented as an increasingly crucial issue,²⁶ artists began to show growing interest in historic sites and monuments within France rather than the charms of the Italian peninsula beyond. Daubigny’s *Château Near Tours* (fig. 21) demonstrates the sort of work gaining in popularity as new numbers of French visited their own historic locale. An expanded national railway network, a prime factor in the creation of an expanded,

²⁴ Magdalena Dabrowski, *French Landscape: The Modern Vision, 1880–1920*, ex. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1999).

²⁵ Richard Brettell, Introduction, in *Rise of Landscape Painting in France*, 16.

²⁶ James McMillan, “La France Profonde, Modernity and National Identity,” in *Landscapes of France*.

²⁷ Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*.



FIGURE 22. Paul Huet, *Light Breaking through Clouds: Two Studies*, undated, oil on paper laid down on canvas, 4 x 9¾"; 3¼ x 10". Courtesy Private Collection.

modern sense of French national identity,²⁷ facilitated the rise of tourism; indeed, more and more people were able to make excursions to historic locations within the homeland.²⁸ Such works as *Château Near Tours* demonstrate the increasing attention given by French landscapists to monuments of national significance, reminding the French of their particular countryside and their particular past.

Daubigny's *Voyage de Nuit*, 1862 (fig. 33), formed part of a series based on the artist's travels in his studio boat along the rivers Seine and Oise, another example of the French becoming "more interested in themselves than in either the ancient figures dear to classicism or the exotic subjects of romantics."²⁹ This interest was facilitated by concurrent developments in lithography that allowed such prints as *Voyage de Nuit* to be widely circulated, serving, in turn, to stimulate greater investigation into indigenous landscape. Painters and tourists flocked to the coasts, castles, and countryside of France. Isabey (figs. 13, 14), as court painter to Napoleon, and,

²⁸ Dabrowski, *French Landscape*; House, "Framing the Landscape."

²⁹ Marlais, "Charles-François Daubigny," 42.



FIGURE 23. Paul Huet, *Sunset over the Sea*, undated, oil on paper laid down on canvas, 13 x 19¼". Courtesy Private Collection.

following Napoleon's demise, King Louis-Philippe, was frequently called upon to commemorate national history; he grew interested in the distinct geographic features of France, especially the Normandy coast, where he explored nuances of site with Paul Huet in the 1820s. Practicing plein air painting, as did so many painters by that time, Huet commented on the difference, for instance, in the quality of light discovered in the humid north as opposed to the drier south, something he could only have discovered as he traveled his homeland.³⁰ This sensitivity to site as experienced on the spot has contributed to increased attention being given to the work of Huet, Daubigny, and Isabey.³¹ *Light Breaking through Clouds: Two Studies* (fig. 22) and *Sunset over the Sea* (fig. 23) serve as apt reminders of the sensory awareness cultivated by plein air practice in early-nineteenth-century France. A raw and powerful response to nature is offered in Huet's oil sketches. Color flows out of immoderate brushstroke and painterly gesture, enlivening surfaces with paint washes communicating vivid impressions of sky and sea. Huet's plein air studies

³⁰ George Shackelford, *Impressions of Light: The French Landscape from Corot to Monet* (Boston, Mass.: MFA Publications, 2002).

³¹ Dabrowski, *French Landscape*.



FIGURE 24. Charles-François Daubigny, *The Seine Near Mantes*, 1860, oil on wood, 15 1/8 x 26 3/8". Huntington Museum of Art, Huntington, W.Va.; Gift of Herbert Fitzpatrick.

offer a sensuous proximity that, although familiar, are not unceremonious, and, although minute in size, are not without impact; rather, each functions as a visual saturnalia, reaching beyond limits of scale to witness effectively particular conditions and experiences before the motif.

A similarly modern vision privileging aesthetic perception over formulaic depiction is found in Daubigny's *The Seine Near Mantes*, 1860 (fig. 24). The work situates the spectator in a captivating trance, beckoning aesthetic apprehension: The silhouette of trees and river hold but for a moment; the spectacle of colors and shapes will soon disappear. The work evokes not so much comprehension as aesthetic contemplation, a response more corporeal than mental. Concentration on the process of seeing, on perception, and the absence of "ennobling" narrative motif earns for this painting the distinction "modern." The synthetic, Italianate ordering of space, balanced groupings of figures, and degree of compositional "finish," which had long associated French painting with an elegance and erudition stemming from aristocratic patronage, interested Daubigny less than original contact with nature.³²

Contact with nature was, of course, of great importance to the younger artists who

³² Marlais, "Charles-François Daubigny," 47.



FIGURE 25. Eugène Boudin, *Sunset*, 1891, oil on canvas, 23 1/2 x 29". Huntington Museum of Art, Huntington, W.Va.; Gift of Herbert Fitzpatrick.

were to become known as Impressionists. Eugène Boudin, mentor to Impressionist painter Claude Monet, evinces the sensitivity to site and sensory awareness drawn by time spent painting en plein air on the Normandy coast. In this exhibition, Boudin's *Sunset*, 1891 (fig. 25), captures the transitory, erratic nature of the shore. The tide is out, revealing a shallow harbor punctuated by pools of water ablaze with fugitive patches of color. In contrast, as if in response to the dormant state of the basin, a lofty sky reaches up through the greater part of the canvas, more prominent against the arrested activity and sunken horizon of the lower quadrant. The relative stillness of the harbor alongside the potentialities presented in the sky demonstrates an acute, sensory familiarity with the variable seacoast.

Boudin grew up the son of a ship's captain; later, in Le Havre, he opened a framing and stationery shop, frequented by the young Claude Monet.³³ It was Boudin who first encouraged Monet to paint, teaching him to practice plein air oil sketches to capture the endlessly stimulating effects of the sea. Monet's *Le Bassin d'Argenteuil* (*The Port of Argenteuil*), 1874 (fig. 36), depicting ships in harbor, shows the lasting influence of Monet's first tutor. Monet has taken the feathered brushstrokes of Boudin to bolder, more antiacademic application. Unblended colors collide on the

³³ Shackelford, *Impressions of Light*.



FIGURE 26. Félix-Hilaire Buhot, *L'Eglise de Lobourg*, undated, collotype, 7 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 12 $\frac{1}{8}$ ". Used with special permission from the Berea College Art Department, Berea, Ky.

work's surface, conveying the ubiquitous presence of water—in clouds, in the basin itself, in the broad dispersion of light from the harbor's dappled surface and the lush vegetation of its shores. Moderate, conservative hues applied with the pulpy nectar of paint capture the effect of motley cloud cover on a moist day.

Another harbor painting in the exhibition illustrates the sensory subtleties nurtured by time painting on-site. In an effect entirely different from *The Port of Argenteuil*, Post-Impressionist Paul Signac explores the stimulus of a fishing cove situated in the Mediterranean south. His *St. Tropez*, 1898 (fig. 39), conveys white-hot light, patches of paper surface left bare to testify to the brilliance of the Côte d'Azur. Lines electrify its surface, and washes replicate the cascading radiance of color ranging on the surface of the Mediterranean.

Images of sensuous immediacy found in Boudin, Monet, Signac, and Félix-Hilaire Buhot (fig. 26) continued to challenge long-standing notions of French fine art in the coming years. Traditionally viewed as a "civilizing" medium, fine art was practiced by many to different effect after the late nineteenth century. *Mahana Atua (La Nourriture des Dieux) (Feast of the Gods)* (fig. 27), painted shortly after Gauguin's 1891 "flight from civilization"³⁴ to Tahiti, illustrates the artist's interest in primordial

³⁴ Gill Perry, "Primitivism and the Modern," in *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), 21.

culture. Gauguin's title refers to the mythological subject of Arcadia, the playground of the gods from Greco-Roman mythology, pictured in Bertin's *Paysage d'Italie avec une fête au Dieu Pan (Arcadian Landscape)* (fig. 12). Gauguin's portrayal, however, differs sharply from that of Bertin. Gauguin's Arcadia calls forth identities more Dionysian than Apollonian—identities increasingly appearing in French art following Impressionist and Post-Impressionist advances.

Simplified forms in the Gauguin print reflect the tenor of a simpler life, and outlines derived from physical incisions into wood communicate visceral contact with nature. Together, the raw expression of carved line and the fundamental, organic shapes of the figures convey the elemental life Gauguin associated with Tahitian natives. Figures in Gauguin's landscapes provided an alternative to the graceful, courtly forms of earlier French works. In this piece, island inhabitants blend formally into their stylized surroundings, and express the unmediated contact with nature Gauguin so admired. A century prior, the presence of human figures had been seen as an "elevating" force; Gauguin and other French artists, including Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret and Emile Bernard, left urban centers in France for provinces, islands, and artists' communities promising distance from such forces. Believing the refined life of Western society to possess corrupting effects that compromised oneness with nature and fundamental human corporeal experience, Gauguin sought alternatives to sophisticated practices and associations, both in real life and in his artwork. His figures broke with the rarified treatment and elegant, courtly mannerisms of the past (fig. 12), presenting a palpably primitive nature in a foil to the traditions of Old France. Gauguin, like Millet, associated the female body with closeness to nature, and thus depicted an almost exclusive female presence in his figural landscapes. Female forms, womblike enclosures, and other images of fecundity in *Feast of the Gods* further connections between the female body and the creative, life-sustaining outcomes associated with proximity to nature.³⁵

Twentieth-century artists would continue to explore alternative visions for fine art initiated by nineteenth-century French landscapists. Many in France maintained the quest for sensuous, elemental expression and less-than-classical attributes. Fauvist, Cubist, and Surrealist artists challenged the French academic hierarchy, and in the forties and fifties American Abstract Expressionists, as well, explored the ways in which physical markings of paint could convey instinctual responses to nature. Others, however, maintained more traditional content and form, asserting the linkage between classical and national French identity. When the French were first introduced to the work of American Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock, for instance, the overwhelming majority of critics claimed that he departed from the classical rubric characterizing "good French taste."³⁶ *A Romance with the Landscape:*

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Linda Stratford, *Artists into Frenchmen: Art and National Definition in France, 1945–1960* (PhD diss., State University of New York, Stony Brook, 2001).



FIGURE 27. Paul Gauguin, *Mahana Atua (La Nourriture des Dieux) (Feast of the Gods)*, printed 1921 from 1894–95 block, woodcut on cream wove paper, 7½ x 8". University of Kentucky Art Museum, Lexington, Ky.; Purchase: Carnegie Corporation Funds.

Realism to Impressionism brings to light the coexistence of traditional, classical approaches and more modern treatments, a coexistence that continued well into the twentieth century. Emblematic associations with Old France, alongside impressions of sensuous immediacy, continued the French family quarrel pitting “l’expression” against “l’expressivité.” Nineteenth-century landscape imaging proved provocative enough to raise questions central to national cultural identity, and artistic theory and practice, for the next century.

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