

The TREE, a Motif in Nature



A painter has a sketchbook and a reporter has a camera. At least, this is how we think today. However, in times past, the sketchbook was the only tool available for illustrating impressions. For example: an indispensable part of the luggage of an Englishman travelling to the Continent 200 years ago would have been his drawing utensils. While many of today's travellers still take their sketchbooks with them to sketch or paint their holiday impressions, a simple press of the camera button can capture an entire image. This click may take no longer than is needed to produce one single stroke on paper—but what great concentration is required for this one stroke of the brush or pencil!

With a fresh and cheerful heart, one explores the surrounding countryside and comes across one of those numerous promising motifs along the

way. But once the painter is seated in front of the chosen motif, the magnitude of the task presents itself. Suddenly, everything has become vague and multifaceted; everything shimmers, shines and changes: the sun, the shadows, the passing clouds.

In contrast to the interior of the studio, nothing is clear outdoors. In nature, there are no sharp table edges, there is no rim of a bowl. Trees have some clear lines, a sort of architecture, and that is why sketchers tend to go for them. They appear to stand peacefully there and to provide the artist with a point of reference, a sort of crutch for the eye. Yet, that is where the real problem begins. A tree is just a thing with a trunk to be depicted credibly on the drawing surface. It protrudes from the ground and has clear and tangible contours—but then this mass of leaves! They are of an entirely different consistency in the midst of the extensive play of light and shadow. How is one to unify the solidity of the trunk with the ephemeral light-filled manifestation of the leaves?

The paint itself is mere material, and its pigments are not luminous. This astounding interplay of light and shadow, of movement and stillness can only be achieved by contrast—that of clarity with ambiguity and form with the formless, the transitional space that leads from clarity to the enigmatic. Because there is no strict set of rules, a sense of proportional balance must be accomplished. The scale is dictated by the trees, to which all other elements of the painting are bound. Furthermore, each object or living thing has its own expression; the pine tree differs greatly from the birch tree, for example.

The artist now soon becomes all too aware of the task that lies before him. This happens to everyone.

In a diary entry dated March 14th, 1847, Eugène Delacroix described a visit he had made to Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, whose landscape paintings he greatly admired. Delacroix had been especially interested in Corot's ability to handle trees, and he asked his older colleague about his techniques. Corot gazed calmly

at his young, enthusiastic guest and proceeded to explain that it was essential to copy the old masters, and work directly in nature as this sharpened the ability to see and to truly observe things. He also gave Delacroix the following remarkable piece of advice: "He told me that I needed to let myself drift somewhat and abandon myself to whatever might come. That was how he usually approached things. After all, he remarked, endeavour, no matter how great, was no guaranteed way of creating beautiful things." Further down the same entry it reads, "Despite this kind of serenity, however, hard work remains an imperative. Corot broods long and hard over a single object. After coming upon new ideas, he works them out while painting; that, he believes, is the best way."

This means that painters cannot just give free rein to their own intentions. They must also be able to respond to whatever arises incidentally, without too much reflection and without going into too much detail—though these aspects cannot be excluded entirely.

Every sketch is a personal gain and it does not matter whether others consider it successful or not. What becomes clear later, in other contexts, is the fact that drawing and painting in nature trains the eye and provides the artist with new ways of seeing.

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