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# Rousseau, (Pierre-Etienne-)Théodore

(b Paris, April 15, 1812; d Barbizon, Dec 22, 1867).

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French painter. He was considered the leader of the Romantic-Naturalist artists of the Barbizon school, but he also had the unhappy distinction of being known as 'le grand refusé', because of his systematic exclusion from the Paris Salon between 1836 and 1841 and his abstention between 1842 and 1849.

## 1. Life and work.

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His orientation towards *plein-air* painting was apparent when as a schoolboy in Paris he sketched trees in the Bois de Boulogne. According to Philippe Burty, *Telegraph Tower on Montmartre* (c. 1826; Boulogne, Mus. Mun.) was one of Rousseau's first painted studies. Alfred Sensier wrote that it was this work that convinced Rousseau's parents to let him pursue an artistic vocation. A cousin, Alexandre Pau de Saint-Martin (1782–1850), who was a landscape painter, took Rousseau to work in the forest of Compiègne and then advised sending him to the studio of Joseph Rémond (1795–1875), who had won the Prix de Rome for historical landscape in 1821. Rousseau was enrolled in Rémond's studio c. 1826 and shortly thereafter began studying with the history painter Guillaume Lethière (1760–1832). He made an unsuccessful attempt at the historical landscape prize in 1829, but the arid goals and stultifying procedures of Rémond's atelier appear to have been extremely uncongenial to Rousseau. The necessity of 'elevating' a landscape by the addition of a mythological theme was especially galling to him, since he had already developed a passionate attachment to nature as a living entity.

The single significant legacy of Rousseau's academic training was his retention of the distinction between a sketch and a finished painting. Sensier, referring to Rousseau's first exhibited painting, *Auvergne Site* (exh. Paris Salon, 1831), described it as a 'composed landscape...because Rousseau did not want to show himself to the public in the rough manner of a study which was for him the preliminary exercise of his work'. However, this painting, which has been identified with the *Fisherman* (Rotterdam, Mus. Boymans-van Beuningen), does not show classical finish or geometrical order.

About 1827–8 Rousseau became acquainted with the area around the Forest of Fontainebleau, but his first extensive travel occurred in 1830, when he spent several months in the Auvergne, a region considered particularly rugged and untamed. Rousseau later made many extensive trips throughout France, but he never went to Italy. Once he abandoned the idea of winning the Prix de Rome he turned aggressively nationalistic in his choice of subject-matter, seeking out the regional character of each area.

The main artistic influences on Rousseau and the majority of Barbizon painters were John Constable and 17th-century Dutch landscape painters. The Barbizon artists began painting during the period of Constable's strongest impact in France, from 1824, when *The Haywain* (1821; London, N.G.) was shown at the Salon, well into the 1830s. Nearly 30 Constable paintings were in France during the 1830s, many easily accessible to artists; these works proved that a monumental painting did not require idealizing conventions. English landscape of the 19th century had ties with the Dutch focus on everyday, unstructured aspects of observed nature, and this stimulated the Barbizon painters to study

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Dutch painting. Rousseau and Jean-François Millet (ii) jointly bought a Jan van Goyen painting, and Rousseau eventually owned some 50 prints of Dutch paintings, including copies of works by Jacob van Ruisdael. Rousseau is also said to have made copies, in the Louvre, of the animals in Adriaen van de Velde's paintings and of the paintings of Karel Dujardin, whose typical works are Italianate and often not true landscapes.

Rousseau's début at the Salon of 1831 coincided with those of his friend Jules Dupré, with whom he made many sketching trips, and of Narcisse Diaz. They had little difficulty having works accepted, although Rousseau's eventual nemesis, Jean-Joseph-Xavier Bidault (1788-1846), was already consistently present on the jury. In 1833 two paintings by Rousseau were accepted, including the large *Coast of Grainville* (St Petersburg, Hermitage). In 1834 one work was rejected; however, *Edge of a Clearing, Forest of Compiègne* (priv. col., see 1967-8 exh. cat.) was accepted, perhaps because it belonged to Ferdinand, Duc d'Orléans, and even received a third-class medal. In 1835 two small sketches were admitted.

Everything Rousseau submitted from 1836 to 1841 was refused; from 1842 until after the Revolution of 1848 Rousseau abstained. Each time, Bidault, the single landscape painter on the jury and an intransigent upholder of the classical tradition, rejected Rousseau, although other members of the Barbizon school sometimes were admitted. The rejection of the monumental *Descent of the Cattle* (The Hague, Rijksmus. Mesdag) in 1836 was a particularly severe blow, since this was a major undertaking, inspirational in origin. Ary Scheffer so much admired this work that he publicly exhibited it in his own studio. Perhaps the most significant result of this rejection was that it sent Rousseau on his first long sojourn in Barbizon. Henceforth, his time was increasingly spent here and in the Forest of Fontainebleau. The culminating insult occurred when in 1841 the jury refused the *Avenue of Chestnut-trees* (Paris, Louvre), although it had already been purchased by the government.



Théodore Rousseau: Avenue of Trees, Forest of l'Isle-Adam, oil on canvas, 1.01×0.82 m, 1849 (Paris, Musée d'Orsay); photo credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY

The Revolution of 1848 marked the end of this era. Rousseau received an official commission, for the *Edge of the Forest of Fontainebleau, Sunset* (exh. Paris Salon, 1850–51; Paris, Louvre), which conforms to a favourite type of Rousseau's mature years: a view from within the forest to a clearing outside. In 1849 Rousseau reappeared at the Salon, showing such paintings as *Avenue of Trees, Forest of l'Isle-Adam* (1849; Paris, Mus. d'Orsay), in which he attempted, for the first time in a French exhibition painting, to portray the vertical light of noon, as Constable had in the *Hay Wain*. Rousseau received a first-class medal, which meant he no longer had to submit to the jury; yet he was passed over for the Légion d'honneur, while Dupré was not. This humiliation may have contributed to their breach, but Dupré's place was soon filled by Millet, who moved to Barbizon that year. In 1851 Rousseau was snubbed again, although Diaz was honoured, but in 1852 he finally received the cross of the Légion d'honneur. The zenith of this successful phase came in 1855, when a room at the Exposition Universelle in Paris was devoted to him; this exhibition gave Rousseau an international reputation.

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Unfortunately, this period of prosperity did not last; in the early 1860s Rousseau was forced to sell works at auction, with disappointing results. True financial security did not come until 1866, when Paul Durand-Ruel and Hector-Henri-Clément Brame convinced Rousseau to sell them 70 sketches with which he had always refused to part. Then Rousseau was elected president of the jury for the Exposition Universelle in 1867 and received one of the four grand medals of honour. This occasion was not the unqualified victory Rousseau had anticipated, because he was passed over for promotion to Officer of the Légion d'honneur, doubtless because of the animosity of Comte de Nieuwerkerke, Directeur-général des Musées impériaux. Rousseau's friends maintained this was the cause of the series of strokes he suffered from July onwards. These friends appealed directly to Louis-Napoléon; Rousseau was made an Officer on 13 August, in a ceremony presided over by Nieuwerkerke, who uttered conventional flattering words. Nieuwerkerke had his final revenge after Rousseau died in December, because he did not, as was customary, arrange a memorial exhibition.

## 2. Working methods and technique.

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The most noteworthy aspect of Rousseau's working methods was his concern with *plein-air* studies. Although he still worked up finished paintings in his studio in Paris in winter, Rousseau made use of a special easel and lean-to to facilitate working outdoors in summer. Such sketches as *Road in the Forest of Fontainebleau*, *Stormy Effect* (c. 1860–65; Paris, Louvre) are some of Rousseau's most vital works. The subject, with its casual view of trees and cloudy sky and an interest in changes of weather, suits the technique, which is rough, variable and rich though not brilliant in colour, with flecks of pigment reminiscent of Constable.

*Oaks at Apremont* (c. 1850–52; Paris, Louvre), representative of his studio-reworked paintings, shows Rousseau's transitional position between Romanticism and Naturalism. The majestic oaks are rendered so meticulously that one can easily accept Rousseau's assertions that he made portraits of all of them and listened to their voices; equally meticulous is his observation of the noon light. There is still a Romantic attachment to specific truths of nature, but the mood is less obvious than in earlier paintings, such as *Valley of Tiffauge* (1837–44; Cincinnati, OH, A. Mus.), with its marvellously teeming vegetal life in the foreground (dubbed 'weed soup' by mocking critics).





Théodore Rousseau: Hoarfrost, oil on canvas, 635×980 mm, 1845 (Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum, Acquired by William T. Walters, 1882, Accession Number: 37.25); image credit: The Walters Art Museum

Rousseau's desire for a personal perfection that always seemed elusive often led him to rework his paintings over a period of many years. The monumental *Forest in Winter at Sunset* (New York, Met.) stands as a testament in that regard, since he worked on it from 1846 until his death. The darkening that has affected many of Rousseau's paintings over the years can partly be traced to this laborious procedure, since he often used chemically incompatible pigments and even bitumens (originally suggested by Scheffer), which eventually proved disastrous, accounting for the ruinous state of the *Descent of the Cattle* and *Avenue of Chestnut-trees*. One unprecedented exception to his usual procedure is *Hoarfrost* (1845; Baltimore, MD, Walters A.G.). Sensier recorded that Rousseau painted it directly from nature on an unprepared canvas in eight days, in his fever to capture a transient effect of nature. The foreground is covered with scintillating dabs of white and the rose reflections of a vivid winter sunset. Here, both in theme and technique Rousseau foreshadowed Impressionism.

### 3. Critical reception and posthumous reputation.

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Rousseau's reputation has always been inseparable from his position both as 'le grand refusé' and as a Romantic rebel escaping urbanization. Yet the artist's enforced exclusion was itself the instrument of enhanced recognition and elevated status. Most critics made a point of referring to Rousseau; as a 'refusé', he was often linked with Eugène Delacroix, for example when an article in *L'Artiste* (1834) stated that the jury exclusions had become 'scandalous', even 'monstrous', since they now included such names as Delacroix and Rousseau. From 1836 critics rallied increasingly to Rousseau's support. Bidault's part in these systematic exclusions appears to have been well-known and was scathingly noted by Gustave Planche in 1840. After Rousseau had been accepted, such critics as the Goncourts emphasized the artist's truthfulness to nature.

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While the Barbizon artists achieved great popularity in England and America around the turn of the century, they have been overshadowed by the movement they herald, Impressionism. This eclipse was partially rectified by the exhibition *Barbizon Revisited* (1962) and the large retrospective exhibition (1967–8) denied Rousseau at his death.

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France, §III, 5(ii): Painting prints, c 1814–c 1914: Romanticism, classicism plein-air studies

Paris, §III, 5: Art life and organization, 1815–69

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