



**NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEAN PAINTINGS  
AT THE STERLING AND FRANCINE CLARK ART INSTITUTE**

**VOLUME ONE**

Edited by Sarah Lees

With an essay by Richard Rand  
and technical reports by Sandra L. Webber

With contributions by Katharine J. Albert, Philippe Bordes, Dan Cohen,  
Kathryn Calley Galitz, Alexis Goodin, Marc Gotlieb, John House,  
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Kelly Pask, Elizabeth A. Pergam, Kathryn A. Price, Mark A. Roglán,  
James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

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**90 | Road by the Water** c. 1865–70

Oil on canvas, 40.3 x 60.5 cm

Lower right: COROT

1955-553

Corot was one of the most popular painters with collectors at the end of the nineteenth century, and *Road by the Water* epitomizes the qualities most prized by those who sought his work. Soft, muted colors and a clear, lambent light define and envelop the forms and figures of a peaceful, rural scene. Two women with bundles in the foreground have the time to stop and chat; their labor is not oppressive. A rider on a horse or donkey may have wares in the panniers to sell, but he too seems in no hurry. Farther along this road by the water, two more figures walk side by side. The mood is one of peacefulness and leisure, despite the token attributes of bundles, faggots, and baskets. But

of course, this being Corot, the figures are not there to comment on the relation of the peasant to the land, as is the case with Jean-François Millet. Rather, “the figures, unusually positive for the artist, are placed with subtle art just where they throw off into contrast the immensity of the fleeting distance. One feels the charm with which hazy and tantalizing distinctions are made clear by the liquid accent in which they are expressed.”<sup>1</sup>

William H. Vanderbilt (1821–1885) was one collector who was seduced by Corot’s ability to embody “by his art all that man thinks and feels about nature, in distinction from what his eye grasps as an optical machine.”<sup>2</sup> This assessment of Corot’s art and the praise of *Road by the Water* were written by the American painter and critic Earl Shinn under the pseudonym Edward Strahan and appeared in the deluxe, four-volume edition of Vanderbilt’s collection. Vanderbilt hired Christian Herter to oversee the decoration of his twin mansions at Fifth Avenue and Fifty-first and

Fifty-second Streets, which included stained glass by John La Farge. The picture gallery was filled with fashionable canvases by such French artists as William-Adolphe Bouguereau, Jules Breton, and Jean-François Millet (including *The Sower* [Museum of Fine Arts, Boston] and two of the Millets Clark bought, *The Knitting Lesson* [cat. 218] and *Young Girl Guarding Her Sheep* [cat. 220]), and the Americans Seymour Joseph Guy and John George Brown.

Among these pictures was Corot's small *Road by the Water*, which struck Strahan as embodying a spiritual dimension, an address to the soul that is seeking release. According to Strahan, in Corot's paintings "the melting colors are controlled and applied with precision, with an accuracy and expressiveness that define perspective scientifically just at its most difficult moment; all else is a glorious sacrifice; the ash trees and birches, swept with trembling exhalations, and the grass confused with the movement of the earth-current of the air, are resolutely kept out of focus, as if the painter were determined to lead you to the distance where earth and heaven meet, and where the heart of man is first gladdened with the promise of the dawn."<sup>3</sup> The precipitous diminution of the figures along this road by the water greatly contributes to the sense of vast distance, of possibility, of release.

Corot knew the setting of this scene of unhurried calm more intimately than any of the many sites he painted, for it is Ville-d'Avray, location of his family's country house, just west of Paris between Sèvres and Versailles. Ville-d'Avray is inextricably linked with Corot's name, as Barbizon is with Millet's or Giverny with Claude Monet's. The two ponds bordered by houses and the forest surrounding them appear in Corot's art throughout his long career. When his parents bought the property in 1817, he claimed a small room on the third floor, which he used as a studio from that point until his last visit, in May 1874.<sup>4</sup> According to a recent study of the pictures Corot made at Ville-d'Avray, *Road by the Water* was painted from a vantage south of the ponds, at a slight elevation.<sup>5</sup> As early as 1905, when Alfred Robaut catalogued the painting, he included it in a group of pictures done at or inspired by Ville-d'Avray and nearby Sèvres, the clear implication being that this, too, is situated in the same locale.<sup>6</sup>

By the late 1860s, when *Road by the Water* was painted, Corot had made, by his own estimation, thousands of studies. This gave him the freedom, he felt, after copying nature "with conscientiousness, with respect, with love, with a naïveté pushed sometimes

to clumsiness" for three decades, to stray a bit from the scene in front of him. In the search for pictorial truth, he did not worry about eliminating an object if it seemed not to the point. But he would never suppress a characteristic detail. Rather, he would accentuate it. It was, he declared, "an affair of discernment."<sup>7</sup> These words of explanation were recorded by Frédéric Henriët (1826–1918), secretary to the Comte de Nieuwerkerke who became a painter after he left government work. Best known for his biography of Charles-François Daubigny and his writings on landscape painting,<sup>8</sup> he accompanied Corot on a painting campaign in Luzancy, probably in the early 1860s. Noticing that Corot had not painted some trees in the scene before him, he asked why and received the foregoing answer. Certainly if Corot took any liberties with the topography of Ville-d'Avray, the place he had known since 1817, he was more than justified. FEW

**PROVENANCE** William H. Vanderbilt, New York (by 1879–d. 1885); George W. Vanderbilt, New York, his son, by descent (1885–d. 1914);<sup>9</sup> Cornelius Vanderbilt III, New York, his nephew, by descent (1914–d. 1942); Grace Wilson Vanderbilt, his wife, by descent (1942–45, her sale, Parke-Bernet Galleries, New York, 18 Apr. 1945, no. 128, sold to Knoedler); [Knoedler, New York, sold to Clark, 20 Apr. 1945]; Robert Sterling Clark (1945–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

**EXHIBITIONS** New York 1942, no. 36, ill., lent by Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt; Williamstown 1956a, no. 91, pl. 8; Williamstown 1959b, ill.; New York 1967, no. 9; New York 1969b, no. 55, ill.; Williamstown 1981a, no cat.

**REFERENCES** Strahan 1879–80, vol. 3, pt. 12, p. 108; Strahan 1883–84, vol. 3, p. 21, ill., as *Road Scene* (print after the painting); Vanderbilt 1884, p. 15, no. 18, as *Road Scene*; Vanderbilt 1886, p. 7, no. 18, as *Road near Paris*; *Collector* 1890, p. 82; Metropolitan Museum of Art 1905, p. 202, no. 11, as *Road near Paris*; Robaut 1905, vol. 3, pp. 74–75, no. 1472, ill., as *La route au bord de l'eau*; Burroughs 1916, p. 54, no. C81-52, as *Road near Paris*; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 18, ill.; Morse 1979, p. 64; Ville-d'Avray 1987, fig. 31; Mowry 2005, p. 13, ill.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The original support is a moderate-weight linen (16–19 threads/cm), glue-lined onto a slightly coarser fabric. The stretcher is a replaced, five-member mortise-and-tenon design in mahogany, possibly dating from the mid-twentieth century. Although the higher impastos have been flattened at the tops, and several have been moated by the lining process, the paint is in fairly good condition. Some of the branched age crackle is also open laterally like traction cracks. The painting was apparently

cleaned by De Wild of New York, possibly around 1945. De Wild re-inpainted the cow that Corot had intentionally covered, which can be detected today fairly easily in the right foreground, along with a small girl in a pink dress standing in front of it. It is not clear whether they were ever part of this image or belonged to an earlier composition. Just beneath the cow is a curved 12.7-cm track left where a human hair was extracted from the dry paint. When the picture was again cleaned in 1978, old solvent abrasion was noted in the darks of the women's costumes and feet, along with other small locations. A large rectangle of new inpainting now hides the cow and the girl.

The ground layers are a warm off-white color and appear to have been applied by the artist. The canvas weave is visible in the sky, with some stretching distortions along the left edge. The ground layer has short diagonal cracks along the threads. No underdrawing was detected with infrared viewing, although the overpainted cow and figure are more discernible. A number of alterations appear to have occurred at the time the cow was removed, including the addition of flowers and foliage in the right foreground. A 7.6-cm band of the sun-streak in the lower left road was placed in shadow with a gray wash. The large and mid-sized figures were painted over thin gray painted reserves. The landscape is made up of layers of thin wispy strokes, glazes, scumbles, and thick highlight details: some of the latter were painted after lower paint layers had set.

1. Strahan 1883–84, vol. 3, p. 21.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. See Paris–Ottawa–New York 1996–97, entries in index under Ville-d'Avray for information on the site, and nos. 4, 32, 102, 147–49 for other depictions of the site.
5. Ville-d'Avray 1987, no. 31.
6. R 1463–71 and 1474–1506.
7. Henriot 1891, p. 101: “C'est affaire de discernement.”
8. Nancy Davenport, “Henriet, Frédéric,” in Grove Art Online (accessed 7 Aug. 2007).
9. George Washington Vanderbilt placed this and a number of other works on long-term loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1886. The works were returned to his nephew in 1919.

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91 | **Washerwomen in a Willow Grove** 1871

Oil on canvas, 38.1 x 46.2 cm  
Lower left: COROT  
1955-526

When Alfred Robaut published this painting in his catalogue raisonné of Corot's oeuvre in 1905, he dated it to May–June 1871 and localized it to Sainte-Catherine-lez-Arras, a hamlet northwest of the town of Arras on the other side of the River Scarpe. Corot had remained in Paris throughout the Franco-Prussian War and the siege of 1870–71. After the siege was lifted, Robaut made his way to Paris in mid-March and convinced Corot to visit his friends in the north. Corot needed little encouragement and by early April was in Arras, in the Pas-de-Calais.

Arras and its environs were well known to Corot by this time, as he had visited there almost annually for twenty years. In Arras, Corot found a group of friends who not only welcomed him into their families but also, being artists themselves, accompanied him on painting expeditions.

Corot's increasingly close connection to Arras began in 1847, when Constant Dutilleux, a painter and lithographer (1807–1865), wrote to Corot asking to buy a painting. Corot went to Arras to meet Dutilleux in 1851, the first of his many trips. The next year in Arras, Corot met Robaut (1830–1909), the man whose catalogue raisonné of Corot's work remains the foundation for all studies of the artist, and in 1853 Robaut married one of Dutilleux's daughters. Five years later, another of Dutilleux's daughters married Charles-Paul Desavary (1837–1885). Desavary, in addition to being a landscapist and lithographer, was a photographer. In 1872, when Robaut was beginning to compile the information for his catalogue, he had six hundred of Corot's paintings shipped from Paris to Arras so that Desavary could photograph them (including this one). Over the years Corot painted close to fifty pictures in Arras and its surroundings.<sup>1</sup> It was in Arras, too, that Corot was persuaded in 1853 to try his hand at the photographic printmaking process of cliché-verre; in 1871, he made twelve transfer lithographs. For Corot, then, Arras was a place filled with genial friends and motifs from which to make art.

The terrain around Arras is flat and was, in Corot's time, marshy, not unlike the countryside of Belgium. The area had been part of France only since 1667,