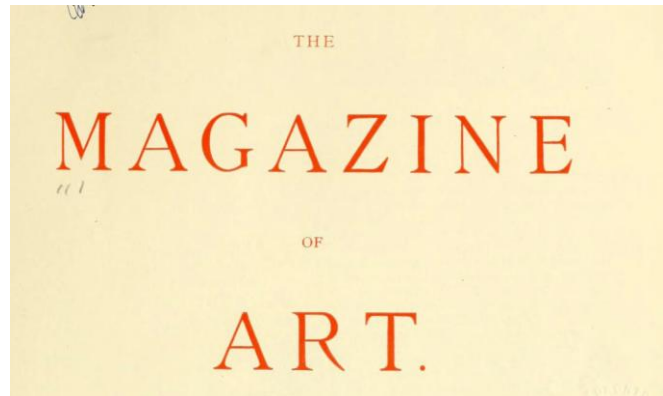


The Barbizon School - Jean Baptiste Camille Corot

David Croal Thomson

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Of all the group of pages of what is termed the school of Barbizon the one who possessed the most interesting personality was Corot. Millet was born a peasant, and he remained a peasant, and through this was his success. he seldom associated with his fellow artists and though his art alone has his influence been felt.



Jean Baptiste Camille Corot at work (from a photograph from life)

Theodore Rousseau had a noble character, but it was marred by sundry unhappy blemishes; while the other two great artists of the group Daubigny and Diaz, never exercised anything like the personal influence of P re Corot.

Corot was the artist-poet of the morning and the evening. the delightful painter of twilight, of rosy dawn and dewy eve; he was a man of all others who could paint the atmosphere, the aqueous vapours of the rivers and lakes and the mists of the valleys; and who could invest every landscape he produced with romanticism which is thoroughly wonderful. Corot was an artist who, in all his many hundreds of pictures (the work of a long and very happy lifetime), has revealed beauties and disclosed exquisite poesies which, when once understood and appreciated, never fail to charm and permanently please.

Corot is one of the painters of the century about whom it is permissible to become unusually enthusiastic. He was the acknowledged leader of a great school of landscape painting, and for many years before his death he had a powerful influence over many painters who have become, or will become, famous. While for a long time Corot was known and acknowledged only by artists and a few highly trained amateurs and merchants, he is now one of those painters whose works are most popular in England, Scotland, and America, as well as in France

Barbizon is a little village on the borders of the forest of Fontainebleau, a couple of hours' travel journey from Paris. There J. F. Millet, Theodore Rousseau, and Diaz lived and these painters, with Corot and Daubigny have gradually become to be called the masters of the Barbizon School. The art of these painters is nearly allied, and they form a group of artists of which the French are justifiably proud. Their influence has been well marked in all departments of the artistic world, and America joins with Europe in a paean of praise to these great men. France rightly believes she now leads a van of poetic landscapes with the work of these painters, and many (some think too many) of our younger artists are disposed to follow in paths that has been developed by the Barbizon School.

It is to be remembered by British as well as French artists that neither Rousseau, nor Corot, Diaz nor Daubigny would have formed found their way so easily if certain English painters had not shown them pictures which were complete revolutions from the accepted semi-classical landscapes of the earlier quarter of the century. This fact of the great indebtedness of French art of today to the earlier English painters has somehow come to be almost forgotten in England but it has always been freely acknowledged in France. T Thoré, writing in the "Histoire des Peintres", 1862 affirms that Constable is incontestably one of those who have regenerated landscape painting in France. This powerful artist received a gold medal at the Paris Salon in 1824 for three pictures, and another gold medal at Lille in 1825 for his celebrated "White Horse".

Thoré thinks that Constable received much of his inspiration from Gainsborough's landscapes and it is to Gainsborough we ought to look for real commitment of the Barbizon School. Another French artist said in 1864: "If you read in the Salon catalogue that Corot was a pupil, first of Michallon, afterwards of Bertin, do not believe it. Neither Michallon nor Bertin were capable of teaching anything to Corot. It was before a picture of Constable that he felt the scales fall from his eyes and from that day forth he took nature as his only guide".

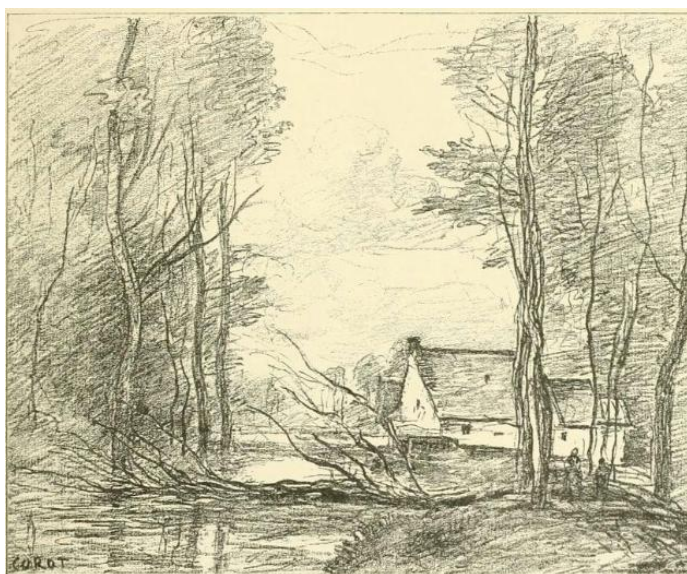
The art of the Barbizon School was, in reality a protest against the old and conventional treatment of landscape, which seemed to ignore the example of those we know are called the old masters – Claude [Lorraine], Hobbema, Ruysdael, and others. These artists with all their conventionalities, were still full of sacred fire of vitality, and were well versed in certain aspects of Nature. In France, as elsewhere, landscape painting had become nearly always subordinate to figure painting, or, in any case was considered secondary to it. It was lifeless emotionless, and dull in the extreme.

But the members of the Barbizon School have reinvested landscape with truth, feeling and animation; having the brilliant example of Constable before their eyes, toned by their knowledge of the old masters, they unitedly have given a new impetus to landscape painting as an art.

John Baptiste Camille Corot was the son of a clerk in the city of Paris, who with his mother, kept a kind of Draper's and Milliner's shop at the corner of the Quai and Rue de Bac, facing the Seine and opposite the Palace of the Tuileries. He was born on the 26th of July, 1796, and spent by far the greater part of the 78 years of his life in and around the French capital. At ten years old Corot was sent to the Lycée at Rouen, and there, during the succeeding seven years, he obtained the usual education which ordinary teachers can supply. All the time, however, another and almost unconscious education was going on. The youth was permitted to walk out occasionally with a friend of his father, a tall, brave man, an embryo artist, who would linger by the Seine and the less frequented roadways while the sunset and the shadows of the evening developed into darkness. Frequently, in later years Corot spoke of a strong impression that these early walks made upon him, and how they influenced his after career.

Corot was an exemplary son, and faithfully endeavoured to follow the paternal precepts. On leaving school he went to a large drapery warehouse in the Rue St. Honore, Paris. Afterwards he was engaged in a similar establishment the Rue de Richelieu. In the latter the employer discovered Corot's artistic inclination, and having tested the young man, he came to the justifiable conclusion that Corot would never be a good salesman. Corot was, in fact, too ready to sell that which was new and popular to the neglect of the stock which was going out of fashion. That Corot's father had set his mind on his only son taking up a business "to make money" and he urged the claims of the *Établissement de rubans* in the Rue de Bac. Corot accordingly remain loyal to the drapery until 1822, when at last, he obtained his father's formal consent to become a painter; but only after repeated entreaties did the old man give way.

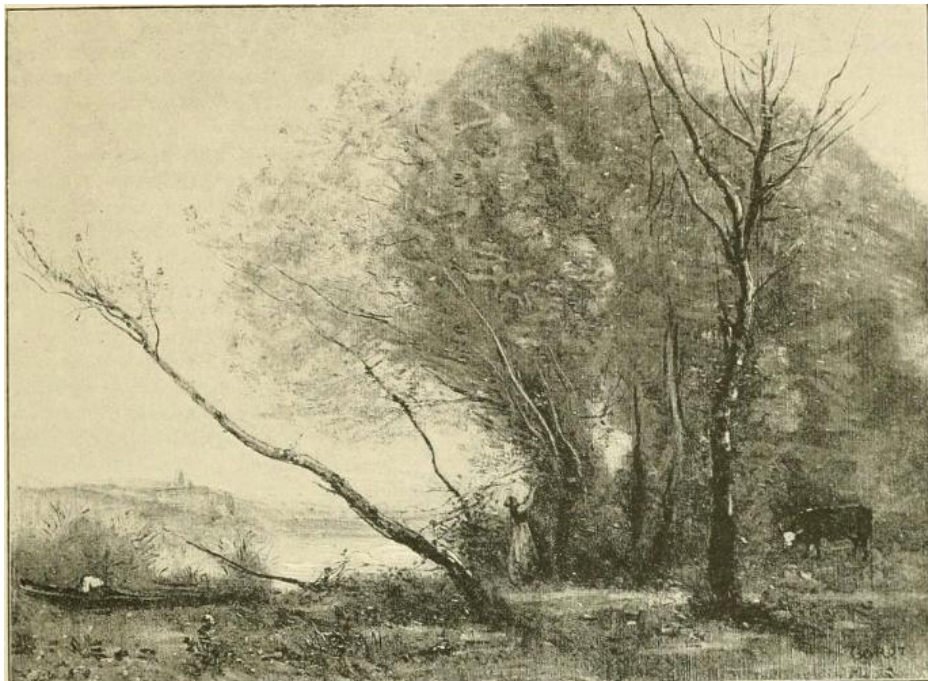
The first morning he was free to do as he liked he collected his materials and just walked across the Quai to the Seine. Going down to the bank to the river he made his first professional study near the Pont Royal, looking towards old Paris. Corot kept his sketch of his studio all his life and he frequently told the story of his *premier etude*, and how the young girls who worked at his mother's house for curious to see "Monsieur Camille" in his new vocation of artist, and how they ran out of the workroom and across the Quai to have a peep at him. Doubtless some of them were more in love with Monsieur Camille than he imagined, but he resisted their charms, and remained a bachelor to the end.



The Workman's Cottage, from a Crayon Study by J.B. Corot

It has been stated that seeing Michallon (1796 – 1822) at work which gave Corot the idea to try to express himself in painting. Michallon was certainly his first great artistic friend, and it is quite possible there is truth in the assertion. When old, Corot was fond of recalling incidents of his business life, and how he used to make runs out of the country whenever he had a holiday, and study at night, or in any leisure moments. After all, this is only what is continually going on amongst many who love to paint, although they may have to earn their bread at desk or counter. Many of our clerks steal away on every opportunity and try to realise the landscape most convenient to them; or as Corot often did, sketch the streets and houses and roofs, with only tall chimney pots for a horizon. How it should encourage then to know that Corot, the great landscape painter of France, kept at his office until he was 26, and that his early business habits never interfered with his after artistic pursuits, but indeed, rather helped him.

Michallon died a few months after Corot devoted himself entirely to art, and then Corot went into the studio of Victor Bertin, a painter “who sketched well and finished badly”. At the end of 1825 he found his way to Rome where after a period of probation he was recognised as a brother artist by Aligny, a classical painter for whom Corot had the most profound respect. There Corot painted the little study of the Coliseum, bearing the date of December, 1825, which is now on the Louvre. In 1827 he returned to France and contributed two small pictures to the Salon. In 1835 he again started for Rome but only got as far as Venice and Tuscany, for he was unexpectedly recalled by his father, who in serious illness desired to see his son. Corot’s father was now entirely reconciled to his son’s following painting as a business; for two years before the artist had been awarded a medal at the Salon and he could afford to live quite independently off his father’s pension of £60 a year. So Corot was written for, and like an ever-obedient son he returned to Paris immediately. In 1843 Corot made his third and last visit to Italy, going to Rome by Marseille and within a year he was back in Paris, never leaving it again except for short excursions.



Jean Baptiste Camille Corot, *The Bent Tree*

From this time Corot’s life was completely happy although only a very few people admired his works or would buy them. Briefly, his career may be summed up in a few sentences. He exhibited pictures

at every Salon up to the year of his death in 1875, and also at the International Exhibitions of 1855 and 1867. In 1846 he was made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour; in 1848 he was chosen to hang the pictures in the Salon, was awarded a first-class medal in 1855, and finally in 1867, he was promoted to be an Officer of the Legion of Honour - a distinction dear to every Frenchman. In the *année terrible* he felt keenly the humiliation of his country and contributed largely (£2000) to the public funds open for the relief of the distressed.

He entered Paris on 20th August 1870 and remained in it during a siege, painting nearly all the time in his studio. In April, 1871 he made an excursion to Arras and Douai. In 1874 one of the pleasantest incidents of his life. His friends had hoped that the Medal of Honour of the Salon would be awarded to the now aged artist, but it was given to Gerome, so they determined to make him a medal themselves, and presented it to him in December, 1874, only three months before his death.



Jean Baptiste Camille Corot, *Lac de Garde*

People who know nothing or little of art, looking at Corot's pictures, sometimes say there seems to be no great difficulty in a producing effects which have so little apparent finish. But these critics are ignorant of the long drudgery Corot went through in his earlier days. He did an enormous number of faithful sketches when young, taking immense pains in the search after tones and values. In these the drawings are so precise and the tone so just, as to almost entitle him to be called a pre-Raphaelite. They were hard in outline, and "tight" in finish, and, in fact were altogether opposed to the style gradually adopted by the master in later years. It is difficult to answer the very obvious question, "Would Corot have been able to paint the pictures which made him famous if he had not faithfully gone through the work manifested in his earlier works?" Some of our younger artists are starting with the idea that the power to finish highly will come with experience; but the uncertainty of outline and vagueness of detail are sufficient to begin an artistic career. Corot's path, designedly or otherwise, led him first to draw carefully and finish minutely; and in this he is supported as well but the Raphael of the old masters as by the Millais of the new. It was only after nearly 20 years of labour study, that about 1840 the genius of Corot distinctly manifest itself as we know it. But these years bore good fruit. From long and ardent observation he was able to penetrate to the very soul of

Nature in her grandest poetry. Inspired by a passionate love of art, he became a leader and no more a follower; a creator and not a repeater nor imitator.

It was in 1845 that Corot's first purchaser appeared. He came in the form of a friend, who knew without saying anything he wanted to carry off a newly finished picture, and he laid a £10 note on the table to pay for it. Corot thought it too much, and at first refused the money. It was necessary that his friend should solemnly swear that he was the intermediary of a real "amateur", as the best kind of art patrons are called; and even then Corot wanted to add two or three little canvases to the purchase of his first patron.

To the student of art it is particularly interesting to know about Corot's technical method of painting, and, fortunately, something of these has been recorded in a series of interesting statements made by Corot to a pupil. Corot appears always to a painted on canvas fastened on keyed stretchers; not strained too tightly, and also not covered with any heavy preparations, which make them easily crack; half- prime canvas, as English artists call it. The preparation was always lightly tinted, and he was always very careful in choosing the finest quality of canvas. Having placed a canvas on the easel, Corot seized a piece of white crayon, and, after pausing a moment to consider his subject he traced with peculiar masterliness and facility the chief masses of the composition. This outline at once became understandable to the onlooker, and from this the artist scarcely deviated in his finished picture, except to fill in details. From this first idea he himself used to foretell the fortunes of the subject. "Look there", said he, "something which shall yet be famous"; and then, leaving this canvas, he would go to another or carry forward a third, or complete a fourth, just as he felt inclined.



Jean Baptiste Camille Corot, *A Wood Nymph*

The first ideas were only taken up again after undergoing a certain period of incubation. They were again put on the easel in order to receive the painting or the sketch of the subject in oil colours. Armed with an ordinary palette, not very carefully arranged, and composed of decided colours, without half-tints; furnished with brushes strong and supple: the painter laid in his groundwork with raw umber, with black and white heightened by raw and burnt sienna and other scientifically good ochres: never, be it observed, with bitumen of any kind. Thus the first plan of the picture was settled from the point of view of the values and the effect required, by fixing from the first on two extremes - the greatest light and the greatest dark. He emphasised also the principal masses with a firmness

sometimes approaching violence, which he toned down afterwards with light transparent colours. After this the canvas was again put away. Then when the first painting had dried solid enough to be worked on, the artist sought to produce a complete harmony of his subject by transparent and semi-transparent colours.

When he arrived at his studio in the mornings (never later than three minutes past eight o'clock) he examined his many unfinished pictures, until he came to a subject which harmonised with his feelings that day. If he felt gay and happy, he would choose a scene in spring, and he would revel with his brush in a field of flowers, a smiling river, with the willows and reeds moving in the breeze. At other times he inclined to the severely classical landscape, grave and grand, full of sobriety and dignity.

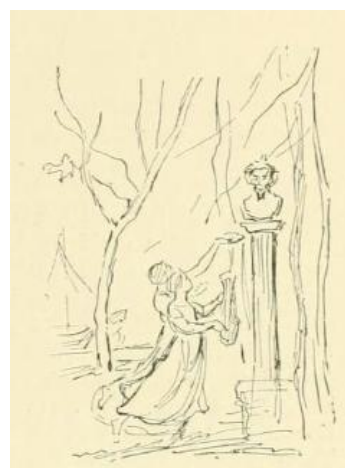
Corot used to say, when it became too dark for him to work, "Very well; you see *le bon dieu* has put out my lamps for me", and he would take off his blouse, which was stained all the colours of the rainbow, and go out to dine. He always ate a hearty dinner, for during the day he only took a dish of soup, very rich, full of small pieces of bread and smaller pieces of all kinds of vegetables. This was served by Adèle, his faithful housekeeper, who was with him for 25 years, in a corner of his studio on an old table which not stand steadily because one of the legs was shorter than the others.

It is difficult to give in black and white examples of work of an artist who is more a colourist than a draughtsman, and the accompanying illustrations can only hint at the subtle beauties of Corot's pictures.

"The Bent Tree" (which is here reproduced, from a picture in the collection of Mr Alexander Young, of Blackheath) is a characteristic specimen of Corot's work. The contrasts in it are strong, as the engraving shows. The colours in the original are firm and clear, with all the exquisite harmony of tone for which the artist is famous. "Lac de Garde" is also a characteristic example of Corot's work of an earlier period; the colour of which is, however, cooler in tone than usual. Mr J. S. Forbes has at Chelsea some fine pictures by Corot; and the Glasgow Institute Exhibition of 1888 contains one unusually perfect in colour, if a little loose in treatment.



Jean Baptiste Camille Corot, *from the artist's sketchbook*



Jean Baptiste Camille Corot, *from the artist's sketchbook*

Although Corot is celebrated only as a landscapist, he was also a figure painter of some ability. Never, certainly, did he excel in figures as he did in landscape, but artistic estimate of his work would not be

complete with a reference without a reference to the subject. In winter time he worked for models so as to keep his hand well trained in drawing, and occasionally he painted a figure subject in oil. One of our illustrations, a girl dressing after bathing, is from a picture once in the possess of Sensier, the biographer of Millet. This is a favourable specimen of Corot's figurework, but is chiefly interesting because it is a design of one who is chiefly a landscape painter. The other illustrations are drawings from Corot made himself on stone, and are examples of the artist's method of sketching.

Corot has been described as personally a strong, robust man, of iron constitution, healthy aspect, frank and free to all, with a happy expression of eye which won the hearts of all he met. His language was a pleasing mixture of *bonhome* and courtesy, and his whole appearance was ruddy and well favoured; altogether much more like a thriving farmer than one having anything to do with the arts. At 60 he walked as erect as a man of 40, with shoulders square and chest expanded. In his studio Corot's head-piece was a little cap of striped cotton, his dress a blue blouse, and his neck having a large well starched collar. Our portrait shows him in the open-air painting, with all his paraphernalia around him, and his everlasting pipe in his mouth. Music with him was a perfect passion, and he attended the chief performances in Paris for many years. Mozart was his famous composer, and French writers are fond of comparing the music of Mozart with the canvases of Corot.

Corot's life seems to have been altogether happy after he became an artist; His charity was very great, alike to his fellow artists, his own tenants, and all who applied to him. He bought scores of pictures from artists who were in distress. In short he acted up to the highest ideal in endeavouring on every possible occasion to do what was not only just but also exceptionally generous; and he was aptly rewarded by the strong attachment of a multitude of sincere friends.

David Croal Thomson

David Croal Thomson was born in 1855 in Edinburgh where he studied drawing and painting. He was also apprenticed as a printseller and artist's colourman (1867), and went on to manage Hill's Picture Gallery and its art publications (1872-1880). He then went to Paris to continue his studies in art.

In London in 1880, he became the sub-editor of The Year's Art, assisting M. B. Huish until 1885. He also published a number of papers in the Scotsman and wrote its annual articles on the Paris Salon. From 1881-1888 he was the sub-editor of the Art Journal and served as editor from 1892-1902.

During 1885-1897, he served as representative in London to the Paris house of Boussod Valadon & Co. Thomson was the first director of the Goupil Gallery in London. In this capacity, he arranged important exhibitions of the best works of Corot, Daubigny, Diaz and Tryon, of the modern Dutch painters, and of James McNeill Whistler, John Lavery, P. Wilson Steer and the English Impressionists.



Jean Baptiste Camille Corot, *Lac de Garde* (Also known as *The Boatman of Mortefontaine*) c. 1865-1870



Jean Baptiste Camille Corot, *The Bent Tree*, 1855-60



John Constable, *The White Horse*, 1819

*This painting was shown at the Paris Salon in 1824 together with *The Hay Wain*, creating a major critical sensation. It was sent onward to Lille for an exhibition in 1825, where it earned Constable another gold medal.*



Achille Etna Michallon, (1796–1822), *The Oak and the Reed*, 1816

French landscape painter, the first artist to win the **Prix de Rome** in the historical landscape category that was established in 1817.



Jean-Victor Bertin, 1767 – 1842, *A Morning View of Valmontone near Rome*, 1812

Bertin produced formal historical landscapes as well as plein air oil sketches that earlier drew on the work of his contemporaries for inspiration, and later incorporated elements from his Italian journey.