
Michel, Georges

(b Paris, Jan 12, 1763; d Paris, 7 or June 8, 1843).

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French painter. He came from a humble background, his father being an employee at the market of Les Halles in Paris. At an early age, a farmer general, M. de Chalue, took an interest in him and found him a place with the curate of Veruts, on the plain of Saint-Denis, north of Paris. It was here that he first developed a love of the countryside. In 1775 he was apprenticed to a mediocre history painter called Leduc, but he preferred to go off and sketch out of doors. In order to assist him, M. de Berchigny, Colonel in the Hussars, engaged him in his regiment garrisoned in Normandy and arranged for him to take lessons in art. He remained there for more than a year and then returned to Paris, where he worked with M. de Grammont-Voulgy, who was Steward to the brother of Louis XVI. In 1789 Grammont-Voulgy took him to Switzerland, and Michel also visited Germany, where he stayed with the Duc de Guiche.

Some time between 1783 and 1789, Michel met the dealer Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Le Brun, who authorized him to copy the 17th-century Dutch paintings that were in his shop. In 1790 he probably met the painter Lazare Bruandet. The two of them became friends, painted at Romainville, north-east of Paris, and in the Bois de Boulogne and shared a dissolute lifestyle. In 1791 he exhibited for the first time at the Salon in Paris, showing two small landscapes and *Horse and Animal Market*. He continued to exhibit regularly there but was ignored by the critics because his style was not yet well defined and his paintings were considered too similar to those of the Dutch masters. Around 1800 he was employed by the Musée du Louvre to restore Flemish and Dutch paintings by Rembrandt, Ruisdael and Meindert Hobbema, and it was in this capacity that he developed a true understanding of technique. In 1808 he decided to set up a studio and to give lessons, although he closed it a year later, as he disliked teaching. In 1813 he opened a shop adjacent to his studio in the Rue de Cléry and sold furniture and paintings. Discouraged by numerous refusals, he exhibited for the last time at the Salon of 1814. After the death in 1820 of the last surviving of his eight children, he left Paris to stay for a year at Condé-sur-l'Escaut in Picardy. After his return he began to lead a reclusive life and gradually withdrew from the art world. Because of his self-imposed artistic isolation, he had to rely solely on the patronage of Baron d'Ivry, who purchased almost his entire output. During the July Revolution of 1830, the two men fell out over political differences, and d'Ivry became one of Michel's principal imitators, even pretending that the artist was dead.

Michel always painted within a small area limited to the surroundings of Paris. He commented that 'Whoever cannot paint within an area of four leagues is but an unskilled artist who seeks the mandrake and will only ever find a void' (Sensier). His preferred locations were Montmartre, where he was inspired by the famous windmills, the plains of Saint-Denis, the villages of Vaugirard, Grenelle, Montsouris, Romainville and Le Pré-Saint-Gervais. He executed small *plein-air* studies: often these were drawings heightened with watercolour wash, which were then used as preliminaries for paintings worked up in the studio. His career may be divided into three phases. The first, until c. 1808, includes the period of his collaboration with Jean-Louis Demarne and Jacques-François Swebach, artists who often executed the staffage of his landscapes. These works recall those by the lesser 18th-century

masters of northern Europe. Typical of this period is *Animals at the Drinking Trough*, also known as *The Storm* (c. 1794–5; Nantes, Mus. B.-A.). From 1808 he developed a more personal vision, in which light and the treatment of the sky and space became his principal concerns. Paintings of this period (e.g. the *Plain of Saint-Denis*, Paris, Carnavalet) are more unified compositionally, with vast expanses of landscape and wide perspectives under stormy skies. The windmills are often the sole accents punctuating the compositions. After 1830 he was at the peak of his talent, his style becoming even more lyrical and visionary. His brushstrokes are broader and his paint thicker. He reinforced the dramatic tension by accentuating the heaviness of the skies and the contrasts of light and dark. The mood is one of unrest, and the inclusion of Man confronted by the immensity of Nature and its forces is a theme later used by Romantic painters. Works from this last period include the *Environs of Montmartre* (Paris, Louvre), *The Storm* (c. 1830; Strasbourg, Mus. B.-A.) and *Two Windmills* (The Hague, Rijksmus. Mesdag). *Landscape outside Paris* (Lille, Mus. B.-A.) is also typical. Various tiny figures, including a horse and rider and two travellers on foot, move through a vast landscape with a sunlit horizon. In the darker mid-ground can be seen a windmill and a thunderstorm.

Michel had little interest in fame, and, with the exception of a few early paintings, his works are unsigned. He said: 'The painting must please without the aid of a name or a label. We should do what our ancestors did: they did not sign [their works], but their talent was their signature' (Sensier, p. 17). He was important as a precursor of the works of the Barbizon school. In 1841, two years before Michel's death, the contents of his studio, consisting of more than 1000 studies and 2000 drawings, were put up at auction, and the Barbizon painter Charles Jacque acquired several of his works, which were of great inspiration to him. Jules Dupré also encountered Michel's art at that time.

An independent artist who never achieved success in his lifetime, Michel's role today is recognized by critics as crucial in the evolution of 19th- and 20th-century landscape painting. However, literature on him remains sparse. The only known facts about his life were collected and published (1873) by Alfred Sensier, his first biographer, and his study is still the principal source of information about the artist.

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External resources

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Michel, Georges: Landscape near Paris, c. 1840, Cleveland Museum of Art (Cleveland, OH) <<http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1975.78>>

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