

Barbizon School

The **Barbizon school** of painters were part of an **art movement** towards Realism in art, which arose in the context of the dominant Romantic Movement of the time. The Barbizon school was active roughly from 1830 until 1870. It takes its name from the village of Barbizon, France, near the Forest of Fontainebleau, where many of the artists gathered. Some of the most prominent features of this school are its tonal qualities, colour, loose brushwork, and softness of form.

In 1824 the Salon de Paris exhibited works of John Constable. His rural scenes influenced some of the younger artists of the time, moving them to abandon formalism and to draw inspiration directly from nature. Natural scenes became the subjects of their paintings rather than mere backdrops to dramatic events.



During the Revolutions of 1848 artists gathered at Barbizon to follow Constable's ideas, making nature the subject of their paintings. The French landscape became a major theme of the Barbizon painters.

The leaders of the Barbizon school were Théodore Rousseau, Jean-François Millet, and Charles-François Daubigny.

Rousseau, *Thunderstorms mood in the level of Montmartre* 1845-48



Rousseau, *Avenue of Chestnut Trees*
watercolour



Rousseau, *Avenue of Chestnut Trees* 1837

Théodore Rousseau (1812 – 1867) was born in Paris, France in a bourgeois family. Although at first his father regretted his decision to pursue a career as an artist he became reconciled to his son forsaking business, and throughout the artist's career (for he survived his son) was a sympathizer with him in all his conflicts with the Paris Salon authorities.

Like the romantic painters of 1830 Rousseau found it difficult to secure a place for his pictures in the annual Paris exhibition. The influence of classically trained artists was against them, and not until 1848 was Rousseau presented adequately to the public.

To begin with Rousseau had lived only occasionally at Barbizon, but in 1848 he took up his residence in the forest village, and spent most of his remaining days in the vicinity.

Rousseau, *The Forest of Fontainebleau, Morning* 1849-51





It has been written of his work that Rousseau:

'...only likes the painful and convulsive side of nature; the trees devastated by the wind, branches fallen by the winds, spread out by old age; the piled up rocks, from where some birch-trees come out like shivering plumes; the wild heathers, subdued by the frost or backed by the scorching heat.'

Rousseau, *The Edge of the forest at Monts-Girard* 1852-54

Edmond About (a prominent critic of the day) in 1857 wrote that he “made a breach in the wall of the historic school, which had lost the habit of regarding nature, and servilely copied the bad copyists of Poussin. This audacious innovator opened an enormous door by which many others have followed him. He emancipated the landscape painters as Moses formerly liberated the Hebrews... On the return of this truant school the young landscapists forced the entrance of the Salon, and it was Théodore Rousseau who broke down the door.”

Rousseau is today regarded as one of the purest and most vigorous landscape painters of the nineteenth century and a direct mentor for the entire Impressionist generation.

Rousseau's pictures are always grave in character, with an air of exquisite melancholy. but he spent so much time developing his subjects that his completed works are comparatively few. He left many canvases with parts of the picture realized in detail and with the remainder somewhat vague; and also a good number of sketches and water-colour drawings



Rousseau, *Charcoal hut in the forest of Fontainebleau* c. 1855

Jean-François Millet (1814 – 1875) Millet is noted for his scenes of peasant farmers.

Millet's parents were members of the farming community close to the coast in Normandy and as a child he had to help his father with the farm-work. So all the farmer's work was familiar to him: to mow, make hay, bind the sheaves, thresh, winnow, spread manure, plough, sow, etc. All these motifs would return in his later art.



When he was 18 he was sent by his father to Cherbourg to study with a portrait painter.

Millet extended the idea of realistic representation from landscape to figures — peasant figures, scenes of peasant life, and work in the fields.

Millet, *Going to Work* 1851-53



Millet was an important source of inspiration for Vincent van Gogh, particularly during his early period, who made his own version of this painting, and mentioned Millet and his work many times in his letters to his brother Theo.

Millet, *The Sower* 1850



Millet, *The Potato Harvest* 1855



While Millet was walking the fields around Barbizon, one theme returned to his pencil and brush for seven years – gleaning - the centuries-old right of poor women and children to remove the bits of grain left in the fields after the owners of the field complete the main harvest.

Millet, *The Gleaners* 1857

The painting portrays three peasant women working at the harvest. The owners (portrayed as wealthy) and their labourers are seen in the back of the painting. Millet shifted the focus and the subject matter from the rich and prominent to those at the bottom of the social ladders. To emphasize their anonymity and marginalized position, he hid their faces. The women's bowed bodies represent their everyday hard work.

The painting is famous for featuring in a sympathetic way what were then the lowest ranks of rural society; this was received poorly by the French upper classes.

Millet's *The Gleaners* was also not perceived well due to its large size, 84 by 112 centimetres. Normally this size of a canvas was reserved for religious or mythological style paintings, and was not usual for a painting depicting labour.

A warm golden light suggests something sacred and eternal in this daily scene where the struggle to survive takes place. During his years of preparatory studies, Millet contemplated how best to convey the sense of repetition and fatigue in the peasants' daily lives. Lines traced over each woman's back lead to the ground and then back up in a repetitive motion identical to their unending, backbreaking labour. Along the horizon, the setting sun silhouettes the farm with its abundant stacks of grain, in contrast to the large shadowy figures in the foreground. The dark homespun dresses of the gleaners cut robust forms against the golden field, giving each woman a noble, monumental strength.

Millet, *The Angelus* 1857–59

The painting depicts two peasants bowing in a field over a basket of potatoes to say a prayer, the Angelus, that together with the ringing of the bell from the church on the horizon marks the end of a day's work.

Millet said: "The idea for *The Angelus* came to me because I remembered that my grandmother, hearing the church bell ringing while we were working in the fields, always made us stop work to say the Angelus prayer for the poor departed". The work was commissioned and originally titled *Prayer for the Potato Crop*



When the man who commissioned it failed to take possession, Millet added a steeple and changed the initial title of the work to *The Angelus*.

Displayed to the public for the first time in 1865, the painting changed hands several times, increasing only modestly in value, since some considered the artist's political sympathies suspect. Upon Millet's death a decade later, a bidding war between the US and France ensued, ending some years later with a price tag of 800,000 gold francs.

The disparity between the apparent value of the painting and the poor estate of Millet's surviving family was a major impetus in the invention of the *droit de suite*, intended to compensate artists or their heirs when works are resold.



This painting of a nude young woman in a landscape is not in the style of conventional 'history painting' where, in the tradition of Classical art handed down from the Renaissance, she would be 'clothed' and made 'decent' by the trappings of a mythological, religious or historic subject. In fact she is not a 'nude' but a naked young peasant woman who has simply cast aside her clothes to bathe in a cool stream. She is unidealised, raw and natural: a real woman showing her reddened face and large, care worn peasants hands.

Millet, *The Goose Girl* 1863

Millet, *Hunting Birds at Night* 1874

This extraordinary painting, with its splattering of colour, the lack of definition and the overall design has a very expressionistic, modern feel.

During the late 1860s, the Barbizon painters attracted the attention of a younger generation of French artists studying in Paris. Several of those artists visited Fontainebleau Forest to paint the landscape, including Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Alfred Sisley and Frédéric Bazille, later known as the Impressionists.



Charles-François Daubigny (1817-1878) is considered an important precursor of Impressionism. Daubigny was born in Paris into a family of painters and was taught by his father Edmond François Daubigny and his uncle.



Daubigny, *Farm at Kerity, Brittany*

In 1866 Daubigny visited England, eventually returning because of the Franco-Prussian war in 1870. In London he met Claude Monet, and together they left for the Netherlands. Back in Auvers, he met Paul Cézanne, another important Impressionist. It is assumed that these younger painters were influenced by Daubigny. It is assumed that these younger painters were influenced by Daubigny.

Initially Daubigny painted in a traditional style, but this changed after 1843 when he settled in Barbizon to work outside in nature. His meeting with Camille Corot in 1852 was an important turning point in his art. On his famous boat *Botin*, which he had turned into a studio, he painted along the Seine and Oise, often in the region around Auvers. From 1852 onward he came under the influence of Gustave Courbet..



Daubigny, *Boats on the Seacoast at Étapes* 1871