

COROT & CONSTABLE: LANDSCAPE PIONEERS

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot

Hugh Lane's exhibition in 1904/05 with the long title of *Catalogue of Pictures Presented to the City of Dublin to Form the Nucleus of a Gallery of Modern Art - Also Pictures Lent by the Executors of the Late Mr. J Staats Forbes and Others* displayed an impressive collection of paintings donated to the new public art gallery. The Prince and Princess of Wales, The Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress of Dublin, artists and supporters came out to purchase works for the new gallery, including paintings and drawings by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot and John Constable. These two artists were among the most significant landscape painters of the 19th century and influenced avant-garde movements in French landscape painting from the Barbizon School and to Impressionism. This display celebrates the return of *Avignon from the West* by Corot, which is one of the paintings from the Sir Hugh Lane Bequest shared with the National Gallery, London.

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796-1875) was born in Paris, just after the French Revolution, and was no doubt influenced by the new liberal ideology which prevailed. His parents approved of his decision to become an artist which placed him in the enviable position of being financially secure. He enjoyed recognition early on for his innovative compositions which combined the ideal with a sense of realism. He first exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1827 and exhibited there regularly.

Corot travelled extensively as he embraced the growing desire by artists to capture the 'real' in the landscape. He immersed himself in the natural environment and in his paintings rearranged nature into a lyrical, personal perspective of the world around him. As his style evolved, his palette became more subdued and the balance between light and shade became more subtle. The resulting works are thoughtful responses to the inherent beauty and mystery in nature.

This display charts Corot's development from his early more linear compositions, with their fresh clear light and orderly constructions, to his later wooded scenes of pastoral pursuits. His *Landscape: Sunset*, signed and dated on the first day of 1875, was one of the last paintings Corot completed. The poetic, mysterious composition sees a vista unfolding into infinity.

Apart from *Avignon from the West*, the scale of these works is small, but this in no part takes from the impact they create on the viewer. Works such as *Rome from the Pincio*, created on his first visit to Italy in 1825-26, rank among the most beautiful small paintings in European art.

In the mid-1830s, Corot introduced portraits into his *oeuvre*, beginning with family and friends. *Woman Meditating* dates from the 1850s. As the sitter remains unidentified, she is most probably a model. This self-absorbed statuesque figure, whose melancholy air is heightened by the neutral background, references classical sculpture whilst at the same time heralding a new take on monumental figurative painting.

An excellent draughtsman, Corot created drawings in pencil and later in charcoal. The two charcoal drawings included here, *The Seamstress* and *Landscape with Figures* reveal his mastery of the medium. The quiet interior of *The Seamstress* is delicately wrought, highlighting a thoughtful woman absorbed in her work, while in *Landscape with Figures*, Corot builds up the scene with quick deft strokes, smudging the charcoal to create quivering movement and mystery.

The Irish novelist George Moore recounts his unexpected meeting with Corot towards the end of the painter's life:

I only saw Corot once. It was in the woods near Paris, where I had gone to paint, and I came across the old gentleman unexpectedly, seated in front of his easel in a pleasant glade. After admiring his work, I ventured to say: "Master, what you are doing is lovely, but I cannot find your composition in the landscape before us" He said "My foreground is a long way ahead" and sure enough, nearly two hundred yards away, his picture rose out of the dimness of the dell, stretching a little beyond the vista into the meadow.

Two of Corot's closest companions were the artists Charles-François Daubigny and Honoré Daumier. They all shared a pioneering spirit embracing the dramatic use of chiaroscuro (contrasting light and shadow), inventive compositional structures and subtle palettes. Corot visited them in Valmondois in northern France to where Daumier, poverty-stricken and with failing eyesight, had moved from Paris. Struggling to pay the rent on his humble cottage, Corot secretly bought the cottage for his old friend.

He tactfully wrote to Daumier:

My old comrade,

I had a little house for which I had no use at Valmondois near l' Isle Adam. The idea came into my head of offering it to you, and, as I think it is a good idea I have placed it in your name at the notaries.

It is not for you that I am doing this, it is merely to annoy your landlord.

Yours Corot

Admiration for Corot continues with contemporary artists. In 2001, Lucian Freud bought Corot's *L'Italienne* or *La Femme á la Manche Jaune* c.1870 (*The Italian Woman* or *Woman with Yellow Sleeve*). Such was his regard for Corot that he bequeathed the painting to the British nation in gratitude for welcoming his Jewish family to the country when they fled Nazi Germany in 1933. It is now in the National Gallery, London.

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John Constable

John Constable (1776-1837) was, along with JMW Turner, one of the greatest English landscape painters of the 19th century. His innovative style brought a fresh naturalistic quality to his work in contrast to the more stylised landscapes favoured in the 18th century. Born in Suffolk, Constable was largely self-taught. He established a reputation as a portrait painter in London, which helped him survive financially, but his passion was nature and the landscape, in particular the landscape of his beloved Suffolk. He marvelled at how nature and this familiar landscape were in constant change and he sought to capture the air, light and life in its seasonal rotation. He said, “No two days are alike nor even two hours, neither were there ever two leaves alike since the creation of the world”.

In capturing the constant motion of the world around him, Constable built up his works in bold gestural brushstrokes suggestive of fleeting clouds, stormy weather, windswept beaches and sparkling sunshine. Constable had little success at the Royal Academy where his paintings received little critical acclaim, being criticised as appearing unfinished, and his paintings failed to sell. However, he was much admired by French artists and he had a considerable influence on the realist painters of the Barbizon school, named after a village south of Paris.

In 1824, Constable exhibited his large work *The Hay Wain* in the Paris Salon where it proved to be one of the highlights of the exhibition. It was awarded a gold medal and Constable's reputation in France was secured. On seeing the work of Constable in the Salon, Eugene Delacroix commented, “This Constable has done me a lot of good.” Although lauded in France, it took Constable much longer to gain acceptance in his native England and it wasn't until 1829 that he was finally elected a full member of the Royal Academy.

This wonderful series of four small oil sketches, reveals Constable's virtuoso style and vigorous brushwork celebrating the majesty and mystery of the natural world.

Francis Bacon and Lucien Freud were admirers of the work of John Constable. Freud regarded him as a great and daring painter. He recounts how he was introduced to Constable by Bacon, “It was through Francis I got keen on Constable, because he was so keen on *The Leaping Horse*” (National Gallery, London).

In 2002-2003, Freud was invited to curate a major exhibition of Constable's work in the Grand Palais, Paris. Just as Constable obsessively observes every bark, leaf, cloud and undulating curve in the landscape, so does Freud apply the same intensity to the every sinew, bone, crease and wrinkle in the human body. Freud observes, “All Constable's work is erotic in the true sense... In Constable there is no false feeling. For me Constable is so much more moving than Turner because you feel, for him, it's truth-telling...”