

# On the Masters Trail:

## *Investigating the Origins of Open-Air Painting*

By MADDINE INSALACO and JOE VINSON

**P**LEIN-AIR PAINTING IN OIL has its origins in Italy, not France as is commonly believed. The 19th-century French paintings of the Barbizon and Impressionist movements, so critical in the development of modern painting, were the fruit of a long history of outdoor painting by international artists in Italy, specifically in the Roman countryside, the famed "Campagna." In fact, there is evidence suggesting that this activity was practiced in the early 17th century, giving it at least a 350-year history, far pre-dating portable easels, paint tubes and all the tools that make open-air painting so accessible today.

We were interested in the historical masters who painted in this region. The editors of *Plein Air Magazine* asked us to explore and find the exact locations where these artists worked. As painters, we divide our lives between New York City and Italy, where we have taught landscape painting since 1995. Given our profession and physical location, it was natural to investigate the roots of open-air painting in the Roman Campagna. Realizing that many well-defined painting itineraries for artists in the 18th and 19th centuries are relatively unknown destinations today, we decided

to re-trace the steps of our artist predecessors. We followed the historical itineraries, located the traditional motives and gave them a contemporary interpretation by painting them ourselves. This was an ideal way to discover overlooked places in Italy as well as to connect with the very important tradition to which we were conscious heirs.

### ITALY AS THE SOURCE

During the 18th century, Rome had assumed a position of unchallenged authority as the art capital of the world. This was due to the achievements of the Renaissance artists, as well as the legacy of the classical antiquity of Rome that inspired them. At this time, any artist possessing talent and ambition knew that an experience in Italy was an important rite of passage on the path to success. For landscape artists, there was an



DETAIL OF  
OLEVANO, LA SERPENTARA



lago di nemi e genzano. N° 34. Doubts



VIEW OF LAKE NEMI AND GENZANO  
PIERRE HENRI VALENCIENNES (1750-1819)  
OIL ON PAPER ON CARDBOARD  
22 x 32 CM.  
LOUVRE, PARIS, FRANCE  
PHOTO: RÉUNION DES MUSÉES NATIONAUX, R. G. ODEA / ART RESOURCE, NY

additional attraction in that the two great founders of the Classical Landscape genre, French artists Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin, lived and worked in Rome in the 17th century. Paintings in this style contained figures based on ancient literary themes, surrounded by classical architecture, all placed in idealized landscape spaces that were directly based on studies made in the Roman Campagna. Famed for its ancient associations in the writings in Virgil, Horace, and Ovid, the Campagna had long enjoyed an almost sacred significance to artists and travelers alike.

The new spirit of empiricism that characterized the world of the Enlightenment underlaid a mass pilgrimage to the Campagna by artists in the 18th century. Painters were urged to study nature directly in order to reproduce the experience of the outdoors as accurately as possible in the studio. Pierre Henri Valenciennes, the French neo-classical painter and academician, who codified the practice of open-air painting in oil with his publication, *Elements of Perspective*, based his theories on practical experiences gained in Italy during the 1780s. Valenciennes even went as far to suggest in his treatise that landscapes made in Italy were superior to all others because *"the warmth of the climate of Rome endows all vegetation with a character of vigor that one does not find in Northern countries; the earth has a warmer color, the rocks stand out more forcefully, the greens are darker and more varied, the skies blue, and the clouds more colorful and lively."*<sup>14</sup>

By 1800, specific painting itineraries in the Campagna and around the Bay of Naples had emerged, representing a sort of Grand Tour for landscape painters. In the Campagna were three principal routes, each encompassing multiple painting destinations: the northern route to Civita Castellana and Piediluco; the eastern route through Tivoli to Olevano; and the southern route around the lake towns Castel Gondolfo, Albano and Nemi. The list of artists who contributed to this tradition is extensive and includes such masters as Claude Lorrain, Valenciennes, J.B.C. Corot, J.M.W. Turner, George Inness, Thomas Cole and John Singer Sargent.



LEFT TO RIGHT:

LAKE NEMI, PHOTO, VALENCIENNES' VIEW OF GENZANO OVER LAKE NEMI TODAY  
CIVITA CASTELLANA, PHOTO, SAN GALLO FORTRESS TODAY  
CIVITA CASTELLANA, PAINTING, VIEW OF SAN GALLO FORTRESS, JOE YOUNG, OIL ON PAPER, 38 x 38 CM.

OLEVANO, LA SERPENTINA, 1827  
 JEAN-BAPTISTE-CAMILLE COROT (1796-1875)  
 OIL ON PAPER, 33.5 x 47 CM.  
 KUNSTMUSEUM BASEL,  
 THE RUDOLF STROHELMAN FAMILY COLLECTION, KUNSTMUSEUM  
 BASEL, 2002. PHOTO: KUNSTMUSEUM BASEL, MARTIN BÖHLER

#### FOLLOWING TRADITIONAL ITINERARIES TODAY

Our intention was to visit, photograph and potentially paint as many of the traditional destinations as possible. There were, however, specific criteria that directed us in the selection of locations of greatest interest. First and foremost, we had to be inspired by a painting of an early master. The inspiration mainly derived from the beauty and natural drama of the place suggested by the image, rather than the formal qualities of the painting itself. Second, we favored relatively unknown destinations — for example, Olevano and Civita Castellana — because we hoped that they would be more likely to resemble the states as depicted in the 18th and 19th century paintings we referenced. Last, we would paint sites ourselves only if we had the opportunity to be relatively isolated from disturbances.

Most of the time, we had only a reproduction of a master plein-air oil sketch to point us in a direction. Well-known sites, such as the Coliseum in Rome, were not problems. In many cases though, 200 years of development or neglect had so altered the landscape that it was difficult to find what we wanted, and the identification process became an art in itself.

While we hunted for a medieval bridge in the overgrown gorges of Civita Castellana, the topography was so obscured by dense foliage that we were on the top of the bridge before we realized we had found it! During the centuries when Vanvitelli, Valenciennes and Corot were studying the gorges and cliffs of Civita Castellana, wood was the primary fuel for heating. The landscape was much more barren when nothing escaped the woodcutter's ax. In today's world, fueled by oil and gas, many sites we visited were in rough terrain, unsuitable for commercial or residential development, and they have been completely reclaimed by nature.

Frequently, we discovered that a particular site could be seen only from private property. We found ourselves making new friends in order to access a view and paint our pictures. This presented the immediate challenge of determining the owners!

Most property owners, when we found them, tended to be only vaguely aware of the artistic tradition that preceded us, but they were very helpful and willing to accommodate our requests. Often, it was from these contacts that we were able to see and paint the most exclusive, intact and suggestive sites of all.



LEFT TO RIGHT:  
 OLEVANO, PHOTO, VIEW OF COROT'S *THE SERPENTINA*  
 MADONNE INSLACCO PAINTING OF COROT'S VIEW OF THE SERPENTINA, 17 x 30 CM., OIL ON PAPER  
 MADONNE INSLACCO AT WORK

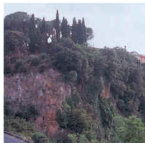




GEORGE AT CIVITA CASTELLANA  
JEAN-JOSEPH XAVIER BIDAULD (1758-1846)  
PHOTO: THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, STOCKHOLM



CIVITA CASTELLANA:  
JOE VINSON PAINTS THE TIRA CLIFFS



CIVITA CASTELLANA  
PHOTO: THE TIRA CLIFFS



MADDINE INSALACO AND JOE VINSON IN THE SAPSENTERRA



CIVITA CASTELLANA: PAINTING, TIRA CLIFFS  
JOE VINSON, 2004  
OIL ON PAPER, 56 x 38 CM

#### WORKING METHODS

To be true to the spirit of tradition, we were committed to following the practices of 18th-century artists for painting from nature. Our working surfaces were unprimed paper of small dimensions, and we used a limited palette in which earth pigments predominated. Moreover, the maximum time limit for each work was two hours. This methodology was theoretically sanctioned by Roger de Piles in his *Principles of Painting* in 1708, as well as by P.H. Valenciennes, nearly a century later, in his *Elements of Perspective*.

#### THE EXPERIENCE

One thing that most attracts us to early open-air oil sketches is their immediate and spontaneous quality. They have a timelessness that defies styl-

istic attribution. To modern viewers, they appear contemporary. We believe that this is due to the conditions of their production. The fugitive light of the sun forces the artist to work quickly and prevents him from allowing intellect and "culture" to intervene in the picture-making process. A good eye and a good hand are more critical to capturing the effect of light on objects in the open air, rather than stylistic ideas. This fact we realized was our main connection with our artist predecessors in the Roman Campagna. If we were all equipped with the same tools under identical conditions and constraints, our responses to our sensations of nature in paint would be similar.

It will not come as a surprise that often our enjoyment of a traditional motif was marred by a road, a power

line, an ugly building, or any number of things that have accompanied economic development in the last century. Unexpected however, were the rare occasions in which we found ourselves in places of extraordinary beauty that seemed unaffected by time. It was in these moments of diffused yellow light, in the company of sheep and goats, that we felt the draw of the Italian pastoral that so moved artists in Italy for centuries. ■

<sup>11</sup> P.H. Valenciennes, *Elements de Perspective Pratique*, p. 397 (1800).

Artists MADDINE INSALACO and JOE VINSON organize plein-air landscape painting workshops in Tuscany and the Roman Campagna every year from May through October. During the winter months, in addition to painting, they lecture on the Italian origins of open-air painting.