

Landscape With the Nymph Egeria Mourning Over Numa
by Claude Lorrain, 1663, oil, 61 x 78. Collection Naples Museo di Capodimonte, Naples, Italy. The town and Lake Nemi appear in the background of this painting.



Lost Icons of the Past: Following Historic Painting Itineraries in Modern Italy

Recently my husband and I took a journey to uncover the landscape-painting routes and motifs made famous by the original open-air painters in the Roman Campagna.

BY MADDINE INSALACO

Open-air painting has a history that is at least 300 years old and had its origins in Italy. Indirectly responsible for the painting revolution in France in the 19th century, a vigorous tradition of painting outdoors evolved in the landscape around Rome, the *Campagna Romana*, during a 200-year period from the 17th to mid-19th centuries. Generations of international

artists including Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), Claude Lorrain (ca. 1621-1682), Richard Wilson (1714-1782), P. H. Valenciennes (1750-1819), Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796-1875), J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851), Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900), Sanford Gifford (1823-1880), and George Inness (1825-1894) followed these itineraries. Ironically, many of the iconic destinations along the routes that featured so largely in this

tradition are virtually unknown to today's travelers and artists.

As painters and open-air landscape instructors based in Italy half the year, my husband Joe Vinson and I had a natural curiosity about the tradition and were intrigued by these obscure locations. Our sense of adventure and discovery prompted us to investigate it further. Our original intent was simple in that we wanted to follow as many

the great works of art and landscapes associated with the ancient writings of the poets Virgil, Horace, and Ovid. Leonardo Da Vinci, writing at this time, encouraged students to use nature, rather than other artists, as a guide for learning how to paint.

Rome had the additional distinction of being the birthplace of the classical landscape genre in the 17th century through the work of French artists Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin. Paintings in this style were composed based on ancient literature, surrounded

by classical architecture, and set in idealized spaces containing motifs from studies made in the Campagna (Image 1). These motifs took on iconic status for subsequent generations of artists who painted the same images during their Roman sojourns as a form of homage to these great Baroque masters.

In the 18th century, under the sway of Enlightenment empiricism and its emphasis on scientific observation, artists were encouraged to make studies from nature directly, thus leading to an explosion of outdoor sketching. Specific

routes radiating out of Rome and around Naples emerged, and by 1800 artists routinely followed them. Fueling this activity were theoretical writings, the most significant being P. H. Valenciennes's *Elements of Practical Perspective*, which codified the practice of open-air oil painting and asserted the primacy of the Italian landscape over others.

THE ITINERARIES OF EARLY OPEN-AIR PAINTING

The earliest open-air painting itineraries focused on sites that had historic or mythological associations with antiquity. Not surprisingly, these routes followed the network of ancient Roman roads: the Via Cassia and Flaminia to the north, the Via Tiburtina to the east, and the Via Appia and Prenestina to the south. Ruins of imperial palaces, temples, bridges, and aqueducts—or natural monuments, such as Mount Soracte (Image 3) or the Lake of Nemi (Image 6), sacred to Roman gods and Latin poets—formed the stock of painting motifs. Other destinations assumed importance by virtue of their location along a major travel route to Rome. Typically in these cases there was a combination of good lodging and spectacular scenery in close proximity. The cliffs, ravines, and meandering watercourses of Civita Castellana became a choice location for artists seeking the Neo-Classical heroic landscape ideal.

At the beginning of the 19th century, when Romantic sensibility supplanted Enlightenment rationalism, new itineraries were added that contained no historic or intellectual associations but were distinguished by their raw and powerful natural beauty. The rugged mountains and forests of Olevano and Civitella (Image 8) were perfect subjects for artists interested in depicting the sublime.

From the very beginning open-air

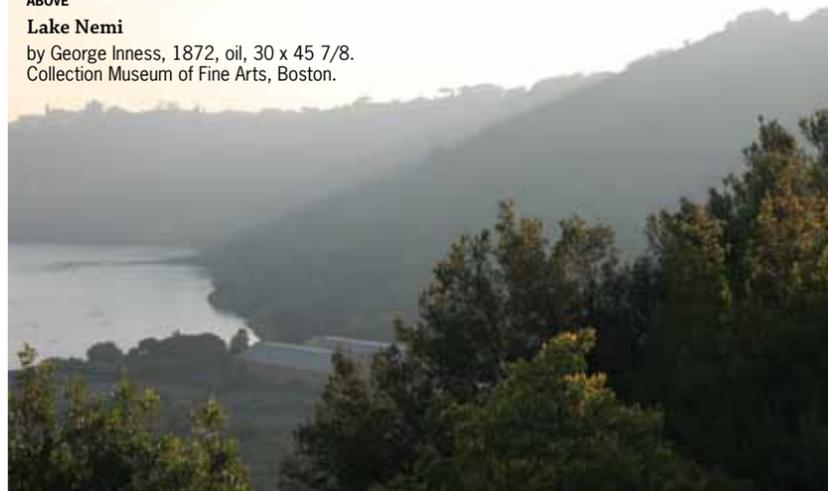


Lake Nemi today.

ABOVE

Lake Nemi

by George Inness, 1872, oil, 30 x 45 7/8. Collection Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
Le Mammelle From Bellegra

by Joe Vinson, 2007, oil on paper, 6 x 6.

Civitella

by André Giroux, ca. 1825-1830, oil, 10 1/2 x 15. Private collection.

The Giroux view of Le Mammelle today.

Photos: Joe Vinson





LEFT
Painters Surprised by an Approaching Storm
 by Richard Wilson, 1752, 19 ½ x 26. Collection
 Dublin National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland.

“When working fast in conditions of fleeting light, painting becomes more of a physical than intellectual activity.”



painting was a social activity and done in groups (Image 11). The primary reason for this was security, as the Campagna could be a dangerous place. Bandits attacked travelers with impunity, and there was no authority upon which to rely for assistance. Working with a group was the best way to ensure safety. It was also true that in the relaxed open studio of the outdoors, artists could learn from one another and enjoy themselves in a beautiful setting.

THE TECHNIQUES OF EARLY OPEN-AIR PAINTING

The pioneers of open-air painting worked in a world very different from

our own. It was a world in which there was a belief in general rules governing the production and evaluation of art. As a result, technical processes tended to be fairly standardized. The prescriptions for outdoor painting set out in Valenciennes’ treatise perfectly reflect the practices of the time.

Despite its inconvenience, oil was the most widely used medium for open-air sketching. It was believed that the physicality of oil paint best allowed the artist to represent landscape forms under changing light and atmospheric conditions. Since industrially produced paint tubes were not available until the 1840s it was necessary to manually prepare small batches of paint and store them in pig bladders for travel. This was a cumbersome procedure, so painters tended to use limited palettes consisting

mainly of earth pigments.

Offsetting the disadvantage of oil’s slow drying time, most paintings were done on unprimed paper. Apart from its clear edge for portability, paper has the added benefit of absorbing oil, leaving a relatively dry layer of paint on the surface onto which subsequent layers could be applied without neutralizing or muddying the mixtures. The paper was affixed to the inside of a wooden box with pins. The box was placed on the artist’s knees, functioning as a portable easel. Dimensions tended to be small, usually no more than 12 inches on any side. Given the fugitive quality of light, Valenciennes was adamant that a sketch be completed in no more than two hours, and only 20 minutes if at sunrise or sunset.

Oil sketches served as studies only

and were used as reference material for studio compositions. Their rough and unfinished quality, lacking in narrative content, did not qualify them for exhibition. It was only in the 20th century when aesthetic sensibilities changed that they came to be valued as works of art.

PAINTING ALONG HISTORIC ROUTES IN ITALY TODAY

Before Joe and I set out to follow historic itineraries, we agreed upon a few rules to guide us: First, the primary resource we would use to find traditional motifs would be reproductions of master oil sketches.

Photo: Maddine Insalaco



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
Palazzo Ruspoli and Lake of Nemi
 by Maddine Insalaco,
 2007, oil, 8 x 8.

The Lake of Nemi (Le Lac de Nemi et Genzano)
 by P.H.Valenciennes,
 ca. 1780s, oil on paper,
 10 x 15. Collection the
 Louvre, Paris, France.

The town and Lake of Nemi today.

Our goal was to find exact locations if possible, and maps were only useful in helping us locate a specific town. Second, we would photograph every site we found but only paint subjects that inspired us, without being rigid about the vantage point. Finally, we would adopt the Valenciennes method and work in oil on small-scale paper only, for a maximum of two hours on each painting.

The reason for the present obscurity of what were once popular destinations immediately became evident, because it was the same reason that they became known in the first place: the road network. Where once the major arteries of transportation overlapped the old Roman roads, the invention of the automobile and construction of highways changed the pattern of movement in Italy. Along with rail lines, modern roads were designed for speed, and were located in valleys, not on ridges where many of these historic sites are to be found. Once the car became the dominant mode of transportation, these places lapsed into insignificance and were forgotten.

Locating these iconic images was anything but easy. In the span of two centuries, between changing patterns of land use, shift from wood to fossil

fuels, technological change, and population growth, the Italian landscape has radically transformed. At times all we had to guide us was topographical information from the reference painting and had to make multiple visits before we discovered a motif. Once, when searching for an ancient bridge in Civita Castellana, the area was so overgrown that it was not until we were standing on the bridge that we realized that we found it! Many sites that were once accessible are now located on private properties, which presented the challenge of meeting owners for permission to visit and paint. My ability to speak Italian was a key factor in gaining entrée to both historic sites and contemporary culture. The extensive discoveries—not to mention the new friends—we made would have been impossible without this.

The sites we documented varied

in condition from overdeveloped and aesthetically destroyed to totally abandoned and unkempt. So many iconic views had been spoiled by electric lines, housing developments, roads, and factories that we feared we would never find sites that still had the power to inspire us. Fortunately, our fears never came true, but there were often obstacles to overcome. We had to work to get the views we wanted, whether that meant hiking with our gear through rough and dangerous terrain (Image 16), cutting through dense growth, or driving off road in a car not designed for it. The effort was always rewarded by the experience of painting a spectacular view in splendid isolation with nothing except the occasional flock of sheep to disturb us (Image 18).

This directly contrasted with the experience of our predecessors who, as we discovered early on, rarely ventured

Photos: Maddine Insalaco



Photos: Joe Vinson

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT
A Treacherous Path to Beauty: Joe Vinson painting Le Mammelle.

Maddine Insalaco surrounded by a flock of sheep in Olevano

Maddine Insalaco preparing to paint the Lake of Nemi.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Maddine Insalaco's portable open-air studio.

farther than a short walking distance from their lodgings when they went out to sketch. There was no reason to. The views were unspoiled and, as long as animals grazed freely and wood was the main source of fuel, nothing was overgrown.

INSIGHTS & OBSERVATIONS

Our appreciation of the spontaneous, painterly quality of early oil sketches inspired us to pursue this project. Although those works appeared fresh and modern, we were perplexed that the studio work of the same artists was stylized and lifeless, entirely void of these qualities. One of the key insights gained from our investigation was that this contradiction was due to the artists' self-imposed time limit.



When working quickly in conditions of fleeting light, painting becomes more of a physical than intellectual activity. Culture has less chance to intervene and leave its imprint as style or fashion. This explained why early outdoor sketches could look remarkably similar to our work (Images 19 and 20)! It is an interesting paradox that by limiting their painting time, open-air work acquired a greater sense of *timelessness*.

We also gained appreciation for the link between Italian open-air painting and modernism. When the locus of painting shifted away from Italy in the middle of the 19th century, artists accustomed to working directly from the motif, such as Corot, continued their work in France in the forests near Barbizon. Works conceived and executed for the most part outdoors—containing less formal compositions, void of narrative content, and done with a loose, spontaneous approach to paint handling—suddenly became a feature of exhibition art. A shift in aesthetic preferences took place that facilitated the subsequent innovations

of the Impressionists and ultimately led to modern painting.

Before taking on this project it was hard to see any meaningful relationship between ourselves as contemporary painters and our predecessors in the Campagna. So much separated our world from theirs. Through the process of outdoor sketching we realized a palpable link with them in our physical selves and paintings. Using the same tools and only eyes and hands to guide us we connected through our similar products. A brushstroke came to represent more than just material substance. Rather, it is a sign of life, a testimony to an artist's existence in movement and creative energy. The human propensity to touch, mark, and leave a trace explains the resilience of painting and guarantees its continuity in the face of challenges from other media. We are as sure of this as of the golden light that will continue to draw artists into the Italian landscape for many years to come. ■

Maddine Insalaco is a painter based in New York and Italy, where she teaches landscape painting workshops.



LEFT
Sky at Villa Borghese
by P.H. Valenciennes, ca. 1780s,
oil on paper, 7 ¾ x 10. Collection
the Louvre, Paris, France.



ABOVE
Evening Sky Study Nemi
by Maddine Insalaco, 2007,
oil on paper, 9 x 12.