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FITZROY CARRINGTON, Editor

LE PÈRE COROT

BY

ROBERT J. WICKENDEN

Author of "Charles Jacque," "Jean-François Millet," "The Men of 1830," "Charles-François Daubigny," etc., etc.

PUBLISHED FOR

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS BOSTON

BY

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

4 Park Street, Boston 16 E. 40th St., New York

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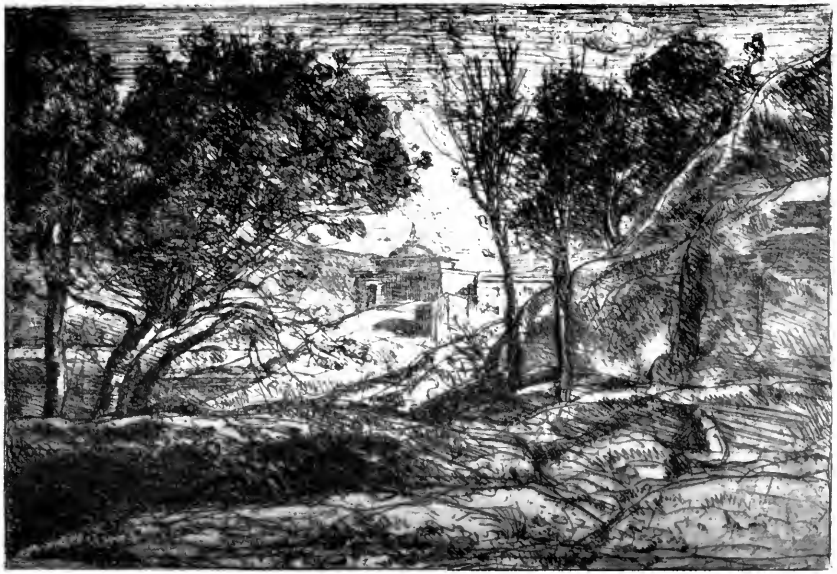
Le Père Corot



SOUVENIR DE TOSCANE

Size of the original etching, 4⅞ × 7 inches

"LE PERE COROT"

By ROBERT J. WICKENDEN

THE title of "Père," with which Corot was invested by his many friends, was purely honorary, for he was never wedded, unless it were to his art, and his pictures were the offspring of that union.

He was regarded as a sort of spiritual father by the many artists he helped and advised, and he might have furnished an excellent example of the soul's superiority, for as his body grew older, his spirit seemed to grow younger, and his later pictures are as fanciful and poetic as his earlier ones were sober and severe. The firmly painted view of the Coliseum, which holds its place so well in the Gallery of Modern French Art at the Louvre, was done in his thirtieth year. Some twenty-five sittings from nature were devoted to its production, and during one of these, Théodore Aligny, the landscapist, happened to surprise him. Aligny was so much impressed by its original and serious qualities, that on returning that evening to his companions at the Restaurant della Lepre, he said: "Mes amis, Corot is our master."

Till then, Corot had been considered as a good fellow with a fine voice, but as an indifferent painter, by the circle of French artists then in Rome, among whom were Léopold Robert, Édouard Bertin, Boilly,

Chenavard, Aligny, and others, while Pierre Guérin was director at the Villa Médicis. It was true that Corot's previous education in art had been of a somewhat desultory sort.

He was born at Paris on the 29th Messidor of year IV of the Revolutionary calendar, corresponding to the 17th of July, 1796, of our own, and was named Jean-Baptiste Camille by his parents, who kept a fashionable millinery establishment, presided over by his mother, at the corner of the rue du Bac and the Pont Royal. Napoleon Bonaparte, then a young general in his twenty-seventh year, after crushing the last serious Revolutionary revolt, had married Josephine de Beauharnais in the previous March, and was now occupied with his famous Italian campaign. A reaction had set in, induced by the excesses of 1793, and in art a pseudo-classic severity was cultivated by David and his school, which blossomed later into the ornamental forms of the First Empire.

In this atmosphere the young Camille grew up, and was placed successively in a lycée at Rouen till he was sixteen, and afterward for two years in a college at Poissy. Then came his father's unsuccessful attempt to train him for a commercial career.

Though his tastes and tendencies were turned toward art, he tried as a dutiful son to obey the parental edict, picking up what instruction was possible and practising it almost by stealth. It would have been much more helpful to his predestined vocation had these eight long years been devoted to a thorough training in drawing and painting.

But at last, in 1822, though much chagrined and disappointed, his father yielded, allowing him some

fifteen hundred francs a year, or about twenty-five dollars a month, as a *pension*.

"All right," said his father, "do as you think best: seeing you wish to amuse yourself, do so. I was ready to buy you a fine business with the one hundred thousand francs in cash which I shall now keep!"

Corot's heart, however, was filled with gratitude, and he began to paint at once, studying with Michallon, a brilliant youth whose career was cut short by death on the twenty-fourth of September, 1822. Though himself a "classic" by education, Michallon had directed his pupil's attention to the study of nature, and a few months later Corot entered the studio of Victor Bertin, where he remained till the start for Italy in December, 1825. Inheriting the precise and orderly habits of the French *bourgeoisie,* the eight years of commercial training had confirmed him to an industrious and regular disposition of his time. As he said, it was always his custom when in town to enter his studio "at three minutes to eight" every morning, and in this way he accomplished a prodigious amount of work. He came of Burgundian stock, Corot's grandfather having been the son of a farmer at Mussy-la-Fosse, a village near Semur in the department of Côte d'Or. In 1860 he went down there to look up his relatives, and was delighted to find many of them. "The country is filled," said he, "with good workers who bear my name; one hears nothing in the fields but 'Hello, Corot!' I thought they were calling me and it seemed as if I were in my own family."

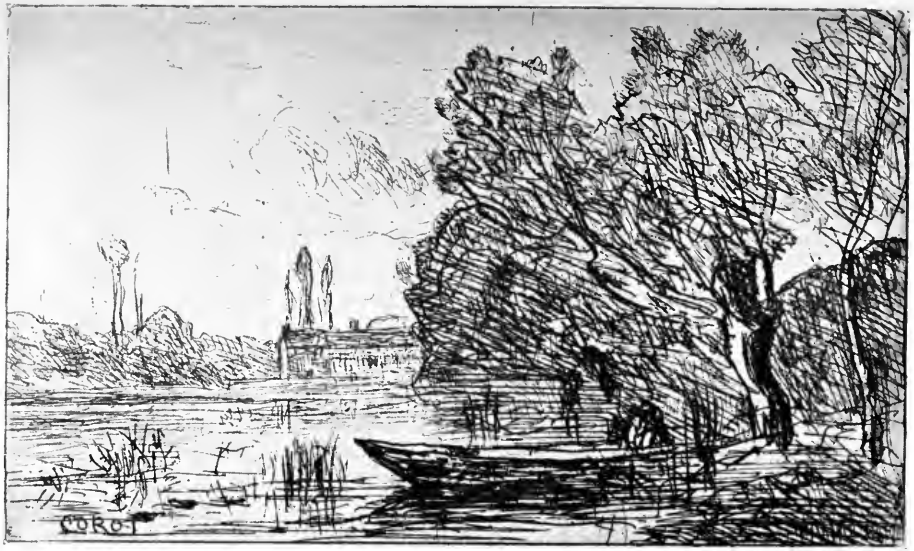
This origin probably accounted for Corot's herculean build and fresh, farmer-like appearance, as well as for his innate love of nature and the life of the

open fields. A certain stubborn independence is ascribed to the French countryman, and this he also possessed, though joined with remarkable amiability.

Corot's respect for Greek and Italian models was strengthened by his three years' residence in Italy, but he had seen the works of Constable, shown at Paris in 1824, which had such a remarkable effect on French painters, suggesting the possibilities that lay in their own immediate surroundings. Corot profited by both of these influences, though the "romantics" always found him too "classic," and the "classics" too "romantic." Thus for many years he received no favors from either camp, nor did the public appreciate an art so peculiarly personal in its character. He needed an ample supply of stoicism and self-reliance to carry him through such a combination of enmity and indifference.

Corot was well into the fifties before material success began to dawn upon him, but his habits were frugal, needs were few, and kept within his modest income, while love for nature and art supplied both courage and inspiration.

It took more than twenty years for the artists and public to realize the truth of Aligny's words, though they were no empty compliment when he uttered them. He followed them up with advice calculated to compensate for Corot's lack of early training. Although two years younger than Corot, he had been through the academic schools. "If it pleases you, Monsieur Corot," he said, "we will occasionally work together; perhaps there is something I can teach you, and I also shall certainly be the gainer in your company." Corot had not been spoiled by expressed ad-



VILLE D'AVRAY : LE BATEAU SOUS LES SAULES. EFFET DU MATIN

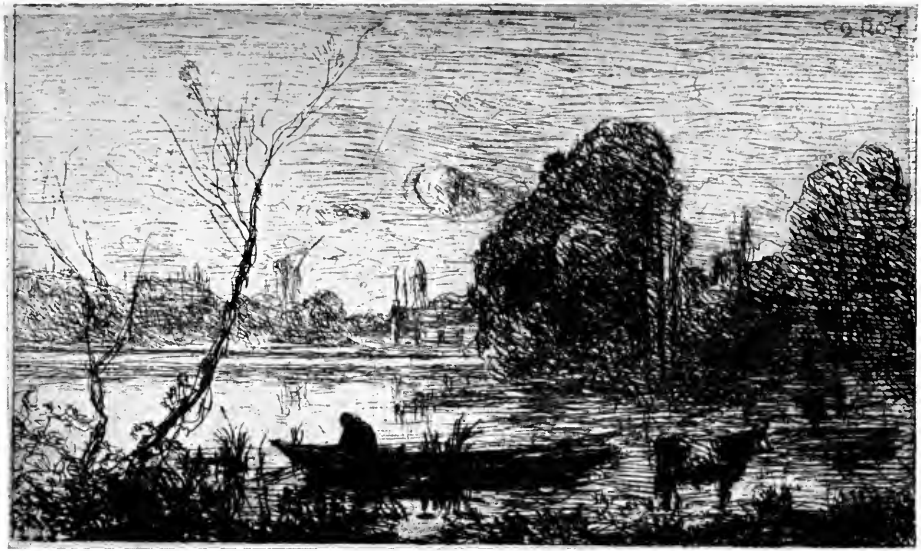
Of the same size as the original etching, $2\frac{7}{8} \times 4\frac{3}{4}$ inches

miration, and he always felt grateful to Aligny for the needful confidence in himself with which these timely words and acts inspired him.

Fifty years later, in 1874, Aligny's remains were carried to their resting-place in Montparnasse cemetery at Paris. At the dim early morning hour of eight o'clock, in spite of a wintry snow-storm, Corot was there, although then seventy-eight and within a year of his own demise. Madame Aligny, who was also present, begged him to leave and to avoid longer exposure to such inclement weather, but he insisted on remaining, and later in the day said to his friend Monsieur Dumesnil, who relates the story, "Ah, it is finer now than it was at the cemetery this morning, but for me it was a duty, a sacred debt."

A sense of self-control and an almost ascetic severity of treatment pervade much of Corot's earlier work both in Italy and in France, but this careful and conscientious study of nature permitted him to give full scope to his imaginative faculties later on, and to enliven his technique with a lighter and more feathery touch, without losing the indispensable sense of basic form.

Charles Blanc, who had followed Corot's successive exhibits at the Salon, thus summed up his earlier career: "During fifteen years or more Corot sought for style by his drawing, by large lines resolutely expressed, by an intentional sobriety of detail. He chose well-grown trees of regular form, smooth rocks with continuous breaks; he opposed to bare trunks, gracefully rounded bouquets, and to sparse leafage, thick bushy growths. He brought the rigidity of pine-trees, straight and smooth as columns, into contrast with the



VILLE D'AVRAY : L'ETANG AU BATELIER. EFFET DU SOIR

Of the same size as the original etching, $2\frac{7}{8} \times 4\frac{3}{4}$ inches

curves of supple and climbing plants; the flat, tranquil contours which mark the horizon, with broken and ravine-marked foregrounds. Nevertheless, that which was rough, solemn and a trifle emphatic in Aligny's drawings and in his masculine paintings, boldly but summarily modeled, was shown in Corot's work, less abruptly, more developed, more penetrated with the warmth of life—not of the life which circulates in each separate plant, marking its movement and general appearance, but of the universal life which exhales mysteriously through the large colorations of all nature when the light animates, heats, and renders it fruitful.''

We might add to this masterly description the human and architectural elements which were rarely absent from Corot's pictures. In his Italian subjects the roofs of old temples or castles peep over distant or nearer hillsides; and in the studies he painted during his wanderings in France, the spires of the village churches or the thatches of rustic cottages, with aptly placed figures and animals, add interest and charm.

Corot spent many seasons at Ville d'Avray, near Paris, where his father had a country-house. His somewhat prosaic parent could not have chosen better, and Corot passed long hours at evening or dawn looking out of his window on the misty lake near by. The fruits of these observations were utilized afterward in many of his famous pictures. He enjoyed journeying through the far-away provinces, sometimes going north toward Arras and Douai, and again traveling into the Limousin and Dauphiné country to the south. Once he visited Switzerland and Holland, and in 1862 went as far as England, always accompanied

Un Lac du Tyrol

Size of the original etching, 4½ × 6⅝ inches

by his portfolio and paint-box. As his store of knowledge increased, he gave freer rein to poetic sentiments, both in choice of subjects and in their manner of treatment. Yet he never became satisfied with himself. After nearly fifty years of constant labor he said one day to Daubigny, "I am not satisfied; I lack manual skill," to which Daubigny replied, "How 's that—you lack skill? You put nothing on your canvas, and everything is there!"

Corot's ideal always kept in advance of what he actually accomplished, and he remained a student to the end of his life. His method was synthetic: he painted the large masses first and worked in sufficient detail to explain and complete his meaning. In one of his sketch-books he wrote during a moment of self-examination: "I am never in a hurry to arrive at details; the masses and the character of a picture interest me before all else: . . . when these are well established I seek for the finer qualities of form and color. I return to these unceasingly, without being stopped by anything, and without system." That he did not always work in this way is made evident in the monograph noted by Silvestre where Corot speaks of his earlier studies. "I had passed two winters with Monsieur Bertin, learning so little that soon after my arrival at Rome I could hardly pull through the slightest drawing. Two men would stop to chat; I would begin to sketch them in parts, commencing with the head, for example. Then they would separate and I had only pieces of head on my paper. Some children were seated on the steps of a church; I commenced again; their mother called them. My book was thus filled with ends of noses, foreheads and locks of hair. I

PAYSAGE D'ITALIE

Size of the original etching, 6 × 9¼ inches

then determined not to return home without a completed work, and I tried for the first time to draw by masses, rapid drawing, the only kind possible. I commenced by circumscribing in the twinkling of an eye the first group that came: if it rested but a short time in place, I had at least caught the character, the general outlines; if they remained longer, I was able to add the details. I did very many of these exercises and now find myself able to catch in a few lines the ballets and decorations of the Opera on a piece of paper in the crown of my hat."

Corot's drawing was not of the highly polished, academic kind, but it was suited to his manner. The planes, perspective, and important characteristics were all carefully noted, though he never sacrificed the dominating sentiment to dry mechanic precision. I could never quite understand what my friend Mr. P. G. Hamerton meant when he wrote in his "Thoughts about Art": "The favorite landscape-painter among artists in France, the one whose reputation has been made by the admiration of artists, Corot, can scarcely draw better than a school-girl." Yet in his "Etching and Etchers," Mr. Hamerton redeems this possible slip of the pen by the following eloquent appreciation: "All sins are forgiven to the true poets. . . . He feels the delightfulness of cool, grey mornings and dewy evenings; he feels the palpitating life of gleaming river-shores and the trembling of the light branches wherein the fitful breezes play. He has an intense sense of the glimmering indecision and mystery of natural appearances, and he does not, as it seems to us, draw and paint with precision simply because his attention does not fix itself on

SOUVENIR D'ITALIE

Size of the original etching, 11½ × 8⅝ inches

that which is precise." The late George Inness once wrote that "if a painter could combine the poetry of Corot with the precision in detail of a Meissonier, he would be a very god in art." There are, however, incompatibilities in art, as in nature, and the effort to unite them like acids and alkalis may only end in producing an insipid and uninteresting neutrality.

If Corot had felt that added precision of detail would have improved an effect, he was too conscientious to have omitted it. His earlier studies are proofs of this. But the beauty he sought in his later manner lay in those phases where facts are dissolved as it were in the mystery of infinite suggestion. His pictures are not intended as lessons in geology, botany and optics; such interesting facts only furnished him elements that were fused under the heat of inspiration into a new and higher product, namely, beauty.

As to Corot's figures and portraits, it is possible they sometimes betray a lack of the severe schooling usual to French painters, who have passed through the ateliers and anatomy classes of the École des Beaux-Arts, yet they possess a personal quality that makes up for occasional insufficiencies. An old Parisian model who had worked a great deal for Corot once told me that it was the master's dearest ambition to succeed as a painter of figures, and that he bestowed endless labor to this end. But the wonder is, how such a landscapist could succeed so well in adding his dancing nymphs and piping shepherds, so that they harmonize perfectly with the sentiment of his subject and the tones of his masses. What Claude Lorrain almost invariably hired another to do, Corot did for himself.

ENVIRONS DE ROME

Size of the original etching, $11\frac{3}{8} \times 8\frac{1}{2}$ inches

In color, which is more a matter of temperament than of education, Corot preferred soft grays, pearls and rose-tints for the higher notes of his chromatic scale, with browns, olives and blacks for the lowest octaves. Some of his Italian studies are more positive in their color-key, but to continue the comparison, his tones resemble those of the flute, violin and harp, rather than the louder brasses and drums.

His love of music was so great that he was called a "*melomane,*" and his fine voice often made him welcome when his art was misunderstood. His last residence in the rue Poissonière was chosen because of its nearness to the Opéra and Conservatoire, where he found a perennial source of delight and recreation. When in the fields, with his friends the birds, he was continually humming a song. In the studio his brush often kept time to some favorite air, which was thus absorbed and expressed in graphic form; and the penetrating charm of many of his pictures is because they are painted music!

Preoccupied with tint and tone, the brush was his principal tool, and his drawings were made either as memoranda or to serve some purpose in present or later work, where careful analysis of line and form was needed. Yet as early as 1822, when in deference to his father's wishes he was still with Delalain the cloth-merchant, he had done several lithographs. Two of these subjects, *The Guard Dies, but Never Surrenders,* and *The Plague at Barcelona,* he sketched in outline again with lithographic crayon on autographic paper, for his friend Alfred Robaut in 1873, but none of the original proofs of his first stones, nor of *The Village Fair,* which he remembered doing

DANS LES DUNES: SOUVENIR DU BOIS DE LA HAYE

Size of the original etching, $4\frac{3}{4} \times 7\frac{1}{2}$ inches

about the same time, have ever been found, not even at the National Library, where Collas the publisher, who lived in the Passage Feydeau, was supposed to have deposited the three obligatory copies. About 1836 he did another figure-subject on stone, as a cover for an opérette, "La Caisse d'Épargne." It represented "Madame Rose in the rôle of *Mère Boisseau,*" and of this Monsieur Robaut possessed an example.

No further attempts were made in either lithography or etching till about 1845, when Charles Jacque's interesting prints may have suggested an essay in etching. Corot took a prepared copper-plate and drew in the outlines and masses of the well-known *Souvenir de Toscane,* but did not proceed to the "biting" process. Some years later Félix Bracquemond discovered it in a nail-box at Corot's studio and begged the master to complete it, offering to take charge of the "biting in." Corot then took the plate and added the tones and details of the final state. This was his first etching and he was then in the fifties of his own life and of his century. There was something in the use of mordants and acids that seemed to frighten Corot, and he always called in some good friend such as Bracquemond, Michelin or Delaunay to assist in this delicate process.

Of the fourteen plates he etched one was overbitten and another, by being spoiled before biting, only indicates the lines which passed through the ground into the copper. They belong to the later and best period of his art. It was generally at the request of a friend or to render some service that he took up plate and needle. His second attempt, *Le Bateau*

CAMPAGNE BOISÉE

Size of the original etching, $3\frac{15}{16} \times 5\frac{1}{8}$ inches

sous les Saules, shows the house in the distance near the lake of Ville d'Avray where the Corots lived, and was intended to illustrate a book of poems by his friend Edmond Roche, who, however, died before they were published. In 1862 a posthumous edition of Roche's poems was published, containing a sonnet dedicated to Corot, and for this he etched a plate known as *Ville d'Avray—l'Étang au Batelier,* which somewhat resembles the *Bateau sous les Saules* but has a more open foreground with a man in a boat and a cow seen among the nearer rushes.

In 1863 he executed the deliciously decorative *Lac du Tyrol,* and in 1865 and 1866, the *Paysage d'Italie, Souvenir d'Italie, Environs de Rome* and *Campagne Boisée.* His thoughts constantly reverted to Italy, where he had spent some of his happiest years, and which he recalled in numerous "souvenirs." In these he could give full scope to his sentiment and imaginative powers.

With all his originality, he respected those conventions of which the ages had approved, and, whether consciously or unconsciously, he followed Greek and Italian traditions. This Hellenic quality pervades all his art, conveying a sense of beauty that is too often lacking in the work of many modern painters.

But to return to his etchings. Of the four plates etched about 1869 two are of the same subject, *Venus coupant les Ailes de l'Amour,*—one of the plates having been overbitten apparently,—and this is Corot's unique etching of a figure-subject. The two others, *Dans les Dunes—Souvenir du Bois de la Haye,* and the *Souvenir des Fortifications de Douai,* both have

northern titles, though by their composition and general appearance they seem as "classic" as the *Dôme Florentin,* in which the foliage seems to suggest incompletion. The naïve and almost *bonhomme* manner of Corot's execution might deceive a superficial glance as to the beauties his etchings reveal upon further study. When he had fixed the main masses of his compositions he would cross and recross his lines in searching for tone and sentiment until the darkest notes reached the bare copper. His skies and clouds, sketched freely, convey, however, a surprising sense of lightness and movement. Whatever the manner of treatment, seen from the right distance his best plates vibrate with decorative and poetic suggestion. Corot's intimate friend Alfred Robaut succeeded in getting him to try lithographic crayon and ink on transfer paper. He liked the freedom of its use and did a number of drawings, some sixteen all told, which show how sympathetic a method Corot had found in auto-lithography. A dozen of these subjects were published by the Lemerciers in a limited edition in 1871 and have become exceedingly rare. Of others very few proofs were taken, which is in a sense regrettable, as Corot's lithographs are as eloquent as his paintings.

Like Daubigny, Millet, Jacque and other artists of his day, he did a number of *clichés-verres.* The process was invented by Monsieur Cuvelier (*père*) of Arras. A glass plate was covered with a whitened coat of opaque varnish. This was placed on a black surface and the drawing made with an etching-needle or other pointed instrument, which removed the varnish in the same way and as freely as the etching-

ground on a copper-plate. From this negative a photographic print was made, which was the exact counterpart of the artist's drawing. The method seemed to please Corot, for he did about sixty-six of these *verres,* some of them careful compositions, and others, sketches of ideas or done directly from nature. They are executed frankly, and reveal an intimate side of Corot's art, as he might have chatted with friends, or fixed a fleeting vision in a few expressive lines.

Corot died at Paris, on the 22d of February, 1875, in his seventy-ninth year. In reviewing the events of his long life, we are impressed by his absolute sincerity of purpose, and it is easy to believe the many legends and anecdotes related by friends, which will perpetuate the remembrance of his unfailing kindness and boundless generosity. Such was the man; and the longer we study his art, the more we feel the truth of the words written and repeated by that most unsparing of critics, Henri Rochefort: "Nothing is more beautiful than a beautiful Corot."