# FINISHED/UNFINISHED

In 1845, the poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire wrote of a painting by Camille Corot on show at the Paris Salon, "Now, on the subject of this so-called awkwardness of M. Corot, it seems to us that that there is a slight bias [...] that there is a great difference between a piece that is complete and a piece that is finished, and that in general that which is complete is not necessary finished, and that a highly finished thing may not be at all complete."

As the above quote shows, nineteenth-century French art was the scene of a battle that pitted the advocates of the finished and the unfinished in painting against each other. Indeed, at the beginning of the century, the sectors most closely linked to the Academy made the *fini* or smooth finish the symbol of artistic excellence. Conversely, they criticized any sketchy finish as careless.

Nevertheless, the *fini* had never become a sole model in western painting. Suffice it to recall that almost around the same time that the nascent sixteenth-century Florentine Academy approved Raphael's carefully outlined surfaces, the Venetians Giorgione and Titian introduced a vibrant, sensuous type of painting. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the open brushwork of the Venetian style resonated with several national schools such as those of Spain, the Netherlands—for example, the painting attributed to Frans Hals in this room—England, and even France if we confine ourselves to artists like Fragonard.

The tension between these two conceptions of art came to a head in nineteenth-century France. There were several reasons for this. Perhaps the most important is that the neoclassical painters, who objected to Rococo sensuality, were radically opposed to any type of finish that revealed personal traits. But it was also due the very contradictions inherent in what was meant in academic milieus by the "generative" and "executive" stages in painting.

The "generative" phase, as understood from the sixteenth century onwards, encompassed a broad range of procedures. Among them was the esquisse or boldly executed oil sketch intended to capture the *première pensèe* of what would later be the final composition, generally large in size—in the exhibition, the oils by Rubens and Tiepolo. In contrast, landscape artists generally resorted to *études* or studies painted outdoors to capture a landscape motif or atmospheric effect—as in the small work on card by Matisse—as inspiration for the final composition. There was a further category that had the Academy's approval. This was the *ébauche* or discontinued initial stage—for example, in the oils on display by Carpioni, Géricault, and Delacroix—of what should have become a final work, had it undergone the "executive" phase, in which the *fini* or polished finish was an essential requisite.

With Romanticism, this strict division between the "generative" (sentimental and private) and "executive" (cerebral and public) phases in the artist's work was called into question. Géricault and Delacroix endowed their final compositions with some of the properties of their *esquisses*. However, it was above all in the field of landscape art that these two stages in artistic practice were merged. Indeed, landscape painting was the genre that witnessed the greatest development in the nineteenth century and in which the changeability of nature called for a fast annotation method more urgently than in other types of painting.

By the end of the nineteenth century, as *esquisses* and *études* lost their raison d'être, subsumed into the final work—for example in Manet—the unfinished adopted new contents. This is found chiefly in the oeuvre of Cézanne and Van Gogh. Both artists, shaped in the throes of the conflict between finished and unfinished work, largely became the last great representatives of the distinction between sketch and final work, and were responsible for introducing the new concepts of the unfinished that would last throughout the twentieth century.

In Cézanne, the process of making a work had no pre-established end. Irrespective of its degree of execution, every end of an art session marked a completion, as it entailed reaching a balance between the different parts of the painting. As the painters Rivière and Schnerb pointed out, anticipating the future development of the avant-garde movements, "for the master of Provence, the canvas was but a blackboard on which the geometrician seeks the answer to a problem."

In contrast to Cézanne, Van Gogh opened up the unfinished to the expression of subjectivity. His winding, loaded brushstrokes are a far cry from a strictly referential value. They are intended to capture not so much external reality as the emotions it arouses in the artist. Accordingly, the painting, instead of a window in the traditional sense, becomes a sort of seismograph of the painter's yearnings. This aspect of the unfinished lingered on in the early twentieth century in the expressionist painting of artists such as Macke, Heckel, and Kokoschka, who are represented in this room. Years later, when World War II had ended and the barbarity of Nazism had been witnessed, that which was merely sketched in works such as Giacometti's would become a symbol of existentialist angst.

The unfinished, regarded as a characteristic of artistic carelessness at the beginning of the nineteenth century, thus ended up becoming one of the driving forces of the artistic renewal spurred by the avant-garde movements.

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