

'Unknown Corot'

Jill Newhouse

Diligent and self-effacing, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796–1875) was a quiet revolutionary whose luminous canvases transformed the moribund tradition of Neoclassical landscape painting, and in the process, paving the way for the innovations of Impressionism.

This beautiful and fascinating show of some 30 of his drawings revealed—in ways his paintings often do not—his distinctive and evolving approach to nature.

The title, “Unknown Corot,” was doubly appropriate: all the works on view were previously unpublished, and, remarkably, this was the first exhibition in America devoted to the artist’s graphic oeuvre.

Roughly half of the drawings dated from the 1820s through the ‘40s, the period of Corot’s boldly painted, sun-struck canvases of Italy and the French countryside. However, the studies he relied on for such works were often highly detailed and rendered in pen or pencil with almost topographic precision. In

Civitella (1827), the rugged terrain of the Roman *campagna* is painstakingly contoured, with each cleft and crevice carefully observed. In the drawing of a felled tree, *Trees in the Forest of Fontainebleau* (ca. 1830–35), Corot’s pen follows every twist and turn of the gnarly trunk.

The approach is markedly different in *Landscape with Figure* (ca.

1850), which heralds Corot’s shift to the soft-focus, dreamy canvases of his later years. Executed in charcoal, which became Corot’s preferred drawing medium, it eschews linear precision for tonal values and the creation of a melancholic mood; a stand of trees resembles wisps of smoke. In subsequent drawings, this alusiveness and freedom of execution are taken to even greater extremes, as in the dramatic *Moonlit Landscape* (1862), with figures and foliage barely discernible in the inky blackness.

Also on view were several portrait drawings that Corot made in his final years, which, by contrast, exemplify his linear precision. Among these was the superb and decidedly Ingres-esque *Lady with Long Hair in Profile* (ca. 1870).

—Elizabeth B. Wilson



Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *Landscape with Figure*, ca. 1850, charcoal and brown conté crayon on paper, 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 12". Jill Newhouse.