

Painting in the Field

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From time to time, when you enjoy the scenery at a pleasant spot out of town, you may come across a person mixing colours on his palette and painting the landscape or cityscape on a canvas. Painting and drawing *en plein air*, or in the open air, has a long history in the development of Western art.

Before the 19th century, painters usually completed their works in their studios. They had to follow the established convention of painting, and their oeuvre was limited to refined portraits, still lifes and mythological or historical themes. Some artists might work outdoors to make sketches and drawings, which were then mainly used as references for larger paintings. Life painting came to prominence in the 19th century with the growing popularity of landscape and everyday life as themes of paintings.

On the list of artists who broke away from the tradition of their days are John Constable, one of the most famous English landscape painters; Jean-Baptist-Camille Corot and Jean-Francois Millet from the Barbizon School, a group of landscape painters who had their base in the hamlet of Barbizon¹; and Gustave Courbet, a pioneer in realist paintings. John Constable's famous saying: "No two days are alike, nor even two hours; neither were there ever two leaves of a tree alike since the creation of the world" explains the artists' urge to step out of the studio and take a close look at the real world.

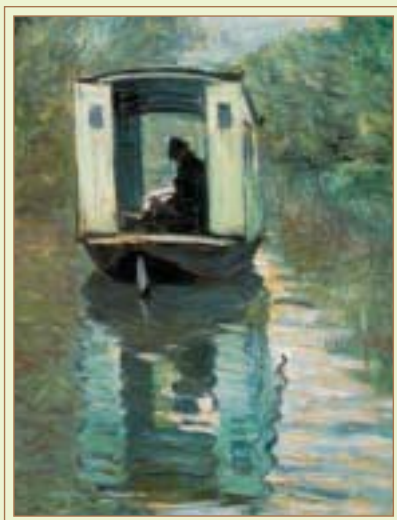
While these artists tied a tighter knot between painting and the real world, not until the mid-19th century did a revolutionary change come in the development of painting *en plein air*.² Since then this has taken the centre stage in landscape painting. The "revolution" was led by a group of artists commonly known

as the Impressionists. Edouard Manet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Edgar Degas, Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro are but a few of the big names in the history of Impressionism. They took their easels and canvases out to the field. What set them apart from the artists of the past was their practice of finishing their paintings in the field. This is closely related to their belief that painting is to capture visual experience, and light and colour are more important than form. Only by turning to Nature itself can the cadence of light and shadow be fully appreciated and captured on the canvas. Their ideas have changed the look of the art world, and the outlook of artists.

Today, painting *en plein air* still plays a key role in professional practice and in the training of artists. It also remains an important means for artists to record what they see and feel on the road. Devoted *plein air* artists have grouped together to study and exchange their experiences of the activity, handing the tradition down from generation to generation.



Jean-Baptist-Camille Corot's *Souvenir of Montefontaine* (1864)
(Louvre, Paris)



Claude Monet's *The Boat Studio* (1876)
(The Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pennsylvania)



Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Path Leading to the High Grass* (1875)
(Musée d'Orsay, Paris)

¹ Located at the edge of the Forest of Fontainebleau, France.

² Painting *en plein air* was made possible by technological innovation in the 19th century when light-weight paint boxes and ready-made paints in portable tubes became available.



Life is a journey that must be travelled no matter how bad the roads and accommodations.

Oliver Goldsmith

