



Forest in Boisrémond, Théodore Rousseau

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Théodore Rousseau
French, Barbizon, 1842
Black chalk (recto); graphite (verso)
10 13/16 x 17 1/2 in.
2002.3



Questions for Teaching

What do you notice first about this drawing? Why do you think your eye is drawn to this area first?

Focus in on one tree in the composition. What kinds of lines did the artist use to create the tree?

What details do you notice in the background? Describe the lines the artist used to create these details.

Théodore Rousseau called his drawings of trees "portraits." After looking at this drawing, why do you think he said this?

Background Information

Théodore Rousseau thought of trees as almost human. He called his drawings of trees "portraits" and the trees themselves "beings." His rendering of a pathway winding through an old forest demonstrates this affinity for natural entities. Zigzags of chalk and a line of trees give the hillside a rugged character, defining a downhill slope from the left side of the drawing to the lower right corner. There, Rousseau incorporated a serpentine creek with curved lines along the right side, leading to a distant, small town with a church. At the far left of the drawing, a person stands on the pathway, providing a sense of scale and distance.

The artists of the Barbizon School were among the first to paint and draw *en plein air*, taking their tools outdoors to create their works of art, rather than inventing a scene from memory in a studio. In keeping with the Barbizon School's techniques, Rousseau captured the essence of the trees, giving them body and form, but rendered details such as leaves minimally with short strokes of chalk. The one gnarled, old tree at left that receives special attention becomes the focus of the image.

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About the Artist

Théodore Rousseau, (French, 1812—1867)

From his boyhood, Théodore Rousseau passionately loved nature. He trained with academic landscapists, but his insistence on "keep[ing] in mind the virgin impression of nature" and painting pure landscape without a mythological theme earned him the hostility of France's academic establishment, making him both famous and poor. His unswerving determination to paint pure landscapes directly from nature paved the way for the Impressionists.

After exhibiting at the Salon in the early 1830s, a rejection in 1836 dismayed him, and he left for the village of Barbizon in Fontainebleau Forest. There he spent his summers, joined by Jean-François Millet and others who became known collectively as the Barbizon School.

Rousseau unified his compositions with muted tones and created rhythm through the use of dark and light areas. His sincere, meticulous renderings seem to demonstrate his assertion that he made portraits of the trees and listened to their voices. Though he had detested his academic training, he never discarded one of its basic tenets: he considered his outdoor paintings to be merely sketches, preludes for the final paintings he worked up in his Paris studio each winter.

When the 1841 Salon jury refused a painting that had already been purchased by the government, Rousseau quit submitting. After the revolutions of 1848, his fortunes changed again, and he gained an international reputation.