



**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,
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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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Details:

TITLE PAGE: John Constable, *Yarmouth Jetty* (cat. 73)

OPPOSITE COPYRIGHT PAGE: Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *Bathers of the Borromean Isles* (cat. 89)

PAGE VIII: Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Woman Crocheting* (cat. 267)

PAGE X: Claude Monet, *Seascape, Storm* (cat. 222)

PAGE XII: Jacques-Louis David, *Comte Henri-Amédée-Mercure de Turenne-d'Aynac* (cat. 103)

PAGE XVI: William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *Nymphs and Satyr* (cat. 33)

PRECEDING PAGE 2: Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Snake Charmer* (cat. 154)



83

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot

French, 1796–1875

83 | Dunkerque, Fishing Boats Tied to the Wharf

c. 1830

Oil on laid paper, mounted on canvas, 23.7 x 36.2 cm

Lower left: VENTE / COROT [stamp]

1955.542

Corot was an inveterate traveler, often returning to the same sites over a span of many years. Dunkerque is one such locale. He went there first in 1830, after he had stayed with his friend Théodore Scribe at Scribe's uncle's country house near Chartres, where Corot went to escape the July Revolution of that year.¹ Traveling with his friend the architect Pierre-Achille Poirot, whom he had met in Tivoli in 1827, he went north, to Normandy, stopping at Honfleur, Trouville, Sainte-Adresse, and Le Havre, and from there east to Boulogne and Dunkerque and inland to Bergues and Saint-Omer. Dunkerque (which means church in the dunes) is about as far east along France's northern coast as one can go; Belgium is just fifteen miles away. According to Karl Baedeker, "The great majority of the inhabitants of this district are Flemings and speak little or no French." He continued: "Though clean and well-built, Dunkirk, apart from its *Harbour*,

is comparatively uninteresting."² The harbor was a complex series of docks and basins, protected from the Channel by a long approach and connected to other towns in northeast France and beyond by canals. On this first trip, Corot, decades before Baedeker compiled his guidebook, was also attracted to the harbor and the geometries of the shipping and quais. He rapidly sketched this modest scene, first in pencil, then in muted oil colors.

Just right of center rises the octagonal Tour de Leughenaer. A brick relic of old town walls, it is the sole survivor of 128 such structures built in the fourteenth century as part of the town's defenses and in use as a lighthouse only from 1825 until 1843.³ The tower is located at the junction of the bassin du Commerce, to the southwest, and the port d'Échange leading to the outer harbor to the northwest, a critical strategic position. Corot, though, would not have been interested in its importance for shipping. For him it was an immovable vertical solid mass offsetting the delicate masts. The other notable monument in Dunkerque was the belfry of the church of Saint-Eloi. Both the maritime and the ecclesiastical structures, from a closer perspective, can be seen in Corot's *Dunkerque, Fishing Docks* (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dunkerque), made on his trip back to Dunkerque in 1857.⁴ Corot seems to have liked the solidity of the lighthouse. When he returned to Dunkerque in 1873, he again painted it in the background of a harbor scene whose figures in the

foreground give it the air of a lazy summer afternoon (Collection Oskar Reinhart, Winterthur).⁵

The painting in Williamstown was dated by Alfred Robaut to 1829–30. The fluidity of its handling induced Charles Cunningham in 1976 to propose it was painted, not on Corot's first trip in 1830, but on one of the later two,⁶ a suggestion taken up by Gabriel P. Weisberg, who posited a relation with the tonalities of James McNeill Whistler.⁷ Its blond palette is not far removed, however, from the portrait of Chartres Cathedral known to have been painted in 1830 (Musée du Louvre, Paris).⁸ Then, too, the painting of Dunkerque was executed in oil on paper, which was later mounted on canvas. Corot's plein-air sketches from early in his career were often (but certainly not always) painted on paper, allowing for a very fluid paint handling, whereas for his later sketches he more habitually chose a canvas support.

According to Robaut, Corot painted but one picture and made three drawings on the first trip to Dunkerque. When he returned in September 1857, in the company of artist-friends Constant Dutilleux and Charles-Paul Desavary, he made ten paintings. His last trip, in July 1873, with Charles-François Daubigny and Corot's student Achille-François Oudinot, resulted in six canvases.⁹ In none of these other views of Dunkerque was Corot's focus as narrow as it was in 1830. The black hulls in the foreground form a heavy base stretching more than halfway across the picture. Tans, grays, and gray-blues make up the rest of the scene, sparkled here and there by touches of white. It has been suggested that the painting was heavily reworked to make it salable after the artist's death.¹⁰ In addition, much of the sky was repainted in 1949, after Clark bought the work in 1947 (see Technical Report).

Robaut noted in his catalogue raisonné that Corot visited Dunkerque the first time with his friend Adolphe Desbarolles (perhaps Poirot had not continued with Corot after Chartres), who painted the same scene, if on a slightly smaller scale, with a few minor differences: the central boat was painted shorter and more curved at bow and stern and angled slightly away from the dock, and a figure was placed in the foreground. Since then, Robaut reported, the painting had been retouched and the figure covered over. Desbarolles seems to have given Corot this cognate work, as Corot kept it in his studio until his death; it was number 670 in his studio sale. Unknown to Weisberg writing in 1989, since 1982 it has been in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, attributed to Adolphe

Desbarolles (1801–1886), and it closely parallels the present work.¹¹ Infrared examination of the painting in Boston revealed a figure at the bow of the boat that has been painted over, confirming its identification with the picture described by Robaut.¹² Presumably the false Corot signature that appears on the Desbarolles was added at the time of the other changes.

On Corot's travels throughout his life, he visited many ports. *Dunkerque, Fishing Boats Tied to the Wharf* is among the first of many such depictions, which include examples of Honfleur (c. 1830; Harvard Art Museums / Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Mass.), Rouen (1834; Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen), and La Rochelle (1851; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven).¹³ These subjects forced him to paint hard-edged shapes, unlike the organic or variable masses of trees and rocks, a challenge he apparently enjoyed. FEW

PROVENANCE Artist's studio sale, Drouot, Paris, 1–4 June 1875, no. 422, sold to Dubuisson; René Dubuisson (from 1875); [Clyfford Trevor, New York, sold to Clark, 1 Dec. 1947]; Robert Sterling Clark (1947–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Williamstown 1956a, no. 96, pl. 13; Williamstown 1959b, ill.; New York 1967, no. 4; Northampton–Williamstown 1976–77, pp. 87–88, no. 53, ill.; Tokyo–Osaka–Yokohama 1989–90, p. 141, no. 5, ill.; Manchester and others 1991–92, p. 117, no. 12, ill.

REFERENCES Robaut 1905, vol. 2, pp. 74–75, no. 213, ill., vol. 4, p. 240; Frankfurter 1956, p. 42, ill.; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 16, ill.; Gowing 1965, p. 121, ill.; Morse 1979, p. 64; Paris–Ottawa–New York 1996–97, pp. 36–37, 253, fig. 22 (French ed., pp. 76, 314, ill.); Horbez 2004, pp. 162–63, 189, ill.

TECHNICAL REPORT The original support is laid paper mounted to canvas, which now has an old glue lining and a six-member stretcher. There are several old cracks and tears that may have occurred before the paper had any additional support. A scratch damage, with losses, through the foremast and sail occurred after the picture was mounted. The edges are filled with a very white material, slightly extending the picture's size and nearly hiding the paper layer. The impastos are all flattened from the mounting and lining. The right sky is very abraded, some rigging lines are nearly missing, and the laid lines of the paper are visible throughout the skinned paint of the buildings on the right. The black painted hulls have traction cracks. The painting was treated in 1949 by Charles De Wild, who was probably responsible for the extensive retouching. Problems with the appearance of the surface led to subsequent partial cleaning by Barbara

Beardsley of New Hampshire in 1976 and another cleaning in Williamstown in 1981. The sky is still problematic due to the extent of repaint, and uneven texture and gloss. Some of the older oil retouches, still in place around the hull, sails, and edges, are yellowed and can be detected in normal and ultra-violet light. The red stamp in the lower left corner is solvent sensitive and damaged from repeated cleanings.

The cream-colored ground is visible in the right foreground and below many sketchy areas of paint. Under low magnification, charcoal lines are seen in the boat and sail outlines, some of which remain as part of the final image. Also visible in infrared reflectography are slight changes in the pitch of the three masts in the front vessels and the typical fractured nature of the torn paper edges in the larger damage. The radiograph shows a large dense circle in the right center sky, possibly indicating the sun. The paint, ranging from thin to moderately thick, is very sketchy and dry throughout. There are large particles of white in the gray paint, and round, clear particles, possibly oil salts, appear occasionally; some of the latter have dropped out, leaving small craters in the paint.

1. Paris–Ottawa–New York 1996–97, p. 93.
2. Baedeker 1909, p. 38.
3. Leuchtturmseiten von Anke und Jens, <http://www.leuchtturmseiten.de/home.htm> (accessed 10 Oct. 2006).
4. R 766. Both can be seen from the dunes surrounding the town in R 2116.
5. R 2119.
6. Northampton–Williamstown 1976–77, p. 88.
7. Tokyo–Osaka–Yokohama 1989–90, p. 141.
8. R 221.
9. R 2116–19, 2121, 2295.
10. Conservation laboratory report, 1981, in the Clark's curatorial file.
11. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1982.385. Desbarolles evidently enjoyed travel. In 1846, he went to Spain with Alexandre Dumas, Louis Boulanger, and Eugène Giraud; the latter recorded sights along the way. Giraud and Desbarolles traveled together before meeting Dumas in Madrid. Desbarolles recounted their adventures in *Deux artistes en Espagne* (1862), a book illustrated by Giraud.
12. E-mail from Susie Wager, Art of Europe, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 6 Sept. 2006.
13. R 240, 256, and 669.

84 | Castel Sant'Angelo, Rome c. 1830–32

Oil on canvas, 34.3 x 45.7 cm
 Lower left: COROT / COROT / Corot
 1955-555

Camille Corot came late to painting; he was twenty-six in 1822, when his parents allowed him to forsake the profession of cloth merchant they had hoped for him. He did not strike out on his own but studied with two academic landscape painters, first but only briefly with Achille-Etna Michallon (1796–1822), then with Jean-Victor Bertin (1767–1842), from September 1822 through sometime in 1824. From these teachers he learned how to paint in oils in the out of doors, as a means both of recording sites under specific meteorological conditions and of training oneself to work quickly. Far from being a radical technique practiced by young rebels, in the early nineteenth century painting out of doors was an established part of the academic curriculum, promoted by artists whose finished paintings may to twenty-first-century eyes appear dry and stiff. But if painting *en plein air* was common practice, the resulting landscapes were considered private works, used for study and as aids in composing the larger pictures destined for exhibition or sale.

Peter Galassi, in his magisterial book *Corot in Italy*, has established the primacy of plein-air painting to the academic method as well as the central place of Italy in the artistic formation of artists from all over Europe.¹ Corot's first study trip to Italy, from 1825 through 1828, then, was simply another traditional step on his way to becoming a landscape painter. By the time he got to Rome, the city had been painted, drawn, etched, and engraved for centuries. Earlier artists had determined which locales were the most picturesque, and Corot's choices of motifs followed the established roster of sites. Among his Roman views are multiple versions of the Trinità dei Monti, one of five French churches in Rome, as seen from the grounds of the Villa Medici, home of the French Academy in Rome, on the Pincio; the Forum from the Farnese Gardens; the fountain in the grounds of the French Academy, with the dome of Saint Peter's and the Castel Sant'Angelo in the distance; and the Castel Sant'Angelo itself, both with and without the dome of Saint Peter's.²

This view of the Tiber River with the Castel Sant'Angelo on the right and the dome of Saint Peter's