French Oil Studies in Italy

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Fig. 1 Nicolas-Didier Boguet (1755–1839), *Landscape with the Father of Psyche Sacrificing at the Miletian Temple of Apollo*. Oil on canvas, 171 x 225 cm. Nationalmuseum, NM 834.
views of Rome and the surrounding countryside have a distinguished ancestry. For a long time, the historical landscapes of Claude Lorrain were the norm. For the modern observer, it can be difficult to imagine that these fantasy scenes were in fact based on direct observations and studies made in the environs of Rome. Artists made rapid studies from nature, both drawings and paintings in oil on paper. These were regarded primarily as working material, but were sometimes admired for their artistic bravura. In contrast to drawn sketches, however, very few oil studies, if any at all, have been preserved. A key figure in injecting new life into the study of landscape in the second half of the 18th century was Charles-Joseph Natoire, director of the French Academy in Rome from 1751 to 1775. He would be particularly important for a generation of French artists who were born around the time he took up his post. Paradoxically, this new study of nature was linked to the revived interest of Neoclassicism in the historical or heroic landscape, as shaped by both Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin. The young artists who headed to Rome in the second half of the 18th century drew inspiration both from works by these founding figures of the previous century and from open-air studies d’après nature. One example is Nicolas-Didier Boguet (1755–1839). The Nationalmuseum has long had in its collections Boguet’s Landscape with the
Pierre Henri de Valenciennes (1750–1819), a peer and compatriot of Boguet’s, is regarded to an even greater extent as a pioneer of early *plein-air* painting. He would have a major influence on the art of his native France, as both a theorist and a teacher. Valenciennes became a member of the Paris Academy of Painting and Sculpture in 1787, serving as professor of perspective from 1812. His book on the practice of landscape painting, with a focus on perspective—*Éléments de perspective pratique à l’usage des artistes* (1800)—proved particularly influential. His efforts eventually prompted the establishment of a special prize for historical landscape painting (the *prix du Paysage Historique*), with Rome as its destination.

Fig. 3 Simon Denis (1755–1813), *Study from the Roman Campagna*, c. 1800. Oil on cardboard, 48.7 x 63.8 cm. Purchase: Sophia Giesecke Fund.
Nationalmuseum, NM 7336.
Although Valenciennes, like Boguet, stuck unwaveringly to the classical heroic landscape, composed in the studio, he was not content with the schematic skies, brown foregrounds and standardised treatment of light of the 17th century. Instead, he stressed the importance of bringing the composed landscape to life by studying atmospheric phenomena, the movement of cloud shadows, the shifting of light in vegetation, and the effects of reflected light in the shadows. In the recently acquired *View of the Roman Campagna near Subiaco* (Fig. 2), Valenciennes demonstrates his skill in capturing light conditions by means of cloud shadows, using brushwork that is at once sketchy and lively. The painting conveys the movement and effects of the wind, rather than the landscape itself. Another characteristic that is clear in this study is Valenciennes’s tendency to transform buildings into almost abstract geometrical shapes, at the same time as he refines and simplifies the different planes of the picture. As with Boguet, oil studies of this kind, painted in front of the motif, differ radically from the works the artist produced in his studio. The latter represent an idealised view of nature, with scenes drawn from classical mythology. With oil studies now an important part of the working process, however, the lights and colours of the finished result differ markedly from the landscape painting of the 17th century.

Simon Denis (1755–1813), a native of Antwerp, travelled via Paris to Italy where, like Boguet, he would remain for the rest of his life. Long overlooked, Denis enjoyed a revival of interest as an early pioneer in 1992, with the sale of a large number of oil studies that had been handed down in his family and thus escaped the public eye. His technique recalls that of Valenciennes. The brushwork is almost as sketchy, and the focus is on the light and the weather conditions. Unlike ideal landscapes, oil studies of this kind portray nature as ever-changing, and the recently acquired works are excellent examples of

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Fig. 4 Simon Denis (1755–1813), *The Waterfall in Neptune’s Grotto at Tivoli*, c. 1790. Oil on canvas, 25.5 x 20.7 cm. Purchase: Hedda and N. D. Qvist Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7358.
this. Denis’s Study from the Roman Campagna (Fig. 3), in particular, demonstrates his skill in capturing atmospheric effects with great simplicity. Here, the light and the weather are more important than the specific landscape motif from the environs of Rome. The result is magnificent and the effect almost illusory. It should be noted, though, that studies of this kind were not always necessarily painted in the open air. This is made clear by an inscription by the artist on a painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In his smaller study of The Waterfall in Neptune’s Grotto at Tivoli (Fig. 4), Denis has captured the play of light in the cascading water and the greenery of the foreground against the dark rock behind with a masterly simplicity. The study seems to have been painted in haste, with thinly applied colours that dried rapidly, enabling the artist to add the next layer. At lower right, a crouching figure serves to indicate the scale of the scene.

The oil studies of Jean-Joseph-Xavier Bidauld (1758–1846) have a very close affinity to those of Simon Denis. Once again, they were not intended to enter the public domain, but served primarily as working material for carefully composed Neoclassical landscapes with mythological references. In his old age, Bidauld found himself completely at odds with the landscape painting of the emerging Barbizon school. His oil sketches were rediscovered after his death in 1847 and were sold in his estate sale. The painting acquired by the Nationalmuseum as early as 1984, Gorge at Civita Vecchia (Fig. 5), in fact came from Bidauld’s estate.

Jean-Victor Bertin (1767–1842), like several other significant French landscapists, was a pupil of Valenciennes. He remained faithful to his teacher’s ideals, producing many paysages historiques. At the same time, he painted views with a distinctive atmosphere, based on plein-air studies and populated with people from his own times. Most of the indications are that they were done in his studio. They

Fig. 5 Jean-Joseph-Xavier Bidauld (1758–1846), Gorge at Civita Vecchia, 1787. Oil on paper mounted on canvas, 50 x 37.5 cm. Nationalmuseum, NM 6776.
became very popular, were repeated several times by the artist himself, and were copied on porcelain plates. In 1806–7, Bertin undertook a study tour of Italy. The recently acquired View of Tivoli from above the Cascata Vecchia (Fig. 6) is from this period. It has many of the qualities of plein-air painting, in terms of its composition, use of colour and sharp light. At the same time, Bertin has adapted his subject to the prevailing convention by adding staffage figures. His painting helps to explain the topographical manner, with very precise reproduction of details, which the Dane Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg acquired in both Paris and Rome.

With the examples of French landscape painting in Italy at the turn of the 19th century recently added to the collection, it is also easier to explain the origins of Camille Corot’s Red Rocks at Cività Castellana (Fig. 7), acquired as early as 1917. Corot, who was a student of Bertin and the last in a line of French artists brought up with the historical or heroic landscape, had also learnt to paint oil studies in the open air. In 1826–27, he paid two visits to the little town of Cività Castellana. Here he studied the picturesque rock formations of the surrounding countryside, rendering them in bright colours and with extremely free brushwork. Corot’s study in the Nationalmuseum is ranked as one of the artist’s best and points forward to the revolution in French landscape painting that followed in the second half of the 19th century.

Notes:
1. The expression historical landscape is a direct translation of the French paysage historique, referring to an ideal Arcadian landscape, populated with buildings and people of an ancient Greek type. Often they allude to ancient mythology or history, hence the word historique. A synonymous term is the French héroïque (heroic), with the same associations.


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Fig. 7 Camille Corot (1796–1875), *Red Rocks at Civitá Castellana*, c. 1827. Oil on paper mounted on canvas, 36 x 51 cm. Nationalmuseum, NM 2060.
l’Espine, who had acquired them in the sale following Valenciennes’s death in 1819 (ibid., p. 220, cat. nos. 1 and 81).


11. Ibid., p. 10.


13. Ibid., p. iv.