

# Corot: Solitude

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Fig. 1  
Camille Corot  
*Solitude. Recollection of Virgen, Limousin*, 1866  
Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection  
on deposit at Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza  
[\[+ info\]](#)

Camille Corot's painting *Solitude. Recollection of Virgen, Limousin* (fig. 1), acquired by the Baroness Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza in 1999, is a celebrated work for having been exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1886<sup>1</sup> and above all for the fact that it was acquired by Napoleon III for the collection of the Empress Eugenia de Montijo for the considerable sum of 18,000 francs. Little more, however, is known about the painting. Its veiled symbolism and the fact that it remained hidden in various private collections until 1999 have contributed to its enigmatic character. The present article will aim to reveal some of its principal features through accounts by the artist himself, others by his biographers and Salon criticisms.

## Picturesque Limousin

Throughout his life Corot travelled extensively in France in order to execute the outdoor studies that he subsequently used as the basis of his landscapes. He visited the Limousin region, located in the west of central France, for the first time around 1849 and subsequently returned on four occasions, the last in 1864. Corot had heard about the region from his friend Auguste Faulte du Puyparlier, who, every two or three years, would spend the late summer months on a farm near Limoges that belonged to his cousin, the industrialist Jules Lacroix. In 1888 Lacroix noted to Alfred Robaut: "On the first occasion he [Corot] limited himself to finding motifs for his studies on my estate and nearby: later, his trips extended towards the river Vienne and the Glane. I would often go with him; we left around five in the morning; and would return every day with a rich booty. The brush had not rested for an instant; we chatted, sang and smoked a small pipe; then we hastened our steps to get back for the tasty cabbage soup that we had so well earned."<sup>2</sup>

Corot appreciated the picturesque nature and the almost virgin landscape of Limousin, devoting a large body of work to its leafy spots and numerous lakes and rivers. With regard to official exhibitions, it is known that in 1849 he sent a painting to the Salon entitled *Landscape in Limousin* (no. 440 in the catalogue), and another in 1859 entitled *Recollection of Limousin* (no. 692), the whereabouts of which are now unknown. In the artist's catalogue raisonné, Robaut refers to further compositions of this type, including *Rustic Interior in Mas-Bilier, near Limoges* of ca. 1850-60,<sup>3</sup> which depicts the kitchen on Jules Lacroix's farm and which was painted on a day of heavy rain according to Lacroix; more typical is *Mas-Bilier, near Limoges. A Path in the Clearing* of ca. 1850,<sup>4</sup> which depicts a peasant woman tending a cow on the edge of a chestnut forest. Close to the latter is also the outdoor study entitled *Forest Clearing in Limousin*, ca. 1845-1850 (fig. 2), recently sold at Sotheby's New York, in which Corot emphasises



Fig. 2  
Camille Corot  
*Forest Clearing in Limousin*, 1845-1850  
Auctioned at Sotheby's, New York,  
10 November 1998, lot 31

Fig. 3  
Camille Corot  
*Solitude. Outdoor Study executed  
in Vigen (Haute-Vienne)*, 1851  
Present location unknown

the density of the forest to create a contrast with the humble labour of the woodcutter and his wife, both collecting firewood and with their backs to the viewer.

With regard to depictions of the region's rivers and lakes, Robaut's catalogue includes a drawing of a village on the banks of a river,<sup>5</sup> as well as the work entitled *Solitude. Outdoor Study executed in Vigen (Haute-Vienne)* (fig. 3).<sup>6</sup> The caption in the catalogue runs: "This is the study that provided the basis for the Salon painting of 1866". Although Robaut refers to an "outdoor study" various features of the work suggested that it may not have been painted from life, including the oval format, the carefully planned composition with the tree in the centre, and in particular the inclusion of the meditative female figure on the bank of the lake. The painting would rather seem to be a close variant of the canvas now in the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, although painted prior to it and thus subsequently transposed to a larger format and given a greater degree of finish, as would be appropriate for the Salon.<sup>7</sup>

### Memory as the Basis of Neo-classical Landscape

Corot's intention was certainly not to produce a literal transcription of the Limousin countryside when he painted *Solitude*. This was clearly the opinion of Charles Blanc, Superintendent of Fine Arts, who commented in regard to the artist's canvases exhibited at the 1866 Salon: "*Evening, Solitude* are not landscapes that explicitly imitate one location or another. They are vague but sublime recollections; evocations. As if he had lived thousands of years, the poet recalls ancient lands that he has at some time travelled through, of which he only retain the principal features, the broad tints and the solemn or melancholy character, smiling or serious. He has seen those landscapes in Thracia or Thessaly, on the banks of the Pineios [...]. What would I know? But for a long time now, no detail has remained in the background of his memory. He only gives us his impression, fully conveying to us all the admirable aspects of it without us missing the leaves that are absent on his trees, the roughness or the cracks that are not to be found on his rocks."<sup>8</sup>

Works such as *Solitude* are a poetical version of reality, conforming to a genre known at the time as "heroic landscape". Although Corot was one of the maximum exponents of outdoor painting, his studies from life are all small scale works which were very rarely displayed in public. From the mid-1830s he sent compositions to the Salon that make use of naturalistic landscape settings but depict a biblical or literary event and thus fall within the tradition of heroic landscape. From the late 1840s, however, Corot's repeated failures at the Salon led him to produce works



Fig. 4  
Camille Corot  
*Souvenir of the Environs of Lake Nemi*, 1865  
The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago

that were more poetic in their treatment of light and brushstroke and which involved unspecific literary references. In these works topographical accuracy gives way to an evocation of the emotions experienced before the landscape, an approach that brings the artist closer to the Barbizon School painters.<sup>9</sup>

Memory plays a key role in this process of making the landscape more poetic. It had been praised by theoreticians such as Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes, who, in his essay *Éléments de perspective pratique* (1800), advised young landscape painters to make *resouvenir* studies so as not to depend exclusively on the direct contemplation of nature. With Corot, the central role conceded to memory means that in many of his most celebrated landscapes of the 1860s and 1870s present and past are fused or combined, as are the shady forests of France and the tranquil lakes of Italy. One of the clearest examples of this approach is the canvas entitled *Souvenir of the Environs of Lake Nemi*, presented at the Salon (fig. 4). Henri Dumesnil offered an account of this painting that is crucial for an understanding of Corot's work as a whole: "In its first state it was a subject of Ville-d'Avray, where, one evening at home, the master was struck by a vivid impression, which he began to work on the next day. Some time later the canvas was rolled up, taken to Paris and finally forgotten for five years. When he rediscovered it he decided that the effect could be better achieved with a recollection of Italy that he had at that time and so he made what we saw [in the 1865 Salon], a firmly resolved work, fully appropriate to the subject and with a type of execution comparable to that which he generally used in that country".<sup>10</sup> As his contemporaries noted, Corot saw Italy through the mists of the outskirts of Paris. *Solitude* also has something of an evocation of Italy that extends beyond the dress of the Roman peasant woman who is the principal figure in the composition.

### Corot and Photography

In his late works Corot placed more emphasis on tonal harmonies than on colour contrasts, given that for the artist form and values were fundamental. The line must be precisely established and the relationship between the values scrupulously observed. His last works are generally executed in a narrow range of colours with most importance given to the values of light and shade. In fact, having determined the lines, Corot devoted most of his efforts to establishing the tones. He started with the darkest and proceeded in order up to the lightest in a progression that could on occasions involve up to twenty different tonal degrees. Colour and execution came last. As the artist himself noted in 1870: "What is to be seen in painting,



Fig. 5  
Camille Corot  
*Morning, Dance of the Nymphs*, 1850  
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Fig. 6  
Adalbert Cuvelier (?)  
*Photograph taken on the Outskirts of Arras (?)*, 1852

or rather what I am looking for, is the form, the whole, the tonal value [...] This is why, for me, colour comes after, as above all I like the whole, the harmony of the tones, while colour produces a certain contrast that I do not like."<sup>11</sup>

This manner of working through tones or values also relates to Corot's involvement in the field of photography, encouraged and instructed by the painter and photographer Constant Dutilleux. A pupil of Delacroix, he had become interested in Corot's work at the 1847 Salon and from that point on they were close friends. Every year from 1851 onwards Corot visited Dutilleux in Arras and together they experimented with new photographic processes.

Corot eventually assembled a collection of more than three hundred photographs, two hundred of which were subjects *d'après nature*. His interest in the new medium, however, went beyond mere collecting. Art historians have associated the evolution evident in his work – from an architectural, colourist style in the 1830s and 1840s to a more vaporous, monochromatic one in the 1850s – with the influence of contemporary photography. Specifically, many of Corot's mature landscapes have features comparable to calotypes such as the brown, grey or greenish tones, the blurry form of the leaves against the sky (the result of lengthy exposure in the case of photography), and the halo of light around some forms (known as halation in photography) (figs. 5 and 6).<sup>12</sup> In addition, alongside Constant Dutilleux, Adalbert Cuvelier and Adolphe Grandguillaume, from 1853 onwards Corot produced *clichés-verres* or "glass images" (fig. 7). Through this new photographic technique<sup>13</sup> the artist was able to experiment with tonal values and with the graphic quality of the line, as can be seen in many of his late compositions, which are structured through screens of back-lit branches and leaves, as can be seen in the painting in the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection.



Fig. 7  
Camille Corot  
*The Dreamer beneath the great Trees*, 1874  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris

### **Solitude as an Image of Melancholy**

Various events in Corot's life may explain the subject depicted in *Solitude*, specifically, the sudden death of Constant Dutilleux on 15 October 1865. As noted above, Corot maintained an almost brotherly relationship with Dutilleux between 1847 and 1865 and his feeling of loss at his death may lie behind the origins of the painting, which he executed just a few months after that event. This seems to be suggested by Corot's biographer, Moreau-Nélaton, who felt that Corot dealt with his feelings of sadness resulting from the death of his best friend through the creation of the work, in the manner of a cathartic process.<sup>14</sup> In addition, in his classic monograph on the artist, Germain Bazin emphasised that the presentation of *Solitude* at the 1866 Salon concealed a veiled allusion to Dutilleux's death.<sup>15</sup>





Fig. 8  
Jean-Paul Flandrin  
*Solitude*, n.d.  
Musée du Louvre, Paris

In addition to the painting in the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, others seem to be associated with the death of individuals close to Corot. The first version of *Solitude* (painted in 1851 according to Robaut) coincides with the death of the artist's mother, Marie-Françoise Oberson at the beginning of that year. Corot, who remained unmarried throughout his life, lived at home with his mother until the year of her death, which profoundly affected him.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond the chronological coincidence between the two versions of *Solitude* and the loss of some of the people closest to Corot, the painting itself has an elegiac tone that has been observed by various critics. It was referred to by the Marquis de Villemer in his account of the 1866 Salon published in *Le Figaro*.<sup>17</sup> In addition, Marc de Montifaud, writing in *L'Artiste*, noted: "All is solemn, all is nascent; everything cries out: it begins. We are pervaded by the glow of this landscape, which subconsciously reminds us of the *Souvenir of Lake Nemi*; our minds set aside their troubles and prepare to experience the effects of this emotion arising from the forest's hidden places; its colour lingers on our gaze and its delightful somnolence lovingly submerges us in a single vague and nebulous mood."<sup>18</sup>

The female figure that is the principal motif in the composition and which looks back into the depths of the pictorial space is the element that seems to suggest this idea most overtly. Throughout his career Corot painted numerous compositions with a single, meditative figure in a virgin landscape (for example, his depictions of Hagar, Saint Jerome, Democritus and Saint Sebastian). This has been interpreted in terms of the artist's admiration for the spiritual fortitude of these figures, rather than as an explicit identification.<sup>19</sup> In the case of *Solitude*, Corot chose an unusual subject but one that had previously been painted by his friend Théodore Cauelle d'Aligny, and by Jean-Paul Flandrin (fig. 8). In both cases the title *Solitude* refers to the physical and mental state of the monks or hermits, secluded in the wildness of nature. Corot shared their approach through his use of a single seated figure before a virgin landscape but depicted a young woman rather than a male figure. By doing so he came close to Neo-classical representations of melancholy, such as the one by the painter Constance-Marie Charpentier (fig. 9), but more fully integrate the psychology of the figure and the shady, silent landscape.<sup>20</sup>

### Epilogue

Corot's late work, which largely comprises pseudo-mythological scenes set in tranquil natural surroundings, falls within the context of the bucolic compositions that first arose in the Renaissance with Giorgione and Titian and whose origins in poetry can be traced back

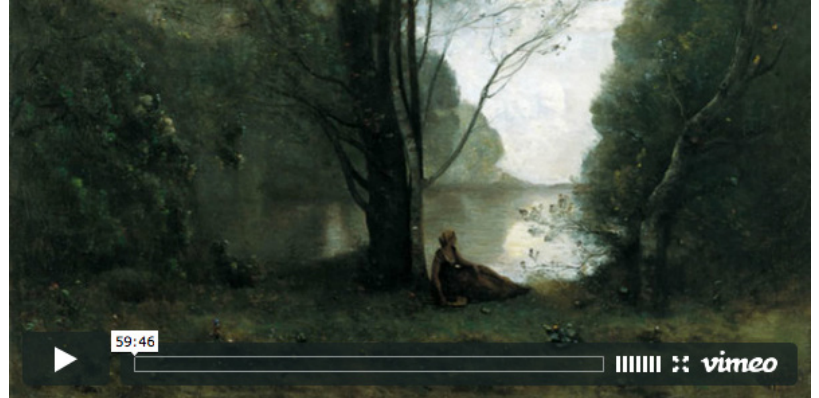


Fig. 9  
Constance-Marie Charpentier  
*Melancholy*, 1801  
Musée de Picardie, Amiens



Fig. 10  
Nicolas Poussin  
*Et in Arcadia ego*, 1637-1638  
Musée du Louvre, Paris

to Theocritus and Virgil in the 3rd and 1st centuries BC, continuing in the work of Petrarch, Boccaccio, Tasso and Jacopo Sannazaro.<sup>21</sup> Rejection of the urban, civilised work is a standard concept within the bucolic mode, as is the search for harmony in nature, in which shepherds play music on folk instruments and compete in writing poetry. The joyful nature of the theme is almost always accompanied by a melancholy awareness of the loss of the Golden Age or, in some cases, by an explicit allusion to fateful events such as exile or death. Poussin, whom Corot admired, located death at the centre of his reflection on Arcadia in his celebrated painting *Et in Arcadia ego* (fig. 10). With *Solitude*, Corot seems to continue the theme from a less epic, more intimate perspective characteristic of his particular approach.



Series of Lectures Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection

## Notes

- 1 No. 453 in the catalogue. Corot also exhibited *Afternoon* (no. 452) on that occasion, as well as an etching entitled *Environs of Rome* (no. 3116).
- 2 Letter from Jules Lacroix to Alfred Robaut, 25 February 1888, quoted in Étienne Moreau-Nélaton: "L'histoire de Corot et de ses œuvres". In Alfred Robaut : *L'Œuvre de Corot. Catalogue raisonné et illustré*, vol. I, Paris 1905, p. 131.
- 3 Musée du Louvre, Paris (RF 1611) [Robaut 824].
- 4 Robaut 843.
- 5 Robaut 2854.
- 6 Robaut 844.
- 7 Corot produced two replicas of *Solitude* in 1867-1868 in which he emphasised its pastoral nature through the inclusion of goats and cows. One of these versions was recently auctioned at Christie's New York on 8 November 1999 (lot 106). The whereabouts of the other, originally owned by Paul Gallimard, is now unknown. See Louis Vauxcelles: "Collection de M. Paul Gallimard", in *Les Arts*. Paris, no. 81, September 1908, p. 10, pl. p. 15; referred to as *Pond at Coubron*.
- 8 Charles Blanc: "Salon de 1866". In *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, Paris, vol. XXI, 1 July 1866, p. 38.
- 9 See: Camille Corot: *Carnet 9*, ca. 1855-65; repr. in Camille Corot: *Carnet de Dessins suivis des lettres d'Italie*. Paris, Éditions de l'Amateur, 1996, p. 36.
- 10 Henri Dumesnil: *Corot. Souvenirs intimes*, Paris, Rapilly, 1875, p. 48.
- 11 Statement by the artist recorded by Mme Aviat in Méry-sur-Seine in 1870; published in Germain Bazin, *Corot* (2nd, revised and expanded ed.), Paris, Pierre Tisné, 1951, pp. 91-92.
- 12 Deborah Johnson: "Confluence and Influence: Photography and the Japanese Print in 1850", in *The Rise of Landscape Painting in France. Corot to Monet*. [exhib.cat.]. Manchester (NH), The Currier Gallery of Art, 1991, pp. 78-92. See also: Aaron Scharf: *Arte y fotografía*, Madrid, Alianza, 1994, pp. 93-97.
- 13 Made in the following way: a glass plate is covered with colloidon. On it, the artist makes grooves with a point in the manner of an etching. Paper, made light-sensitive with silver nitrate and gallic acid, is then placed under the plate, and exposed to light. A negative is produced that is fixed with sodium hyposulfite. The negative paper is then soaked in melted wax to make it transparent. It is then exposed to light again to obtain a positive image.
- 14 Moreau-Nélaton, op. cit., pp. 226-227.
- 15 Bazin, op. cit., p. 23.
- 16 Corot noted: "I was prepared for the blow that has befallen me; but it has greatly affected me. From today I return to the studio; work will do me good, I hope." (*Catalogue des autographes de Corot*, no. 26 bis. In Robaut, op. cit., vol. IV, p. 333).
- 17 Marqués de Villemer: "Le Salon". In *Le Figaro*. Paris, 13 May 1866, p. 2.
- 18 Marc de Montifaud: "Salon de 1866". In *L'Artiste. Beaux-Arts et Belles-Lettres*. Paris, 1866, vol. I, 15 May, p. 177.
- 19 Galassi, Peter: *Corot in Italy. Open-Air Painting and the Classical-Landscape Tradition*. New Haven – London, Yale University Press, 1991, p. 57.
- 20 *Solitude*, furthermore, differs from other depictions on the theme of melancholy by Corot himself, for example, the painting now in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen [Robaut 1267], in which a female figure in contemporary dress looks directly at the viewer.
- 21 In a letter to Abel Osmond of 2 December 1825, Corot noted: "Tell your uncle A[ndré] that I will not abandon Virgil"; repr. in Camille Corot: *Carnet de Dessins...*, op. cit., p. 59. Years later, in a letter to Ernestine Clerc de Landresse of 16 April 1853, Corot referred to the fact that he had lost his trilingual edition (in Greek, Latin and French) of Theocritus' *Idylls*, published by Gail in 1792, and that he intended to acquire another copy (see *Catalogue des autographes de Corot*, no. 46. In Robaut, op. cit., vol. IV, p. 334). With thanks to Guillermo Solana for drawing my attention to this crucial but little studied aspect of Corot's work.