A Landscape
By Claude Lorrain

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The purchase of a landscape by Claude Lorrain, if considered casually, might be thought desirable only for its historical interest, as a useful addition to the Museum’s French seventeenth-century collections, but not because it is vitally related to present-day developments in painting.

To the general public Claude has come to be known as the first and greatest exponent of what is called classical landscape, a form which has long been considered thoroughly old-fashioned. However, this point of view, like many of those formed under the influence of contemporary fashion, is a superficial one, and a thorough examination of the landscape recently acquired by the Metropolitan Museum is admirably suited to show this. The painting has qualities which make it worthy of comparison with the best production of any period—and particularly important today, when most of the successful, high-priced painters deliberately close their eyes to nature. Though unsigned, its history and its character as a painting show it to be unquestionably a work by the master and from what is considered his best period.

The pedigree of a painting is always one of its most interesting aspects. It not only helps to establish authorship, but, by revealing to us the names of men to whose taste the picture has appealed, it gives us an unusual insight into what might be called the intimate side of the past. The history of our painting is particularly rewarding in this respect since it belonged at different times to such famous men as Sir Joshua Reynolds, Julius Angerstein—whose collection formed the nucleus of the National Gallery in London—and perhaps Cardinal Mazarin.

There is a drawing of the same subject, number 109 in the Liber Veritatis, the collection of drawings which Claude used as a record of the paintings sold during his lifetime. On the back of this drawing Claude himself has written tableaux faict pour lions (pictures painted for Lyon). Next to this another hand, within the artist’s lifetime or shortly after his death, has added: Claudio Fecit in V. R. (painted by Claude in Rome). There is nothing to indicate the identity of the client in Lyon, and after this initial notice we have no further information concerning the painting until it turns up in the de Merval sale in Paris in 1708.

The catalogue of Monsieur de Merval’s collection states that it was composed of pictures formerly owned by Cardinal Mazarin, the Prince de Carignan, the Comte de Vence, Monsieur de la Chataignerie, Monsieur Aved, and Monsieur de Julienne. In this catalogue the painting is described in detail as measuring 3 pieds, 2 pouces by 4 pieds, 1 pouce (40½ by 52 in.) and representing a landscape with the effect of a sunrise: “Cows cross a river, led to the pasture by a man and woman on horseback. A shepherd also drives a herd of goats and sheep through the stream.” It was sold with a companion piece for 5,000 francs (£200). The name of the buyer is not recorded, but it may well have been Sir Joshua Reynolds, because in 1795, at the sale of his collection, it appeared again, with the title View near Castel Gandolfo. At this time we know that the painting was bought for £152/5 by John Julius Angerstein, who sold it to Sir Charles Long, later Lord Farnborough, sometime before 1819 since in that year it was exhibited under the latter’s name at the British Institution. In 1882 it appeared again at the sale of the collection of Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Long, Lord Farnborough’s nephew and heir, was bought by the dealer Wertheimer for £425/5, and resold in the same year to Sir Frederick Cook of Doughty House, Richmond, in whose family it remained until their collection began to be gradually dis-
The Flight into Egypt, by Claude Lorrain (1600-1682). Formerly in the Picture Gallery, Dresden

persed before the beginning of the second World War. (The Rape of the Sabine Women by Poussin has recently been acquired by the Museum from this collection. Other pictures, which had found their way to Holland just before the war, were sold to Goering during the occupation.)

There is evidence indicating that Claude painted a companion piece for our painting. In the seventeenth century it was fashionable to hang pictures in pairs, and the record shows that many of Claude’s clients ordered two pictures from him at one time. In the Liber Veritatis, drawing number 110, which follows that corresponding to our landscape, represents the Flight into Egypt, the finished painting of which, signed and dated 1647, was, before the war, number 730 (725) in the Dresden Gallery (its present location is unknown, but it seems probable that it may have been removed to Russia with the cream of the Dresden collections). The drawing is inscribed by Claude himself Quadro pour Monsieur Parsson a Lions. Unfortunately, little is known about this gentleman. It has been suggested that he was identical with Pierre Perichon, a notary of Lyon who collected pictures, but the evidence for this is insufficient.

The catalogue of the Dresden Gallery gives the history of the painting as follows: “Originally in the collection of Cardinal Mazarin, later passed into the possession of Madame de Verrue and then to the collection of Monsieur de Nocet, where it is recorded in 1725. It is believed to have been sold by him to Graf von Hoym, the Saxon Ambassador to the French Court, who bought it for the Dresden Gallery, where it is first recorded in the Österreicher catalogue in 1754.”

The painting is well suited to be a compan-
ion piece to the Metropolitan landscape. Its measurements are the same, the opening to the distant view is on the right side, corresponding symmetrically to ours, and the light comes from the left, which might mean that one was intended as a sunset and the other as a sunrise. The scale of the figures is the same, as are the general treatment of the foliage and the details. Finally the two paintings are the only two inscribed specifically as painted for Lyon in the whole Liber Veritatis. The outstanding difference between them is that the Dresden picture is a religious scene while ours is purely a landscape. But Claude often painted companion pieces one of which was a subject picture and the other simply a landscape (see L. V., nos. 44 and 45; 61 and 62), and as the religious scene in the Dresden picture is quite insignificant in the composition as a whole, the theory that the two pictures were painted as companion pieces need not be dismissed on this score.

In the de Merval sale catalogue another companion piece is recorded with our picture. It is described as a sunset in which herdsmen are driving cattle across a river. The present whereabouts of this painting is unknown, but its description corresponds almost exactly to that of number 103 in the Liber Veritatis, which was also in Sir Joshua Reynolds’ collection. This drawing, however, is inscribed as executed for Avignon, which precludes the possibility of its having been originally intended as the pendant of our picture.

Although no other drawings in the Liber Veritatis are inscribed “for Lyon,” it is known that Claude painted for some other collectors in that city. Balthazar de Monconys, a merchant who died in 1665, is recorded as having bought paintings by Poussin and Claude during his travels, but we do not know how or
where he obtained them. Philippe Sylvestre Dufour (1622-1687), a drug merchant whose business brought him into contact with all manner of people from Europe and Asia, had a collection famous for gold medals and containing a beautiful mummy. Curiously enough drawing number 108, immediately preceding ours, is inscribed by Claude as painted for “M. Dufourt.” Could this be the same man? Unfortunately there is nothing further to give an answer to this question.

The fact that the Dresden Flight into Egypt definitely was owned by Mazarin and that our landscape came from a collection made up in part from the cardinal’s paintings gives further strength to the theory that they were companion pieces. There is also one other detail which might be added. Claude wrote on the back of the drawing for our landscape tableaux, pictures—in the plural. Was he referring to both pictures for Lyon? His spelling and grammar were much too poor for any positive conclusion to be drawn from this, but it may be significant that he used the plural in this case whereas generally he wrote the word quadro when referring to a single painting. If the two were originally a pair, then it is possible to suppose that they went from Mr. Parsson to Cardinal Mazarin and were separated in 1670, in the confusion following the mad attack upon objects of the collection made by the cardinal’s chief heir, Charles Armand de la Porte, Duc de Mazarin, who was intent on mutilating any work of art which represented the nude. The king himself stopped this vandalism, but great damage had already been done, and Saint Evremond records that there was nothing left of the collection which was not either disfigured or sold.

If we accept the Dresden Flight into Egypt as the companion piece for our landscape, then, since it is signed and dated 1647, we may conclude that ours was painted in about the same year. Its position in relation to other dated drawings in the Liber Veritatis also confirms this. There is some evidence that the Liber Veritatis has been rebound and perhaps somewhat rearranged since Claude’s death, but there are still considerable sections of it which are in chronological order. The drawing for our picture is to be found in one of these. It is preceded by drawings for the Cephalus and Procris in the National Gallery, London, dated 1645 (no. 91) and for the Saint John the Baptist in the Methuen collection, dated 1647 (no. 97); and it is followed by drawings for the Dresden Flight into Egypt (no. 110), for a landscape, now lost, inscribed for Signor Angelino in 1647 (no. 112), for the Mill in the Doria collection (no. 113), and for the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba in the National Gallery, London (no. 114), the last two dated 1648.

The character of the painting itself confirms this date. Claude’s work of the years 1645-1648 shows a considerable advance over that of the earlier periods. A comparison of the Mill in the Doria collection, painted in 1648 or slightly before, with an earlier picture such as the Village Feast in the Louvre, painted in 1639, is an excellent example of this. What strikes one first is the great improvement in drawing and knowledge of the different forms in nature. The composition has become much more complex. Depth is no longer obtained by a narrow foreground with silhouettes against the light, but rather by a more subtle placing and interrelation of different forms. There is no longer a single dramatic light effect carried out and emphasized in all the details. The light is now distributed evenly throughout the picture and gives an atmosphere much closer to nature and removed from the theatrical. Indeed Claude’s painting in this period seems to approximate his drawings more than at any other time in his life.

A comparison of the Metropolitan picture with the Mill reveals that it also has the qualities described above. There is certainly no dramatic emphasis on any one part of the picture. It seems as if the artist had fixed on his canvas the casual passing scene. Whether it be the darker foreground or the sunlit distance, the whole is bathed in the same clarity of atmosphere. The two trees in the center of the picture and that rising in a diagonal from the right are particularly close to Claude’s drawings in freshness and in spontaneity. In this
picture, as in the Mill, Claude seems to have embraced a much greater part of the sky than he did in his earlier pictures, and the over-all distribution of light is the same in both.

Outside of number 109 in the Liber Veritatis there are no other drawings known which could be called studies for our landscape as a whole. Of Claude's many drawings of trees, none could be found which correspond closely enough to be identified as studies for our picture. However, there is nothing unusual or astonishing about this because the variety of his drawings of trees and foliage is almost infinite. Even in Claude's own replica of one of his paintings, in which the composition, the figures, the general arrangement of light are exactly as in the original, the tree forms will be found to be different. This can be verified by comparing the Doria Mill with the replica in the National Gallery, London.

There are drawings which correspond with certain parts of our picture (see p. 251). Two small Views of Mountains from the Campagna (British Museum, Oo6-15) are similar in character to the distant view with the small hill towns and the mountain range on the left side of our picture. A sketch of farmhouses on a hilltop in the Uffizi bears some resemblance to the house or castle on the hilltop to the right.

Claude was never able to draw the human form successfully. His biographers and contemporaries testify to this. The figures in his landscapes were usually painted by assistants or collaborators such as Jean Miel, Filippo Lauri, Jacques Courtois, and Francesco Allegrini. In some cases, however, he painted them himself and our picture seems to be one of these. The figures fit perfectly into the composition and nothing in their execution reveals the touch of another hand. A drawing in the Louvre (Rf.
represented a herdsman driving goats and cows is sufficiently similar to the figure in the lower left of our landscape to be identified as a study. The only difference is in the placing of the left arm. The rest, including the shape of the head, the general structure of the body, and in particular the curious short forward leg, is almost identical, as is the drawing and movement of the goats and cows. The same figure occurs again in the etching entitled Herdsman Driving Cattle Home in Stormy Weather, dated 1651. The single sheep represented in our picture bears a strong resemblance to those in the charming drawing in the J. P. Heseltine collection, which is dated 1668 (see A. M. Hind, The Drawings of Claude Lorrain, pl. 61).

When in the collection of Sir Joshua Reynolds our landscape was called a View near Castel Gandolfo. A comparison with Claude’s view of Castel Gandolfo painted for Pope Urban VIII and now in the Barberini collection shows no resemblance whatever to any detail of our landscape or to the buildings represented. Another view of Castel Gandolfo by Corot (in the Metropolitan Museum) is also quite different. We are obliged to conclude that the scene represents a view of some part of the neighborhood or of the grounds of the papal villa, identified perhaps by Sir Joshua. Our picture has less the quality of a studio composition than most of Claude’s landscapes, and may well have been begun as an oil study from nature like those described by Sandrart, Claude’s German biographer and friend, who often went sketching with him. The identification of such a scene is a doubtful matter at best, since Claude is known, even in his drawings, which were always done directly from nature, to have introduced details not embraceable in one view and sometimes to have added other elements to help the composition (Hind, p. 14).

The condition of the Metropolitan Museum landscape is unusually good. Before it was acquired it was found to have a considerable quantity of recent and quite unnecessary restoration. This was removed, and the painting is now in a condition as close to the original state as possible—with the exception of some small spots where patching was considered essential. It has suffered a certain amount of wear, but no more than is normal for a painting almost three hundred years old. What is most important is that its pictorial unity has been preserved almost perfectly.

The principal change which has come about since it was first painted is probably an over-all dulling of contrasts due to abrasion of the paint surface. This is basically the result of the fact that in some places the paint has been worn thin and the neutral underpainting has appeared. It is more visible in the shadows where the paint is thinner than in the lighter parts. The sky shows some of this type of alteration in the gray spots coming through the blue on the left over the distant landscape and in the upper right corner. The far and middle distance, where the paint is more thickly applied, has suffered hardly at all, with the exception of a slight loss of sharpness in the definition of the outline of trees on the brow of the hill and of the bridge in the far distance. The foreground has darkened considerably throughout. This is most evident in the tree trunks on the right, where the dark neutral ground has been completely revealed in several places. Darkening has also occurred in spots in the foreground at the feet of the goatherd and along the far bank of the river. But this area was always intended to contrast as shade against the sunny hill and distant view so that, as far as the general effect of the picture is concerned, there is probably very little change.

This over-all reduction of contrasts, taken with the very limited range of values in which the foreground was painted, make it necessary for the picture to be seen in a strong light to be fully appreciated. (As it hangs at present in Gallery A 21 it is best seen in the morning.) But, all in all, it is possible to say that a Claude in which the general color relationships have been so well preserved and which has suffered so little from restoration and cleaning during the ages is a rarity. The majority of his pictures have suffered or altered in some way. Recently the restoration department of the Louvre abandoned the project of a complete cleaning of several of their Claudes because they believed,
after making tests, that some of the color (particularly the blues) had altered to such an extent that the general color harmony of the picture would be destroyed were the varnish removed.

As a painter Claude's greatest achievement was the complete understanding of light, and its infinite and subtle variations in nature. This he felt with the sensitivity of a native of northern Europe who had lived with the mists and gray skies of Lorraine and the Black Forest. He never lost this feeling in spite of the many years spent in Rome. He always tried to paint a passing moment, a mood of nature, never to represent its permanent structure. Poussin, in contrast, fell more completely under the spell of Latin genius. His landscapes and his figures both have a certain statuesque immobility.

Our painting is a particularly fine example of Claude's understanding of light. Nowhere except in the drawings does he surpass the rendering of light and atmosphere which we see in the foliage of the tree tops in our picture. It is almost as if his freedom and sureness of handling increased as he moved further up to the sky, the source and realm of light in which he felt most completely at home. In its lack of pretension, its almost humble interest in nature, we feel the character of Claude the man, who began working as a pastry cook, who never really learned to write properly, but who maintained a dignified simplicity to the end of his life in spite of his great success and his patrons, among whom were popes, noblemen, and the wealthiest merchants of his day.

Claude's name is often linked with Turner's, but the English virtuoso's understanding of him was never more than superficial. His real spiritual heir was Constable. This becomes strikingly apparent when one compares Claude's drawings with Constable's oil sketches such as those which were lent recently to the Metropolitan Museum by the British Government. Indeed they make one wonder if Constable did not have a direct contact with some of Claude's drawings now in the British Museum. The sketch of a tree trunk (no. 14, Catalogue, Exhibition of Masterpieces of English Painting), for instance, is strikingly similar to the wash drawing of the same subject done in the gardens of the Villa Madama (BM Oo 7-224; Hind, pl. 14).

Corot also shared Claude's feeling for light and resembled him as a man, in his simplicity and honesty. He seems to have felt, though to a lesser extent, the same timidity when dealing with humanity in contrast to his great power and freedom when confronting nature. Our painting has what these three great landscape painters share in common, a timeless quality, divorced from any trends of fashion, which will always appeal to those who really love nature.