

## True to Nature Open-air painting in Europe 1780-1870

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Johann Jakob Frey, Cloud Study. Private collection. Photo © Pascal Faligot

True to Nature (May 3 – August 29) unites, for the first time, over one hundred and twenty luminous open-air paintings from the remarkable collections of The Fondation Custodia in Paris, The National Gallery of Art in Washington, and The Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, together with a distinguished private collection of oil sketches, never before seen in public. The exhibition reveals the evolution of plein air painting across Europe in the nineteenth century.

The practice of open-air painting developed rapidly across Europe during this period, as artists sought new ways of representing the natural world. As the century progressed, it became enshrined in the teaching of art academies and was enthusiastically taken up by French, German, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, Dutch and British painters, amongst them two pioneering women, Louise-Josephine Sarazin de Belmont and Rosa Bonheur.

Painting out-of-doors meant using materials that were small, lightweight, and easily transported on foot. Camille Corot's small wooden paintbox, on special loan to the exhibition, is typical of the portable equipment that became available to plein air artists of the period. Small enough to be packed up and carried from site to site, paintboxes could be balanced on the knees at a moment's notice to sketch the fleeting effects of nature onto small sheets of paper slotted inside the lid.

Italy was at the centre of this tradition. Artists from all over Europe travelled south to paint the monuments of Rome and the landscapes of the Campagna, the countryside around the city. Spectacular monuments testified to the great classical civilisations of the past, but the city itself had a unique picturesque appeal. Buildings and rooftops, extended over time, formed higgeldy-piggeldy assemblages of 'irregularity and symmetry, incoherence and harmony, madness and reason' which fascinated painters like Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes.

Capri, on the Sorrentine peninsula, rapidly became a magnet for artists with its dramatic coastal scenery of towering limestone cliffs pierced at sea level by underground caverns carved by the action of the water. The 'discovery' in 1826 of the 'Blue Grotto' by August Kopisch and Ernst Fries further fuelled painters' imaginations as they sought to capture the iridescent azure reflections that illuminate the cavern.

Paintings in the exhibition are presented thematically, according to natural phenomena they depict: skies and atmospheric effects, rocks and grottoes, volcanoes, trees, and shape-shifting bodies of water - crashing waves, waterfalls, and the still, reflective, surface of lakes and rock pools.

Artists' eagerness to engage directly with nature, observing and recording it 'in the field', was mirrored in developments in the natural sciences. Just as painters amassed outdoor studies for reference, and to keep the authenticity of their experience fresh in the memory, so geologists, botanists and others – including artists like Valenciennes and Constable – formed collections of minerals, rocks and botanical specimens.

This fluidity between art and science allows the exhibition to interrogate what it means to be 'true' to nature, through a wide range of complementary material that includes rare field notebooks by Adam Sedgwick, one of the founders of modern geology; a dazzling group of minerals on loan from the Sedgwick Museum of Earth Sciences, named after him; scoriae (lava rock) collected after the devastating eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 1794; and an extraordinary group of volcanic rock specimens, collected on field trips around the world, from Hawaii to Java and Mount Erebus in Antarctica.

**A bespoke short film, made specially for the exhibition by volcanologist and filmmaker, Clive Oppenheimer** (Into the Inferno; Fireball: Visitors from Darker Worlds, both with Werner Herzog), reveals the cinematic 'truths' of volcanic activity, recorded at first hand. Through it, we glimpse the wonders of the 'Living Earth'.

A final, immersive, section on trees – *'the grandest, and most beautiful of all the productions of the earth'* (William Gilpin, 1791) – demonstrates how artists went about recording not just the appearance and character of individual trees, but how it felt to be under or among them: the flickering light, the cool shade of a tree canopy, the sound of wind in the branches, the scent of aromatic foliage and sun-baked bark.

A series of astonishingly beautiful projections of the cellular structure of trees by plant scientist Alan Crivellaro and ecologist Ulf Büntgen allow us to marvel at the inner beauty of tree anatomy – the unseen 'truths' of trees that lie within.

Of all the features of the natural world, trees were considered to be the most difficult to paint. Too often, they became the artist's 'stumbling block'. Works by J.M.W. Turner, John Constable, André Giroux and others in this exhibition set the stage for the bold experiments of painting from nature pursued by the Impressionist painters at the end of the century. Paintings by Monet and Pissarro, depict the crocheted canopy of trees in blossom in spring and leafless branches of trees under the weight of a thick fall of snow.

David Hockney's mesmeric video installation of Woldgate Woods in winter concludes the exhibition. It takes us on a journey through a luminous snowscape in Yorkshire, swathed in silence, the installation is also part of **Hockney's Eye The Art and Technology of Depiction** which runs concurrently to **True to Nature** and complements the exhibition.

**Jane Munro co-curator of the exhibition and keeper of paintings, drawings and prints at The Fitzwilliam Museum said,** *'One of the few activities that remained a constant throughout the pandemic was the ability to go outside. We were drawn closer to the natural world, reawakening an appreciation of beauty too often overlooked in our busy lives. Nature on our doorstep became a reassurance, a salve. In these jewel-like paintings, the thrill of artists' first-hand encounter with nature is palpable. Visitors will see through their eyes, feel their wonder as they record storm-torn skies, limpid rockpools, the dappled shade of a tree canopy or the awe-inspiring sight of an erupting volcano, admiring their endeavour to be true to nature.'*

**For further enquires please contact The Fitzwilliam Museum Communications:**

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The Hockney Foundation press images: <https://fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/about-us/terms/hockney>

## **Notes to Editors**

**True to Nature Open-air Painting in Europe 1780-1870 (May 3 – August 29 2022) #TrueToNature** is curated by Jane Munro, keeper of paintings, drawings and prints, The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, Ger Luijten, director, The Fondation Custodia, Collection Frits Lugt, Paris, and Mary Morton, curator and head of the department of French paintings, The National Gallery of Art, Washington.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue, *True to Nature. Open-air Painting in Europe 1780-1870* Ger Luijten, Mary Morton and Jane Munro (ed.) London, Paul Holberton Publishing, 2020, 280 pages, c. 140 colour illustrations, 24 x 25,5 cm, hardback ISBN 978 1 911 300 83 0

## **The Fitzwilliam Museum**

Founded in 1816, The Fitzwilliam Museum is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation funded programme. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of coins, Asian arts, ceramics and other applied arts. The Fitzwilliam is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation.

**The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB | Free admission**

**Tuesday – Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00, Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 – 17.00**

**CLOSED: 24 - 26 & 31 December, 1 January, Good Friday.**