The rural world seen by artists 1848-1914

1. Transformation of 19th century rural France

- Since the peace of 1815, rural France entered into the 19th century heralded an era of, not revolution, then dramatic transformation. Whilst the ancient, rural way of life with its century-old rhythms and customs persisted, features associated with today's countryside - mechanisation, profitability, depopulation, etc. - were already beginning to take hold.

- A few such transformations:
  - the overpopulation of the countryside (circa 1840) gave way to rural depopulation, a trend that accelerated from 1870 onwards.
  - the traditional communal life bound by custom and ritual was progressively replaced by a more open way of life, suffused with individualism and urban practices.
  - aristocratic and bourgeois proprietors turned their attentions to rural life - but more superficially, and customs etc. Such paintings were welcomed by the public as they reassured the viewer presenting country people as archetypes, the incarnation of an austere and eternal work ethic, the unshakable pillars of a society as yet untouched by the turbulence of the Industrial Revolution affecting the rest of the world.

2. The taste for rural subjects in 19th century art

- The rural rootedness of French society was championed in the field of the arts by an unprecedented passion for rural subjects.
- In literature, the countryside was at the heart of numerous works: Balzac's Paysans (Peasants, 1841), Zola's La terre ('The Earth', George Sand's La mare au diable ('The Devil's Pool', 1844), Flaubert's Bouvard et Pécuchet (1861), Huysmans' En rade ('The Emigrant', 1880) and various short stories by Maupassant. The final novel to gain popularity in this series of rural narratives was written in 1906, by a genuine countryman, Emile Guillaumin: La vie d'un simple ('The Life of a Simple Man').
- In the visual arts, a brief tour of the Musée d'Orsay collections is enough to confirm the importance of rural themes for painters in the second half of the 19th century. The popularity of the rural subject even exceeded that of history painting, though the latter remained the highest goal for official artists. Even when painting domestic scenes ('genre painting'), artists showed a marked preference for rural settings over urban life, for all its growth and progress.

3. The country-dweller as a social concept

- At the point where history and art history meet, art can often illuminate aspects of the zeitgeist. In this way the 19th century taste for rural subjects in literature and visual art reveals - and this should be stressed - as much about society's concept of country people as about the country people themselves: the resulting image, far from being coherent, is equivocal and contradictory. This phenomenon was reflected by numerous critics in the press.

- Generally speaking - and mainly before the 1870's - two opposing visions prevailed: on one hand, artists pictured the rural community engaged in the immutable rhythm of work, habits, and customs. Such paintings were welcomed by the public as they reassured the viewer presenting country people as archetypes, the incarnation of an austere and eternal work ethic, the unshakable pillars of a society as yet untouched by the turbulence of the Industrial Revolution affecting the rest of the world. The same image could be found in some of the novels of the period.

- On the other hand, the works of certain artists (particularly Courbet and Millet) were thought to question these values and so drew a hostile reaction. Yet, before being adopted by painters, this negative image of country people - which portrayed them as primitive if not bestial - had already been explored by certain novelists (Balzac, Zola...) and furthermore, it was an attitude often shared by the bourgeoisie and city-dwellers which portraits them as primitive if not bestial - had already been explored by certain novelists (Balzac, Zola...) and furthermore, it was an attitude often shared by the bourgeoisie and city-dwellers.

Bibliography

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- *La Paye des moissonneurs*, catalogue of the exhibition, Musée d’Orsay, Paris 1988
- *En rade*, catalogue of the exhibition, Musée d’Orsay, Paris 1991-1992
Objectives

1. An interdisciplinary subject

While this visit is highly suitable for inclusion in the GCSE or A level history syllabus, it also provides art history classes with an excellent pretext for studying the main artistic movements of the 19th century: the Barbizon school, Realism and Naturalism, Impressionism and Post-impressionism.

This visit also encourages the combined study of literature and visual arts. It allows students to appreciate how authors, such as Zola and of course, the novelist who inspired the subject of this visit, celebrated the peasant’s duty and his role in society.

2. An obvious point: an artwork is not an illustration

One must resist the temptation to use an artwork simply as mere illustrations for the history class. An artwork is not an illustration of a pretext, a grounds for individual artistic reproduction in a textbook impossible, one must take account of the artist’s use of contre-jour enables him to preserve the integrity of the figures and then transposes reality onto the canvas. The artist, striving neither to be reporter nor historian, does not have to pretend to be either comprehensive or objective.

Of course, artists observe reality and never more so than in the second half of the 19th century when they were championing contemporary, everyday subjects and therefore, the necessity for direct observation. It is this aspect of the artistic process which justifies subjecting each work to an anthropological analysis in order to gather specific data. But, having made their observations, notes and sketches on their chosen subject, the artists usually made the finished work in their studios, transposing – if not transforming – the subject according to their personal pictorial, sensual, and semantic requirements. Therefore, when contemplating each work, one must keep the artist’s objectives in mind. In this case one should try to discover each artist’s specific attitude to the rural world.

To sum up, an artwork is a visual witness of its time: it contains the kind of details no description could fully encompass and is the manifestation of ideas, values and attitudes... but it is a highly objective and ambivalent witness and must be treated as such.

4. A method: Comparison

To fully understand an artwork’s value as historical witness, it should be compared with other sources of information on the same theme - in this case, the rural world.

Firstly one should compare what is known of 19th century rural history with what is shown in the artworks. As a rule, artists seemed to be more comfortable representing traditional rural life and showed little interest in social changes (such as rural depopulation) or the progress of mechanisation (the introduction of the threshing machine, the harvester etc.). Further observation shows that paintings most often portrayed country people at work and that, if they are shown at rest, the painting often takes on the aspect of a rural idyll.

One should also compare the image of the rural community as it appears in literature and the visual arts whilst many paintings clearly share the tranquil, rustic atmosphere of Sand’s real subject in his paintings. To fully understand an artwork, one must keep the nature of the artwork, which makes its satisfactory reproduction in a textbook impossible, one must take account of the artist’s motivation, personality and above all, outlook.

5. A reflection: the artist observes and then transposes reality

The work of art, be it painting, sculpture, or even photography, is not an innocent double of reality. The artist, striving neither to be reporter nor historian, does have to pretend to be either comprehensive or objective.

Of course, artists observe reality and never more so than in the second half of the 19th century when they were championing contemporary, everyday subjects and therefore, the necessity for direct observation. It is this aspect of the artistic process which justifies subjecting each work to an anthropological analysis in order to gather specific data. But, having made their observations, notes and sketches on their chosen subject, the artists usually made the finished work in their studios, transposing – if not transforming – the subject according to their personal pictorial, sensual, and semantic requirements. Therefore, when contemplating each work, one must keep the artist’s objectives in mind. In this case one should try to discover each artist’s specific attitude to the rural world.

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Before the visit

Depending on the level of the pupils there are various possibilities open to teachers to prepare them for the visit to the Musée d’Orsay.

 Studying the economic and social history of France in the 19th century seems to be indispensable: the main elements being the Industrial Revolution, the growth of cities, and the peaks and slumps in the rural economies. These broad outlines may be filled in with more detailed studies on themes such as rural population, technical progress, lifestyle, specialisations...

 Observe and analyse school textbook illustrations (or those of 19th century newspapers); the point being to understand the purpose of each image (advertisement, tract, poster, newspaper engraving, photograph, painting, map, graph, etc.) and the specificity of the information provided.

 Analyse the image of the rural community given by the great novelists of the 19th century. Balzac, George Sand, Huysmans, Zola, Nam... and then transposes reality onto the canvas. The artist, striving neither to be reporter nor historian, does not have to pretend to be either comprehensive or objective.

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One should also compare the image of the rural community as it appears in literature and the visual arts whilst many paintings clearly share the tranquil, rustic atmosphere of Sand’s real subject in his paintings. To fully understand an artwork, one must keep the nature of the artwork, which makes its satisfactory reproduction in a textbook impossible, one must take account of the artist’s motivation, personality and above all, outlook.

5. A reflection: the artist observes and then transposes reality

The work of art, be it painting, sculpture, or even photography, is not an innocent double of reality. The artist, striving neither to be reporter nor historian, does not have to pretend to be either comprehensive or objective.

Of course, artists observe reality and never more so than in the second half of the 19th century when they were championing contemporary, everyday subjects and therefore, the necessity for direct observation. It is this aspect of the artistic process which justifies subjecting each work to an anthropological analysis in order to gather specific data. But, having made their observations, notes and sketches on their chosen subject, the artists usually made the finished work in their studios, transposing – if not transforming – the subject according to their personal pictorial, sensual, and semantic requirements. Therefore, when contemplating each work, one must keep the artist’s objectives in mind. In this case one should try to discover each artist’s specific attitude to the rural world.

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The visit: list of artworks

N.B. For guide to visits, the list is indicative only. The guide leading the group of pupils is free to choose which artworks support their demonstration.

With two exceptions, all these artworks are paintings.

Jean-François Millet : Le retour du trognon (The Return of the Flood), 1846
Théodore Rousseau: Une avenue, forêt de l’Héldam (An Avenue, Forest of L’Héldam), 1846-1848
Eugène Guillaumin : Le faucheur (The Reaper), watercolour, 1880
Boas Bonnefous : Labouvre normande, le semailage (Ploughing in the Normandy, the Sowing of the Vineyard), 1840
Cézanne Courtet : Un enterrement à Ornans (Burial at Ornans), 1848
Jean-François Millet : Le repos des lavandières (The Haymakers’ Rest), 1848
Charles François Daubigny : La vendange en Bourgogne (The Grape Harvest in Burgundy), 1851
Constant Troyon : Bœuf allant au boucher (cow going to the butcher), 1855
Alexandre Decamps : La fête des Dées (Corpus Christi), 1855
Jean-François Millet : Des glaneuses (Gleaners), 1852
Jean-François Millet : L’angélus (The Angelus), 1857-58
Paul Gauguin : La route de la Giteuse (The Giteuse Road, near Marseille), 1877
Jules Bastien-Lepage : Les foins (Hay-Making), 1881
Camille Pissarro : La moisson au bord de la mer (Harvest by the Sea), 1891
Émile Berlioz : La moisson (The Gleaners) or La moisson de l’Isle Adam, 1885
Jean-François Millet : La moisson (The Harvest), 1885
Vincent Van Gogh : Paysanne près de l’âtre (Countrywoman By the Fireplace), 1885
Jean-François Millet : Le méridiennet (The Siesta), 1885-90
Paul Gauguin : Les meules jaunes (Yellow Haystacks) or La moisson blonde (The Blond Hay), 1886
Claude Monet : Les meules (The Haystacks), 1886–91
Monet’s real subject in his Auvers-sur-Oise series, is the variation in the light according to the moment... Likewise, students will see that in the 19th century the literary form on an uncompromising treatment of things rural preceded the painter’s interest in this subject...

After the visit

Besides making tests or evaluations, there are various ways to expand on the theme in class:

- Making comparisons with 19th century paintings.
- Study the main artistic movements featured in the visit in greater detail. As well as working through the art history sections of the syllabus this will probably require another visit to the Museum.
- Look at works on other themes by artists featured in the visit.
Objectives

1. An interdisciplinary subject

While this visit is highly suitable for inclusion in the GCSE A & AS level history syllabus, it also provides art history classes with an excellent pretext for studying the main artistic movements of the 19th century: the Barbizon school, Realism and Naturalism, Impressionism and Postimpressionism. This visit also encourages the combined study of literature and visual arts. It allows students to understand the crucial role of light in painting. Millier’s use of contre-jour enables him to preserve his figures’ anonymity thereby turning them into types the shepherdess, the winnower, the gleaners... and Menot’s real subject in his harvesters series, is the variation in the light according to the moment... Likewise, students will see that in the 19th century the literary form on an uncompromising illustration of themes events preceded the painter’s interest in this subject...

2. An obvious point: an artwork is not an illustration

One must resist the temptation to use an artwork simply for its documentary value. It is true that paintings, with their numerous visual details, are particularly useful in contributing to our knowledge of the 19th century rural world and one could easily content oneself with using artworks as mere illustrations for the history class. Besides making tests or evaluations, there are various ways to expand on the theme in class: making comparisons with 19th century conditions, study today’s countryside and its economic and daily life, study the main artistic movements featured in the visit in greater depth. As well as working through the art history sections of the syllabus this will probably require another visit to the Museum.

3. A reflection: the artist observes and then transposes reality

The work of art, be it painting, sculpture, or even photography, is not an innocent double of reality. The artist, steering neither to be repeater nor historian, does not have to pretend to be either comprehensive or objective. Of course, artists observe reality and never so much in the second half of the 19th century when they were championing contemporary, everyday subjects and therefore, the necessity for direct observation. It is this aspect of the artistic process which justifies subjecting each work to an historical analysis in order to gather specific data. But, having made their observations, notes and sketches on their chosen subject, the artists usually made the finished work in their studios, transposing – if not transforming – the subject according to their personal pictorial, sensual, and semantic requirements. Therefore, when contemplating each work, one must keep the artist’s objectives in mind. In this case one should be trying to discover each artist’s specific attitude to the rural world.

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To fully understand an artwork’s value as historical witness, it should be compared with other sources of information on the same theme (in this case, the rural world). Firstly one should compare what is known of 19th century rural history with what is shown in the artworks. As a rule, artists seemed to be more comfortably representing traditional rural life and showed little interest in social changes (such as rural depopulation) or in the progress of mechanisation (the introduction of the threshing machine, the harvester etc.). Further observation shows that painters most often portrayed country people at work and that, if they are shown at rest, the painting often takes on the aspect of a rural idyll.

One should also compare the image of the rural community as it appears in literature and the visual arts whilst many paintings clearly share the tranquil, rustic atmosphere of Sand’s The Devil’s Pool, one finds little echo in the visual arts of the darkness of Balzac’s Prasante, of Huysmans’ L’Assommoir and of Zola’s The Earth. Finally - and most importantly - artworks should be compared with one another... Such an exercise practiced on Millier’s Gleaners and Jules Bastien-Lepage’s Return of the Flooding, 1886, will highlight the partial differences between these respective meanings. Through this method one also finds that for Monet, Pissarro, Gauguin, Emile Bernard and Van Gogh, the rural subject was more a pretext, a grounds for individual artistic experimentation, whereas for the painters of the Barbizon school, of Realism and of Naturalism it remains a priority (as is proved by the impact of human presence).

After the visit

Besides making tests or evaluations, there are various ways to expand on the theme in class:

• Studying the economic and social history of France in the 19th century seems to be indispensable: the main elements being the Industrial Revolution, the growth of cities, and the peaks and slumps in the rural economy. These issues outline may be filled in with more detailed studies on themes such as rural population, technical progress, lifestyle, spiritualisation...
• The guide leading the group of pupils is free to contemplate each work, one must keep the objectives in mind. In this case one should...
The rural world seen by artists
1848-1914

1. Transformation of 19th century rural France
- After centuries of slow-paced change, rural France’s entry into the 19th century heralded an era of dramatic transformation. Whilst the ancient, rural way of life with its centuries-old rhythms and customs persisted, features associated with today’s countryside—mechanisation, profitability, depopulation, etc.—were already beginning to take hold.

- A few such transformations:
  - the overpopulation of the countryside (circa 1848) gave way to rural depopulation, a trend which accelerated from 1870 onwards;
  - the traditional communal life bound by custom and ritual was progressively replaced by a more open way of life, suffused with individualism and urban practices.

- Aristocratic and bourgeois proprietors turned their interests to industrial property leaving more room for tenant farmers to acquire land. By 1860, 84% of agricultural property was cultivated by its owner.

- The first technological revolution ended the exclusive use of animal and manpower. As early as the 1860s, the moulder plough, the threshing machine, the harvester, etc. began to be used up and down the country.

- Rural poverty was progressively succeeded by a degree of affluence, an amelioration which is noticeable in the quality of 19th century rural furniture.

- This rural transformation was dominated, from 1848 to 1914, by two contradictory social and economic phases:
  - expansion from 1850 to 1880
  - crisis from 1880 to 1914

- Despite the changes, France remained fundamentally more rural than her neighbours. Although, during the sixty years from 1851 to 1911, France’s rural population had fallen from 75% to 65% of the overall population, it still represented a majority, unlike that of Germany (40% in 1911) and Great Britain (27% in 1911).

2. The taste for rural subjects in 19th century art
- This rural rooting of French society was championed in the field of the arts by an unprecedented passion for rural subjects.

- In literature, the countryside was at the heart of numerous works: Balzac’s Peuses (Peuses, 1841), Zola’s La Terre (The Earth), George Sand’s La mare au diable (The Devil’s Pool, 1844), Flaubert’s Bouvard and Pécuchet (1861), Huysmans’ En rade (Drunkard, 1884) and various short stories by Maupassant. The final novel to gain popularity in this series of rural narratives was written in 1905, by a genuine countryman, Émile Guillaumin: La vie d’un simple (The Life of a Simple Man).

- In the visual arts, a brief tour of the Musée d’Orsay collections is enough to confirm the importance of rural themes for painters in the second half of the 19th century. The popularity of the rural subject even exceeded that of history painting, though the latter remained the highest goal for official artists. Even when painting domestic scenes (“genre painting”), artists showed a marked preference for rural settings over urban life, for all its growth and progress.

- This was certainly true for the artists of the Barbizon school who, from 1848 onwards, settled in the countryside to paint from direct observation, and for the Realists who took their subjects from everyday contemporary life.

- Later, in the 1870-1890s, the new generations of Impressionists and Postimpressionists also turned their attentions to rural life: at least to the outskirts of the city but more superficially, and with different objectives: for them, the “modern” life of cities and their inhabitants held attractions too.

3. The country-dweller as a social concept
- At the point where history and art history meet, art can often illuminate aspects of the zeitgeist. In this way the 19th century taste for rural subjects in literature and visual art reveals – and this should be stressing – as much about society’s concept of country people as about the country people themselves: the resulting image, far from being coherent, is equivocal and contradictory. The phenomenon was reflected by numerous critics in the press.

- Generally speaking – and mainly before the 1870s – two opposing visions prevailed: on one hand, artists pictured the rural community engaged in the immutable rhythm of work, habits, and customs etc. Such paintings were welcomed by the public as they reassured the viewer, presenting country people as archetypes, the incarnation of an ancient and eternal work ethic, the unbreakable pillars of a society as yet untouched by the turbulence of the Industrial Revolution affecting the rest of the world. The same image could be found in some of the novels of the period.

- On the other hand, the works of certain artists (particularly early Courbet and Millet) were thought to question these values and so drew a hostile reaction. Yet, before being adopted by painters, this negative image of country people – which portrays them as primitive if not bestial – had already been explored by certain novelists (Balzac, Zola...). Furthermore, it was an attitude often shared by the bourgeoisie and city-dwellers.

Bibliography
- Musée d’Orsay
  - Service culturel
  - Musée d’Orsay exhibitions, catalogues and guides

- The visitor’s sheet

- Visitor’s sheet

- Presentation
- Objectives
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- The visit: list of artworks
- After the visit
- Bibliography

- Presentation

- The visit is structured around two poles, one being history and the other, art history and literature.

- 1. Transformation of 19th century rural France

- After centuries of slow-paced change, rural France’s entry into the 19th century heralded an era of dramatic transformation. Whilst the ancient, rural way of life with its centuries-old rhythms and customs persisted, features associated with today’s countryside—mechanisation, profitability, depopulation, etc.—were already beginning to take hold.

- A few such transformations:
  - the overpopulation of the countryside (circa 1848) gave way to rural depopulation, a trend which accelerated from 1870 onwards;
  - the traditional communal life bound by custom and ritual was progressively replaced by a more open way of life, suffused with individualism and urban practices.

- Aristocratic and bourgeois proprietors turned their interests to industrial property leaving more room for tenant farmers to acquire land. By 1860, 84% of agricultural property was cultivated by its owner.

- The first technological revolution ended the exclusive use of animal and manpower. As early as the 1860s, the moulder plough, the threshing machine, the harvester, etc. began to be used up and down the country.

- Rural poverty was progressively succeeded by a degree of affluence, an amelioration which is noticeable in the quality of 19th century rural furniture.

- This rural transformation was dominated, from 1848 to 1914, by two contradictory social and economic phases:
  - expansion from 1850 to 1880
  - crisis from 1880 to 1914

- Despite the changes, France remained fundamentally more rural than her neighbours. Although, during the sixty years from 1851 to 1911, France’s rural population had fallen from 75% to 65% of the overall population, it still represented a majority, unlike that of Germany (40% in 1911) and Great Britain (27% in 1911).
The rural world seen by artists
1848-1914

Part 1: 1850-1870

How did artists represent the rural world during the period of economic growth? Within its traditional framework, according to the selection below.

1. Théodore Rousseau: Le parc à mosson, clair de lune (The Sheep Meadow, Moonlight), 1861
   • location: ground floor, second gallery on the left.
   • the rural theme: two teams of six oxen. Whilst the herdsman guides the beasts, the ploughman leans on the plough, splitting the earth. This is the dressing of the vineyard, the first deep ploughing of the fallow ground. Surfaced terrain, ploughed down, hardened and invaded by weeds, required the full force of three pairs of oxen to turn it into.
   • observe the painting: describe the rural scene; identify gestures and signs which indicate the strength employed by the men and the animals; describe the landscape, the condition of the soil, the time of day... Compare this painting with that which follows.

   2. Jean François Millet: Les foins, 1849
   • location: ground floor, second gallery on the left.
   • the rural theme: two teams of six oxen. Whilst the herdsman guides the beasts, the ploughman leans on the plough, splitting the earth. This is the dressing of the vineyard, the first deep ploughing of the fallow ground. Surfaced terrain, ploughed down, hardened and invaded by weeds, required the full force of three pairs of oxen to turn it into.
   • observe the painting: describe the rural scene; identify gestures and signs which indicate the strength employed by the men and the animals; describe the landscape, the condition of the soil, the time of day... Compare this painting with that which follows.

   3. Rosa Bonheur: Labousseur nivernais, le sombrage (Ploughing in the Nivernais, the ploughing of the fallow field), 1849
   • location: ground floor, upper gallery on the left.
   • the rural theme: two teams of six oxen. Whilst the herdsman guides the beasts, the ploughman leans on the plough, splitting the earth. This is the dressing of the vineyard, the first deep ploughing of the fallow ground. Surfaced terrain, ploughed down, hardened and invaded by weeds, required the full force of three pairs of oxen to turn it into.
   • observe the painting: describe the rural scene; identify gestures and signs which indicate the strength employed by the men and the animals; describe the landscape, the condition of the soil, the time of day... Compare this painting with that which follows.

   4. Constant Troyon: Brochail allot au labour, effet du matin (Castle Going to Work, Morning Effect), 1855
   • location: ground floor, lower gallery on the left.
   • the rural theme: two teams of six oxen. Whilst the herdsman guides the beasts, the ploughman leans on the plough, splitting the earth. This is the dressing of the vineyard, the first deep ploughing of the fallow ground. Surfaced terrain, ploughed down, hardened and invaded by weeds, required the full force of three pairs of oxen to turn it into.
   • observe the painting: describe the rural scene; identify gestures and signs which indicate the strength employed by the men and the animals; describe the landscape, the condition of the soil, the time of day... Compare this painting with that which follows.

   5. Rosa Bonheur: L’agneau des moissonneurs, 1846-48
   • location: ground floor, upper gallery on the left.
   • the rural theme: two teams of six oxen. Whilst the herdsman guides the beasts, the ploughman leans on the plough, splitting the earth. This is the dressing of the vineyard, the first deep ploughing of the fallow ground. Surfaced terrain, ploughed down, hardened and invaded by weeds, required the full force of three pairs of oxen to turn it into.
   • observe the painting: describe the rural scene; identify gestures and signs which indicate the strength employed by the men and the animals; describe the landscape, the condition of the soil, the time of day... Compare this painting with that which follows.

Part 2: 1870-1914

How did artists represent the rural world during the period of economic growth? Within its traditional framework, according to the selection below.

1. Jean François Millet: Le repos behind the vineyard, 1861
   • location: middle level, first painting gallery on the Seine side.
   • the rural theme: a vast open field, bounded by the bank of the river Seine: the location is Damvillers... Two haystackers, apparently engrossed with work, take a break on the edge of a meadow. Evidently they have just come from turning the hay to speed up the drying process.
   • observe the painting: describe the rural scene; notice the place name written under the signature; where has the artist positioned the horizon? In what manner are the trees and grass painted? Compare this with the painting on the figures, describe the people: their postures, costumes, and their expressions; what do they suggest? Compare this with the previous painting.
   • the painter’s vision: Bautain-Lepage was country born – in Lorraine – and had a fondness for the rural subjects he had observed. He liked painting country people and their everyday lives even more than scenery... people occupy the entire foreground in this painting. His paintings, airing figures; describe the people: their positions, stance, their gestures and expressions; compare them with the figures of country people who painted his fellow son of country people. Compare this picture with the previous one.

2. Jean François Millet: La mare au mouton, clair de lune (The Sheep Meadow, Moonlight), 1861
   • location: ground floor, second gallery on the left.
   • the rural theme: a shepherd and his flock of sheep in an open landscape. It is night. The hut on the right is used by the shepherd as a resting place. Sheep farming was carried out in vast circuits over poor soil, waste land, fallow ground and stubble. As the flocks remained outside for the night, the shepherd decided to use a barn near Melun. Lhermitte chose to represent this particular natural light effect and its surroundings. Compare this painting with the previous one.

3. Rosa Bonheur: Cattle Going to Work, Morning Effect, 1846-48
   • location: middle level, first painting gallery on the Seine side.
   • the rural theme: a vast open field, bounded by the bank of the river Seine: the location is Damvillers... Two haystackers, apparently engrossed with work, take a break on the edge of a meadow. Evidently they have just come from turning the hay to speed up the drying process.
   • observe the painting: describe the rural scene; notice the place name written under the signature; where has the artist positioned the horizon? In what manner are the trees and grass painted? Compare this with the painting on the figures, describe the people: their postures, costumes, and their expressions; what do they suggest? Compare this with the previous painting.
   • the painter’s vision: Bautain-Lepage was country born – in Lorraine – and had a fondness for the rural subjects he had observed. He liked painting country people and their everyday lives even more than scenery... people occupy the entire foreground in this painting. His paintings, airing figures; describe the people: their positions, stance, their gestures and expressions; compare them with the figures of country people who painted his fellow son of country people. Compare this picture with the previous one.

4. Constant Troyon: Brochair allot au labour, effet du matin (Castle Going to Work, Morning Effect), 1855
   • location: ground floor, lower gallery on the left.
   • the rural theme: two teams of six oxen. Whilst the herdsman guides the beasts, the ploughman leans on the plough, splitting the earth. This is the dressing of the vineyard, the first deep ploughing of the fallow field. Surfaced terrain, ploughed down, hardened and invaded by weeds, required the full force of three pairs of oxen to turn it into.
   • observe the painting: describe the rural scene; identify gestures and signs which indicate the strength employed by the men and the animals; describe the landscape, the condition of the soil, the time of day... Compare this painting with that which follows.

5. Rosa Bonheur: L’agneau des moissonneurs, 1846-48
   • location: ground floor, upper gallery on the left.
   • the rural theme: two teams of six oxen. Whilst the herdsman guides the beasts, the ploughman leans on the plough, splitting the earth. This is the dressing of the vineyard, the first deep ploughing of the fallow field. Surfaced terrain, ploughed down, hardened and invaded by weeds, required the full force of three pairs of oxen to turn it into.
   • observe the painting: describe the rural scene; identify gestures and signs which indicate the strength employed by the men and the animals; describe the landscape, the condition of the soil, the time of day... Compare this painting with that which follows.

Information from:
- [3] Jules Bastien-Lepage: Labousseur nivernais, le sombrage (Ploughing in the Nivernais, the ploughing of the fallow field), 1849
- [4] Constant Troyon: Brocharl allot au labour, effet du matin (Castle Going to Work, Morning Effect), 1855
this sense of reassurance was echoed by the critics. Théophile Gautier wrote ‘it is the humble
livery of labour, not the ragged clothes of begging.’ Napoleon III bought the painting
without hesitation.

• location: ground floor, second gallery on the left.
• the rural theme: the harvest is over and two
harvesters stand in a field in the morning sun,
there is neither human presence nor specific
countryside activity.
• observe the painting: describe the harvesters
and the setting, what conclusions can be drawn
from the absence of people? Observe the treatment
of light and shadow...
• the painter’s vision: if Monet’s oeuvre had not
always featured landscape and the countryside,
one might conclude from this painting that the
rural subject is merely a vehicle for the artist’s
explorations. Indeed, during the autumn of 1885,
the artist noted ‘The further I go, the more I
understand how hard I must work to express what
I am looking for: the immensity, above all the
units, the same light infusing everything...’ Light
and its fleeting effects, were what Monet
endeavoured to capture on canvas and he painted
a series of five plein-air paintings on this same
subject.

8. Émile Bernard: La moisson au bord de la mer (The Harvest by the Sea), 1891
• location: upper level, Galerie des hauts niveaux.
• the rural theme: it is the harvesters’ after-lunch
siesta at midday (the title La moisson)
• observe the painting: describe the rural scene,
the figures’ poses, the landscape, and its
immediacy; note the colours and how they are composed; what can
be said of brushstroke and paint texture. Compare this
painting with the following work.
• the painter’s vision: Émile Bernard, from
Coutances, in Artois, is also a child of the country.
He was as passionately attracted to the theme
of gleaners as Millet. But Breton was tempted
to embellish reality: gracious gestures, dancing
gongs, plump arms, self-assured expressions, bare
feet, torn clothes, bundle-like gilets. And the
viewers are reassured: even the poorest respect
the law, and the society who accords them such
abundance, is good.

Part 2: 1870–1900

How did artists portray the rural world during the period of crisis? The following works indicate that
the rural theme continued to be used as the theme for individual exploration, whilst artists like Bastien-
Lepage and Jean Lhermitte uphold the rural community’s traditional image.

9. Claude Monet: Moulin fin de l’été, côté de la mairie (Haystacks, End of Summer; Morning Effect), 1890–91
• location: upper level, Galerie des hauts niveaux,
gallery six.
• the rural theme: the harvest is over and two
harvesters stand in a field in the morning sun,
there is neither human presence nor specific
countryside activity.
• observe the painting: describe the harvesters
and the setting, what conclusions can be drawn
from the absence of people? Observe the treatment
of light and shadow...
• the painter’s vision: if Monet’s oeuvre had not
always featured landscape and the countryside,
one might conclude from this painting that the
rural subject is merely a vehicle for the artist’s
explorations. Indeed, during the autumn of 1885,
the artist noted ‘The further I go, the more I
understand how hard I must work to express what
I am looking for: the immensity, above all the
units, the same light infusing everything...’ Light
and its fleeting effects, were what Monet
endeavoured to capture on canvas and he painted
a series of five plein-air paintings on this same
subject.

10. Camille Pissarro: Jeune fille à la baguette (Girl With a Stick), 1881
• location: upper level, Galerie des hauts niveaux.
• the rural theme: a thoughtful young girl, dressed
in country attire is sitting on a slope, holding a
stick in her right hand.
• observe the painting: describe the rural scene,
the attitude and gesture of the girl; indicate the
place she occupies in the painting; look at the
colours, the shadows, the brush strokes; what
can be said about them?
• the painter’s vision: like Millet or Degas.
Pissarro was deeply interested in the lives of his
contemporaries. This Girl With Stick could almost be a close up of a shepherdesse by Millet or
Théodore Rousseau but whilst the slope and the
stick are familiar, the face has disappeared and
making identification of the girl’s activity difficult.
Pissarro centres his painting around this figures,
which almost becomes an open-air portrait.

11. Vincent van Gogh: La métamorphose (The Storith), 1889–1890
• location: upper level, Van Gogh galleries.
• the rural theme: it is the harvesters’ after-lunch
siesta at midday (THE La métamorphose)
• observe the painting: describe the rural scene,
the figures’ poses, what kind of atmosphere
emanates from this scene? Note the composition of
light and shade; look at the choice of
brushstroke and paint texture. Compare this
painting with the following work.
• the painter’s vision: the life of the peasant and
the habitat in the community was always central
to Van Gogh’s preoccupations. In his early
days whilst still in Holland, he painted subjects
of black and white impressions of chiaroscuro...
and a couple of labourers are napping in the
shadows of a haystack...
Part 2: 1870–1900

How did artists portray the rural world during the period of crisis? The following works indicate that the rural scene continued to be used as a theme for individual exploration, whilst artists like Bastien-Lepage and Leon Lhermitte uphold the rural community’s traditional image.

5. Jean-François Millet: Des glaneuses (Glaneuses), 1857
• location: ground floor, third gallery on the left.
• the rural theme: glaners consisted of collecting the ears of corn left behind by the harvesters – which meant walking the fields bent double to spot the ears. Ears with stems were made into small bundles called ‘glaneuses’ whilst stems less ears were collected in the gleaners’ aprons binned on their waist. Gloming was an ancient right conceded by the rural community to its poorest members.
• observe the painting: describe the rural scene, the attitude, gestures and actions of each gleaner; describe their costumes, their hands, their faces – what is happening in the background? Describe the activity and think about it in relation to the gleaners. What is the role of the horseman on the right? What time of the day is it? Compare this with the following painting.
• the painter’s vision: Millet worked at length on this theme in Barbizon, making many preparatory studies. His observation is rich, reproducing exact details and accurate movements. He contrived, no doubt voluntarily, the roughness and meedle of the gleaners’ work and the luminous abundance of the harvest in the background. Yet Millet did not give his gleaners the air of paupers to be looked upon with pity. Their work brings them simplicity and dignity. And they are far from being portraits, neither of greatness and serenity

6. Jules Breton: Le rappel des glaneuses (The Recall of the Glaneuses), 1859
• location: ground floor, upper gallery on the left.
• the rural theme: is similar to that of the previous painting, but the moment chosen is different. This is sundown when, as required by law, the gleaners finish work and return home their harvest.
• observe the painting: describe the rural scene, the expressions, gestures and actions of the gleaners; what can be said about their harvest? Describe their costumes, their hands, their faces; identify which information indicates the hour of day and therefore the time at which they must leave; why the recall? Compare this work with the previous painting.
• the painter’s vision: Jules Breton, from Courrèges, in Artois, is also a child of the country. He was as passionately attracted to the theme of gleaners as Millet. But Breton was tempted to embellish reality: gracious gestures, dancing poses, plump arms, self-assured expressions, bare feet, torn clothes, bundle-like glaneuses. And the viewers are reassured: even the poorest respect the law, and the society who accords them such abundance, is good.

• location: ground floor, second gallery on the left.
• the rural theme: three times a day, the church bell interrupted work in the fields. The prayer commemorated the salvation of the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary during the Annunciation. It was traditionally recited, according to Millet, ‘piously, cup in hand, for the departed souls of the poor’.
• observe the painting: describe the rural scene, the attitude and gestures of the couple; note the spire in the distance and the interrupted work; define the impression the painting inspires.
• the painter’s vision: Millet portrays a religious ritual he has known since childhood and has certainly also observed around Barbizon. The figures’ statures, despite the painting’s small size, their devout contemplation, heads against the sky, and the immensity of the landscape in which the tolling bell would sound for miles, all contribute to the painting’s greatness and explain its popularity.

8. Claude Monet: Moules, fin de l’été, éôt du matin (Bivalves, End of Summer: Morning Effect), 1880–91
• location: upper level, Galerie des Hauteurs, gallery five.
• the rural theme: the harvest is over and two haystacks stand in a field in the morning sun, there is neither human presence nor specific countryside activity.
• observe the painting: describe the haystacks and the setting, what conclusions can be drawn from the absence of people? Observe the treatment of light and shade.
• the painter’s vision: if Monet’s œuvre had not always featured landscape and the countryside, one might conclude from this painting that the rural subject is merely a vehicle for the artist’s explorations. Indeed, during the autumn of 1880, the artist noted: ‘The further I go, the more I understand how hard I must work to express what I am looking for: the immensity, above all the units, the same light infusing everything… Light and its fleeting effects, were what Monet endeavoured to capture on canvas and he painted a series of five plein-air paintings on this same subject.

9. Émile Bernard: La moisson au bord de la mer (The Harvest by the Sea), 1889–1890
• location: upper level, Galerie Bellechasse, second alcove on the right.
• the rural theme: three harvesters are working in a field on the edge of a bay, long bundles or taking a moment to stretch. The bundles are already gathered. In the background are the scattered houses of the village of Saint-Briac.
• observe the painting: describe the harvesters’ attitudes, the shape of the bundles; how does the painter express the activity? Note the colours and how they are composed, what can be said of brushstroke and paint texture. Compare this painting with Monet’s Haystacks.
• the painter’s vision: here once again, the harvest may seem to be a mere vehicle through which Émile Bernard might test his pictorial objectives. He wrote: ‘One must no longer paint in front of the thing, but by recalling it in one’s imagination… The simplification or synthesis is immediately overwhelming as being inherent to the idea… and by consequence, nothing precise’. Yet it is interesting that of the three activities which went on at that time in this Bay – fishing, framing – which developed on the British coast from 1890 onwards – and agriculture, the painter chose the latter, persisting in a traditional vision of the countryside.

10. Camille Pissarro: La siesta (The Siesta), 1888–1890
• location: upper level, Galerie des Hauteurs, gallery six.
• the rural theme: a thoughtful young girl, dressed in country attire is sitting on a slope, holding a stick in her right hand.
• observe the painting: describe the rural scene, the attitude and gesture of the girl; indicate the place she occupies in the painting; look at the colours, the shadows, the brush strokes; what can be said about them?
• the painter’s vision: like Millet or Degas, Pissarro was deeply interested in the lives of his contemporaries. This Girl With Stick could almost be a close up of a shepherdess by Millet or Théodore Rousseau but whilst the slouch and the stick are familiar, the rocks have disappeared and making identification of the girl’s activity difficult.

• location: upper level, Van Gogh galleries.
• the rural theme: it is the harvesters’ after-lunch siesta at midday (hence the title La moisson) and a couple of labourers are napping in the shadow of a haystack.
• observe the painting: describe the rural scene, the figures’ positions; what kind of atmosphere emanates from this scene? Note the composition of light and shadow; look at the choice of brushstroke and paint texture. Compare this painting with the following work.
• the painter’s vision: the life of the peasant and the humility in the community was always central to Van Gogh’s preoccupations. In his early days, whilst still in Holland, he painted subjects such as haystacks and their faces; their hands; their crops. Four years later, in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, where he was hospitalized, Van Gogh took up the theme again. But here he copied a Millet painting dated 1852, reproduced as an engraving. He wrote to Theo, his brother: ‘It is not a straightforward copy, it is rather translating into another language, into colour, the black and white impressions of chiaroscuro.’ indicating how the painterly objective had shifted.
The rural world seen by artists
1848-1914

Part 1: 1850-1870
How did artists represent the rural world during the period of economic growth? Within its traditional framework, according to the selection below.

1. Théodore Rousseau: L’avenue, forêt de l’Ermitage (An Avenue of Trees, Forest of Isle-Adam), 1846-48
- location: ground floor, second gallery on the left.
- The rural theme: a shepherd and his flock of sheep in an open landscape. It is night. The hut on the right is used by the shepherd as a resting place. Sheep farming was carried out in vast pastures (the communal lands). It was generally the girls in the community who took the cows to their daily pasture.
- observe the painting: identify and describe the rural scene; how large a place does it occupy in the overall composition? Describe and define the setting. Compare this piece with the Millet which follows.
- the artist’s vision: taken superficially, Rousseau’s painting only seems to be interested in painting nature and capturing the radiant, milky atmosphere. However, Rousseau was familiar with the life and labour of the countryside and perhaps, taken as a whole, this painting shows his desire to tackle both concerns.

2. Jean François Millet: Le parc à moutons, clair de lune (The Sheep Meadow, Moonlight), 1861
- location: ground floor, second gallery on the left.
- The rural theme: a shepherd and his flock of sheep in an open landscape. It is night. The hut on the right is used by the shepherd as a resting place. Sheep farming was carried out in vast pastures (the communal lands). It was generally the girls in the community who took the cows to their daily pasture.
- observe the painting: describe the rural scene; how large a place does it occupy in the overall composition? Describe and define the setting. Compare this painting with the previous one.
- observe the painting: the scene preceding Rosa Bonheur’s Cattle Going to Work, Morning Effect.
- the artist’s vision: the painting was a State commission and Rosa Bonheur spent a whole season in the Nivernais in order to paint it. Rather than chasing atmospheric effects, she stress to render with extremely accurate details, the very work of the land in all its harshness and all its secrets. Contemporary critics did not fail to draw comparisons between this painting and George Sismondi’s romantic, painted in 1846. Le pain au diable (The Devil’s Pasture), 1846; François le champ (The Country Stall), 1847-1849 and La petite Fadette (Little Fadette), 1849.

3. Rosa Bonheur: Labours of the Nivernais, the ploughman or ploughing (Ploughing in the Nivernais, the dressing of the fallow field), 1849
- location: ground floor, upper gallery on the left.
- The rural theme: two teams of six oxen. Whilst the herdsman guides the beasts, the ploughman leans on the plough, splitting the earth. This is the dressing of the stonyard, the first deep ploughing of the fallow ground. Such a terrain, packed down, hardened and invaded by weeds, required the full force of three pairs of oxen to carry it into.
- observe the painting: describe the rural scene; identify gestures and signs which indicate the strength employed by the men and the animals. Describe the landscape, the condition of the soil, the time of day... Compare this painting with that which follows.
- the artist’s vision: the painting was a State commission and Rosa Bonheur spent a whole season in the Nivernais in order to paint it. Rather than chasing atmospheric effects, she stress to render with extremely accurate details, the very work of the land in all its harshness and all its secrets. Contemporary critics did not fail to draw comparisons between this painting and George Sismondi’s romantic, painted in 1846. Le pain au diable (The Devil’s Pasture), 1846; François le champ (The Country Stall), 1847-1849 and La petite Fadette (Little Fadette), 1849.

4. Constant Troyon: Bœuf allaitant au labour, effet du matin (Cattle Going to Work, Morning Effect), 1855
- location: ground floor, upper gallery on the left.
- The rural theme: a shepherd and his oxen, already tired, are being led to the plough by the herdsman. In the ploughing order, this is the scene preceding Rosa Bonheur’s Cattle Going to Work, Morning Effect.
- observe the painting: describe the rural scene; how important is the horse in the overall picture? Describe the movement of the oxen in relation to the light, in relation to the viewer’s gaze... Compare this work with the previous painting.
- the artist’s vision: Troyon observed this scene in Solage. But the precise information on rural activity is blurred by the painter’s desire to capture a particular natural light effect and its consequences on the atmosphere: note the place given to the sky, the silhouettes of the animals, the cast shadows, the breadth of the sky, the rule of values over colours etc..