
Corot

with short notes on Daubigny

Martin Kinnear Norfolk Painting School - 5 October 2020



Introduction

Scope

These are my studio notes, and notes for a published article (published by Artists & Illustrators) compiled in 2015/16 from National Gallery resources and my own practical research into the methods of Barbizon School painters, particularly Corot and Daubigny.

Technical notes

Barbizon School, Corot and Daubigny

As the 19th Century drew to a close the new 'Impressionist' methods of direct oil painting began to supplant a tradition of largely indirect painting that had evolved (often slowly, but inexorably) from the earliest, simple oils created by Van Eyck, through the swagger painting of Baroque masters to the complex medium rich confections of Turner.

19th Century France was very much a bastion of technical oil painting and many of its masters could trace unbroken lines of apprenticeship to some of the most important painters in history. For example, one of the founding members of what was to become the Académie des Beaux-Arts, Eustache Le Sueur was trained by Vouet, a pupil of Caravaggio himself.

When political Revolution came it did little to change this conservative tradition of art, indeed Napoleon saw the meter and discipline of Neo Classical Art as the perfect expression of the Republican ideal.

Between 1874 and 1900 this tradition was effectively erased from mainstream French painting by an artistic revolution every bit as thorough and ruthless as the Terror of 1793-4.

Thanks to this short period we have an opportunity to see how the techniques of French painters who were schooled (or aware of and influenced by) the grand manner of painting adapted to not only new ways of painting, but new materials, new ideas and ultimately new imperatives from the art buying public and critics.

Two such artists, were Corot (1796-1875) and Daubigny (1817 –1878).

Although both seen as Pre-Impressionist (strictly speaking Impressionism was first made public at the inaugural exhibition of April 1874), it is clear from both their works and Monet's own words ('There is only one master here—Corot. We are nothing compared to him, nothing.), that their works represent a tangible bridge between an Academic past and Impressionist future.

By studying these artists we can gain an understanding of both 18th Century technique, and the new 19th Century materials and ideas which together, would ultimately eclipse traditional practice. In doing this we can see the opportunities they took, the compromises they made and perhaps quantify the loss to contemporary painters of this rich pre- Impressionist tradition.

Many modern Ateliers and Academies feel; so strongly that 'something was lost' that to paint in a post 1874 manner is seen as almost a betrayal of the Art, Craft and Tradition of Art (note my use of capitals).

Conversely most modern Art Schools (or at least those who don't consider the painting itself utterly irrelevant to Contemporary Art), consider pre Impressionist painting to be so. The purpose of this article then is to see if a look at the artists who worked through this time can shed a little more light than heat on the subject.

Both of these artists have been featured in the pages of the National Gallery Technical Bulletin; Corot in a comprehensive piece about his early and late technique, and Daubigny in a shorter paper which focused on the instability of his paint films, created by his non traditional working process.

The source documents for this quarter's Technical Notes are: National Gallery Technical Bulletin Vol. 30 (Paintings by Corot: Methods, Materials and Sources by Sarah Herring), and National Gallery Technical Bulletin Vol. 23 (Mixed Media in the Work of Charles-François Daubigny: Analysis and Implications for Conservation Larry Keith and Raymond White)

Corot

Corot's technique may be divided into two phases; early and late. His early work embodied the principle of working outdoors to collect source material, in the form of oil sketches, before embellishing and working them up into studio paintings in the Grand Manner. These works then may be thought of as 'working sketches' and 'salon paintings'. The former, never intended to be shown, the latter also-ran examples of painting to the Salon taste.

In his later works, Corot concentrated not on the Academic idealisation of scenes for the Salon, but rather the ideal use of mediums, colours, close harmony and technique to produce hauntingly lyrical work.

In this second group of works, Corot not only moved away from painting in the grand manner, but pioneered almost Impressionistic levels of softly harmonic yet muted colour planning, whilst retaining an indirect painter's concern for both value and opacity; both of which Monet was to either discard or so radically rephrase as to lose their original role in his new Impressionist way of working.

In her paper, Herring suggests that the rise in landscape photography (new and sensational stuff of course in the 1860's) contributed to Corot's choice of increasingly muted colour: as though he sought an equivalent to this new media in the old one of paint. However in his own sketchbook he noted 'The first two things to study are the form, then the values. For me, these two things are the mainstays of art. Colour and touch give the work its charm.'

Corot then stared into and embraced the future, yet felt that some aspects of Academic painting (which relied heavily on Values to create Forms) were so valuable that he retained them in his late method.

Corot's late method

Corot's late method is well described by Herring in her paper, in brief it is:

1. Visualise a scene
2. Prepare the best translucent ground colour
3. Mass the darks
4. Develop the lights
5. Develop the half tones
6. Detail the scene and add any accents
7. Unify the optical qualities of the work with translucent or turbid media

Looking at these in more practical detail:

Rule 1: Visualise your scene

Corot didn't paint what he saw, he actively refined his sources and in doing so effectively designed his pictures. This first point alone - that old Academic idea of sorting, sifting, developing and designing a painting from a visual source rather than just transcribing what is seen - lies at the heart of most Post Impressionist movements.

In other words Corot's principle that his paintings should be improvements on, or at least selected from, the scene, holds true today. Expressionism, Abstract Minimalism, Vorticism, Pointillism and almost every other 'ism' since have endorsed his view.

Rule 2: Get the ground and Imprimatura right

Herring notes that 'Corot used a very fine canvas, which he favoured increasingly in his later years. The ground is white, consisting of a mixture of lead white and extenders: chalk and silicate minerals.' An oil ground with silicates and chalk shows that Corot wanted an optimal ground for both drying (chalk), adhesion (silicates) yet fat enough (oil) to offset sinking in and keep his first working fluid for a little time.

His use of a white ground is significant, and a break from some of the more traditional (and muted) yellow, grey or red toned grounds used in most Academic painting. White reflects light, and if used with glazes lends an inner luminosity to the work.

Corot's imprimatura of choice was a translucent Viridian and Alizarin Crimson mix, modified as necessary with a little black or white (a subtractive mix of cool green and cool red) which creates a silvery tonality. Both Viridian (1859) and Alizarin (1868) were relatively new colours, indeed the latter was first synthesised only 7 years before the artist's death.

This implies that far from clinging reverently onto the past (as many modern Ateliers do), Corot was happy to adjust his Academic technique to take advantage of the latest materials, yet never compromised on the key pillars of academic painting, Value and Form.

Rule 3: Mass the Darks

Herring notes that Corot typically massed his forms with a dark liquid paint ranging from almost black to pale brown. The purpose of this stage was to quickly develop the work and provide translucent darks for all of the principal forms, into which more opaque half tones and ultimately highlights might be added.

This concern for the optical sequencing of the paint (translucent darks, opaque lights) is typical of academic work. Yet Corot's working sequence and relative lack of 'finish' were novel. As Herring notes 'He often painted very thinly, leaving more of the *ébauche*, or even the ground, visible.'

My own experiments show that a Van Dyke Brown is ideal for this; creating off black masses where undisturbed yet showing as a pale brown if rubbed back with a rag. In this manner one can develop a loosely massed *ébauche* in a minute or two.

Rule 4: Develop the Lights

Once the *ébauche* was done Corot began to develop the sky. Painting the light into the trees (as opposed to placing trees over a sky) is counter intuitive and again novel in respect of Academic methods. Herring notes that 'he also enlivened his picture surface with innumerable small touches of paint, creating a shimmering effect.' This shimmering effect was created by using dabs of thicker, more opaque paint over the luminous *imprimatura*, and was often amplified by a choice of softly complementary *and* equiluminant colours; cool blue and warm violet admixed with whites at Value 9 for example.

There are several novel things here; his scientific use of colour, his awareness of the potential of equiluminant complementaries to 'shimmer' and working the sky, counter intuitively, into the trees. Yet despite embracing these very new ideas, Corot never allows his Academic control of opacity to slip, as Monet did, later in the Century.

Rule 5: Develop the half tones

Once the accents are established (by now one has translucent darks and opaque lights), it becomes possible to develop half tones using semi opaque colours. At this stage Corot limited himself to a very restricted palette (far more muted than Ingres or David for example). It is clear that he uses this stage to set the harmonic and chromatic ranges of the work.

This is very different again to Impressionism. Not only is Corot's method broken into working stages, his colour choice is based upon *his* design rather than a quotidian view (an 'impression') of what he is painting

Rule 6: Develop the Details

Once the picture was established, Corot turned his attention to developing it. In general he added a range of translucent to opaque passages over the translucent *ébauche* and semi opaque half tones

Herring provides a good insight into Corot's method here noting that he 'Subsequently, the trunk and most of the branches of the oak tree were picked out in a brown glaze-like paint.' and that he

‘At a late stage of working he added strong olive-green highlights, for example in the tree and along the bottom edge.’

This variance in opacity in detailing can only be explained as Corot’s Academic understanding of the role of opacity in creating optical depth. Again he retains what he considers to be useful from traditional painting, and his handling of detail may usefully be compared to Monet, Sisley etc who applied most of their paint without consideration to its opacity.

As a result of this Corot’s pictures are beguilingly deep and subtle, with none of the flatness one associates with much 20th Century work.

Rule 7: Unify everything with mediums

Despite his limited palette it would have been impossible for Corot to ensure that his finished work would have an even sheen. This is partly due to the differing oil to pigment ratios of his colours, partly due to his use of different mediums, and an inevitable consequence of using calcites in a ground (they aid drying but promote sinking in).

To ensure that the work was optically integrated Corot would use a finishing varnish of some kind, and possibly a little pine resin or heat bodied oils to impart a slightly turbid, glass like effect over the work [as if it ha been lightly coated with vaseline.

This attention to the optical quality of the upper layer is simply absent in Impressionist and most 20th Century works, yet Corot clearly considered it to be essential.

Daubigny

The shorter paper on Daubigny addresses the conservation of two of his works, both of which were in need of re-varnishing, yet appeared to have unstable paint films under this existing varnish. The works were indeed unstable, and the conservation of them illustrated how painters of this period mixed various mediums up to combine plein air and studio techniques.

Corot’s early method shows how the job of painting sketches on location (en plein air) was generally carried out using oil on paper, cheap millboard or sketching panels. Such works had no intrinsic value, and were never intended to be developed into easel paintings (studio work) by the artist.

In contrast to this Daubigny experimented with beginning his studio oils in the field, and subsequently brought the same pictures to a finish as easel paintings in his studio.

This is a major departure from Academic painting, and (although he would deny it) sets the template for Monet’s typical method, of starting outdoors and refining indoors.

To accomplish this Daubigny used one fast drying medium for plein air painting, and a second slower one for developing his work in the studio.

Daubigny's plein air medium

To facilitate working outdoors Daubigny used a (standard) walnut oil medium to which he added a mix of fast drying Dammar medium (Dammar resin varnish), extended with a Gum Benzoin type balsam. Balsams are oleo resinous compounds which alter the rheology of paint films, in this case extending the fast drying Dammar to facilitate scumbling.

As Herring notes 'his mixture would have been readily soluble and relatively quick drying, and therefore highly suitable for making changes and corrections in the latter stages of painting, particularly after the paint had already dried. Combining the properties of the two in an essential oil carrier would provide a very quick-drying medium with a measure of translucency and without excessive colour saturation, amenable to selective, multiple applications in those areas requiring additional 'toning down', with minimal delay between each stage.'

This fast drying medium would allow Daubigny to approximate some of the traditional 'layered' or wet over dry techniques used in traditional studio painting on the spot. Similar mediums are evident in Turner's later works

Once the outdoor stage were done Daubigny changed his medium.

Daubigny's Studio Medium

Once the picture was laid down on location, Daubigny would work it up in the studio. Without the constraints of drying time he chose a more complex, traditional medium for this which maximised the technical potential of his paint.

Herring describes the medium thus, 'Daubigny used a mixed medium technique for the later painting stages employed a different mixture: both the darkest green glazes used in the foliage and the translucent orange glaze depicting the sunset are painted in a mixture of walnut oil, dammar and pine resin. It seems reasonable to assume that the specific optical properties of the different finishing media were deliberately exploited; the walnut oil, dammar and pine resin mixture has a higher refractive index than the benzoin-type balsam and dammar mixture, and therefore is better suited to the more transparent glazes on which it was used.

Unfortunately the initial medium used by Daubigny proved to be very similar in composition and solubility to the topcoat varnish which was subsequently applied to his work; all of which made the removal of this varnish 'highly problematic'.

Technical problems aside, this evidence of Daubigny's and Corot's working methods points strongly to painters who understood the principles and value of traditional painting, yet were keen to use the latest ideas to move it on; never dreaming one supposes that Impressionism would sweep away many of the principles they held to be central to good Art within a quarter century of their deaths.