The Lake by Jean Baptiste Camille Corot – A Modern Interpretation

“"To get into my landscapes, you need to have the patience to wait for the haze to lift; you can enter them only by slow degrees and once you are there, let’s hope, enjoy them.” – Jean Baptiste Camille Corot¹

¹ Jean Leymarie, Corot; Biographical and Critical Study (Geneva: Skira; [distributed in the U.S. by World Pub., Cleveland, 1966), 86.
Jean Baptiste-Camille Corot was a genius who revolutionized the way that people perceived landscape paintings and nature. By choosing to break away from the politically and biblically charged artwork of the time, Corot spearheaded the landscape movement that eventually led to impressionism. In *The Lake*, Corot masterfully uses subdued tones and loose brushwork in order to convey the impression that nature has upon one's soul. Within this masterpiece there are strong undercurrents that represent nature as serene, overpowering, and beautiful. One who stands in front of this painting is utterly consumed by these undercurrents, and gets a glimpse into how Corot experienced nature.

Corot was a French artist who was born in 1796 in Paris. After he received a classical education at a college in Rouen, he proceeded to focus exclusively on his art career when he was twenty-six. Since Corot’s family supported him financially for most of his life, the confines of the art market did not bind Corot. This freedom, along with his natural creativity, allowed Corot to free himself from the limitations of what was popular at the time, and become truly original.

Corot’s career can essentially be broken up into two separate periods in which his paintings are very distinct from each other: his earlier years and his later years. Corot began his full-time art career between 1822 and 1823. In France, this was around the time period in which artists began to switch from depicting scenes of the Revolution to

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
depicting scenes from classical literature (as showcased in the Paris Salon of 1924). In these fledgling years of Corot’s painting career he, for the most part, stuck to what his contemporaries were painting. He painted mostly landscapes in a Neo-classical style, focusing on literary and biblical subjects. Because it does not hold true in his later years, it is also important to note that in his early years, Corot used a plein-air technique in which he would paint outside thanks to the new paint-tube availability. Although this time period in Corot’s life did not yield the most thought-provoking paintings, his works were popular, and he solidified himself as a accomplished painter of the time.

Starting in the early 1950s, Corot moved away from Neo-classicism and focused his efforts into works in which he conveyed his impression of nature. Along with changing the subject matter of his paintings, Corot began to experiment with new and innovative techniques. Corot also began to use charcoal to sketch. By using charcoal rather than a hard-nosed pencil in his sketches, he was able to smudge the contours in order to soften them and suggest the irrelevance of detail. This irrelevance of detail and focus on shifting tones, as showcased in The Lake, are some of the principal characteristics that scholars point to when citing how Corot (and others) influenced impressionism.

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11 Ibid.
One can see this idea of ignoring detail manifest itself in Claude Monet’s *Wheatstacks (End of Summer)*.

In this painting, there is an obvious lack of detail and clear emphasis on light and shifting colors. The importance of minute details in the wheatstacks or the hills in the background frail in comparison to the significance of the impression that the whole scene has upon oneself. Monet conveys this impression of light and shape through a gentle shifting of contrasting colors. In *The Lake*, instead of using colors to demonstrate the phenomenon of light, Corot uses an array of tones.

*The Lake* is a painting that is unassuming when first looked at through a computer screen. The center of the painting features a cluster of dark brown trees that obscure the view of a lake in the background. There are several cows in the painting – a prominent one in the left-center, and others, less prominent, to the right. The shield of trees in the middleground obscure the lake and the rolling hills in the background. There is a man who stands, gazing out through the trees and onto the lake in the left foreground. Although this piece ostensibly has a (some would say) boring subject matter, the brushstrokes, along with its subtitles in tone is what draws the viewer into this painting, and only then can the subject be appreciated.

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I think the first thing that is important to consider when looking at *The Lake*, is to understand that Corot, in his later years, began to paint from memory.\(^{14}\) This movement away from the *plein-air* technique is especially important when reflecting on *The Lake* because of the paintings unique dream-like quality. It almost feels like a memory that is being recalled. Through Corot’s lucid brushwork and his muting of colors, he seems to truly capture the essence of a memory or a dream. Everything humans do and see leaves behind a lasting impression on us. However, the memory is not as perfect or vibrant as the experience itself. What is left are the shapes, muted colors, and an overall sentiment—a sentiment of serenity in nature is what Corot expresses in *The Lake*. Personally, when I stood in front of this painting, I recalled a memory of my own. Corot would say that this is when the haze started to lift for me. When one stares at this painting for long enough, neither the tones, the brushwork, nor the subject matter are important. When one gets into this painting, Corot actually turns the tables, and the viewer becomes the subject. The viewer becomes the man in the painting, reflecting on his or her own life.

For me, in a modern context, *The Lake* is a melancholic painting because it tells the story of humanity loosing touch with the natural world. I see the man, leaning on his wooden staff, looking over this spot of land that he loves, and knowing that lands like this are becoming constantly scarcer. Humans in contemporary society take advantage of nature. People see a bird or a lake or a mountain and they say, “So what?” Well this man knows that these small bits of nature are things to be cherished. We know he knows this because he is not hiking or hunting in these woods, but he is simply taking in the nature. He is enjoying it just for what it is— not because he can gain something financially.

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exploitable from it. Even though we take advantage of nature in today’s world, there is no denying that we cannot possibly survive without its help.

This idea of the importance of nature is ubiquitous in *The Lake*. The man’s very positioning in the painting is what most obviously reveals this notion. He is so insignificant. The grass around him threatens to climb up and suffocate him. He actually threatens to disappear into the background because the two tones are so similar. The trees tower above him as if he were an ant. The way he leans on his stick, made of wood, makes him seem old, frail, and weak. He is literally relying on the world to keep him on his two feet. This landscape doesn’t need this inconsequential being to survive – but he needs it. Even the cows are more prominent than the man, and are depicted very differently. The cow in the center of the painting has its head up, looks alert, and contrasts starkly with the light background of the lake. And there is more than one cow. They are sociably interacting in their wild habitat while the man is alone in what should be his, but is in fact a foreign territory to most people today.

The syllabus for this Montserrat course states that the purpose of this course is to “encourage reflection on what it means to be human and on our existence with and responsibility for the natural world.”¹⁵ This is exactly what this painting, this year at Holy Cross, and the past twenty years of my life have done for me. And it is clear to me that our relationship with the natural world needs to change. With climate change, immense economic insecurity around the world, a serious food and water shortage, and a dwindling supply of oil, we live in a time of converging crises. And I do believe that the collapse of society, as we know it, is a very real concern.

¹⁵ Virginia Raguin, Montserrat Course Syllabus.
Why waste time with these dooms-day prophecies? The man in The Lake knows why - because the natural world is the answer to all of humanities’ problems. We must regain the connection with the world that our ancestors once had. The majority of the people in the United States today (including myself) don’t have the first inkling on how to grow their own food. This is something we and I must learn, because we can’t keep relying on food coming to us from thousands of miles away via petroleum consuming machines. We must understand that every spot of natural earth is a complex ecosystem that we are living in, and there is equilibrium to everything that is natural.

The man in The Lake looks out on the world with a sense of longing, because he knows that we are destroying it. The man looks out with a sense of apprehension, because he doesn’t know what the future will hold. However, he also looks with a sense of opportunity, because a better life waits on the other side of the horizon. He looks with a sense of optimism, because the natural world is indefatigable. He looks with a sense of pride, because he knows that with hard work, the natural world and humanity can peacefully coexist. He looks. He looks. I look…
Illustrations:

1. *The Lake*, 1861, oil on canvas, 52 3/8 x 62 in. (133 x 157.5 cm), 1906.1.25, The Frick Collection, New York, NY. (The Frick Collection website.)

2. Claude Monet, *Wheatstacks (End of Summer)*, Oil on canvas, 1890-1891. 60 x 100 cm (23 5-8 x 39 3-8 in), Art Institute of Chicago. (The Art Institute of Chicago website.)

Works Cited


