

Loan Exhibition

Country Life: 19th-Century Paintings from the Dahesh Museum

by Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt



Dr. Dahesh (1909–1984) was a writer, philosopher, and art lover who lived in Beirut, Lebanon. He was a successful author who put some of his financial gain into a collection of European academic art of the 19th and early 20th centuries, work which he admired both for its technical finesse and for its often morally uplifting subject matter. Travelling throughout the Middle East, to the United States and Europe, Dr. Dahesh attended auctions and visited artists' studios, collecting during a period of 50 years more than 2,000 paintings, sculptures and works on paper. It had been Dr. Dahesh's intention to establish an international art museum in

Figure 1. Constant Troyon, The Return of the Flock, oil on canvas, 29 x 36 inches (Dahesh Museum Collection)

Beirut, but when civil war broke out in Lebanon in 1975 his collection was in danger of damage or loss. The following year a group of Dr. Dahesh's friends transported the works to the United States. That collection formed the nucleus of the Dahesh Museum. The collection of the museum has continued to expand, under the leadership of its director, J. David Farmer, the guidance of curator Stephen Edidin, and an active and supportive Board of

Trustees. In fact, all the seven paintings selected for this Loan Exhibition have been acquired since 1995.

The Dahesh Museum, however, currently located on Fifth Avenue at 48th Street, is much more than a collection. Since early 1995, three exhibitions annually have focused on subjects such as the Paris Salon and the London Royal Academy, the Classical tradition, religious art during the 19th century and Orientalism. Each is accompanied by public lectures and symposia, publications and presentations for children. The Dahesh Museum maintains an active world-wide relationship with other museums and arts institutions. In coordination with the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Bordeaux the Dahesh Museum organized the first international loan exhibition dedicated to Rosa Bonheur (1997); the accompanying exhibition catalogue is the only English-language publication in print on this important artist. The current exhibition, "Overcoming All Obstacles: The Women of the Académie Julian," includes loans from the distant State Art Museum in Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine and museums in France, Poland, and Sweden (the exhibition is on view through May 13).

As the only arts institution in the United States dedicated to academic art of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Dahesh Museum is uniquely positioned to organize exhibitions of a "school" of European and American art that, despite the phenomenal popularity of Impressionism, remains broadly appealing and commands rapidly rising critical esteem. Many of the works in the collection are by painters and sculptors who are not (yet) so well known today, such as Ignaz-Marcel Gaugengigl, who emigrated from Bavaria to Boston and there taught, among others, the American Impressionist painter Childe Hassam. However, many of the artists' names are familiar to all art lovers: among them, Jean-Léon Gérôme; Alexandre Cabanel; Adolph-William Bouguereau; David Roberts and Frederic, Lord Leighton.

Although "academic painting" often first brings to mind the lofty mythological and historical themes promoted by art academies since their founding in the 16th century, the art market in the 19th century encouraged a broad range of subjects. Among these were the scenes of country life which varied in focus according to their inspiration.

Constant Troyon (1810-1865) was a member of the Barbizon school of painters, whose depictions of the rural landscape prefigured the natural subjects favored by the Impressionists. Troyon developed a specialty of animal paintings which fetched enormous prices at auction from around 1850 until World War I. *The Return of the Flock* (fig. 1) was still in the artist's studio at the time of his death. That fact, as well as the handling of the paint,



Figure 2. Charles Emile Jacque, *A Shepherdess with Her Flock*, oil on canvas, 18½ x 27½ inches (Dahesh Museum Collection)

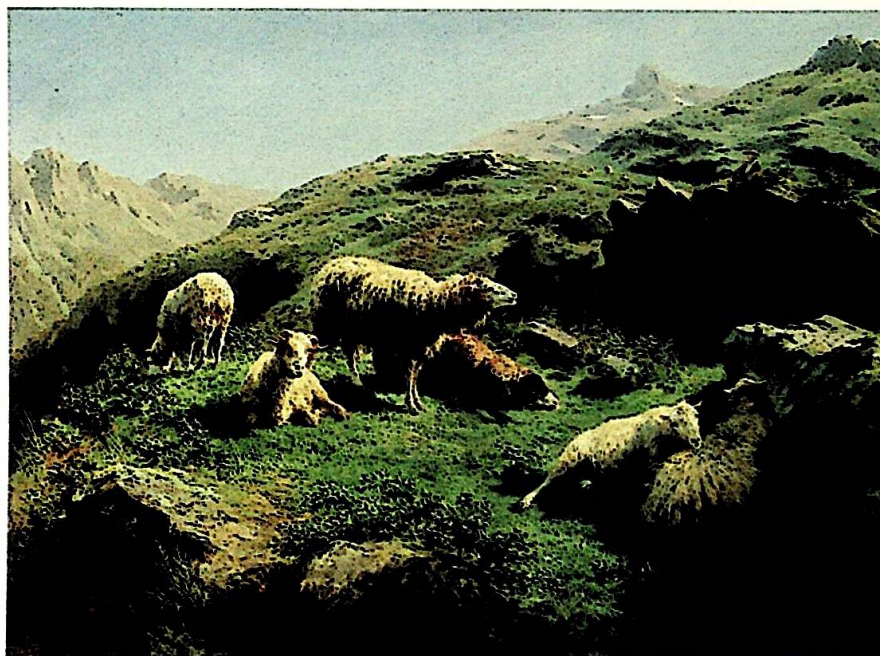


Figure 3. Rosa Bonheur, *Landscape in the Pyrenees with Grazing Sheep*, oil on canvas, 12⅝ x 17⅛ inches (Dahesh Museum Collection)

suggest that the work may very well have been left unfinished. The artist had already, however, captured the late afternoon light, the feeling of cooling atmosphere, a moment in time that would have been the envy of the Impressionists.

Charles Emile Jacques (1813-1894) was also associated with the Barbizon school. Jacques responded to the demands of the marketplace by specializing in sheep, but he was more than a workmanlike *animalier*. In the *Shepherdess with Her Flock* (fig. 2), dated 1852, the leaves of the trees take on that odd green that precedes a storm while the steely sky in the distance prepares to carry out the threat.

Rosa Bonheur (1822-1899) turned the painting and



sculpting of animals into an internationally recognized and commercially successful career at a time when being an artist was a difficult task for any woman. She garnered honors and awards for her work and then, having captivated the art world of Paris, retired to life in the country, where she continued painting her beloved animals until her death. This *Landscape in the Pyrenees with Grazing Sheep* (fig. 3) might have been modeled after one of the many drawings she did out of doors, such as a watercolor of the same subject also in the Dashesh Museum (1997.37, Gift of Mrs. Mervat Zahid).

Sidney R. W. Percy's *Little Langdale, Westmoreland* of 1870 (fig. 4) gives the viewer a bit of distance from the sheep and their caretakers and so moves us into the world of landscape painting, one with origins in the work of the 17th-century painter Claude Lorraine. This academic tradition is "classical" in that the scene represented is an idealized one. Although the landscape is "site specific," we can imagine that Percy (1821-1886), one of the most prolific and popular landscape painters of Victorian England, romanticized the vista before him in order to ensure perfect balance and harmony of composition.

Percy's fellow British painters William Powell Frith (1818-1909) and Richard Ansdell (1815-1885) collaborated on an

Figure 4. William Powell Frith and Richard Ansdell, *The Pet Fawn*, oil on canvas, 44½ x 35 inches (Dahesh Museum Collection)

Figure 5. Sidney R. W. Percy, *Little Langdale, Westmoreland*, oil on canvas, 24½ x 38 inches (Dahesh Museum Collection, Gift of Mrs. Mervat Zahid)





Figure 6. Adolphe-William Bouguereau, *The Water Girl*, oil on canvas, 63 1/8 x 28 7/8 inches (Dahesh Museum Collection)

of absolute reality, the scene is charmingly fictitious: the deer are remarkable for their comfortable ease in the presence of an alert Border Collie.

Adolphe-William Bouguereau's *The Water Girl*, painted in 1885 (fig. 6) also sentimentalizes rural life, for although he indeed used a young girl from his native village of La Rochelle as a model, she is so clean, so graceful, so content with her task that we may doubt that the jug actually holds water. Bouguereau's composition closely depends on classical sources, with the most immediate antecedent being Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's 1856 *The Source* (Paris, Musée d'Orsay).

Thirst, picturing harvesters at work, with one drinking deeply from a flask, was painted by Léon-Augustin Lhermitte in 1905



Figure 7. Léon Augustin Lhermitte, *Harvester Drinking from a Flask, or Thirst*, oil on canvas, 28 x 33 inches (Dahesh Museum Collection)

(fig. 7). His images of rustic life as noble and good are more realistic than Bouguereau's idealized *Water Girl*, even though they, too, were impelled somewhat by contemporary ideas conflating rural life with spirituality. Lhermitte's sketchy painting technique and convincing rendering of hot sun warming both the golden field of grain and its inhabitants owe more than a nod to the ascendance of Impressionism.

The Dahesh Museum, through its growing collection and active and thoughtful exhibitions, programs and publications, an expanding membership and public, and the promise of a new, much larger home, promises to play a special role among museums and arts institutions worldwide. The few paintings selected for this Loan Exhibition can only suggest the possibilities.

unabashedly romantic interpretation of country life in *The Pet Fawn* (fig. 5). This painting thus represents another strand in the broad realm of "country life," an escapist interpretation of the joys of the rustic life in opposition to the harsh urban realities ushered in by industrialization, realities which were at least of more social concern in the 19th century than previously. Despite the highly finished technique of these painters, with the resulting appearance