



Forest of Fontainebleau, Cluster of Tall Trees Overlooking the Plain of Clair-Bois at the Edge of Bas-Bréau, Théodore Rousseau

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Théodore Rousseau
French, Barbizon, 1842
Oil on canvas
35 7/16 x 45 11/16 in.
2007.13



Questions for Teaching

What is the subject of this painting?

What do you notice about the way the painting is painted?

What do you notice about the color, brushstrokes, and amount of detail?

Théodore Rousseau called his drawings of trees "portraits." Looking at this painting, why do you think he would have said this?

Background Information

Théodore Rousseau thought of trees as almost human. He called his drawings of trees "portraits" and the trees themselves "beings."

This painting depicts a corner of the Forest of Fontainebleau known as Bas-Bréau, near the artist's home in the village of Barbizon. Bas-Bréau attracted Rousseau beginning in the winter of 1836-1837, and he continued to paint in this area throughout his career. In 1853, he submitted a petition to the Duke of Morny, an influential politician close to Napoleon III, in which he protested the commercial exploitation of the trees and rocks of Bas-Bréau, and requested its protection.

At the center of the composition are Rousseau's beloved oaks, the central motif of this great nineteenth-century landscape-painter's working life. In the distance at the right is an open plain, above which looms a late-afternoon sky. A thinly sketched single figure and herd of cows make their way around a bend towards a pond, whose surface reflects the milky light of the sky. The foreground of earth, boulders, grass, and broken branches is barely suggested, and the dramatic focus of the canvas converges on the trunk, branches, and foliage of a central live oak, flanked by two dead trees whose sharp, splintered forms are evoked with quick upward thrusting strokes. The meandering graphic shapes of the central oak's branches, whose gnarled limbs stretch around one another towards the sky, clearly fascinated the artist. Sunlight reflects off the pond and up into the branches, filtering through the foliage in an extraordinarily nuanced

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range of earthy greens and browns. Rousseau employs a variety of energetic brush marks to render this magical evening moment in the ancient forest.

About the Artist

Théodore Rousseau, (French, 1812—1867)

From his boyhood, Théodore Rousseau passionately loved nature. He trained with academic landscape artists, 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 Paris for the village of Barbizon in Fontainebleau Forest. There he spent his summers, and was 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 one of Rousseau's painting, which had already been purchased by the government, Rousseau stopped submitting to the Salon. Luckily, by the late 1840s, Rousseau's fortunes changed. He gained an international reputation after receiving the first place medal at the 1849 Salon and the Salon's prestigious Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur in 1852.