



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

VOLUME TWO

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,
Simon Kelly, Richard Kendall, Kathleen M. Morris, Leslie Hill Paisley,
Kelly Pask, Elizabeth A. Pergam, Kathryn A. Price, Mark A. Roglán,
James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

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EXHIBITIONS Williamstown 1959b, ill., as *Landscape*; Williamstown 1984a, p. 65, no. 94, as *Landscape*.

REFERENCES Hoerber 1915, ill. opp. p. 236, as *La ferme*; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 137, ill.; Schulman 1997–99, vol. 2, p. 308, no. 598, ill., as *Chaumière au bord d'un marais*.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is an oak panel 1 cm thick with chamfers 1.9 cm wide along the back edges. The panel has a slight convex warp, and the grain runs horizontally. In reflected light, the wavy striation of the wood grain can be clearly seen through the paint. There are scattered age cracks in the colors containing white pigment and cracks in the varnish running perpendicular to the wood grain. There is no evidence of any cleaning damage; the paint layer is in nearly untouched original condition. The ultraviolet light fluorescence of the natural resin varnish is thin and may have a second coating applied over the original varnish. De Wild may have cleaned it in 1945, perhaps only removing grime and adding varnish. The surface is quite shiny, and there are a few retouchings along the top edge, probably covering old frame abrasion.

The ground is a moderately thin white commercial layer. It shows through the under-sketch and the final colors. There may be a sketch done in dark brown paint, which remains as part of the finished paint layer in the trees and the dark passages of the foreground. The upper colors are applied in a loose, open manner, with low, soft *impastos* in the sky and in some details. The water in the foreground was laid in after the surrounding dark paint, and the sky color was applied after the trees, with feathering used to blend the outlines of the foliage.

1. Burty 1868, p. 317: "Celui-ci, disait-il, n'a pas besoin de beaucoup de couleur pour donner l'idée de l'espace."
2. Thomas 2000, pp. 7, 2.
3. Baudelaire 1846; translation from Mayne 1965, p. 109.
4. Baudelaire 1859; translation from Mayne 1965, p. 196.
5. RSC Diary, 14 Apr. and 18 May 1945.

300 | **Landscape with Cows and Oaks** c. 1860

Oil on panel, 17.5 x 26 cm
1955.848

Théodore Rousseau was a man who listened to "the voices of the trees, the surprises of their movements, their varieties of form, and all the way to their singularity of attraction toward the light," all of which revealed to him "the language of forests."¹ This sympathy for trees, verging on anthropomorphism, can be seen in the majesty with which the artist endowed these largest of plant forms. Four massive trees, plus several smaller ones, combine to dominate this sunny view. They are oaks, grown from acorns carried to the field from the trees that terminate the view into the distance. Reddish brown cows, small under the oaks, graze in the orbit of these trees, their herder in a blue smock an even smaller element. The subtle touches of reddish brown set off the greens of the trees and foreground and the blue of the sky. In radiating a sense of warmth and bucolic peace, this small painting, full of color and light, pictures the French countryside as a place where man, his activities, and nature function as a harmonious unit.

Trees for Rousseau symbolized ongoing nature, a realm apart from the quotidian affairs of commerce and cities. "The tree that rustles and the heather that grows is for me grand history, that which will not change; if I speak their dialect well, I will have spoken the language of all times."² An aspect of this unchanging story is the pastoral. Rousseau evoked the classical past, and hence the entire construct of the pastoral as it was understood in the nineteenth century, in letters to his friend and biographer, Alfred Sensier. In 1863, he sent Sensier a sketch of a place they had seen during one of their walks through the Forest of Fontainebleau. "It seems to me," Rousseau wrote, "that Homer and Virgil would not have considered it beneath them to sit there, to dream of their poetry, in the place where I have indicated a figure."³ "Here is a little sketch," the artist wrote at another time, "in remembrance of our walks in the old part of the forest that we called *Arcadia*, all still vibrating with the sound of ancient poetry."⁴

These comments reveal Rousseau's eagerness to place his art in the venerable tradition of the pastoral. In tandem with this avowed adherence to tradition went a deep-seated conservatism. Having discovered



300

the Forest of Fontainebleau in the late 1830s and having been deeply moved by the trees he saw there, he was appalled when they began to be cut down. He famously wrote a letter to Napoleon III in 1852 in protest.⁵ The trees in this painting, isolated in their field and therefore probably not among those slated to be felled, can stand for the trees that were harvested. One can understand someone wanting to preserve such towering, shapely trees. Rousseau certainly realized that trees are not eternal; they grow old and die. He included evidence of this natural cycle in the lower left, the vestiges of a once mighty oak, putting forth a few leaves, an arboreal memento mori, gesturing to the left.

At first glance, *Landscape with Cows and Oaks* seems to be simply constructed. A field strewn with boulders stretches from one side of the picture to the other and from the foreground back to the distant trees that read as the edge of a forest, but that more likely are a series of clumps of trees like those in the middle ground. The trees, cows, and the pond from which a cow drinks are in the fore- and middle ground. A simple matter, then, of recession into space balanced by figural interest nearer the picture plane. The scene seems to promise breadth and depth. The actual experience of the painting, however, is some-

what different. Rather than the trees or shoreline at the side of a painting that a seventeenth-century painter would use to direct the viewer's gaze farther into the picture, Rousseau cunningly constructed a scoop. Terminated on the left by the blasted tree stump and on the right by a larger stone, a gentle arc connects the tree trunks on the left and the cow path on the right. And that's about as far as one gets. All pictorial interest stops at the mighty trees. Instead of reading as distant, the smaller trees to the right and left, by joining their foliage with that of the trees in the middle, read as lateral extensions. It is as if the clump of trees, in dominating the painting, dominates all of nature. Even the stupendous oaks in *Group of Oaks, Apremont*, of 1850–52 (Musée du Louvre, Paris), do not arrest all motion. In that picture, a road or stream curves into the distance on either side. The trees in *Landscape with Cows and Oaks* are not part of nature so much as they stand for all of nature.

Landscape with Cows and Oaks was most likely painted later than *Group of Oaks, Apremont*, probably about 1860.⁶ Beginning in the 1850s and continuing until the end of his life, Rousseau's paint handling became tight, controlled, and meticulous, even obsessive. Although it is impossible to paint every leaf on a tree and every branch of a shrub, the artist,

in touching the brush to the panel countless times, gave the impression of myriad leaves, of innumerable blades of grass, suggesting the overwhelming fecundity of the natural world. Unsympathetic critics began to complain about his fastidious technique: “His touch flutters and teases; his manner is becoming a method. The myriad leaves that overwhelm his paintings are all painted with the same yellowish green.”⁷ By contrast, a reviewer who liked Rousseau’s paintings could write that his “multitude of small, distinct touches” resulted in a “synthesis of a thousand different or at least individual details, harmonized by the light and brought under the same law.” Nonetheless, despite the artist’s being able to render “with a perfect unity the superabundance of life,” this same critic chastised Rousseau for his “monotonous” details and urged him to vary his execution in order to reflect the “diversity of elements” to be found in nature.⁸

Rousseau expressed his reverence for trees in the way he painted them. One of his students, Ludovic Létrône, relayed to Philippe Burty some of Rousseau’s lessons, which are applicable to *Landscape with Cows and Oaks*. “He explained to me that drawing was not only a matter of the exactness of the silhouettes; that a tree was not ‘an espalier’; that it had ‘a volume,’ like earth, water, space; that only the canvas was flat; that it was necessary to be eager from the first touch of the brush to make that uniformity disappear: ‘Your trees must cling to the ground, your branches must come forward or plunge into the canvas; the viewer must think he could walk around your tree. After all, form is the first thing to observe.’”⁹ One can indeed imagine circling these large trees. Like the cows, however, one would not stray far, likely staying under the shady canopy. FEW

PROVENANCE Thiem, Berlin, sold to Goupil, 17 June 1881, as *Bords de rivière vache sous arbres*; [Goupil, Paris, sold to Knoedler, 20 June 1881];¹⁰ [Knoedler, Paris, 1881–1922, sold to Clark, 3 Feb. 1922]; Robert Sterling Clark (1922–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Williamstown 1988–89, no cat.; Lyon 2002, pp. 192, 298, no. 97, ill.

REFERENCES *Antiques* 1997, p. 526; Schulman 1997–99, vol. 2, p. 174, no. 251, ill., as *Groupe de chênes et vaches à la mare*.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is an oak panel 1.3 cm thick with steep chamfers 1.3 cm wide along the back edges. The

panel is flat and stable, and has 0.6-cm wood framing spacers attached to all four edges. Old frame indentations and cracks are located 1.3 cm inside all four original edges. There are age cracks in the varnish and paint layers, following and running perpendicular to the wood grain. Branched drying cracks are scattered in the thicker paint applications. In the sky are overpaint and thick varnish, and there is solvent damage in the dark colors, which affects the full range of contrast in the trees and cattle. The overpainted area repelled several varnish attempts and presents a slightly reticulated appearance as a result. Old natural resin varnish residues can be seen in ultraviolet light in the lower left and scattered in the trees. In reflected light, the peculiar raised horizontal nature of the central trees’ brushwork is evident. This may be due to the thick ground layer accentuating the panel grain.

The ground appears to be artist applied or enhanced. It is quite thick and may have been pumiced or sanded; there are score marks and depressions that run vertically and diagonally in the sky. No underdrawing was detected with either infrared equipment or microscopic examination. A large dark band, indicating the lowest areas of the tree foliage, stands out in infrared and may have been laid in ahead of the remaining landscape details. The paint technique is a mixture of wet-into-wet and dry scumbling, with substantial layering of color in many areas. Thin gritty glazes of red can be seen in the foreground foliage, as well as warm brown glazes on the tree bark. The cows are painted over completed landscape elements.

1. Sensier 1872, p. 52: “les voix des arbres . . . les surprises de leurs mouvements, leurs variétés de forms et jusqu’à leur singularité d’attraction vers la lumière . . . le langage des forêts.”
2. *Ibid.*, p. 142; translation from Thomas 2000, p. 101.
3. Sensier 1872, p. 274: “Il me semble, à moi, qu’Homère et Virgile n’auraient pas dédaigné de s’y asseoir, pour rêver à leur poésies, à la place où j’ai indiqué une figure.”
4. *Ibid.*, p. 275: “voici un petit croquis en souvenir de nos promenades dans ce lieu antique de la forêt que nous avons nommé *l’Arcadie*, tout vibrant encore du son des anciennes poésies.”
5. Rousseau’s response to the lumbering in France is a chief subject of Thomas 2000. For the letter to the emperor, see pp. 214–17.
6. Date suggested to author by Simon Kelly, e-mail to author, 3 May 2006.
7. Saint-Victor 1861, p. 33; quoted in Miquel 1975, vol. 3, p. 469: “Sa touche papillote et pointille; sa manière tourne au procédé. Les myriades de feuilles qui criblent ses tableaux sont toutes peintes du même vert jaunâtre.”
8. Mantz 1863, pp. 38–39; quoted (with slight alterations) in Miquel 1975, vol. 3, p. 473: “multitude de petites touches distinctes;” “synthèse de mille détails différents ou du moins individuels, harmonisés par la lumière et ramenés à la même loi;” “avec une parfaite unité, la

surabondance de la vie;” “la monotonie des détails;” “diversité d’éléments.”

9. Burty 1868, p. 316, translation partially taken from Thomas 2000, pp. 95–96. The original French reads: “Il m’expliqua que le dessin ne consistait pas seulement dans l’exactitude des silhouettes; qu’un arbre n’était pas ‘un espalier’; qu’il avait ‘un volume’, comme les terrains, l’eau, l’espace; que la toile seule était plate; qu’il fallait s’empressez dès le premier coup de brosse de faire disparaître cette uniformité: ‘Vos arbres doivent tenir au terrain, vos branches doivent venir en avant ou s’enfoncer dans la toile; le spectateur doit penser qu’il pourrait faire le tour de votre arbre. Enfin la forme est la première chose à observer.’”

10. See Goupil Stock Books, book 10, p. 173, no. 15493.

Théo van Rysselberghe

Belgian, 1862–1926

301 | Sylvie Descamps Monnom 1900

Oil on canvas, 116.8 x 90.3 cm

Lower left: TVR [monogram] 1900

1967.2

Between the years 1888 and 1905, the Belgian painter Théo van Rysselberghe painted almost exclusively in a pointillist, or more accurately, a divisionist style. He began working in this manner, which consists of applying small dots or strokes of color adjacent to one another to achieve a maximum of color intensity, after seeing Georges Seurat’s revolutionary *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* (The Art Institute of Chicago) at the eighth Impressionist exhibition, held in Paris in 1886. Reportedly first exasperated and then transfixed by this tour de force of pointillism, he and his friends arranged to bring the controversial painting to Brussels in 1887. There it was shown at the exhibition of Les XX, the artists’ society formed in 1883 by Van Rysselberghe and several other like-minded avant-garde artists. The style, as epitomized by Seurat’s painting and its strong basis in scientific optical theory, was modified and personalized by Van Rysselberghe over the course of working in this manner.

A fine example of divisionism is this large portrait of the artist’s mother-in-law, Sylvie Descamps Monnom (1836–1921), at approximately sixty-four years of age. Van Rysselberghe married Madame Monnom’s daughter, Maria, in 1889. By the time of this painting,

Sylvie’s husband, Célestin Monnom, was deceased, but the *Veuve* (widow) Monnom, as she was known, held a prominent place in the artistic and literary circles of Brussels. Her publishing house issued the Belgian periodicals *L’Art moderne* and *Le Jeune Belgique*, and also published the catalogues and posters for the art exhibitions mounted by the members of Les XX and another artists’ group that followed it called La Libre Esthétique. Madame Monnom thus had both personal and professional ties to Van Rysselberghe.

The painter favored the format of seating his female portrait subjects, usually close friends or family members, in domestic interiors. Earlier examples of this type include the portraits of Madame Charles Maus (1890; Musée Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels) and Maria van de Velde-Sèthe (1891; Koninklijk Museum vor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp).¹ The settings typically give an indication of the social and cultural milieu of the sitters, their status, wealth, and interests, such as music in the case of Maria van de Velde-Sèthe. Madame Monnom, as a financially secure business owner, sits in a well-appointed salon near a fireplace. There is a mirror on the carved mantel as well as a vase of what seem to be irises. Given the indistinct aspect of the divisionist style of painting, precise details can be difficult to decipher. Nevertheless, four paintings decorate the wall behind her, an oriental rug covers the floor, and a blue settee fills the background. Madame Monnom comfortably sits, thanks also to a pillow behind her back, in a simple yet modern chair similar in style to those designed by Henry van de Velde, a painter and designer who was a close friend of the family.² The *Veuve Monnom*’s body is shown almost in profile as she clutches a handkerchief in her right hand, yet she turns her head to gaze out at the viewer. Van Rysselberghe studied the angle of his mother-in-law’s head, as well as her facial features, in a drawing dated 1899.³ In the study, Madame Monnom carries a rather more stern expression, and is enveloped in an especially voluminous cloak with a ruffled collar. Both of these aspects are tempered in the painting of 1900. Another, smaller painting of Madame Monnom dates to the same year, as do at least three additional drawings and a pastel.⁴ Over the next years, Van Rysselberghe continued to draw and paint his wife’s mother, the last time seemingly in 1919.⁵

The tonality of the portrait is strongly green, blue, and purple throughout the entire canvas. The individual rectangular strokes of differentiated bold pigments placed adjacent to one another enliven the surface