The Barbizon School, Through Vincent's Eyes

By Ricki Morse

First in a series of ongoing articles on this exhibition

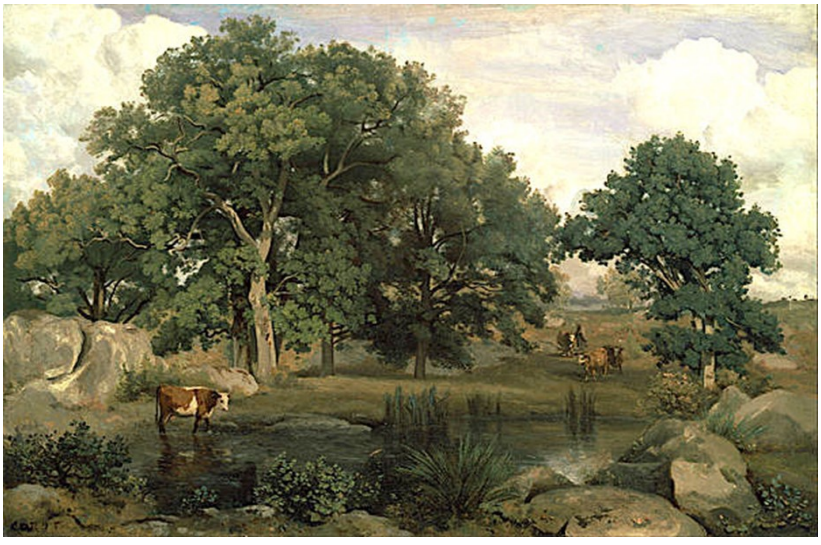
Inspired by the preliminary Van Gogh checklist, I am planning a chronological series of articles on this massive show, *Through Vincent's Eyes: Van Gogh and His Sources*, opening at our SBMA on February 27, 2022 and showing through May 22nd. Ninety-five paintings, prints and drawings are accompanied by a library of books Van Gogh valued.

Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) *Self-Portrait with Pipe*, 1886, oil on canvas, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. In Paris Van Gogh discovered the work of Adolphe Monticelli (1824-1886) and employed his thick paint application, rich palette and color and light effects. Monticelli's works appear later in the exhibition.

This show is a docent's dream, providing works by early influencers like his countryman, Rembrandt. Arranged roughly chronologically, the exhibition displays about 20 Van Goghs, and includes major works by Paul Gauguin, Edgar Degas, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, and Paul Signac, to name just a few. As we learn more I'm sure we will devise an appropriate touring strategy. Probably no single docent would take on the whole exhibition.

One early section is devoted to the Barbizon School, that remarkable break from convention that rejected biblical, classical and historical themes to paint nature while experiencing it. The political upheavals following the failed French Revolution—which continued through wars, kingdoms, monarchies and failed republics until the 1870 Third Republic—also upended the traditional power of the Academy in accepting only conventional art into the annual Parisian Salon exhibitions. Corot's increasingly naturalistic rather than idealized landscapes were shown in Paris to wide interest and growing acceptance.

Barbizon is a village 50 miles south of Paris on the skirts of the Fontainebleau Forest, long a hunting preserve of the French aristocracy, full of resplendent old trees and craggy rock formations. It was to this village that Parisian artists retreated to live inexpensively, escape the competitive art world and political unrest of the capitol to paint in nature, making studies which they took back to their studios to transform into finished works.



Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *Forest of Fontainebeau*, 1846, oil on canvas, Museum of Fine

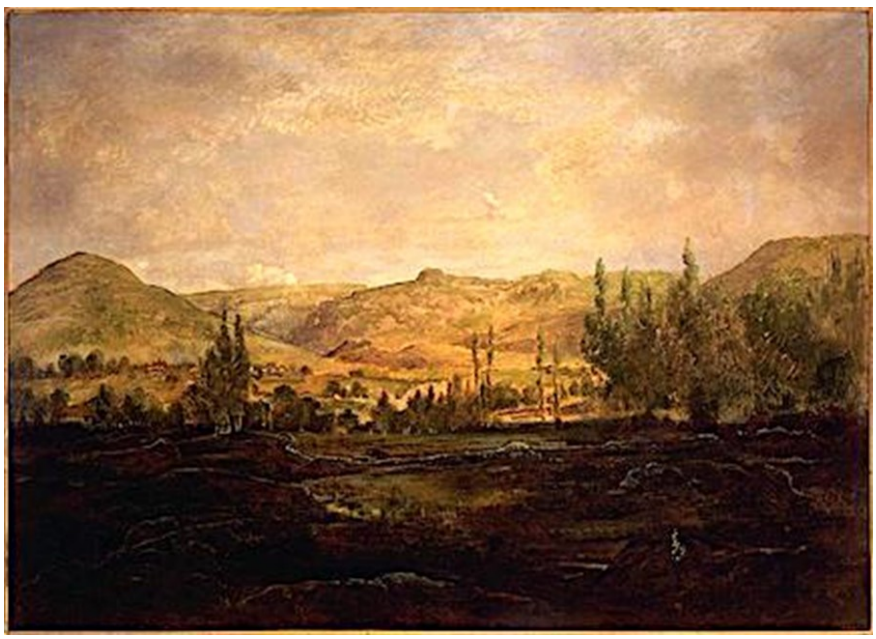
Camille Corot was born in Paris to a well-to-do couple who owned and operated a millinery shop, his mother's hats worn by fashionable Parisian women.

Though the recipient of a classical education, Corot was a disinterested student, and his father apprenticed him to a draper, a pursuit which he found dull. At 26 his parents agreed to fund his art studies at Académie Suisse, and thus began the career of one of the most influential and widely admired of French landscape artists. He spent the requisite time in Italy, two years of traditional landscape drawing and painting, but was more and more drawn to *plein air*.

In 1829 Camille Corot was one of the first to paint in Barbizon, his choice facilitated by the invention and availability of metal tubes of oil paint in a wide range of colors, replacing the tedious, studio-bound task of grinding colors from various natural sources and carting them to the site in a pigskin, by which time the paint world dry up. In our beloved Corot (right) the slope below an old fort rises behind the swaying poplars, conveying the artist's presence. A quiet grace invests the scene which we experience in many of Corot's works, from loose brushstroke to the intensity of his felt presence in the landscape, often characterized as the "poetry" of his work. He taught many young contemporaries—including Berthe Morisot—and remained the romantic realist, though widely viewed as the precursor to Impressionism. As his health weakened, he turned to portrait painting in his studio, was widely collected and revered by the artistic community as Pere Corot.

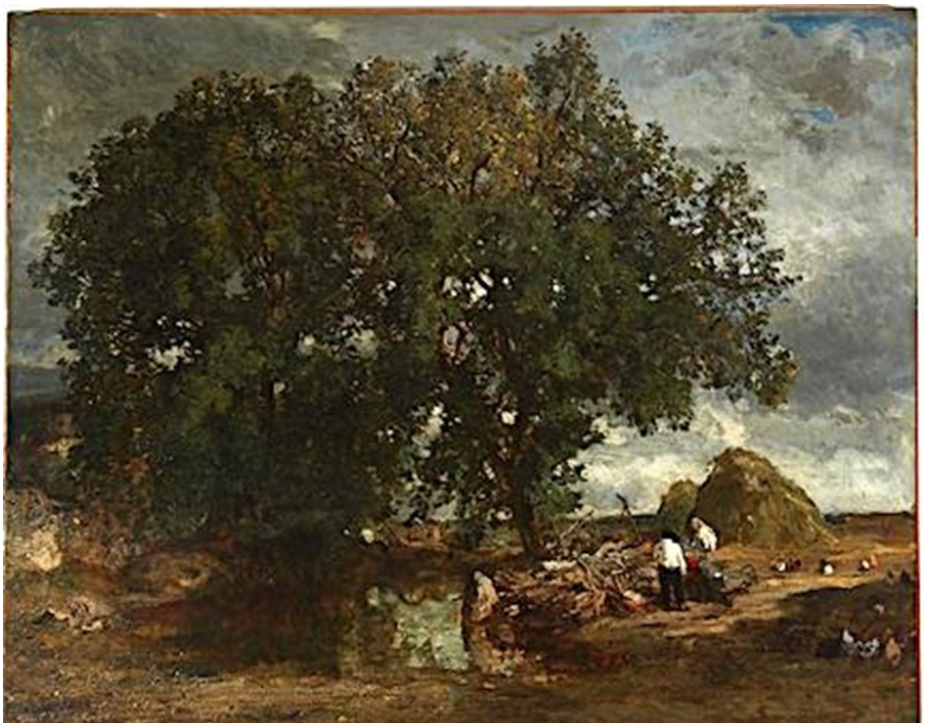
Jean-Baptiste-Corot, French, 1796-1875, *The Glacis of a Ruined Castle-Fort*, 1855-1865, oil on canvas, SBMA.

In 2016, The Getty in Los Angeles mounted an extensive exhibition of the paintings and drawings of Théodore Rousseau (1812-1867) entitled *Unruly Nature*, which succinctly describes a quality of Rousseau's work as distinct from Corot's—the heavily worked, energetic, roiling trees and boulders (often unfinished) of Rousseau as opposed to the gentle, settled, at ease Corot landscape. The Morgan Museum and Library in NYC titled their 2014 Rousseau show *The Untamed Landscape*. Corot and Rousseau share leadership of the Barbizon School which promoted this very individuality, asking only that the artist draw his inspiration from his presence in the landscape.



Théodore Rousseau, *Valley of Saint Ferjeux, Doubs*, 1860-62,

Though classically trained, Rousseau, the son of a Parisian tailor, began from his early years to paint and draw outdoors, capturing nature as untamed, undesigned, alive—not a romantic but an objective view. However, there exists in his work a melancholy, perhaps a sense of the fleetingness of the moment. Drawing was for Rousseau of the same value as painting. An expert draftsman, he treasured his



Constant Troyon, *Under The Trees*, 1847, oil on canvas.

drawings and archived them as carefully as his paintings. Rousseau moved to Barbizon in 1833 and remained there for the rest of his life, while his works, though not accepted at the Salon, became widely prized in the international art market. (Docent Ellen Lawson's closely observed discussion of this painting posted on the Docent website is very insightful and a wonderful read.)

Constant Troyon (1810-1865), the son of a porcelain manufacturer near Paris, learned from childhood the intricate craft of decorating pottery. Feeling that he could become an artist, the labored for decades to shake the meticulous habits of decoration, though he returned to painting porcelain intermittently to support his artistic aspirations. He was introduced to Rousseau and in 1840 followed him to Barbizon, sketching in the forest for the next seven years and refining his studies into finished paintings in his studio. We do see in our *Under The Trees* echoes of the careful detailing of his craft. It wasn't until he visited Holland later in the year of our painting, that he found his subject, one which he related to with the same passion Rousseau and Corot felt for landscape. Under the brushes of the Dutch animal painters the creatures came to life as breathing presences. Landscape became just the background of his acclaimed animal paintings, which not only earned him the Legion of Honor from the Salon but also the patronage of none other than Napoleon III. In our painting, Corot's lessons of light filtering through a tree where clearly well learned.

Claude Monet painted with the Barbizon group in the Foutainebleau Forest in 1865, completing a painting by that title (now in the Metropolitan's collection). However, he increasingly remained on site to complete his work in order to capture the momentary effects of reflected light. This more analytical rendition of the light spectrum launched Impressionism, which became the ultimate pinnacle of French landscape painting. Certainly Vincent Van Gogh's *Wheatfield*, which hangs at the end of the Barbizon section of our upcoming exhibition, celebrates the exuberant fragmenting of light into individual strokes of color which came to characterize his work and provides a sense of continuity in the language of modern art. ■

Van Gogh, *Wheat Field (LeChamp de Ble')* 1888, oil on canvas. Honolulu Museum of Art. This work celebrates the colorful canvases which followed Van Gogh's joining his brother Theo in Paris in 1886.