

DECEMBER 06, 2019 (DECEMBER 02, 2020)

# Exhibition of Early European Open-Air Painting Reveals New Scholarship and Recently Discovered Works



Jules Coignet, *View of Bozen with a Painter*, 1837

oil on paper, mounted on canvas

Gift of Mrs. John Jay Ide in memory of Mr. and Mrs. William Henry Donner

Washington, DC—An integral part of art education in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, painting *en plein air* (in the open air) was a core practice for artists in Europe. Intrepid painters—developing their abilities to quickly capturing effects of light and atmosphere—made sometimes arduous journeys to study landscapes at breathtaking sites, ranging from the Baltic coast and Swiss Alps to the streets of Paris and ruins of Rome. ***True to Nature: Open-Air Painting in Europe, 1780–1870*** presents some 100 oil sketches made outdoors across Europe by artists such as Carl Blechen, Jules Coignet, André Giroux, Anton Sminck Pitloo, Carl Frederik Sørensen, and Joseph Mallord William Turner. On view in the West Building of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, from February 2 through November 15, 2020, the exhibition presents dozens of recently discovered studies and explores issues of attribution, chronology, and technique.

“The Gallery is fortunate to have one of the finest public collections of landscape sketches by 18th- and 19th-century European painters, largely due to acquisitions made by the late Philip Conisbee during his time as the Gallery’s senior curator of European paintings from 1993 to 2008,” said Kaywin Feldman, director, National Gallery of Art, Washington. “***True to Nature*** builds on recent scholarship as well as the discovery of paintings that have come to light since the 1996 exhibition organized by Conisbee, *In the Light of Italy: Corot and Early Open-Air Painting*. That exhibition sparked curatorial and collector interest in this genre, and ***True to Nature*** continues to expand our understanding of this relatively unstudied, yet central, aspect of European art history. The Gallery is grateful to work with the Fondation Custodia, Collection Frits Lugt, and the Fitzwilliam Museum to bring together highlights from the best collections of European landscape sketches from this period.”

### **Exhibition Organization and Curators**

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, the Fondation Custodia, Collection Frits Lugt, Paris, and the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

The exhibition is curated by Mary Morton, curator and head of the department of French paintings, National Gallery of Art, Washington; Ger Luijten, director, Fondation Custodia, Collection Frits Lugt, Paris; and Jane Munro, keeper of paintings, drawings and prints, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

### **Exhibition Tour**

National Gallery of Art, Washington, February 2–November 15, 2020  
Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, June 22–September 19, 2021

Fondation Custodia, Collection Frits Lugt, Paris, December 3, 2021–April 3, 2022

## Exhibition Highlights

**True to Nature** begins as European artists would have in the late 18th and early 19th century—in Rome. The study of ancient sculpture and architecture, as well as of Renaissance and baroque art, was already a key part of an artist's education, but Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes's influential treatise on landscape painting, published in 1800, went further to recommend that young artists develop their skills by painting oil sketches out of doors. Valenciennes advised exploring the Roman countryside, as he had in *Study of Clouds over the Roman Campagna* (c. 1782/1785). This section includes examples by a range of European artists who followed his advice, such as Michel Dumas, Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg, and Johan Thomas Lundbye. Also included is *The Island and Bridge of San Bartolomeo, Rome* (1825/1828) by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot. Corot was a key figure in 19th-century landscape painting, bringing the practice of open-air painting back to France and inspiring a younger generation of impressionist painters.

Other sections focus on both natural and man-made features that proved challenging to painters, such as waterfalls, trees, skies, coastlines, and rooftops. Examples include rare studies by well-known artists such as John Constable's *Sky Study with a Shaft of Sunlight* (c. 1822, Fitzwilliam Museum), Jean Honoré Fragonard's *Mountain Landscape at Sunset* (c. 1765), and Odilon Redon's *Village on the Coast of Brittany* (1840–1916, Fondation Custodia) as well as sketches by lesser-known painters like Louise-Joséphine Sarazin del Belmont, one of the few known women artists active during this period. **True to Nature** illustrates how pervasive *plein-air* painting became across Europe with examples by many Belgian, Danish, Dutch, German, Swiss, and Swedish artists who studied in Italy before returning home to paint their native surroundings. Sketches by Carl Blechen include an example from his time in Italy, *View of the Colosseum in Rome* (1829, Fondation Custodia), as well as a study made at home in Germany, *View of the Baltic Coast* (1798-1840), Fondation Custodia).

## Exhibition Catalog

Published by the Fondation Custodia, Collection Frits Lugt, a comprehensive catalog with essays by leading experts in the field will present new information about this key aspect of European art history. Authors include the curatorial team and Michael Clarke, former director of the Scottish National Gallery and deputy director of the National Galleries of Scotland; Anna Ottani Cavina, director of the Fondazione Federico Zeri, Bologna, and professor of art history of the department of visual arts, University of Bologna; and Ann Hoenigswald, former senior conservator of paintings, National Gallery of Art, Washington. With some 140 color illustrations and 250 pages, the catalog

will be available in the Gallery shops, at [shop.nga.gov](http://shop.nga.gov), or by calling (800) 697-9350 or (202) 842-6002; faxing (202) 789-3047; or emailing [customer.service@nga.gov](mailto:customer.service@nga.gov).

## **Related Programs**

### **Lecture**

*Introduction to the Exhibition—True to Nature: Open-Air Painting in Europe, 1780–1870*

February 2, 2:00 p.m.

West Building Lecture Hall

Mary Morton, curator and head of the department of French paintings, National Gallery of Art, will lead a conversation with co-curators Ger Luijten, director, Fondation Custodia, Collection Frits Lugt, Paris and and Jane Munro, keeper of paintings, drawings and prints, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, along with private collector Alice Goldet.

A signing of the exhibition catalog follows.

*Painting in the Open Air: A Conversation with Ann Lofquist*

February 23, 2:00 p.m.

West Building Lecture Hall

Mary Morton is joined in conversation with artist Ann Lofquist to discuss the exhibition. Singling out particular paintings from the exhibition, Lofquist describes the influence of 19th-century artists, such as Camille Corot, on her own practice of sketching in oil paint outdoors. Like these European painters who were aesthetically energized by the light of Italy, Lofquist spent several years in California after a lifetime of painting in the northeast. The conversation highlights a tradition begun in the late 18th century that extends to contemporary painting.

### **Gallery Talks**

*True to Nature: Open-Air Painting in Europe, 1780–1870*

February 7\*, 11\*, 12\*, 14\*, 1:00 p.m.

February 27, 28, 11:00 a.m.

March 4\*, 5\*, 7, 8, 17\*, 31\*, noon

March 13, 27, 1:00 p.m.

(60 minutes)

West Building Rotunda

Heidi Applegate\* or Nathalie Ryan, lecturers

This introduction to the exhibition considers the role of small-scale oil sketches in the tradition of

European landscape painting.

*Weather in Art: From Symbol to Science*

February 19, 21, 26, 28, 2:00 p.m.

(60 minutes)

West Building Lecture Hall

David Gariff, lecturer

In conjunction with the exhibition, David Gariff presents a slide lecture that discusses shifting definitions and visual explorations of weather in European painting.

*Geology in Art*

February 26–28, 1:00 p.m.

March 6, 11, 18, 1:00 p.m.

(60 minutes)

West Building Rotunda

Heidi Applegate, lecturer

Designed in conjunction with the exhibition, this gallery talk explores the depiction of geologic features in landscape paintings in the Gallery's permanent collection.

**Concert**

*Liquid Music @NGA*

yMusic

April 19, 3:30 p.m. (canceled)

West Building, West Garden Court

yMusic, composed of "six contemporary classical polymaths who playfully overstep the boundaries of musical genres" (*New Yorker*), performs in concert halls, arenas, and clubs around the world. Founded in New York City in 2008, yMusic believes in presenting excellent, emotionally communicative music, regardless of style or idiom. Liquid Music, led by its founder and curator-producer Kate Nordstrum, develops innovative new projects with iconoclastic artists in unique presentation formats. Collaborations are a central focus of the series, along with risk-taking. This concert features a playlist of works by contemporary composers inspired by nature, and the music enhances the paintings on view in *True to Nature*.

**Update:** December 22, 2020

*Updated Fondation Custodia tour dates to October 21, 2021 to January 23, 2022.*

**Update:** December 14, 2020

*Updated Fondation Custodia tour dates from February 20–May 23, 2021 to October 2021–January 2022.*

**Update:** November 2, 2020

*Updated closing date of November 29 to November 15, 2020. Updated tour dates from June 13–September 13, 2020 for the Fondation Custodia and October 6, 2020–January 31, 2021 for the Fitzwilliam Museum.*

**Update:** February 3, 2020

*Updated to include an additional lecture on February 23.*

**Update:** March 26, 2020

*Updated to include program cancellations.*

**Update:** July 13, 2020

*Updated closing date of May 3, 2020 with new date of November 29, 2020.*

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## **Exhibition Press Release**

[Order Press Images](#)

[Exhibition Checklist \(PDF 660 KB\)](#)

[\*Press Event: True to Nature: Open-Air Painting in Europe, 1780–1870\*](#)

Audio, Released: January 28, 2019, (95:25 minutes)

[Exhibition Page](#)

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