



**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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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)



98

## Charles-François Daubigny

French, 1817–1878

### 98 | The Creek (Landscape) 1863

Oil on panel, 30 x 48.3 cm

Lower right: Daubigny 1863.

1955.693

“I so much like the talent of d’Aubigny [*sic*]. As far as I am concerned he is the strongest of us all, since I find that he paints not just the objects in front of his eyes, but the air which surrounds them and the light which colors them all. He paints the important; and that I believe is all the fascination of the landscape.”<sup>1</sup> This discerning appreciation of Daubigny’s work, by Adolphe Appian, a landscapist from Lyon, could have been written of *The Creek*. Soft light combines with moisture in the air to create an enveloping, unifying atmosphere. This effect is more often credited to the later paintings of Claude Monet but was in fact explored many years earlier by painters such as Daubigny and Camille Corot.

Daubigny experimented with different ways to put paint on his chosen support, whether panel, as here, or canvas. He used smooth strokes for water, dabs of the end of the brush for foliage, long lines of paint for

boughs and branches of trees, and thin squiggles for highlights on the boat and faint ripples on the water nearby. Choosing an unspecified site—a small creek bordered by trees, perhaps a field in the distance demarcated by pollarded trees—released him from any obligation to replicate accurately the scene in front of him. Art making alone was his goal.

One of Daubigny’s gifts was the ability to create the impression of immediacy: one often feels as if one is looking at a place that truly appears as it does in his painting, without the overlay of artistic conventions. This is not true, of course; what is important is the effect that is created. In Frédéric Henriet’s words: “The great boldness of Daubigny is to be simple; his novelty is to have renounced all the worn-out and facile means of arriving at the effect.”<sup>2</sup> In this case, the vantage point chosen, suspended over the calm water, confronts the viewer with an unmediated view of the quiet scene. The bright green in the middle ground draws the eye into the picture, leaping over the still waters that stretch across the full width of the panel.

The sense of being in a landscape by Daubigny extends to the conviction that some people have of knowing what time of day the painting depicts. In 1868, for example, Odilon Redon reviewed the Salon and was of the opinion that “it is impossible to be mistaken about the hour Monsieur Daubigny paints. He is the painter of a moment, of an impression. He

possesses it, alive, strong, and for the rest has never sought any other goal.”<sup>3</sup> The responses to the present small work are varied, suggesting that, except for the full sunlight of noon or the complete darkness of night, the quality of natural light is elusive to the point of indeterminacy. When *The Creek* was sold in 1891, the cataloguer felt that it showed “the harmonizing light of a morning sky.”<sup>4</sup> The cataloguer for the 1923 sale, by contrast, wrote that “on the low horizon rises an early evening sky.”<sup>5</sup> Then in 1929, when Robert Sterling Clark saw the painting at the dealer Scott and Fowles, he thought it depicted early afternoon. Francine liked the picture—Clark seems not to have bought without her approval—and he purchased it at the reduced price of \$4,000.<sup>6</sup> Twelve days later he bought a much smaller woodland scene (cat. 100) for \$500. The discrepancy in price is not easily explained. It may have been due to the fact that *The Creek* is larger than *Woodland Scene*, or it could be attributable to Clark’s willingness to buy a painting that moved him at a high price. FEW

**PROVENANCE** George I. Seney (his sale, American Art Association, New York, 11–13 Feb. 1891, no. 288); Joseph Eastman, New York; sale, American Art Association, New York, 16 Jan. 1923, no. 17, ill.; [Scott & Fowles, New York, sold to Clark, 10 Apr. 1929]; Robert Sterling Clark (1929–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

**EXHIBITIONS** Williamstown 1956a, pl. S-18, ill.

**REFERENCES** Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 27, ill.; Fidell-Beaufort and Bailly-Herzberg 1975, p. 153, no. 84, ill., as *La Petite rivière / Landscape*; Hellebranth 1976, p. 256, no. 771, ill., as *Barque sur la rivière*; Hayward 2008, p. 118, fig. 5.3.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The original support is a light-colored hardwood panel, possibly oak, probably thinned and leveled to its present 0.3–0.4-cm thickness to remove any chamfers. The grain, which is very widely spaced, and pronounced in reflected light, runs horizontally. The secondary support, already in place by 1891, is an attached mahogany panel (0.5 cm thick) and a cradle that extends past the original panel edges. Small inlaid mahogany borders bring the attachments up to the paint level, creating the appearance that the picture is painted on mahogany. There are a number of old checks and splits in the panel. These include a check in the upper right, a crack (10.2 cm) starting on the lower left edge, and a split (17.8 cm) along the irregular grain in the lower center, possibly surrounding a knot in the wood. There may also be a second knot near the bottom center edge, seen as a circular crack. The brown paint in the trees

displays some traction crackle, as do a few areas of sky. Age cracks follow the wood grain, except in the whites where the cracks run perpendicular to the grain. In 1978, the darker passages were partially cleaned due to solvent sensitivity, and these still fluoresce slightly in ultraviolet light. There are a few new retouches in the lower left corner, the right edge, and the left tree group. Older oil paint retouches along the edges may be the work of the artist. The translucent appearance of the sky may be an original aging phenomenon related to some pigment or medium used by the artist.

The ground is a thin cream-colored layer, with a strong multidirectional array of wide brush marks scattered below the paint, suggesting the panel was primed by the artist. Solvent abrasion to the paint layer could have increased the visibility of this ground texture. No underdrawing was discovered, although in infrared viewing there seem to be paint changes where additional foliage was covered over with sky in the final layers. There may be a warm dark-brown sketch below the paint, which remains partially visible in the thinner passages. The final paint layers are vehicular in consistency and were applied in wispy strokes, sometimes two and three levels deep. The thicker, more opaque pale colors were often applied in and around the dark details. There is very little impasto work.

1. Adolphe Appian, quoted in Fidell-Beaufort and Bailly-Herzberg 1975, p. 48, from the Appian papers.
2. Henriët 1857, p. 197: “La grande hardiesse de Daubigny, c’est d’être simple; sa nouveauté, c’est d’avoir renoncé à tous les moyens usés et faciles d’arriver à l’effet.”
3. Redon 1868; reprinted with translation from Fidell-Beaufort and Bailly-Herzberg 1975, p. 60.
4. American Art Association 1891, p. 281.
5. American Art Association 1923, no. 17.
6. RSC Diary, 11 Apr. 1929; asking price was \$5,000.

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## 99 | The Bridge between Persan and Beaumont-sur-Oise 1867

Oil on panel, 38.4 x 67.1 cm  
Lower right: Daubigny 1867  
1955.694

Charles-François Daubigny had an affinity for the rivers of France. His early childhood was spent in the village of Valmondois, near Pontoise. The area around Pontoise, about twenty-two miles northwest of Paris on the Oise River, had special resonance for Daubigny. He began visiting Auvers, a town between Pontoise and