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**PLEIN-AIR PRACTICE IN THE FOREST OF
FONTAINEBLEAU
TO BE EXPLORED IN EXHIBITION
PREMIERING AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART,
WASHINGTON
MARCH 2 - JUNE 8, 2008**



Claude Monet (1840 - 1926)

***Bazille and Camille (Study for "Déjeuner sur l'herbe")*, 1865**

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection, 1970

Washington, DC—The quiet but significant revolution that was

launched by artists working outdoors in 19th-century France is explored through some 100 paintings, pastels, and photographs as well as artist and tourist ephemera assembled for the exhibition **In the Forest of Fontainebleau: Painters and Photographers from Corot to Monet** at the National Gallery of Art, East Building, from March 2 through June 8, 2008.

Works by artists such as Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796-1875), Théodore Rousseau (1812-1867), Jean-François Millet (1814-1875), Claude Monet (1840-1926), and photographer Eugène Cuvelier (1837-1900) will showcase the French phenomenon of plein-air (open-air) painting in the region of Fontainebleau which became a pilgrimage site for aspiring landscapists. Spanning half a century, from the mid-1820s through the 1870s, this artistic movement gave rise to the "Barbizon School" and laid the groundwork for impressionism.

"This exhibition celebrates a fertile relationship between artists and a unique locale that had a critical impact on European and American artists, such as the impressionists, in the decades that followed," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "We are grateful to the many public and private lenders and especially would like to thank the Florence Gould Foundation for its support and its continuing commitment to the National Gallery"

In the Forest of Fontainebleau is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington in association with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, where the exhibition will be on view July 13 through October 19, 2008.

Exhibition Sponsorship

The exhibition in Washington is made possible by The Florence Gould Foundation.

The exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

The Forest of Fontainebleau

The Forest of Fontainebleau, some 35 miles southeast of Paris, was formerly a royal hunting ground of kings and emperors, but it

became a magnet for artists and tourists in the 19th century. The forest was accessible, beautiful, and visually compelling, with a rare mix of traditional rural French villages and natural landscape features—magnificent old-growth trees, stark plateaus, dramatic rocks, and stone quarries. Best known for the informal artists' colony centered in the village of Barbizon, Fontainebleau became a nearly obligatory pilgrimage site for French and foreign artists, serving as both subject and sanctuary, "natural studio" and open-air laboratory for investigating nature.

Art, new technologies, and the rise of tourism combined to increase Fontainebleau's fame and introduce it to an emerging mass market. New rail lines, such as the *trains de plaisir* that ran convenient Sunday schedules, made the trip from Paris inexpensive and easy while the introduction of the paper negative process enabled photographers to travel without heavy equipment. The entrepreneurial zeal of Claude-François Denecourt, who established clearly marked *sentiers* (trails) throughout the forest and published guidebooks describing its highlights, made the forest accessible not only to professional artists but also to amateurs and throngs of day-trippers. As the forest's popularity and congestion increased, the painter Théodore Rousseau appealed to the emperor Napoleon III, who decreed part of Fontainebleau a nature preserve—the first in history—in 1861, eleven years before Yellowstone became the first American national park.

The Exhibition

From plein-air sketches to impressionist canvases, the exhibition traces the centrality of the Forest of Fontainebleau in the development of naturalistic landscape painting in the 19th century. In addition to paintings, pastels, and photographs, **In the Forest of Fontainebleau** includes popular 19th-century guidebooks, maps, and souvenirs that reflect Fontainebleau's history as a tourist destination.

An installation of 19th-century photographic equipment as well as open-air painting gear will be displayed near the entrance to the exhibition.

The exhibition is organized in six sections:

Discovery of the Forest: Artists first began visiting the forest in 1820s. Having adopted the practice of painting outdoors while studying in Italy, these early visitors sought a similarly inspiring place in France to learn directly from nature. In 1822 Corot discovered Fontainebleau, where he created some of his first open-air studies and returned repeatedly over the next five decades. In *Le Rageur, Forest of Fontainebleau* (c.1830) Corot depicts a favorite motif of the painters in the forest: a twisted, knotty oak tree nicknamed "the raging one." Beginning in the late 1840s, photographers seeking to reveal nature in a fresh and unadorned manner, joined the ranks of painters who made seasonal pilgrimages to the forest. Like their fellow painters, photographers captured the transitory effects of light and shadow as well as seasons and weather, in images like *Study of Trees and Pathways* (1849) by Gustave Le Gray (1820-1884).

Trees and Rocks: Fontainebleau differs from other French forests in size, the extraordinary variety of its vegetation, the unusually rugged topography (especially the massive rock formations), and the remarkable number of trees, including beech, hornbeam, and the forest's great pride, oak. Renowned for her animal paintings, Rosa Bonheur (1822-1899) visited Barbizon in 1853 and eventually settled permanently in the village of Thoméry. In one of her rare pure landscapes, *Forest of Fontainebleau: Spring in the Woods* (1860-1861), she depicts a vibrant, meticulously detailed view of trees in the forest. Cuvelier, who studied landscape painting as a young man, photographed the forest in all seasons. In *Franchard* (1863), he depicts a single figure atop the infamous rocky plateau considered among the most savage and desolate places in the forest.

Nature and Observation: By the 1830s a new generation of artists who had not made the pilgrimage to Italy began to gravitate to the forest of Fontainebleau. Chief among them was Rousseau, who was a regular visitor to the forest throughout the 1830s and 1840s before settling there, and was perhaps most obsessed with conveying its many moods. Rousseau painted Jean de Paris, an area known for its stark plateaus and rough terrain, many times in diverse weather, including fog, rain and snow, and at varying times of day, as seen in his *Sunset over the Sands of Jean de Paris* (1864). This desire to capture the ephemeral effects of nature was a hallmark of the movement that came to be known as the Barbizon School.

Fontainebleau on a Grand Scale: Although many artists enjoyed the freedom of making small- scale studies, the Forest of Fontainebleau also was the subject and inspiration for monumental paintings, many of which were produced in the studio after studies, drawings, and even photographs made on site. Although based in part on sketches of Fontainebleau, *The Gust of Wind*, (c. 1865) by Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) is a fantasy landscape combining different elements of the forest rather than a depiction of a specific view. The largest of his pure landscape paintings (57 3/4 by 90 7/8 inches), it stands as a prime example of the artist's virtuoso technique.

Village Life: The villages surrounding Fontainebleau were rural communities that depended on the cultivation of crops planted in the adjoining plains. For painters and photographers who took up lodgings in the villages, the daily life of peasants going about their routine—farmers planting in the fields, shepherdesses tending their flocks, and laborers at work and rest—provided an endless source of themes. While attracted to the picturesque qualities of rural life, some artists were also aware of its demanding conditions, as suggested by Millet's *The Shepherdess* (1870) and Auguste Giraudon's *Artist's Peasant* (c. 1870).

Sites of Renown: The northwest region of the forest was the area most often frequented by tourists and artists, benefiting not only from the proximity of the nearby villages of Barbizon and Chailly but also from the wealth of extraordinary sites such as the Pavé de Chailly, Carrefour de l'Épine, and Bas-Bréau. When Frédéric Bazille, Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, and Alfred Sisley traveled to Fontainebleau together in the 1860s, they sought out many of the same areas that had attracted painters they admired. Adopting a brighter palette than their predecessors, they focused on the play of light, shadow, and reflections in the forest, in the process developing the basic vocabulary of impressionism. In his painting of one of the most famous trees in the Bas-Bréau, *The Bodmer Oak, Fontainebleau Forest* (1865), Monet concentrated fully on the effects of sunlight falling through the trees.

The Curators and Catalogue

The exhibition curators are Kimberly Jones, associate curator of

French paintings at the National Gallery of Art, and Helga Aurisch, associate curator of European Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in collaboration with Sarah Kennel, assistant curator of photographs, National Gallery of Art.

The catalogue *In the Forest of Fontainebleau: Painters and Photographers from Corot to Monet* is the first English-language publication to consider the place of photography within the history of the evolution of landscape painting from the plein-air practices of Corot to the impressionist endeavors of Monet. Published by the National Gallery of Art in association with Yale University Press, New Haven and London, the 224-page catalogue is edited by Jones with essays by Aurisch, Kennel, and Simon Kelly and includes 179 color illustrations. It will be available in March 2008 from the Gallery Shops for \$60 (hardcover) and \$40 (softcover). To order, call (800) 697-9350 or (202) 842-6002; fax (202) 789-3047; or e-mail mailorder@nga.gov.

General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets at Constitution Avenue NW, and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's Web site at www.nga.gov.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 x 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

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