



Fig. 1. Hubert Robert, *Young Girls Dancing around an Obelisk*, 1798, oil on canvas, 119.7 x 99 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 2. Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *L'île heureuse*, ca. 1865–68, oil on canvas, 188 x 142.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 3. Marc-Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Côté, *Shepherdess at Vallangoujard (Seine-et-Oise)*, 1898, oil on canvas, 235.5 x 100.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The Romantic Landscape: Representations of Women and Girls in Landscape Painting

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The development of Romanticism and rising political tensions in France in the eighteenth century had an undeniable influence on the development of landscape painting. While this genre had hitherto been considered decorative and inferior to other genres such as history and portrait painting,¹ ongoing political upheaval and the development of Impressionism and photography in the mid-nineteenth century allowed it to stand on its own, becoming an essential artistic genre capable of demonstrating ideological shifts and stylistic transformations. Three paintings by Hubert Robert (1733–1808), Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796–1875) and Marc-Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Côté (1869–1937) offer different interpretations of the relationship between the Romantic landscape and the female figure. A comparison of these works, which were completed during three separate time periods from the late eighteenth to early twentieth centuries, will reveal how this recurring theme has transformed over time, reflecting the unique social, political and artistic climates in which they were conceived.

Young Girls Dancing around an Obelisk (1798) (fig. 1) by Robert presents a fictionalized Egyptian landscape wherein pyramids, a fractured sphinx and a fragmented obelisk become a dreamlike scene of romanticized ruins and alluring exoticism. Robert was first introduced to Egyptian art and architecture while studying in Rome, and drew inspiration for this painting from physical reproductions of pyramids and sphinxes he saw there.² The obelisk is placed at the centre of the composition and is illuminated dramatically, dominating the scene. Its top half rests

in shadow at the bottom right of the canvas, where a carved pharaoh head also lies separated from the rest of its structure.



Fig. 1. Hubert Robert, *Young Girls Dancing around an Obelisk*, 1798, oil on canvas, 119.7 x 99 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The imaginative quality of this landscape is further emphasized by the circle of young women in classical white dresses dancing around the obelisk, which is evocative of celebratory Bacchic rituals.³ Modern musicians are inexplicably placed on the lintel of the obelisk, serenading the dancers below.⁴ It is unclear whether they are meant to exist within the same realm or time period as the rest of the figures in the piece; nevertheless, they become part of the mythological landscape by adding to the surreal and exotic atmosphere of the scene. There is also a strange and unexplained figure sitting astride the sphinx and a large community assembled at the base of

the pyramid in the distance. A peasant woman with a group of children in the foreground on the left surveys the ruins of a past civilization.⁵ She is perhaps a widow relocating her family, ensuring France's future by protecting her children. Although women were meant to occupy interior spaces, her presence in the exotic landscape is acceptable because she is fulfilling her role as a benevolent mother.⁶ As in many of Robert's other works, human figures serve to demonstrate the impressive scale of the architectural elements.⁷ Although these monuments are in ruins, they remain imposing as they overshadow the human presence. There is a sense of foreboding in the threatening storm clouds on the horizon, suggesting that the figures are trespassers in this landscape.

This work was inspired by the launch of Napoléon Bonaparte's (1769–1821) Egyptian Campaign (1798–99), which ultimately ended in failure.⁸ A widespread preoccupation with exoticism and imperialism at this time fuelled the growing presence of Orientalism in painting.⁹ This was accompanied by the development of romanticized images of ruins, which emerged as a result of numerous recent archaeological excavations as well as the French Revolution (1789–99).¹⁰ There is an apparent sense of unease in this painting despite the successful conquest implied by the celebratory atmosphere. With the newly formed French First Republic (1792–1804) struggling to establish itself as a legitimate and functional governing system,¹¹ great emphasis was placed on the upholding of national morality despite continued political unrest.

Although the uncertainty of Napoleon's foreign conquest was another cause for concern, the presence of ruins in this work alludes to the new opportunities and possibilities that come with such undertakings.¹² The obelisk becomes a symbol of regeneration, while the women wearing

sashes of red and blue represent the hope of the French Revolution.¹³ Dressed in red, the figure of the mother reinforces the iconographic representation of France as a woman. She provides hope and reassurance while leading the country forward, serving as an allegory for “modern nationalism.”¹⁴ *Young Girls Dancing around an Obelisk* becomes a moralistic chronicle that not only celebrates the romanticism of conquest, but reminds the French population of its unwavering patriotic devotion to the New Republic. This piece is ripe with symbolism and uses landscape imagery to convey the significant political, social and cultural developments of the late eighteenth century.

Corot's *La jeune heureuse* (ca. 1865–68) (fig. 2) demonstrates the harmonious relationship between figure and nature in an ephemeral landscape. The second half of the nineteenth century saw a change in thematic preferences, as the romanticism of ruins and of didactic imagery gave way to an appreciation for the poetry and simplicity of quotidian life.¹⁵ In the foreground of this painting, a woman accompanied by a child harvests something from a tree. Her extended arms mimic the branches of the lone tree, which becomes feminine and anthropomorphic through its curvaceous trunk and face-like hollow. Corot often painted nymphs dancing among the trees in what was a typically Romantic approach to landscape imagery,¹⁶ yet the woman in this piece is a modern peasant engaged in a realistic interaction with the surrounding landscape. She is not a fantastical being emphasizing the mystical atmosphere of the woods, but a corporeal human figure harvesting the goodness of nature.



Fig. 2. Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *L'île heureuse*, ca. 1865–68, oil on canvas, 188 x 142.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The figures stand on the edge of a small body of water, with the opposite bank rising up and covered in tall trees and moss. Corot also studied in Italy where he was influenced by architectural spaces,¹⁷ as can be seen in the Italian-style buildings placed in the distance. The trees encompass the majority of the picture plane, filling up the sky and reducing the figures and buildings to objects of little consequence, yet there is a harmonious balance between these elements. The figures are modelled like the landscape: they are not overworked but blended and subtly rendered.¹⁸ While this scene is not a record of actual events, it could very well have occurred. Corot interprets the landscape in a straightforward, yet atmospheric way that makes it feel like a hazy, half-remembered dream, unlike the nightmarish landscape of *Young Girls Dancing around an Obelisk*. Corot's landscape is not threatening or filled with the unknown of

Robert's piece; rather, it is welcoming and serene, offering a paradise removed from the conflict of civilization.

Corot's work evolved over the course of his artistic practice, moving from mere academic documentation of the landscape to remembered moments and sentimental expressions of the landscape.¹⁹ “L'île heureuse” is not a specific place or a named location but a memory, an impression, a constructed ideal. Corot was called “the painter of the air,” as he was infatuated with capturing ephemeral and insubstantial moments of atmospheric light at dawn and dusk or the subtleties of leaves shimmering in the wind.²⁰ He aimed to capture the experience of occupying a landscape by infusing his painting with sentimentality and truth.²¹ There is a rhythm and musicality in Corot's compositions, as the placement of the figures often echoes the verticality of the trees.²² Masterful attention to value and subtle use of colour imbue his pieces with tonal richness and depth. The strong distinction between foreground and background creates theatricality in this work, bringing the figures to life as if they were on a stage. Corot uses the trees and the elements of the landscape to frame the scene and draw the viewer into an engaging space.²³

As landscape painting began to distance itself from the traditions of history painting to become a genre of its own,²⁴ greater numbers of artists were painting outside to capture as much as they could from the landscape. Corot worked alongside numerous other painters in the forests of Fontainebleau, combining academic values and techniques with direct observation to arrive at a new approach to landscape referred to as the Barbizon school.²⁵ Occurring alongside the development of Impressionism, this fresh method of landscape painting allowed Corot to work

both from life and in the studio to ensure that his landscapes came alive, achieving the impression of movement.²⁶ The development of photography also influenced his painting, as he referenced it to discover a new way of interpreting the landscape.²⁷ Instead of using photography to record precise detail, Corot utilized the unpredictable qualities of landscape photography to enhance his work. The long exposure of photographs blurred the movement of the trees and over-exposed the sky so as to capture detail in the darker areas.²⁸ Corot used these effects in this painting to generate an authentic experience of the landscape by capturing fleeting glimpses and moments of sunlight.

Suzor-Côté's *Shepherdess at Vallangoujard (Seine-et-Oise)* (1898) (fig. 3) is a life-sized painting of a young girl immersed in a landscape, reflecting a convergence of impressionist and realist influences. Born in Quebec, Suzor-Côté moved to France where he spent many years studying art and traveling around Europe. The setting of this work is the northern countryside on the outskirts of Paris, where artists were still drawing on the richness of the landscape for their painting. In this piece the shepherd girl is the main subject, with the landscape functioning as a comforting backdrop. The girl occupies the space, surrounded by lush, tall grasses and wild flowers, and makes direct eye contact with the viewer. She is at ease in her environment and holds a stick in her hand, which asserts her dominance over the landscape. The scene is strangely lit as the girl seems to be bathed in an ambiguous, washed-out light that is not dark enough to be shade, while the faint field in the distance seems to be bathed in direct sunlight. This and the size of the canvas emphasize that this work was produced in the studio, though the detail of the plants in the foreground suggest that they were likely rendered from sketches and observations made *en plein air*.



Fig. 3. Marc-Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Côté, *Shepherdess at Vallangoujard (Seine-et-Oise)*, 1898, oil on canvas, 235.5 x 100.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

As he became more influenced by French artists, Suzor-Côté began to adopt the expressive paint application of Impressionism in combination with the academic techniques he had learned, while still using a subtle and Romantic colour palette.²⁹ These painterly motifs and styles are explored in this work, with the foreground and background landscapes functioning very differently from one another. The plants in the front draw us in towards the girl, while the field and forest fade into a hazy impression of the background landscape. The unsensational subject matter of a shepherd girl in a sunlit field also recalls the work of the Impressionists, as they developed an interest in painting scenes of modern people occupied in the activities of everyday life. The harmonious relationship between the girl and the environment is demonstrated through the assertiveness of her posture and expression. She is at home in this landscape, and her familiarity

with it is emphasized through the matching colours of her dress and the landscape. The pale cream colour of her dress echoes the colour of the field behind her, while the green of her vest matches that of the grass. The shepherdess is respectful of the landscape, yet is superior to it, utilizing and conquering it without fear.

These paintings offer three approaches to landscape and three representations of female figures, with each scene presenting a distinct interaction between the two. In Robert's painting, the women represent the nation and are expected to uphold cultural values while raising their children and future citizens of France. The women are symbolic of the entire country's hopes and fears and are depicted as small and insignificant among the defeated ruins of a once majestic exotic civilization. By contrast, Corot's work emphasizes the beauty and ephemerality of the landscape and explores the harmony between nature and humanity. The dancing nymphs typical of Corot's works give way to a humble peasant woman and child who share in nature's fertility. The landscape is all-encompassing, yet entirely unthreatening and is generous in its provision of goods, comfort and serenity. Finally, Suzor-Côté's painting depicts the youngest of the female figures, who is given the most agency. The natural world is merely a backdrop, framing her undeniably powerful presence, as the lowly shepherdess becomes momentary queen of the painted landscape. Although these romanticized landscapes are imaginative and significant in terms of artistic development, their real value lies in the way they uniquely approach similar themes to reveal a great variety of truths that are indiscernible at first glance, requiring one's full immersion into the paintings to be discovered.

NOTES

- ¹ Jolanta Pekacz, "Musical Subjects in the French Painting of the Romantic Period," *Research Centre for Music Iconography* 15, no. 1 (1990): 3.
- ² John Davis and Jaroslaw Leshko, *The Smith College Museum of Art: European and American painting and sculpture, 1760–1960* (New York: Hudson Hill Press, 2000), 110.
- ³ Robert Rosenblum and Horst Woldemar Janson, *19th-Century Art* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2005), 76.
- ⁴ Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, *Guide* (Montreal: The Museum, 1977), 97.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Joan B. Landes, "Possessing La Patrie: Nationalism and Sexuality in Revolutionary Culture," in *Visualizing the Nation: Gender, Representation, and the Revolution in Eighteenth-Century France* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 138.
- ⁷ William N. Eisendrath, "Four Paintings by Hubert Robert," *Bulletin of the City Art Museum of St. Louis* 42, no. 3 (1957): 33.
- ⁸ Randy Norman Innes, "On the Limits of the Work of Art: The Fragment in Visual Culture," (master's thesis, University of Rochester, 2008), 117.
- ⁹ Pekacz, 7.
- ¹⁰ Eisendrath, 26.
- ¹¹ Landes, 135.
- ¹² Innes, 119.
- ¹³ Paula Rea Radisich, *Hubert Robert: Painted Spaces of the Enlightenment* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 137.
- ¹⁴ Landes, 141.
- ¹⁵ Pekacz, 8.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 7.
- ¹⁷ Eileen Yanoviak, "From *Vue* to *Souvenir*: Time, Memory, and Place in Corot's Late Landscapes," *Southeastern College Art Conference Review* 16, no. 2 (2012): 172.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 174.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 171.
- ²⁰ "Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot," *Fine Arts Journal* 22, no. 4 (1910): 207.
- ²¹ Yanoviak, 171.
- ²² Jean Leymarie, *Corot: Biographical and Critical Study* (Geneva: Skira, 1966), 80.
- ²³ Yanoviak, 174.
- ²⁴ Dita Amory, "The Barbizon School: French Painters of Nature," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/bfnp/hd_bfnp.htm.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Sir Alan Bowness, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Camille Corot," last modified January 21, 2014, <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Camille-Corot>.
- ²⁷ Yanoviak, 177.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 180.
- ²⁹ A. Prakash, "Marc-Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Côté: Apôtre canadien du symbolisme impressioniste," *Magazin Art* 9, no. 1 (1996): 97.

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