



Review: Corot

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Peter Galassi. *Corot in Italy: Open-Air Painting and the Classical-Landscape Tradition.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991. viii + 258 pp.; 105 color ills., 200 black-and-white. \$55.00

of an alcoholic, a sexually aroused or inhibited, or an unfulfilled personality. The biographer's role should be to enrich understanding and help the viewer find deeper meaning in the work, rather than to take the easier "low road" to popularity. Only such a judicious merging of personal history and artistic analysis will bridge the gap between the popular and the highbrow—a gap that seems to become wider and deeper with the passing of time.

Notes

1. Jan Garden Castro, *The Art and Life of Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Crown, 1985).
2. Naomi Rosenblum, "Paul Strand: The Early Years. 1910–1932" (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Center of the City University of New York, 1978).
3. Eisler's note indicates that the letter in which this phrase appears was written by Anita Pollitzer to O'Keeffe on January 1, 1916, and cites Giboire as the source. The letter, as reprinted in part in Anita Pollitzer, *A Woman on Paper: Georgia O'Keeffe, The Letters and Memoirs of a Legendary Friendship* (New York: Touchstone/Simon and Schuster, 1988), 120, does not contain the phrase in question. Robinson excerpts the letter (pp. 128–29), reprinting the part about Stieglitz's reaction to the drawings, but without the phrase "Finally a woman on paper." In discussing this letter, both Castro (p. 31) and Lisle (p. 83) agree that there are problems with the phrase. Lisle notes that it is an addition; Castro reprints the letter in full, including the phrase, but indicates that it probably was appended later and in a different hand. Giboire reprints the letter with the phrase (p. 115), without noting its problems.
4. There is no indication in Eisler's text that the Stieglitz Archive contains correspondence between O'Keeffe and Stieglitz, consisting of many letters that she was unable to consult because it has been sealed until 2021. By omitting this fact and stating that the Beinecke Library opened a sealed package for her, she leaves the unsuspecting reader to assume that she had access to all the material available. That she did not was ascertained in conversation with Patricia C. Willis, curator of the Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, October 21, 1991.
5. Willis maintains that the Beinecke Library made an administrative decision to open the sealed correspondence. Conversation with this author, October 21, 1991.
6. Telephone conversation with Calvin Tomkins, September 1991.
7. Jo Ann Baldinger, "Two Portraits Steeped in Controversy," *Santa Fe Weekly*, June 14–20, 1991, 8.
8. Hartmann's critical writings have been collected in Harry W. Lawton and George Knox, eds., *The Valiant Knights of Daguerre: Selected Critical Essays on Photography and Profiles of Photographic Pioneers* by Sadakichi Hartmann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); and Jane Weaver, ed., *Sadakichi Hartmann: Critical Modernist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
9. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983.
10. Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1977.

NAOMI ROSENBLUM, author of *A World History of Photography and articles on Paul Strand, Lewis Hine, and other topics in photography, is at work on a history of women photographers.*

Peter Galassi's *Corot in Italy* is yet another beautifully produced Yale University Press book that transforms our view of nineteenth-century European painting. His subject is specific: the landscape sketches that Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796–1875) made out of doors in Italy, especially those painted during his first stay (1825–28). But the ramifications of Galassi's argument extend far beyond these works by Corot and, in fact, beyond Corot himself. The evidence the author gathers and the case he makes from it dramatically change our ideas about the tradition of open-air landscape painting, French academic studio practice, and the transformation of landscape as an artistic genre during the nineteenth century. His conception of Corot's artistic originality is also important, for it offers rich possibilities as a paradigm for other nineteenth-century artists:

The originality of [Corot's] work arose not from impatience with tradition but from deep devotion to it. . . . [It] belongs to a moment, now obliterated, when the unfolding of tradition was no longer in the hands of the academy, but when commitment to tradition was not yet an obstacle to originality (p. 227).

These are arguments worth rehearsing in detail.

Galassi begins his book with a history of Corot's reputation. Like many others who came to scholarly maturity during the 1980s, trained with revisionist readings of nineteenth-century art, the author is quick to look beneath the familiar art-historical persona for long-buried historical contexts and meanings. This is especially fruitful in Corot's case, for his artistic reputation has never encompassed all of his work. Galassi explains:

The sense of Corot's achievement [always] has corresponded to the prevailing outline of progress in nineteenth-century art. At any point the election of part of Corot's work to the grand unfolding of artistic progress has transformed the remainder into a puzzling failure—of talent or, in the favored explanation, of nerve. In the most extreme formulation Corot was both a courageous pioneer, for his outdoor painting, and a craven retrograde, for the Salon pictures he painted in the studio (p. 2).

In this scheme, Corot's work became a precedent for the Impressionists as well as an essential part of the development of French classical landscape painting, bridging the centuries between Poussin and Cézanne (pp. 6–7).

Representative of our attitude toward Corot's art is that chestnut of the nineteenth-century art-history survey, the comparison of Corot's oil sketch of the ruined bridge at Narni (Louvre, Paris) with his oil painting of the same subject (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa), shown in Paris at the Salon of 1827. Germain Bazin surely expressed the reaction of most twentieth-century viewers when he wrote about the pair: "While the study is a marvel of spontaneity, already containing the germ of Impressionism, the ambitious canvas is a mediocre exercise of a Neo-classical student" (p. 6). Galassi continues:

Th[is] image of conflict between genuine personal expression and inherited academic rules has remained a staple of Corot criticism. It allows the modern critic to dismiss the greater part of Corot's effort as a capitulation to conventional taste, and thus to identify the remainder—Corot's work from nature—with the authentic tradition of modern art (p. 7).

Such readings of Corot's career, and the history of landscape painting they assumed, were contradicted dramatically in 1930, when the Louvre received a bequest of several hundred drawings by Corot's teacher Achille-Etna Michallon (1796–1822) and many landscape studies by the neoclassical landscape painter Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes (1750–1819). The latter especially overturned much of the conventional wisdom about the tradition in which Corot was trained. Galassi notes that, after seeing them that year, René Huyghe wrote:

Corot remains a poetic miracle, but no longer a historical miracle. Valenciennes, in his official role, is associated with the most insipid degeneration of classical landscape; in his intimate work he directly introduces the young Corot, the Corot of Italy. . . . Once Corot is linked with classical landscape, opposed to [the Barbizon painters], everything becomes clear (p. 8).

Galassi observes:

[These] brief remarks contain two original and provocative perceptions: that our understanding of Corot's work is profoundly influenced by the frame of reference in which it is considered, and that the appropriate context for Corot's Italian landscapes is not what came after but what came before. This book might fairly be summarized as an application of these two perceptions (p. 9).

Having placed both the artist and the ar-

gument historically—a very welcome means of introduction—the author turns to careful reconstruction of the context in which Corot made these pictures. First comes a lengthy discussion of outdoor sketching (chapter one, “Painting from Nature”). At least for the historian of nineteenth-century art, there are many surprises here. Most important is Galassi’s demonstration of the degree to which open-air painting was an integral part of Academic theory and practice. Far from being a radical innovation of nineteenth-century artists, painting outside flourished in Rome even at the French Academy itself during the eighteenth century. Furthermore, the artistic tradition was full of stories about studies made outside by Claude, Gaspard Poussin, and other seventeenth-century masters of classical landscape, while treatises by such authors as Roger de Piles outlined the details of its practice.

By any account, the theory and legends of sketching nature out of doors converged in brilliant achievements during the 1780s, when Valenciennes and the British painter Thomas Jones (1742–1803) produced—probably independent of one another—splendid works in a strikingly “modern” style. Style is the most surprising aspect of these pictures, as Galassi discussed a decade ago in his exhibition catalogue *Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography*.¹ Although neither painter challenged convention in his exhibition pictures and, at least initially, both began outdoor sketching as part of normal studio practice, these studies ended up looking anything but usual. It is their astonishing “modernity,” their discovery and celebration of abstract pictorial values in inconsequential bits of nature, that has made them so interesting to us. But to eighteenth-century eyes, Galassi argues, their compositional boldness was “a hallmark of unqualified empiricism,” a proof that what was seen had not been arranged artistically. Nonetheless, the result was that, “emboldened by the powerful oil medium, outdoor sketching acquired a new autonomy, defined in opposition to the system of which it once had been part. The empirical and synthetic functions of landscape painting had become irreconcilable” (p. 37). It was left to nineteenth-century artists like Corot to “re-establish a fruitful exchange between the studio and the newly expanded resource of outdoor work” (p. 39).

Corot’s education, the subject of chapter two, placed him in the center of these developments. Very much within Michallon’s and Valenciennes’s tradition, he studied nature as a necessary step in the process that led to the learned synthesis of his exhibited landscape paintings. Galassi rightly emphasizes how much of Corot’s ambition and aesthetic attitudes came from the neoclassicism that existed around 1800. That French neoclassical landscape painting collapsed into stasis and then became a villainous influence in the eyes of mid-nineteenth-century artists, Galassi points out, should not affect our recogni-

tion of its historical importance. The zeal with which Corot went to Italy is in itself proof of the sense of mission and importance neoclassicism gave its adherents, still, in the 1820s.

What happened in Italy to this tradition of open-air sketching, discussed in chapter three, and what Corot did there, discussed in chapter four, defied the boundaries of that tradition:

In effect, the synthetic process [of creating Academic landscape paintings] had reversed direction, so that the traditions of landscape composition became a resource for outdoor work. . . . Instead of gradually shedding inherited convention, the new tradition began at a height of spontaneity and gradually matured by absorbing the lessons of the past (pp. 127, 129).

The past, in Galassi’s reading, provided essential support: “What made the past so useful to the outdoor painters [in Italy] . . . was its deep attachment to specific places. The outdoor painters in Italy possessed an artistic ideal, which guided their ambitions; they possessed also a practical, detailed map, which guided their footsteps” (p. 128).

It is here that Galassi’s paradigm of innovation becomes important, for he argues that Corot’s vision arose not from isolation but from community: “Artistically, the community provided an atmosphere of mutual encouragement and competition, and the security of a shared aesthetic. Practically, it provided an abundance of word-of-mouth advice on where to go and how to get there and what to paint.” Unlike many of the artistic groups we associate with the most interesting painting of the nineteenth century, this “was not a narrow community of a few advanced artists but a broad community of sophisticated tourists, which included painters” (p. 128). Thus, like Jacques-Louis David’s *Oath of the Horatii* (Louvre, Paris), for one interesting comparison (cited p. 140), Corot’s open-air Italian sketches give full and authoritative expression to well-prepared material. They represent “a rich tradition at its peak of maturity” (p. 129).

Galassi’s description of Corot’s position in relation to existing traditions well explains the astonishing maturity of the oil sketches made by the young painter within one month of his arrival in Italy. Talented but still artistically immature, Corot learned from his companions “a daily routine, a favored itinerary, and a catalogue of motifs—a highly codified program of work, which gave shape to his talent” (p. 136). His acceptance of the most familiar motifs is an important point, for it marked his work as very different from that of Valenciennes. The eighteenth-century painter “had avoided the celebrated monuments, as if to set his empirical enterprise apart from the habits of commercial topography. Corot favored such motifs, as if to invest his outdoor work with historical significance” (p. 149). Corot’s best Italian work “made it seem that classical rigor and immediacy of vision are not qualities opposed, but one and the same thing” (p. 138).

The artistic confidence of Corot’s Italian sketches makes interesting comparison to the relative tentativeness of the sketches he made of French subjects upon his return home in 1828. Galassi concludes his book with a reflection on this difference:

His first trip to Italy expresses a seamless collaboration of personal talent and collective circumstance, of training and opportunity, of tradition and innovation. Had Corot died in 1829 he would be admired; but he deserves still deeper admiration for the courage with which he left the perfection of Italy behind. Without a new manifesto, without rejecting his education, Corot led the creation of a new artistic opportunity rich enough to sustain more than half a century of exploration by a roster of very talented painters. His Italian work is magnificent, but it marks the end of a tradition. His French work is imperfect, but it began a new one (p. 212).

The historical revisions that must be made if Galassi’s argument is accepted—as surely it will be—are many. Those for Corot and the French tradition are profound. But perhaps even more impressive is the way his interpretation of this small section of history easily embraces artists from the larger European context. The nineteenth-century French use of the classical landscape tradition is contrasted to the much more vital use made of it by J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), especially during the same years (pp. 53–54). The subjects depicted by these artists outdoors in Rome are contrasted to the very different selections made by John Constable (1776–1837), sketching outside in the English countryside (pp. 99, 225). The Danish artist Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg (1783–1853), whose sharp-edged, highly detailed paintings have seemed interestingly anomalous to our eyes, is finally anchored within European historical developments. In Galassi’s account, he took “the Italian style of bright, simply structured views of modest scale [and extended it] into a national school.” Thus the Italian works of Eckersberg’s students Constantin Hansen (1804–80) and Christian Købke (1810–48) are “not so much contributions to the lingering international school in Italy as they are applications of the [by then] established Danish style to Italian motifs” (pp. 224–25).

Corot in Italy demonstrates the substantial rewards that can come from highly directed historical research. Refreshingly free of either theoretical jargon or dissertation prose, Galassi’s book builds a grand argument from a circumscribed body of material. At a moment when the field of nineteenth-century art history is changing, such achievement is particularly welcome.

Note

1. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1981.

MARJORIE MUNSTERBERG has published on a variety of topics in nineteenth-century art and the history of photography. She currently is working on a book on nineteenth-century portraiture.