

Barbizon School

In 1816, the French Academy introduced a Prix de Rome in paysage historique, historical landscape painting. The prize, awarded every four years, enabled its laureate to live and work at the Villa Medici in Rome, an opportunity conferred on promising French painters schooled in the academic canon. Intended to restore history painting to its seventeenth-century glory, the new Prix de Rome actually prompted a frenzy of excitement over landscape painting. At the time, young artists were flocking to the Louvre to study seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish landscapes, a naturalist tradition long practiced in the Netherlands. The exhibition of John Constable's pictures at the Paris Salon of 1824 further set the stage for this new genre in France. In warm weather, artists now ventured outside Paris to work from nature, traveling to the royal parks of Saint-Cloud and Versailles and to more far-flung areas of the country. No destination was more popular than the Forest of Fontainebleau. Once the unmapped preserve of kings and their royal hunting parties (given the proximity of the hunting lodge turned Château de Fontainebleau), the Forest of Fontainebleau became a sanctuary for the growing leisure classes, for whom a train ride from Paris was an easy jaunt.

Called "the branch-office of Italy" by one popular nineteenth-century writer, the Forest of Fontainebleau spread across 42,000 acres of dense woods undercut with meadows, marshes, gorges, and sandy clearings. Bitterly cold winters and warm summers, coupled with heavy rainfall, encouraged the growth of a wide variety of tree specimens, a great attraction for incipient landscape painters, especially Théodore Rousseau. Quiet hamlets ringed the forest, refuges for woodchoppers and modest farm laborers. It was to one of those villages, Barbizon, that artists journeyed beginning in the 1820s, with a promise of room and board at the newly established inn Auberge Ganne. The Auberge provided lodging for painters who typically forayed into the nearby forest in warm weather and retreated to Parisian studios in winter. After daylong excursions in nature, artists convened at the Auberge Ganne to share ideas, discuss technical practices, and revel in one another's company. Years later, already eclipsed by Impressionism, these pioneering painters of nature came to be called the Barbizon School.

Despite differing in age, technique, training, and lifestyle, the artists of the Barbizon School collectively embraced their native landscape, particularly the rich terrain of the Forest of Fontainebleau. They shared a recognition of landscape as an independent subject, a determination to exhibit such paintings at the conservative Salon, and a mutually reinforcing pleasure in nature. Alfred Sensier, close friend and biographer of Barbizon painters Théodore Rousseau and Jean-François Millet, wrote of the romantic attraction of the Forest of Fontainebleau: "They had reached such a pitch of over-excitement that they were quite unable to work ... the proud majesty of the old trees, the virgin state of rocks and heath all these intoxicated them with their beauty and their smell. They were, in truth, possessed".

Théodore Rousseau was indeed possessed by the forest. A powerful voice for painting outdoors, he spent more time there than any of his fellow artists, often guiding them to his favorite haunts. He worked in the forest in all climates, even in the freeze of winter, and only returned to Paris to advance sales. Rousseau deplored the encroachment of industry and tourism at Fontainebleau. He appealed to Napoleon III to halt the wholesale destruction of the forest's trees, and in 1853 the emperor established a preserve to protect the artists' cherished giant oaks.

Among the painters who followed Rousseau into the forest, Narcisse Diaz de la Pena was his most loyal disciple. Together, they often packed a picnic to last the day, as they ventured into the woods in search of imagery. Diaz was not of a temperament to paint the meticulous detail so familiar in Rousseau's landscapes, yet his heavily impastoed canvases nonetheless won much praise at the Paris Salon.

Millet moved his growing family to Fontainebleau to escape an epidemic of cholera that followed the Revolution of 1848. He and his wife raised nine children in a spare peasant cottage bordering the forest. Penurious circumstances never dampened Millet's spirit, nor did they compromise his productive career. All his life, he painted farm laborers with blunt realism and quiet dignity.

Camille Corot, perhaps the most influential of all French landscape painters of the nineteenth century, never settled in Fontainebleau, although its rocky outcroppings and majestic trees informed some of his prized early paintings. Fontainebleau: Oak Trees at Bas-Bréau is one of the most vigorous and precise. Its sharply focused topography stands in contrast to his much later paintings, Ville-d'Avray, for example, in which nature dissolves in a silvery mist of tonal lyricism. Corot always returned to the studio to process his visual experience and never admitted conflict in reconciling academic values with the newfound freedom afforded by direct observation.

Of the artists who joined Corot in the French countryside in the summer months, Charles-François Daubigny was among the most accomplished. Whether painting storks hovering over a marsh or an apple orchard swaying in the wind, he brought his canvases to a radical degree of completion outdoors. Daubigny worked in the Forest of Fontainebleau in his early years, but his preference for water soon led him to other regions of France. From his floating studio, a refitted ferry called Le Bottin (The Little Box), Daubigny ambled along the River Oise painting transient skies and limpid waters. His simple scenes of reflected light-A River Landscape with Storks, for example-resonate with the immediacy of that direct experience outdoors. Daubigny supported many Impressionists in their early years and urged their inclusion in Salon exhibitions.

Barbizon was more than just a place; it was an encompassing motif. Like other great motifs, it transcended geography. Inspirational and nurturing, even despite daily trials of frostbitten fingers at winter's dawn or sunburned hands at summer's midday, Barbizon answered the quest for landscape's metaphoric power. The artists of the Barbizon School showed us the rapidly disappearing rural path to painterly "truth" well before the Impressionists trod the same forest and fields, carrying with them their factory-made satchels with metallic tubes of new pigments and their modern ways of seeing. Landscape painting was no longer subservient to history painting. It was history in the making.