

# Barbizon



## The artists' village

The name alone brings to mind idyllic countryside, the pleasures of living close to nature and the beauty of the unparalleled forest of Fontainebleau - the country seat and hunting preserve of the kings of France.

Now an internationally-renowned place of residence and tourism, the **village of yesteryear**, so beloved of **artists**, is still in evidence. At the time of the 19th-century landscape artists, Barbizon was a humble hamlet, but its subsequent artistic renown has spread its fame worldwide.

## The School of Barbizon

The term «**School of Barbizon**» was not used until the end of the 19th century, twenty years after the death of its most famous masters. In historical terms, it relates to the 1830 generation of artists who faded from the scene around 1875, opening the way for the Impressionists. Most of these painters were landscape and wildlife artists: disappointed by the teaching of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and rejections by Salon juries from 1831 to around 1847, they decided to go and find Nature «on her own ground».

Although the lure of Italian sites was strong, they went off to explore France. This new approach reflected the «back to nature» trend which had begun during the 18th century and was further fuelled by rural depopulation: peasants drawn by industrialisation swelled the working classes of the cities. These artists studied nature for her own sake, in the open air, «from the subject», without pretexting a historical or mythological subject which, up until then, had been the main

focus in landscape painting (historical landscapes). Gone was the idea of creating an imaginary, idealised landscape in their studios composed using from-the-subject studies with the addition of historical figures. In its place came the idea of depicting outdoor emotions and feelings when actually in the midst of nature. This desire for concrete observation and the freedom to choose an unusual subject, previously confined to studies, brought them into conflict with the Salon jury, who held to academic teaching and were keen to uphold rules established in the 17th century.



Several factors encouraged the gathering of these artists with a taste for freedom in the forest of Fontainebleau and more specifically the hamlet of Barbizon.

Firstly, the forest of Fontainebleau became easily accessible by train from 1849 onwards; secondly, the use of tubes of paint, invented in 1834, enabled artists to work «from the subject» for a

whole day without other equipment; finally, the low cost of living in Barbizon in peasant dwellings made material subsistence easier.

The artists who came to Barbizon clearly had a common love of observing nature for its own sake and pronounced taste for freedom of artistic creation, but they often had highly differing sensitivities and aesthetic motivations.

The forerunners who had begun painting in the forest of Fontainebleau as early as 1820, such as **Camille Corot** (1796-1875), Théodore Caruelle d'Aligny (1798-1871) and Paul Huet (1803-1869), are a case apart.

These category-defying artists, with strong personalities, worked throughout France and did not base themselves in **Barbizon**; nonetheless, they were a driving force behind the artists who were to make the hamlet famous.

Thus, **Théodore Rousseau** (1812-1867) came to Fontainebleau as early as 1828 in the footsteps of Corot and Caruelle d'Aligny, before settling for good in Barbizon in 1847 in a house on the Grande Rue, now a branch of the Département museum.

He was won over by the powerful oaks and amazing quality of the light. His romantic vision was complemented by rigorous observation of nature and the changes it underwent over time and through the seasons.

**Jean-François Millet** (1814-1875) settled in Barbizon in 1849; his studio still exists today. He had already established a brilliant career as a portrait artist and historical painter, including a number of works now in the Thomas-Henry museum in Cherbourg.

His arrival in Barbizon marked a turning-point in his career which led him to make peasants going about their daily business the subjects of his work. His uncompromising vision, combined with a keen eye for rural life, places him in the realist tradition. Suspected of having anarchistic political leanings, he did particularly badly at the hands of the official jury.

After an eclectic Parisian career, Narcisse Diaz de la Pena (1807-1876) settled in Barbizon in 1840. Following Rousseau's advice, his ability to capture Light and its effects, particularly in woodland studies, quickly became apparent.

Charles Jacque (1813-1894) arrived in Barbizon in 1849 with Millet and began to specialise in painting animals, with subjects such as herds of sheep gathered in sheepfolds or on the plain, and poultry in farmyards.

Ferdinand Chaigneau successfully continued the animal work of Charles Jacque from 1868 onwards.

A large number of artists identified as part of the Barbizon School actually lived in the neighbouring villages of Chailly, Marlotte or Fontainebleau, or simply visited the region from time to time.

This was the case for Constant Troyon (1810-1865). This animal artist, inspired by 17th century Dutch painters Cuyp and Potter, made his name with his pictures of cows.



Antoine Barye (1795-1875), better known as a sculptor, spent his holidays in Barbizon, where he rented a house on the Grande Rue.

Jules Dupré (1811-1889), although drawn more to the landscapes of l'Isle-Adam, also stayed in the forest of Fontainebleau;

Charles-François Daubigny (1817-1878), often found painting the reflections of light on the banks of the Oise, still had time for his friends at Barbizon, where he stayed every year.

Little by little, the attraction of this region, initially felt by French artists, spread worldwide. Among those drawn there were Americans such as William Hunt (1824-1879) and George Inness (1825-1894), Belgians such as Victor de Papeleu (1810-1881) and Xavier de Cock (1818-1896) followed by his brother César (1823-1904), Germans such as Ludwig Knauss (1829-1910), Romanians such as Nicolae Grigorescu (1838-1907), Hungarians such as Mihaly Munkacsy

(1844-1900), and others.

If one thing united these artists of such diverse origins and motivations, it was undoubtedly the Auberge Ganne, opened around 1824 in its current location on the Grande Rue in Barbizon.

The Gannes took in the young artists at very reasonable rates and provided a friendly place to stay close to the sites where they worked in the forest and on the plain.

Even at the height of their glory, the Universal Exhibition of 1855, the artists did not forget the warm and disinterested welcome of the innkeeping family.

In 1863, the masters of the Barbizon School, the incarnation of the rejection of official art and freedom of artistic expression, were joined by younger generation artists such as Bazille, Monet, Renoir and Sisley.

Rejected in turn by the Salon jury, they came to spend the summers with their famous predecessors. They became friends with Diaz who helped



them in their quest.

These artists were to bring a whole kaleidoscope of developments to the work of the masters of Barbizon, inventing a new form of painting called Impressionism.

From 1874, they organised joint exhibitions, something their predecessors had never done, and established a new technique which called for the use of primary colours, broken brush strokes and coloured shadows.

Some masters of the Barbizon School such as Diaz and Daubigny had foreseen these new techniques of expression and had already used almost pure colours applied in broken brush strokes without prior mixing.

## Things to see in the village:

**Département Museum of the Barbizon School: the «Auberge Ganne» and branches at the studio homes of Théodore Rousseau and Jean-François Millet (private collection), the «Artist Croquet» feature and the «In the artists' footsteps» trail.**