

Rousseau and Fontainebleau, beyond Brushes

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Fig. 1
Théodore Rousseau
The Colliers' Hut in the Forest of Fontainebleau, ca. 1855
Oil on canvas, 34.2 × 42.1 cm
Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza collection, on deposit at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

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Fig. 2
Étienne Carjat
Photograph of Théodore Rousseau, ca. 1865
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

The Colliers' Hut in the Forest of Fontainebleau, painted by Théodore Rousseau (1812–1867) around 1855, was acquired by Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza in 1999. Today it is part of the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza collection, on deposit at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza.

In this work, Rousseau presents a small hut surrounded by trees near a little copse. It depicts the calm after a storm, which has left behind a puddle, in the foreground.¹

Sensier, the artist's friend and biographer, describes Rousseau's works and explains how the artist begins with a grey preparation upon which he lays out a large mass of trees, spreading the medium with a painting knife and adding tiny, almost imperceptible touches.²

The painting is but one example of the numerous works Rousseau would devote to Fontainebleau, a place that would leave its mark on his life and his painting. Rousseau would become one of the nineteenth century's great defenders of the natural environment.

Frédéric Henriot claimed in 1876 that "the forest of Fontainebleau is the true school of contemporary landscape painting", but Fontainebleau, located about fifty-five kilometres outside Paris, was not simply a subject to be painted.³ In the middle of the nineteenth century, when our current concerns about climate change and the ozone layer remained far in the future, artists like Rousseau defended real nature—nature devoid of artifice—the beauty of desolate wilderness or a wood full of different kinds of trees, plants, flowers and animals.

The artist settled in Barbizon in 1847, from whence he wrote, enthusiastically describing the views from his studio. He praises the elegance of the poplars, the majesty of the oaks; he marvels at every detail that he observes in nature and bemoans the fact that few any longer can enjoy it. Sensier quotes Rousseau to explain for us at first hand the profound sentiments that the artist held for nature: "I could also hear the voices of the trees; the unexpected surprises of their movements, the variety of their forms, and even the singularity with which they are attracted to the light suddenly revealed to me the language of the forests: that entire world of flora [...] whose passions I was discovering".⁴

Rousseau and the other members of the Barbizon school became particularly committed to the cause in support of the forest of Fontainebleau. The first time that the alarm was raised was when, between 1830 and 1847, one of the areas of open ground was replanted with fifteen million pine trees on the order of Louis Philippe and M. de Bois d'Hyver, who was then the inspector of woodlands. It was the largest reforestation effort ever before carried out: some six thousand hectares—which came to more than twenty times the number of trees replanted in the three previous decades combined—and over a quarter of the total area of the forest of Fontainebleau.⁵ At first blush, this might strike one as an ecologically sound strategy, but the sole purpose of



Fig. 3
Nicolas de Fer
Plate 78, *Plan général de la forêt de Fontainebleau en 1705* (General map of the forest of Fontainebleau, 1705). Château de Versailles



Fig. 4
Alfred Sisley
The Painter Claude Monet in the Forest of Fontainebleau, ca. 1865. Oil on canvas, 36 × 55 cm
Saarland Museum, Saarbrücken



Fig. 5
Augustin Enfantin
An Artist Painting in the Forest of Fontainebleau, ca. 1825
Oil on paper mounted on canvas, 26.7 × 34.3 cm
Private collection



Fig. 6
Théodore Rousseau
Massacre of the Innocents, 1847
Oil on canvas, 94 × 147 cm
The Mesdag Collection, The Hague



Fig. 7
Claude Monet
Luncheon on the Grass, 1865
Oil on canvas, 130 × 181 cm
The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow



Fig. 8
Poster,
Fontainebleau,
Its Palace
and Its Forest
Château de
Fontainebleau

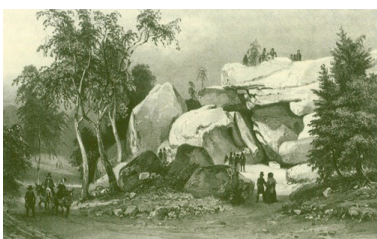


Fig. 9
Anonymous
View from "la Roche qui Pleure", from
the album *Souvenirs de Fontainebleau*
Lithograph, 34.6 × 55 cm

this reforestation was for the trees to be later cleared by local wood merchants. Fontainebleau had ceased to be a “wild” forest and had become a “cultivated” wood.⁶ Rousseau and his colleagues could not abide that manipulation of nature, which turned it into some sort of artificial tree factory. To that effect, the painter complained that “Mankind bustles about in his ignorance, inverts the order of nature and disturbs the balance in disrupting the compensations”.⁷ In the same sense, Georges Gassies reveals all the artists’ vexation with the decision to plant fast-growing pine trees rather than the majestic, native oaks: “At that time, the entire area near Barbizon was free of all these horrid plantations of pines, which are, it is true, productive for the administration”.⁸

As early as 1785 there had been an attempt to introduce plantations of coastal pine trees into France, but their success was very limited. Later, however, plantings of Scots pines imported from Sweden proved successful.⁹ Since the trees grow quickly and also do not require very specific climatological conditions, it was a boon to the market in wood.

For Rousseau, the felling of trees was nothing less than a “massacre”, which he made manifest in a work from 1847 titled *Massacre of the Innocents*, now in the Mesdag Collection in The Hague, and which portrays one of those habitual acts of disproportionate destruction. The artist never completed this painting, though he worked on it throughout his life and kept it in his studio as a reminder of that drama.

Rousseau would persevere throughout his life in the struggle to maintain Fontainebleau’s original nature. Initially he addressed the authorities, alleging that “[The administration] indiscriminately cuts down trees whose great age, fame and artistic beauty should make them respected”.¹⁰ The administration ignored his protestations, but this did not stop the artist. He decided then to make an appeal to Claude François Denecourt, Fontainebleau’s superintendent, who since 1832 had been focused, almost obsessively, on making Fontainebleau a major tourist attraction. Denecourt replied to Rousseau—without referring to him by name—in a pamphlet titled “La guerre déclarée à mes sentiers!” (War declared on my trails!), in which he claims that “Certain artists say, ‘We don’t like your trails precisely because they have civilised the forest too much and they lead to too many unwanted visitors so that we can no longer paint either a site or even the most minor study without distraction...’ In truth, these artists would be more comfortable if our sites were forbidden to the 80 or 100,000 tourists and walkers who visit this lovely area of Fontainebleau annually; but in general, they are too just to want to keep the enjoyment of our picturesque deserts to themselves and equally too intelligent to reprove someone who, I repeat, has furnished so many subjects, so many treasures for their brushes to explore.”¹¹



Fig. 10
G. La Fosse
The Belle-Croix Pond, illustration to "Train de plaisir à Fontainebleau", in *Le Journal Amusant*, no. 994, 18 September 1875



Fig. 11
Anonymous
Landscape of Painters in the Forest of Fontainebleau: Study of Nature by a Merchant of Umbrellas and Parasols. Cartoon in *L'Illustration* 14, no. 352, 24 November 1849



Fig. 12
Cham
Excursions to Fontainebleau. Cartoon in *Le Journal Amusant*, no. 461, 29 October 1864



Fig. 13
Gustave Le Gray
Oak Tree and Rocks, Forest of Fontainebleau, 1849–52
Photograph, 25.2 × 35.7 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

But Rousseau would not give up. In 1852, together with Sensier and in the name of the other artists of the Barbizon school, he defended their cause before the emperor Napoleon III himself, through the intercession of the Duke of Morny.¹² They sought the conservation of certain areas, to be kept free of tourists and reforestation and left exclusively to undefiled nature and to artists at work: "I ask you for protection, Monseigneur, for these old trees which for artists are the source from which they derive their inspiration and their future, and which are for all visitors, venerable souvenirs of ages past".¹³ In the end, Rousseau triumphed. On 14 April 1861, the emperor signed a decree protecting over 1600 hectares from cultivation, reserving 1000 exclusively for the purposes of the work of artists. Indeed, the decree provided for an area larger than that which the painter had sought, making him a guiding light for his colleagues in the Barbizon school.

This victory made Fontainebleau the world's first nature reserve.¹⁴ In 1872, the Committee for the Artistic Conservation of the Forest of Fontainebleau was created. From that point, other artists and humanists from the period, like Millet, Daubigny, Corot and Victor Hugo, joined forces to protect the forest. In 1874 they presented a new petition to preserve another 1000 hectares and to name the forest of Fontainebleau a national monument. As Victor Hugo declared, "A tree is an edifice, a forest is a city, and amongst all the forests, the forest of Fontainebleau is a monument".¹⁵ In the event, they obtained an expansion of the nature reserve, though not the official title of National Historical Monument.

Fontainebleau thereafter became the obligatory destination of any respectable landscape artist from the period.

Unlike the Impressionists, who represented sensations derived from their direct experience of nature, their predecessors like Rousseau painted their feelings towards nature. A work is not just a painting; it is a story, a fragment of the artist's biography, a part of him. To conclude, we shall redirect our gaze towards the work that brought us here in the first place: *The Colliers' Hut in the Forest of Fontainebleau*, the hut from which we have contemplated the origin, the first green shoots, of the emerging science of ecology. It is a hut surrounded by rainwater, a characteristic element in Rousseau's work that, as Greg Thomas has aptly explained, flows through his canvases giving life to the landscape, in the same way that blood flows through our veins in order to give life to our bodies.¹⁶

Notes

- 1 Michel Schulman, *Théodore Rousseau, 1812–1867: Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre peint* (Paris: Éditions de l'Amateur, 1999).
- 2 Alfred Sensier, *Souvenirs sur Théodore Rousseau* (Paris: Léon Techner, 1872), p. 199.
- 3 “La forêt de Fontainebleau, c'est la véritable école du paysage contemporain”. Frédéric Henriet, *Le Paysagiste aux champs* (Paris, 1876), p. 9; quoted in Vincent Pomarède, “Songe à Barbizon, cette histoire est sublime”, in *L'École de Barbizon: Peintre en plein air avant l'impressionnisme*, ed. Vincent Pomarède and Gérard Wallens, exh. cat., Musée des Beaux Arts de Lyon (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2002), p. 30.
- 4 “J'entendais la voix des arbres, les surprises de leurs mouvements, leurs variétés de formes et jusqu'à leur singularité d'attraction vers la lumière m'avaient tout d'un coup révélé le langage des forêts, tout ce monde de flore [...] dont je découvrais les passions”. Sensier, *Souvenirs*, p. 52n2.
- 5 Kimberly Jones, “Landscapes, Legends, Souvenirs, Fantasies: The Forest of Fontainebleau in the Nineteenth Century”, in *In the Forest of Fontainebleau: Painters and Photographers from Corot to Monet*, exh. cat., National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 20–21.
- 6 G. Tendron, *La Forêt de Fontainebleau: De l'écologie à la sylviculture* (Fontainebleau: Office nationale des forêts, 1983), p. 9.
- 7 “L'homme s'agit dans son ignorance, intervertit l'ordre dans la nature et rompt les équilibres en troublant les compensations». Ibid., pp. 14–15.
- 8 “Dans ce temps-là, tout ce qui a voisine immédiatement Barbizon était vierge de ces atroces plantations de pins qui sont, il est vrai, productives pour l'administration”. Georges Gassies, *Le Vieux Barbizon: Souvenirs de jeunesse d'un paysagiste, 1852–1875* (Paris, 1907); quoted in Pomarède, “Songe”, p. 27n3.
- 9 Jones, “Landscapes”, p. 21n5.
- 10 Ibid., p. 20.
- 11 Claude-François Denecourt: “La guerre déclarée à mes sentiers”, in *L'Indicateur de Fontainebleau: Itinéraire descriptif du palais, de la forêt et des environs* (Fontainebleau, 1855); quoted in Jones, “Landscapes”, p. 22n5.
- 12 The letter may be found in Greg M. Thomas, *Art and Ecology in Nineteenth-Century France: The Landscapes of Théodore Rousseau* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 214–17.
- 13 Jones, “Landscapes”, p. 22n5.
- 14 Chantal Georgel, “Un héritage pour la forêt d'aujourd'hui, et de demain”, in *La Forêt de Fontainebleau: Un atelier grandeur nature*, exh. cat. (Paris, Musée d'Orsay, 2007), p. 175.
- 15 Jones, “Landscapes”, p. 23n5.
- 16 Thomas, *Art*, p. 27n13.