Landscape Paintings by Jean-Joseph-Xavier Bidauld and Achille-Etna Michallon

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Fig. 1 Achille Etna Michallon (1796–1822), Waterfalls at Tivoli, signed 1820. Oil on canvas, 57.5 x 76 cm. Purchase: Hedda and N. D. Qvist Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7520.
Ideal Landscape with a Sacrifice to the Goddess Flora shows a view towards an imaginary town, with a sacrificial scene in the foreground. It is a consummate example of the kind of classical, idealised depiction of nature which Valenciennes established as an alternative to the pure figure scenes of history painting and which he sought to develop into a genre of equal standing.

Painting landscapes in the spirit of Claude Lorrain (1604/5–1682) and Nicolas...
Poussin (1594–1665) was something artists did throughout the 18th century, so it was not a new phenomenon, but with Pierre Henri de Valenciennes both the intellectual basis for and the practice of landscape art changed. In 1800, Valenciennes published a treatise, *Éléments de perspective pratique, à l’usage des artistes*, in which he summarised his ideas and principles and which served as a manual of landscape painting. It contains instructions on every conceivable challenge that a landscapist could face in terms of subject matter and representational technique. How, for example, do you paint a scene involving Daphne, or a view in afternoon light? In his introduction, he discussed something of a fresh start for landscape painting, which he considered to have stagnated as a result of practitioners relying on too mechanical an artist’s gaze and on schematic modes of representation. Valenciennes argued that landscapists needed to observe nature with their own eyes in order to paint it, not take their starting point in traditional representational approaches by looking at it through the lens of older paintings. The key to doing so successfully, in his view, was to thoroughly get to know nature in its individual constituent parts, by contemplating it as if one were seeing it for the first time. In that way, the artist could create the kind of painting that a contemporary public could relate to.

Getting to know nature was something that could be done by painting studies in oil in front of the motif, a new practice that enabled the distance between what the artist observed and his or her representation of it to be radically reduced. Painting rather than drawing details in nature in direct contact with them created a new basis for reproducing things like colours, light and textures.³

Achille-Etna Michallon was a pupil of Pierre Henri de Valenciennes. In 1817, with his painting *Democritus and the Abderites* (École nationale des Beaux-Arts, Paris), he became the first artist to win the Prix de Rome in the *Paysage historique* category, established in 1816 as the result of a campaign with Valenciennes as one of its prime movers.⁴ Michallon subsequently stayed in Italy from 1818 to 1821. He worked very
much in keeping with his teacher’s principles, painting and drawing numerous studies from nature as a way of etching it in his memory and gaining a mastery of its various visual characteristics. The historical landscapes he painted throughout his mature period are technically of a very high quality, but they are not original in relation to other artists’ works in the same genre. Michallon is truly original, though, in paintings like the one from 1820 recently acquired by the Nationalmuseum (Fig. 1). In broad terms, it can be described as a finished picture painted in the studio in a technique similar to that of the oil study, with no significant historical or mythological elements, but with groups of shepherds as staffage – characteristics it shares with pictures such as Waterfall at Mont-Dore from 1818 (Fig. 2). These paintings can perhaps best be understood as works of an academically less formal kind which Michallon sold, for example, to wealthy visitors to Rome. The one in the Metropolitan was owned until 1821 by a certain Comte Charles Pierre de L’Espine, who is believed to have acquired it directly from the artist. The explanation for the freer, oil study-like brushwork in these paintings and their strong emphasis on atmosphere could simply be that such works could be rapidly executed, in that they would never have to face the scrutiny of an exhibition...
we feel we can make out every single leaf on the trees and every fold of the clouds in the sky (Fig. 4). Topographically, the landscape depicted is fairly general in character. The ancient-style town in the background is set in the landscape in a way that recalls Poussin, and is made up of buildings typical of antiquity, but nothing that enables us to identify it. The composition is based largely on the principles of the earlier ideal landscape, with trees in the foreground and a road and a body of water leading the viewer on into the picture. In the foreground, a woman is placing a sa-

Interestingly, it seems as if this freer way of painting, which technically was close to that of the oil study, would in fact be Michallon’s most important contribution to the development of art. Corot was one of his pupils and took precisely these qualities in Michallon’s representations of nature as a starting point in both his studies and his exhibition paintings. Another connection that made this acquisition of interest to the Nationalmuseum was the artist’s friendship with the Swede Gustaf Söderberg (1799–1875). The two got to know each other in Rome and travelled to Sicily together in 1820. Michallon’s View of the Banks of the Tiber near the Ponte Sant’Angelo (Fig. 3), a drawing acquired in 2018, illustrates the close affinity between them as draughtsmen. The Museum already had a number of drawings and oil studies by Söderberg in its collection. It was in all likelihood Michallon who introduced him to the practice of painting oil studies, something they presumably did side by side on several occasions.10

Jean-Joseph-Xavier Bidauld was another of the artists who practised this technique to the full, though in a way that differed from Michallon’s as it has been described above. Bidauld’s landscape paintings are almost better examples than Valenciennes’s own of how the sharpness and wealth of detail of the larger studio paintings increased as a result of oil studies. In the recently acquired Ideal Landscape with a Sacrifice to the Goddess Flora, we feel we can make out every single leaf on the trees and every fold of the clouds in the sky (Fig. 4). Topographically, the landscape depicted is fairly general in character. The ancient-style town in the background is set in the landscape in a way that recalls Poussin, and is made up of buildings typical of antiquity, but nothing that enables us to identify it. The composition is based largely on the principles of the earlier ideal landscape, with trees in the foreground and a road and a body of water leading the viewer on into the picture. In the foreground, a woman is placing a sa-

Fig. 5 Jean-Joseph-Xavier Bidauld (1758–1846), Ideal Landscape with a Sacrifice to Goddess Flora, c. 1800 (detail, infrared reflectogram). Oil on canvas, 72 x 97 cm. Purchase: Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7497.
crifice below a marble sculpture that presumably represents Flora, the goddess of flowers and spring. Infrared reflectography reveals how Bidauld changed his original arrangement of the scene, in which all the figures were placed together, sitting on the grass beneath another sculpture, which represented an unidentified male god (Fig. 5). The mood in that version can be interpreted as sensual and the scene may possibly have been intended as a modest bacchanal, its atmosphere reinforced by the bathers who were planned and drawn, but subsequently painted over, at the bottom of the slope. If this reading is correct, then the change is quite radical, given the gravity that now pervades the scene, intensified by the two men reverently watching the woman from the road. This tells us something interesting about Bidauld’s basic aim, which was thus evidently to paint the landscape, even though, in a formal sense, the sacrificial scene is the subject matter of the picture. The reflectograms also reveal that the ground layer of the painting was squared up, suggesting the existence of a relatively detailed and worked-up study. Based on a comparison of the two paintings discussed in this article, it is possible to advance the hypothesis that Michallon’s working process was freer, while Bidauld worked more carefully, passage by passage. Bidauld himself said that, in Italy, he “learned to make studies by making pictures, and to make pictures by making studies”.

To sum up, in the recently acquired paintings the artists approach nature and landscape in ways that are both similar and different. Both artists can be seen as visionary in relation to the study of nature. Bidauld paints a nostalgic dream of Arcadia, true to nature in its details, but highly idealised in its expression. Michallon’s scene from Tivoli, despite its emphasis on atmosphere, is anchored in the present and looks clearly towards the future, painted as it is with the kind of free, fresh gaze which Valenciennes regarded as fundamental to modern landscape painting.

Notes:
1. Michallon’s work can be compared with subjects from the same location, such as a painting by Johann Martin von Rohden in the Landesmuseum in Hannover. My thanks to Martin Olin for correctly identifying the motif, which when the painting was acquired was described as The Marmore Falls near Terni.
2. Bidauld’s painting was acquired on 12 December 2018 from Artcurial, Toulouse.
5. The painting was acquired at Sotheby’s, Paris, sale PF1909, Tableaux, sculptures et dessins anciens et du XIXe siècle, 26 June 2019. The catalogue entry for the sale states that in 1822 Michallon exhibited a painting on the subject of “Cascade de Tivoli” in Lille and a “Chute d’eau” in Douai.
6. In addition, paintings of this kind were smaller in scale, making them less of a financial risk and also easier for their buyers to transport.
8. Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts graphiques, RF 13774.
9. Mention may be made here of Michallon’s painted study of the falls at Tivoli in the Musée du Louvre (Département des Peintures, RF 2881), which views them from closer quarters and at a slightly different angle.
10. See, for example, Torsten Gunnarsson, Friluftsmåleri före friluftsmåleriet: Oljestudien i nordiskt landskapsmåleri, Uppsala 1989, pp. 232–239.
11. IRR analysis carried out by Cecilia Heisser and Astrid von Hofsten at the Nationalmuseum.