

# 2011 exhibition: press release

Corot: L'Armoire secrète – 'Girl Reading' in Context

4 February to 15 May 2011

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COROT

L'ARMOIRE SECRETE

'GIRL READING' IN CONTEXT

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Curated by Mariantonia Reinhard-Felice, Director of the Oskar Reinhart Collection 'Am Römerholz', with specialist consultant Vincent Pomarède, Director of the Département des Peintures at the Musée du Louvre, Paris

The 'dossier' exhibition focuses on *Girl Reading*, one of an extensive group of major paintings by Camille Corot (1796–1875) in the Oskar Reinhart Collection 'Am Römerholz'. This outstanding canvas is shown in conjunction with a number of key works by the artist from public and private collections both at home and abroad. These document the crucial stages in his career as a figure painter, paying special attention to the subject of reading. The exhibition thus provides a concise representative survey of this area of Corot's activity, which occupied a significant place in his oeuvre, despite his primary focus on landscape. This is only the second exhibition ever to concentrate exclusively on Corot's figure paintings, and its predecessor, shown at the Louvre in Paris, was mounted almost fifty years ago, in 1962.

The terms of Oskar Reinhart's donation to the Swiss Confederation forbid the loan of items from the collection. Hence none of his Corots could be included in the exhibition *Corot en Suisse* (Corot in Switzerland) at the Musée Rath in Geneva (24 September 2010 – 9 January 2011). Our show aims not least to further the recent resurgence of interest in Corot in Switzerland by drawing attention to the holdings in our museum. Since these contain a significant number of figure paintings, we decided to focus on this aspect. Some fine examples from Swiss collections were included in the Geneva exhibition, but we explore this area of the artist's work in greater depth.

The Paris show of 1962 prompted a reappraisal of Corot's figure painting. By consistently referring to himself as a landscape painter Corot doubtless contributed to earlier assessments of his figure painting as an insignificant sideline. Contemporary critics alluded to his work in this field as an 'armoire secrète', a 'secret cupboard', accessible only to a small circle of the artist's friends. Landscapes certainly account for the major part of his oeuvre, yet ample evidence exists to indicate that he was also deeply interested in the human figure. The catalogue raisonné of his work published in 1905, for instance, lists more than three hundred figure paintings. They started to find favour with dealers and connoisseurs during Corot's lifetime, around 1860, and at the same time they attracted the attention of fellow artists, such as Edgar Degas, who began collecting them.

The treasure in the 'secret cupboard' was discovered long ago, but we have nevertheless titled our exhibition 'L'Armoire secrète' so as to point up the rarity of displays focusing only Corot's figure paintings. In addition, the title reflects the aura of mystery surrounding many of the withdrawn, self-absorbed figures in the pictures. The artist's models – almost exclusively young women – sat for him in the studio, clothed in 'exotic' apparel and furnished with a book, musical instrument or other evocative attribute. The composition and basic mood of the images give expression to the emotional life of these figures, who are idealised but still of this world.

Grouped around *Girl Reading* are other images of people reading, testifying both to the importance of this theme in Corot's figure painting and to the highly individual interpretation of the human figure that the artist arrived at in the 1850s. This core of exhibits is augmented by works documenting the most important factors which contributed to that interpretation, beginning with the costume studies that Corot produced during his first stay in Italy, from 1825 to 1828. These studies are followed by portraits, a genre that the artist practised extensively on his return to France, and by historical figures, which initially merely populated his landscapes before coming to dominate them around 1840. Finally, there are the interiors in which Corot took his cue from Dutch seventeenth-century and French eighteenth-century painting.

Including items from all phases of the artist's career, exhibits complementing the images of people reading show that his development as a figure painter was by no means smooth, its consistency disrupted by the striking nude *Marietta (à Rome)* of 1843 and other works. Three

paintings in the exhibition document crucial aspects of Corot's mature figure style: *La Femme à la perle* (*Woman with a Pearl*) of c. 1858–68, which marks the transition from portrait to anonymous image and bears witness to the influence of Italian Renaissance art; *Le Moine au violoncelle* (*Monk with a Cello*) of 1874, in which the artist, approaching the end of his days, conveyed the inner life of an imaginary figure most compellingly; and *La Dame bleue* (*Lady in Blue*), also of 1874, which combines an idealised female figure with the image of a modern woman. Together with *Marietta (à Rome)*, *La Dame bleue* shows Corot clearly anticipating subsequent developments towards modern art.

The paintings are augmented in the prints and drawings galleries by three hitherto unknown figure drawings by Corot. They all testify to the influence of his great senior contemporary Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. Corot's prints have been excluded from the exhibition because the human figure plays only a minor role in them. Instead, paintings by artists who had an impact on his figure paintings, such as Achille-Etna Michallon and Léopold Robert, have been included, along with relevant examples of early photography. Some of Corot's sketchbooks are also displayed in the prints and drawings galleries, providing evidence of the importance of the world of fashion and the theatre as iconographical sources.

Landscapes appear in the exhibition as a further aid to understanding the figure paintings. For instance, *Vue prise à Narni* (*View at Narni*) of 1826–27, a work dating from Corot's Italian period, shows how at this early stage the artist saw the human figure principally as a means of imbuing pastoral images with life and authenticity. Another example bears witness to his increasing tendency to isolate figures from their landscape surroundings, foreshadowing their independence in the figure paintings.

The issues outlined here are examined in detail by leading Corot specialists in the copiously illustrated catalogue accompanying the exhibition.