



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

**VOLUME ONE**

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James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

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## Narcisse Virgile Diaz de la Peña

French, 1807/8–1876

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### 119 | **The Two Great Oaks** 1854

Oil on canvas, 42.5 x 56.5 cm

Lower left: N. Diaz. 54

1955.714

### 120 | **Trees near Barbizon** c. 1855–76

Oil on panel, 13 x 18.3 cm

1955.713

### 121 | **Forest Clearing** 1869

Oil on canvas, 37.9 x 55.7 cm

Lower left: N. Diaz. 69

1955.712

Of all the so-called Barbizon artists, Narcisse Virgile Diaz de la Peña produced the widest range of subject matter: landscapes, floral still lifes, orientalizing harem scenes, nudes in the guise of Venuses, and Gypsies. Robert Sterling Clark was evidently not drawn to the figural subjects because he bought three landscapes of remarkably similar composition, eschewing Diaz's scenes of forest interiors. These pictures answered Clark's feeling that artists often were more successful when they worked on a reduced scale. He recorded in his diary a trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art with friends who were just beginning to appreciate paintings. He spoke to them, wrote Clark, "about loss of control in big pictures. Almost all artists should paint small ones."<sup>1</sup> Typical of the views recorded in the Forest of Fontainebleau near Barbizon, these three small paintings by Diaz feature a flat plain with a pond in the foreground and a clump of trees in the middle ground. Small figures punctuate the space in each.

Like Jules Dupré and Constant Troyon, Diaz began his career decorating porcelain. A legacy of that experience was the praise he received from Théophile



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Thoré in 1844 for his jewel-like colors: “His pictures are like a pile of precious stones. The reds, blues, greens, and yellows, all [are] pure tones and all combined in a thousand different ways, their brilliance gleaming from every point in his pictures; it is like a bed of poppies, tulips, bouquets scattered under the sun; it is like the fantastic palette of a great colorist.”<sup>2</sup>

Sadly, many of Diaz’s paintings have lost the brilliance and vibrancy of tone for which he was known during his lifetime. This may be due to his unorthodox technique. Roger Ballu, a contemporary of the artist, reported that it was more accurate to say that Diaz prepared his canvas only in the open air. “Then, returning to his studio, he finished his work, he gave it the final touches, he softened what could appear too rough.”<sup>3</sup> Théophile Silvestre, a critic who knew the artist, reported that Diaz’s “method of painting is as variable as his temperament: sometimes he begins with light tones, sometimes with dark tones, at other times intermediary tones, according to the caprice of the moment and the state of his nerves. . . . He uses colors in their virgin state, that is, without extending them with oil, fearing the bad effects of oil on the future of the painting.”<sup>4</sup> Diaz’s fears proved not to be in vain. Already during his lifetime or shortly thereafter, viewers noticed that his pictures were darkening. One writer, J.-G. Gassies, a painter who wrote his reminiscences of his years in Barbizon, blamed the paint merchants for the poor quality of the paints Diaz used.<sup>5</sup> This seems disingenuous, since technical examination of Diaz’s paintings often reveals a complicated technique. In some instances, Diaz applied paint over a layer of varnish.<sup>6</sup> Any discoloration of the varnish as a result of age is almost impossible to correct, as treatment might disturb the artist’s paint layers that lie on top of his varnish. Such a painting technique—layering a resinous varnish with fresh paint—doubtless resulted in a glowing surface, but only for a while.

Diaz enjoyed a successful career. His pictures of nudes and Gypsies were popular with the public, and by the 1850s dealers reportedly had to wait more than a year for one of his works.<sup>7</sup> Beginning in 1849, Diaz also sold his works directly to the public through sales of the contents of his studio. Sketches of sites in the Forest of Fontainebleau, often done on the spot, found ready buyers. These sales recurred at regular intervals throughout the 1850s and 1860s.<sup>8</sup> Many pictures were offered at these sales and prices varied, but they sold. His commercial success, not surprisingly, spawned imitators.

Diaz visited Barbizon and the Forest of Fontainebleau regularly, beginning in the mid-1830s. He had a wooden leg, the result of a snakebite that required the amputation of his leg when he was young, and it could be that he restricted his travels because of his *pilon*. He took the motifs for his landscapes exclusively from the Forest of Fontainebleau. They fall into two general categories, the *sous-bois*, or undergrowth or forest interior view, and, as here, the view of trees silhouetted against the sky with a small pond at their base.

Diaz must have painted hundreds of small pictures such as these in the Clark collection. Ballu addressed the question of repetition. “Despite reproaches of monotony, he began again without getting tired of studying, finding with reason that nothing in nature is the same and that one can take up the same subject endlessly without making the same picture.”<sup>9</sup> The three together bear out the insightfulness of Ballu’s words, charting the variables Diaz was able to coax out of a seemingly simple composition. Although the earliest of these works, dated 1854 (cat. 119), was painted more than twenty years after Diaz had been working professionally, its structure nonetheless is uncertain: the fall of the land is unclear, the rocks appear insubstantial, and the trees are not well defined. A downward movement characterizes the painting, as if the land were collapsing toward the small pond. A feeling of heaviness permeates the scene.<sup>10</sup>

The later dated work, 1869 (cat. 121), by contrast, is open, expansive, owing in large part to its more assured and legible rendering of space. Light falling from the left defines the trees, highlighting their russet and dull gold foliage. The pond hints at mysterious depths, gleaming with reflected light. It is of pictures like this one that Ballu might have written his panegyric to Diaz’s autumnal scenes:

*He has attached his name to one aspect of nature. When October comes, go to the heights of the Valley of the Salle, or in the thickets of the Bas-Bréau [both in the Forest of Fontainebleau], wander in the midst of this superb and lusty vegetation, under the trees, species of immense bouquets glittering with a thousand colors, where play all shades, the dark green, the brown, the golden yellow, the bright scarlet; and, seeing this magnificent twinkling of autumn tints, you will surprise yourself in saying, “Behold a Diaz!”<sup>11</sup>*

The third, tiniest, picture is highly artificial (cat. 120). An impenetrable wall of dark green foliage closes off the distance. Sunlight falls only in the center, to illuminate the red-skirted white-capped woman, who is framed by two enormous boulders. The trees before which the woman passes create a rhythmic arch for her. Their trunks are picked out in highlights, and their sizes and spacing—small-large-large-small—owe more perhaps to stage sets than to nature.

Despite the artist's facility and evident speed of production, he experimented with and adjusted the composition of his paintings as he worked. Technical examination using infrared reflectography revealed that in the 1854 *The Two Great Oaks* a bent female figure was originally painted in the left middle ground. She was removed, her place covered by a bush, and she now appears at the right, beneath the trees. More extensive changes occurred in the 1869 *Forest Clearing*. There, on the far side of the water a male figure in a hat, executed in a scale larger than the seated woman, was leaning over a line running into the water. His figure has been overpainted with green, but his brown hat can still be seen. The woman seated at the right of the pond, wearing a blue skirt, white blouse, and pink kerchief, is oriented as if she were looking at the now-effaced man. The undated *Trees near Barbizon* was painted on the corner of a larger panel: infrared reflectography reveals the underdrawing of the back end of a horse, trotting to the left, perhaps carrying a female rider.<sup>12</sup>

Clark deemed *Trees near Barbizon* to be "tiny but fine in quality" and hoped that the good prices achieved at the sale from which he bought it "might mean the return to favor of the Barbizon School."<sup>13</sup> FEW

**PROVENANCE** Cat. 119: Madame Paradis, Paris, sold to Boussod, Valadon, 4 Nov. 1896, as *Les deux grands chênes*; [Boussod, Valadon, Paris, sold to Gentien, 18 Dec. 1896]; Gentien, Paris (1896–1901, sold to Boussod, Valadon, 16 Mar. 1901); [Boussod, Valadon, Paris, sold to Stotesbury, 11 May 1901];<sup>14</sup> Edward T. Stotesbury, Philadelphia (1901–possibly until d. 1938); E. L. Lueder, New York; [John Levy Galleries, New York, sold to Clark, 11 Mar. 1940]; Robert Sterling Clark (1940–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

Cat. 120: Charles H. Truax, New York (until 1882, his sale, Leavitt & Co., New York, 5 Dec. 1882, no. 28, as *A Clump of Trees Near Barbizon*); Colonel Henry T. Chapman Jr., Brooklyn (possibly from 1882, possibly his sale, American Art Galleries, New York, 13–16 Apr. 1888);<sup>15</sup> Jay Gould, New York (d. 1892); Helen Miller Gould Shepard, New York, his daughter, by descent (1892–d. 1938); Finley Johnson Shepard, New York, her husband, by descent (1938–d. 1942, his sale,

Kende Galleries, New York, 12–14 Nov. 1942, no. 591, ill., as *A Clump of Trees Near Barbizon*); [Knoedler, New York, sold to Clark, 17 Nov. 1942]; Robert Sterling Clark (1942–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

Cat. 121: Henry Seligman, New York (d. 1933, his sale, American Art Association, 29 Mar. 1934, no. 11, as *Forest of Fontainebleau*, sold to Scott & Fowles); [Scott & Fowles, New York, sold to Clark, 30 Mar. 1934]; Robert Sterling Clark (1934–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

**EXHIBITIONS** Cat. 119: Williamstown 1959b, ill.; New York 1967, no. 12; Williamstown 1984a, not in cat.

Cat. 120: Williamstown 1958a, ill.; Williamstown 1959b, ill.; Williamstown 1988–89, no cat.

Cat. 121: Williamstown 1959a, ill.

**REFERENCES** Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, nos. 49–51, ill.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** Cat. 119: The original support is an unlined, commercially primed, fine-weight linen (22 threads/cm). The reverse bears a canvas stamp for the supplier Deforge of the period 1841–57. The canvas reverse is stained along the paint-film cracks. The picture was partially cleaned, repaired, and varnished in 1940 by Beers Brothers through Durand-Ruel, and was strip-lined in 2009. Although the painting was lightly flattened during the attachment of the Beva 371 and linen edge strips, most distortions remain, as they are caused by the artist's uneven paint application. In 2009, the yellow coating was thinned and evened out, minor inpainting was done, and a synthetic resin varnish was applied.

The ground is a commercially applied off-white layer, and the artist may have varnished it before he started painting. While there is no detectable underdrawing, several anomalies and changes in the composition can be seen using infrared reflectography. A female figure removed from the left middle ground, and now covered by a bush, was then placed on the right side in the final image. It may be that large areas of the foreground were blocked in with a dark transparent paint, still visible as drips on the tacking margins in the lower half of the picture. In infrared light, some of these dark masses appear to indicate slightly different placement of forms at an early stage of the painting. The painting style consists of textured daubs of paint in layers, interspersed with toned transparent glazes. Even to the unaided eye, the application of the small blue vertical strokes in the water reflection can be discerned as floating over a resinous layer.

Cat. 120: The support is a small section of what was probably a commercially prepared mahogany panel. There are chamfers only on the top and right edges, suggesting that the bottom and left edges originally extended to form a larger panel. The wood is 1 cm thick, with the grain running horizontally, and the reverse is lightly coated with a natural resin varnish. The picture was cleaned, probably by De Wild in 1945, and has discolored residues of an earlier coating in the deeper interstices of the paint. The paint layer

shows evidence of solvent abrasion along the tops of many impastos. There are scattered age cracks in the paint, and it is possible that the dark greens are turning blackish, which may indicate the use of a copper green pigment for some of the glaze work. There is slightly discolored retouching along the right and left edges and possibly in the upper left sky. The present varnish is a thin horizontal brush coat of natural resin, which has pooled in the recesses of the impastos, and has frame abrasion on the lower edge.

The ground, which appears to be off-white in color, is not visible except in the thinly painted foreground at the water's edge. The upper left corner has several lines of impressed canvas pattern in the surface, which seem to have pushed the surface into diagonal ridges. The trees seem to have been painted over the roughly textured sky, with a final sky color added afterward. The brushwork is a combination of very fluid impastos and thick, dark transparent glazes. Under magnification, scattered pigment particles can be seen toning the damaged transparent upper paint layers. Confirming the structural evidence that this panel was cut from a larger support is an underdrawing in the lower left corner that has no connection to the visible landscape. In infrared reflectography, the outlines of the back two-thirds of a horse are visible, measuring about 3.2 cm in height. The only visible portion of the rider reveals drapery that could be read as the skirt of a woman.

Cat. 121: The original support is a finely woven linen (22 threads/cm), glue-lined to a heavier, bleached fabric of double warp and weft weave. The original stretcher appears to have been retained. The painting was probably lined, cleaned, and repaired by Beers Brothers in 1940. The treatment may have included only grime removal, since the picture appears to have two discolored varnish layers, the lower one extremely dark. The upper layer is thick and has an independent crackle network whose edges look white from refracted light. The ultraviolet light fluorescence is extremely dense, which would mask any retouches that may exist beneath the upper varnish. Age cracks in the paint film and lower varnish layer are quite dark, possibly from infusion of the lining glue. Traction crackle is also visible through the paint, with some cracks wide and deep enough to reveal the ground color below.

The off-white ground is probably a commercially applied layer. In infrared reflectography, changes are evident in the composition. There is a painted male figure with a hat, now obscured by green paint, on the far side of the water to the left of the seated woman. There is also a dark tree trunk visible to the left of the white tree, and a line perhaps of rock in the lower right corner. The trees in the clump in the right middle ground have more clearly defined trunks in infrared light, with a line drawn below them marking the horizon. The painting has a resinous surface and small, scumbled brushstrokes applied opaquely over thick transparent pools of color. It is possible that the artist varnished all or parts of the surface while progressing, applying small final paint strokes over an intermediate saturating resin. This is true even in the

pale sky where reworking can be seen floating above a clear layer, which in turn lies over a more opaque paint.

1. RSC Diary, 19 Feb. 1928.
2. Thoré 1844, p. 36; translation from Holt 1979, p. 398.
3. Ballu 1877, p. 296: "puis, rentré dans son atelier, il parachevait son oeuvre, il la polissait, il adoucissait ce qui pouvait être trop brutal."
4. Silvestre 1856, p. 230; "sa manière de peindre est variable comme son humeur: il débute tantôt par les tons clairs, tantôt par les tons sombres, quelquefois par les tons intermédiaires, selon le caprice du moment et l'état de ses nerfs. . . . Il emploie les couleurs à l'état vierge, c'est-à-dire sans les étendre dans l'huile dont il craint les mauvais effets pour l'avenir du tableau."
5. Gassies 1907, p. 44.
6. As is the case in *Forest Clearing* (cat. 121), in the sky. See Technical Report.
7. Miquel 1975, vol. 2, p. 300.
8. In Fowle and Thomson 2003, p. 33, Simon Kelley writes that Diaz held eleven sales between 1849 and 1868. See also Miquel 1975, vol. 2, pp. 296–314.
9. Ballu 1877, p. 296: "En dépit des reproches de monotonie, il recommençait sans se lasser cette étude, trouvant avec raison que rien ne se ressemble dans la nature et qu'on peut reprendre à l'infini le même sujet, sans faire le même tableau."
10. The canvas stamp from the Deforge artists' supply shop on the back of this picture points to a link between Diaz and the younger generation of landscape painters: in the early 1860s, Diaz let Pierre-Auguste Renoir buy supplies on his account at Deforge's. See Callen 2000, p. 105.
11. Ballu 1877, p. 304; translation from Clement and Hutton 1883, vol. 1, p. 205.
12. See Technical Report. The motif of a horse and rider is not to be found in finished works by the artist and suggests that the panel did not originate in his studio.
13. RSC Diary, 16 and 14 Nov. 1942.
14. The transactions with Boussod, Valadon are recorded in Goupil Stock Books, book 14, p. 112, no. 24601, and p. 276, no. 27070. "BVC 27070" is written on the stretcher of this painting.
15. This sale included thirteen works by Diaz, but no dimensions or illustrations are given, so the identities of most works cannot be determined.