

Théodore Rousseau (1812-1867)

The Voice of the Forest

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Petit Palais
Musée des Beaux-Arts
de la Ville de Paris

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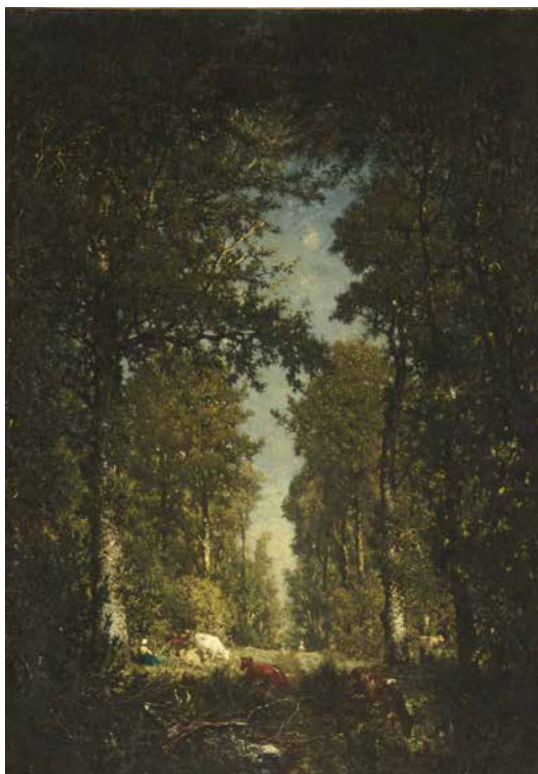


Théodore Rousseau, *Un arbre dans la forêt de Fontainebleau*, 1840-1849, oil on paper laid on canvas, 40,4x54,2 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, United Kingdom.
Photo © image Victoria and Albert Museum, Londres.

The Petit Palais presents a unique exhibition devoted to Théodore Rousseau (1812-1867), a bohemian and modern artist, who made nature the principal motif of his work and world, as well as his refuge. Admired by the young Impressionists and the photographers who followed his footsteps through the forest, Rousseau single-handedly embodied the vitality of the landscape school, in the middle of a century marked by the industrial revolution and the rise of the life sciences. A true ecologist before his time, he turned his artist's gaze on Fontainebleau Forest and raised his voice in warning at the

fragility of this ecosystem. The exhibition brings together almost one hundred works from major French museums like the Louvre and the Musée d'Orsay, as well as European institutions such as the Victoria and Albert Museum and the National Gallery in London, the Mesdag Collection in The Hague, the Kunsthalle in Hamburg, amongst others, and from private collections. These works show the extent to which the artist deserves a significant place in the history of art and landscape, but also reveal the influence his work has had on our contemporary relationship with nature.

The exhibition follows the career of this singular artist who always positioned himself in opposition to his contemporaries. The first section explores his turning away from the academic path, notably through his refusal to undergo the traditional voyage to Italy as part of his artistic apprenticeship. **Rousseau**, in fact, wanted to paint nature for its own sake and not as a setting for mythological scenes. He preferred to travel the length and breadth of France as evidenced by his early works: *Landscape in the Auvergne*, 1830 (Musée du Louvre); *Village in Normandy*, 1833 (Custodia Foundation, Frits Lugt Collection); *Mont Blanc, seen from La Faucille. Storm Effect*, 1834 (Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen). From his travels, he brought back numerous studies that bear witness to his attentive observation of the visible: studies of trunks, rocks, undergrowth, and marshes. The exhibition also demonstrates the unique dimension of Rousseau's work, of which painting closely from and in nature was an integral part of his creative process. The painter needed to immerse himself in nature.



Théodore Rousseau, *Une avenue, forêt de l'Isle Adam*, 1846-1849. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (musée d'Orsay) / Hervé Lewandowski

He renounced any geometric perspective and placed the viewer in a position where they were not overlooking the landscape but at the heart of this ecosystem. He often retouched his paintings in his studio, a process that could last several years. His very personal technique, contrasting with that of other artists of the day, contributed to the refusal of his work by the Salons for several consecutive years before a discouraged Rousseau chose not to submit anymore. Paradoxically, this rejection, which earned him the nickname "the great rejected one", allowed him to acquire a certain notoriety and real critical and commercial success both in France and abroad.

The exhibition then focuses on his works painted in the forest of Fontainebleau and his prominent role amongst the artists and photographers who visited the village of Barbizon, where he settled in 1847. Around him was a circle of painters that included **Narcisse Diaz de la Peña**, **Charles Jacques**, and **Jean-François Millet** who would become his closest friend, but also photographers like

Eugène Cuvelier, **Charles Bodmer**, and **Gustave Le Gray**. They tirelessly scoured Fontainebleau Forest executing portraits of trees. This, in fact, would become Rousseau's signature. He carefully observed the trees' organic structure, the line of their branches, the form of their knots. He individualized them, citing the precise location for each of his paintings: *Chailly Path*, circa 1840 (Musée départemental des peintres de Barbizon), or *The Vieux Dormoir of Bas-Bréau*, 1836-1837 (on long-term loan from the Musée du Louvre to the Musée d'Orsay).

Around this time, a keen awareness of the threat posed to forests emerged amongst artists, critics, and writers in a context of increasing industrialization. Painters witnessed deforestation and showed this in their works. Rousseau sought to denounce these "crimes" through his paintings. For example, he borrowed a particularly striking or arresting title for one work—*Massacre of the Innocents*, 1847 (Mesdag Collection, Netherlands)—inspired by a biblical episode. The canvas presents trees being felled in the forest. In 1852, Rousseau became the voice of the forest on behalf of all the artists who painted it, and on this subject, he wrote to the Count of Morny, the then Minister of the Interior. His combat found its resolution in the creation, in 1853, of the world's very first nature reserve, under the name of "artistic reserve", made official in 1861. At the end of the exhibition, a timeline traces the history of Fontainebleau Forest and its preservation from the early 19th century up to the present day, highlighting Rousseau's decisive contribution, in the name of art, to the emergence of an ecological conscience.

This exhibition has been organized with the exceptional participation of the Musée du Louvre and Musée d'Orsay.

The exhibition has been possible thanks to



Curators:

Annick Lemoine, Chief Heritage Curator, Director of the Petit Palais, Head Curator
Servane Dargnies-de Vitry, Curator of Paintings at the Musée d'Orsay,