



**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

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as do those of the tree in *Souvenir of Mortefontaine*, carving out, under their length, a space where time is suspended. The crown of the apple tree merges with the foliage of the smaller trees to the right, eliminating the distance between the trees to form an arc of protected space. Corot exploited the space-defying aspect of this decorative sweep of foliage a few years later in *The Road to Sin-le-Noble, near Douai* (Musée du Louvre, Paris).⁶

The magical zone beneath the trees is populated by people ostensibly harvesting a field of grain. Commensurate with the confected setting, they do not truly toil, as do the workers in Daubigny's harvest scenes.⁷ Corot may have taken the idea of a harvest under apple trees from Daubigny, but he had no choice but to render the subject in his own terms. FEW

PROVENANCE Jaquette; Beugniet (in 1893); Jolly;⁸ Robert Sterling Clark (by 1930–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Williamstown 1956a, no. 87, pl. 4; Williamstown 1959b, ill.

REFERENCES Robaut 1905, vol. 3, pp. 278–79, no. 209, ill., as *Pommiers dans la campagne*; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 11, ill.; Morse 1979, p. 64.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a moderate-weight linen (14 threads/cm) whose threads are pulled out of square in the right third of the picture. The painting has an old glue lining onto a fabric of similar weight, and small bits of newspaper used in the lining process remain adhered to the original tacking margins. The painting was treated, probably a partial cleaning, by Chapuis and Coince of Paris in 1930. The stretcher, which is nailed together in the corners, is probably a replacement. All four edges of the image are repainted, perhaps to cover damage or incompleteness. There are scattered age cracks, some weave impression, and scattered solvent abrasion where thin dark colors were applied over light-colored impastos. A few retouches can be seen in the foreground abrasions. The natural resin varnish is moderately discolored and has its own crackle network, while the edge retouches on top of the coating now look cooler in tone.

The ground is a cream-colored commercial application that is not visible through the layers of paint. No underdrawing was detected with infrared reflectography, although occasional glimpses of charcoal may be located in the trees. There may have been some sketching of forms in a thin gray-green paint. The paint has a somewhat dry, paste consistency, with some scumbling, and some wet-into-wet brushwork. The small figures and trees were painted before the foreground field and the rather thickly applied sky. In reflected light, unrelated thick deposits of paint in the leftmost lower branches of the central tree may indicate a reworking of forms.

1. See Paris–Ottawa–New York 1996–97, p. 387, fig. 167; and Micucci 2001, p. 36.
2. H 956.
3. H 960 and 140.
4. R 1625.
5. Henriët 1891, p. 101. “On ne peut pas copier littéralement la nature, n’est-ce pas? Je ne puis peindre toutes les branches, ni toutes les feuilles de cet arbre? Je me borne à en donner l’aspect général en le modelant dans la masse; je choisis celles de ses branches qui servent le mieux à établir son anatomie. Je préciserai ensuite quelques feuilles qui, bien choisies elles aussi, donneront l’impression de milliers d’autres feuilles.”
6. R 2169.
7. For examples, see H 140–42, 983–86, or 998–1000.
8. Jaquette and Beugniet are listed as former owners in Robaut 1905, vol. 3, pp. 278. Beugniet is probably the artist’s supplier and dealer often associated with Barbizon; see Constantin 2001, p. 51. Jolly is listed in Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 11, but this picture has not been found associated with that name in any relevant sales or other records.

89 | **Bathers of the Borromean Isles** c. 1865–70

Oil on canvas, 79 x 61.7 cm

Lower left: COROT

1955-537

It can be argued that Corot's *Bathers of the Borromean Isles* is the best example of the artist's work in the collections of the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute. Not only is it in a superb state of preservation (see Technical Report), but it also epitomizes Corot's late, great style, embodying as it does Corot's feelings for what Étienne Moreau-Nélaton called the artist's "second adopted country."¹ After Ville d'Avray, the location of the Corot family's country house just west of Paris, this region of Lombardy, in northern Italy, was the inspiration, according to Moreau-Nélaton, for Corot's goat-herds and idyllic nymphs in their setting of blue-toned mornings and golden evenings—in short, his *souvenirs*. The painting is magical, as are the artist's best works, and part of its power derives from its simplicity. A huge tree, its trunk sunk into the waters of a lake, fills up more than half the picture. Its limbs, thick with leaves, fan out from the trunk. Its erect fullness is accentuated by the slimness of a second trunk, sparsely graced with foliage, leaning to the left. Two women cool themselves



in the calm waters, which are enlivened with brushy strokes. Buildings, barely delineated on a hill in the background, are illumined by the sun. The little of the blue sky that shows is still full of daylight, yet clouds are beginning to be tinged pink by the setting sun.

These twenty-first-century words suffice as a prosaic description. Yet writers closer in time to Corot perhaps understood him better, and their more poetic style is more consonant with the visual effects he achieved. James Jackson Jarves was one of many who fell under Corot's spell:

But Corot is a poet. Nature is subjective to his mental vision. He is no seer, is not profound; but is sensitive and, as it were, clairvoyant, seeing the spirit more than the forms of things. There is a bewitching mystery and suggestiveness in his apprehension of the landscape, united to a pensive joyousness and absorption of self in the scene, that is very uncommon in his race. [This is Jarves, an American, writing about Corot, a Frenchman.] . . . This obliviousness of selfhood is an important element in truly great work. Corot's paintings . . . fall upon the eye as distant melody upon the ear, captivating the senses and inspiring the sentiments. Contemplation, too, and sympathetic reception of Nature's language are quickened by his compositions. They are no transcripts of scenery, but pictures of the mind.²

Corot's muted palette, more tonal than colored, creates pictures that suggest more than they describe. In one of his notebooks late in life Corot wrote: "The first two things to study are the form, then the values. For me, those are the mainstays of art."³ An emphasis on form, or masses, and values makes pictures with few but salient details.

In many of his later works, Corot was painting memories, the idea of a place he had once visited, rather than the specifics of a site that he painted while there. His technique of layered glazes and scumbles, so evident here in the water, foliage, and sky, blurs the edges of forms and invites the sort of contemplation Jarves describes. Particularly powerful in *Bathers of the Borromean Isles* is the effect of light on the water. Spreading into the distance, the water "glimmers and sparkles under [the light's] rays. Shadows and reflections are alive with it. The densest vegetation opens before it."⁴ Looking at this water seems to liberate the mind.

For surely, when Corot toured northern Italy in

the autumn of 1834, he did not see women bathing in the waters of Lake Maggiore. On this, the second of his three trips to Italy, Corot stayed in the north, visiting Genoa, Pisa, Volterra, Florence, and Venice. Leaving Venice on 8 September, he stopped at Lakes Garda, Como, and Maggiore before crossing the Alps at the Simplon Pass on his way home. By 8 October, he was in Geneva. His time at Lake Garda resulted in a series of pictures that, painted over decades, move ever farther from the original motif, an early instance of Corot's ringing changes on a theme, as a composer writes variations on a melody.⁵ While Lake Como spurred him to paint a ravishing oil sketch on the spot,⁶ Lake Maggiore, the largest of these northern lakes (as its name implies), prompted at the time but a single sketch of the island called Isola Bella, showing the outline of the seventeenth-century palazzo built by Count Vitaliano Borromeo (d. 1690),⁷ to whose family the island still belongs.

If the topography of Lake Maggiore did not inspire Corot for decades, the theme of the bather appeared as early as 1836, in *Diana Surprised in Her Bath* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), one of Corot's submissions to the Salon of that year. Michael Pantazzi has compared the Diana picture with *Bathers of the Borromean Isles*,⁸ pointing in the earlier picture to the nude hanging from the branch of the tree and the dead tree at the right as motifs Corot repeated years later. Corot experimented with the bather theme in the intervening years, most notably in *Impression of Morning* (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux), also a scene of Diana and her nymphs, some bathing, others returning from the hunt with their spoils, accompanied by implausibly elegant whippet-like white dogs. It, like *The Bathers of Bellinzona, Evening* (Musée du Louvre, Paris), is an intermediate step toward the concentrated poetry of *Bathers of the Borromean Isles*. Another step in the progression can be seen in *Souvenir of the Lake Nemi Region of 1865* (The Art Institute of Chicago). In *Bathers of the Borromean Isles*, Corot reverts to the vertical format he used for *Diana Surprised in Her Bath*, where the orientation focused attention on the figures and the story they are telling. The horizontal formats of the intervening canvases, by contrast, allow more room for the landscape elements. What could be seen as Corot's inept draftsmanship of the figures in *Bathers of the Borromean Isles* can more charitably be interpreted as his way of harmonizing the human figure with its equally idiosyncratically drawn landscape setting, a harmonization underscored by the vertical format.⁹

This vision of a faraway land bathed in golden light that warms water and bodies struck a responsive chord, for several versions of it exist. About 1872, the dealer Goupil ordered a replica of the present work of the same size. Corot never finished it, so it appeared in his studio sale.¹⁰ He made another, smaller version, which was with the dealer Gustave Tempelaere in 1888.¹¹ The version at the Clark is the first of the series. Corot sold it to the dealer Pierre-Firmin Martin who in turn sold it to Henri Rouart (1833–1912). A friend of Edgar Degas and collector of note, Rouart eventually owned forty-seven oil paintings and fifteen drawings by Corot, more works than by any other single artist, including his friend Degas. Rouart had a predilection for Corot's early Italian views, those that were painted on the spot, out of doors. Their straightforwardness would have fit well with his paintings by Degas, Édouard Manet, Berthe Morisot, and Camille Pissarro. *Bathers of the Borromean Isles* spoke to a side of Rouart that was more lyrical, even melancholic. Together with the pictures of Italy from early in Corot's career, *Bathers of the Borromean Isles* neatly summed up the range of Corot's landscape art. FEW

PROVENANCE The artist, sold to Martin; [Pierre-Firmin Martin, sold to Rouart]; Henri Rouart, Paris (by 1875–1912, his sale, Galerie Manzi-Joyant, Paris, 9 Dec. 1912, no. 118, ill., sold to Knoedler); [Knoedler, Paris and New York, from 1912]; Cornelius Kingsley Garrison Billings, New York and Santa Barbara (until 1926, his sale, American Art Association, New York, 8 Jan. 1926, no. 19, sold to Elverson); James Elverson Jr., Philadelphia (1926–30, his sale, American Art Association, New York, 30 Jan. 1930, no. 34, ill. frontispiece, sold to Knoedler); [Knoedler, New York, sold to Clark, 1 Feb. 1930, as *Les Baigneuses des Iles Borromées*]; Robert Sterling Clark (1930–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Paris 1875, no. 45, as *Baigneuses*, lent by Rouart; Paris 1878, no. 105, as *Baigneuses du Tyrol*, lent by Rouart; Williamstown 1956a, no. 94, pl. 11; Williamstown 1959b, ill.; New York 1967, no. 8; San Diego–Williamstown 1988, not in cat. (exhibited in Williamstown only); Williamstown 1995a, p. 17, no. 66.

REFERENCES Robaut 1905, vol. 3, pp. 154–55, no. 1653, ill.; Alexandre 1912b, p. 75; Meier-Graefe 1913, p. 131, ill.; Waldmann 1927, p. 403, ill.; Schoeller and Dieterle 1956, no. 62, ill.; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 13, ill.; Morse 1979, p. 64; Kern et al. 1996, pp. 50–51, ill.; Pomarède 1996a, p. 184, ill.; Paris–Ottawa–New York 1996–97, p. 160, fig. 73 (French ed., p. 212, ill.); Griffin 2004, p. 23, fig. 9.

TECHNICAL REPORT The original support is a moderate-weight linen (thread count inaccessible), with an old, brittle,

pre-1930 glue lining onto a coarser fabric. The tacking margins have been removed, and the stretcher is a six-member replacement that is a bit larger than the painting. The reason for the lining may be the small three-corner tear in the upper left quadrant. A pronounced weave impression is emphasized by the glossy varnish. Some tented, but stable, paint is seen along the weave. There are scattered age cracks, with some cupping in the center of the picture, and a few areas of traction crackle along the lower edge. Several localized crack networks are associated with old, minor handling damages, and there is widespread wrinkling. The old, possibly original, lower varnish is unevenly yellowed, especially along the left edge. There are old retouches on the lower edge, in the upper left quadrant, and possibly in the tree foliage. The painting's surface was cleaned of grime in 1978 and a varnish layer added, and minor inpainting was done in traction cracks in the center tree. In 2010, lifted paint was set down, old fractured varnish patches were resaturated, and traction cracks in the tree were inpainted.

The ground layers are off-white and probably commercially prepared. There was no underdrawing detected with infrared reflectography, although the right thigh of the central female figure was slightly higher, and her arm originally extended in a more vertical position. The paint is applied and blended in a complex layering of thin to thick paste-consistency strokes and numerous light and feathery scumbles. The sky is painted more thickly than the rest of the image. Thin branches added over the completed foliage may be executed in a water-based paint or ink. The 1978 report noted considerable reworking by the artist in such areas as the lower right, where the pale reflection was altered by a gray wash over the light impasto. Under low magnification, the paint film is in remarkably good condition.

1. Moreau-Nélaton 1924, vol. 1, p. 36: "sa seconde patrie adoptive."
2. Jarves 1869, p. 273.
3. *Carnet* B, fol. 3, Cabinet des Dessins, Département des Autographes, Musée du Louvre, R.F. 1870-08732; translation from Paris–Ottawa–New York 1996–97, p. 265.
4. Jarves 1869, p. 273.
5. For illustrations, see Paris–Ottawa–New York 1996–97, p. 134, nos. 58, 59, p. 216, no. 94, p. 310, no. 131. For discussion, see Wissman 1989, pp. 71–74.
6. Paris–Ottawa–New York 1996–97, p. 132, no. 57.
7. R 2672.
8. Paris–Ottawa–New York 1996–97, p. 160.
9. For a less successful variant, see R 1657, of women bathing a child. The quotidian flavor of child rearing leeches away the idyllic quality of the other pictures discussed here.
10. R 1654 and Robaut 1905, vol. 4, p. 213, no. 187. See Sotheby's 1998, no. 44. This painting is currently with Dickinson Roundell, New York.
11. R 1655. See Sotheby's 1981a, no. 24.