

Narcisse-Virgile Díaz de la Peña (Burdeos, 1808 –
Menton, 1876 France)

“The pond in the forest”

The creative light of color, the color shaping the volumes: the humid atmosphere emerging from those delicate tonal games in which Díaz was a master. The forest captured in a unique moment, fleeting and unrepeatable, an ephemeral moment of light and color; the artist trying to hide his hand but unable to hide his gaze, his love for nature as it is, without artifice or lyrical or intellectual constructions.

Oil on canvas

39'25 H by 50 W inches framed

35 H by 45'5 W inches unframed



Description and formal analysis:

Díaz demonstrates in this wooded landscape his magnificent gifts as a colorist; the tones illuminated by the silver light that seeps through the clouds and is reflected in the water, delicate and fresh, emerge from the ochre, green and warm earthy, revealing the magical character of real, everyday nature, far from any idealization. Next to the pond, a brightly colored spot: the red skirt of a woman walking on a cane, with a white shirt and apron and a yellow shawl that seems to reflect the golden glitters of the treetops.

Díaz's forests are known as the best of his work; perhaps his greatest defender was Théophile Thoré who, in a review of the Salon of 1846, noted that the artist "does not show us a tree or a figure, but the effect of sunlight on this figure or on that tree." Two years earlier, Thoré himself had written that "Monsieur Díaz has studied a lot in the most virgin corners of the Fontainebleau forest ... The trees, the terrain, the shadows of his landscapes have a strange and very poetic aspect." The Bordelès master was especially admired for his representations of the undergrowth, very often with small ponds in clearings under the canopy of trees. This is just what we see here: the trees, defined by the infinitely nuanced play of light and shadow, as Thoré pointed out, open to show us a clean pond whose mirrored surface reflects the cloudy sky. Through the treetops, which cover the entire upper half of the canvas, we glimpse the intense blue of a sky that, we guess, clears in its high part while the dense clouds swirl towards the horizon, over the snowy mountains.

The composition tends to symmetry, with trees that rise almost vertically on both sides of the pond, axis of the scene that also extends vertically, through color, in the sky visible in the opening of the foliage. On both sides the light fades, skillfully obscured by the wise hand of Díaz, master of the treatment of shadows and half lights. The color vibrates throughout the scene, the light reverberates and shapes the motifs, accurately reflecting the mutability of nature, the transience of the ephemeral moment immortalized by the brush.

Biography:

French painter of the Barbizon school, son of Spanish parents, Narcisse Díaz de la Peña began his training in the workshops of the Royal Porcelain Factory of Sèvres at fifteen, in 1822. There he was a disciple of the master Arsène Gillet and was employed as a decorator, although the rigid work schedule will eventually lead him to leave the factory to devote himself to painting in Paris, at the hands of his teacher and friend François Souchon.

In this first stage of his life he will paint oriental figures dressed in rich fabrics of sumptuous and bright colors. Admirer of Eugène Delacroix and fascinated by *The Orientals* of Victor Hugo, he created at this time some of his most admired works, within the romantic root orientalism so typical of the France of the moment.

However, his initial interest in the figure will decline in favor of the landscape, a genre in which all his mastery will be revealed. Around 1831 he will meet the father of the landscape school of Barbizon, Théodore Rousseau, four years younger than him but already brilliant in his approach to painting. Despite the initial opposition of Rousseau himself, at that time in his home for health reasons, away from the world, Diaz managed to earn his friendship and education. From 1837 he will be integrated in the Barbizon School, focusing on outdoor painting in the forests of Fontainebleau. His language will then evolve towards a masterful tonality, leaving behind its strong initial color.

Díaz has developed since then a work focused on the landscape, which he will sometimes use as a backdrop for the representation of allegorical, mythological or customary scenes. One of them, *The Descent of the Bohemians*, was a great success in the Paris Salon of 1844. Brilliant examples of his figure paintings are also *Diana* (1849) and *Figures and dog in a landscape* (1852), currently preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of New York.

For these same years, in 1849, Díaz dared to organize a sale of sketches and painted studies of the natural, instead of the finished works that the rest of the artists sold. Although at the beginning he would obtain a relatively low price for these studies, he repeated this sale annually and he got more and more benefits. In parallel he will continue to show his paintings in the Parisian Salon, where he was known as "charming colorist"; where he was

regularly rewarded and became awarded in 1851 with the French Legion of Honor. He also participated in the other great Parisian Saloon of the time, "the French Artists". With works such as "Autumn: the pond in the forest" (1867, Metropolitan Museum), it is appreciated how their language will mature, evolving through increasingly rich pigments unified by translucent glazes.

Although he had no renowned disciples, his material work and rich in light effects, is precursor to Impressionism, and it will influence notable painters such as Jean-François Millet. His masterful treatment of color was, on the other hand, the quality that most appreciated his style that was one of his most fervent admirers, Vincent van Gogh.

From 1862 Diaz will regularly visit the Normandy coast, where he will paint marinas with his friend Gustave Courbet. Despite his many friendships within the Impressionist movement, he will not participate in the group's first exhibition, held in 1874, due to his poor health. Already by then he suffered from tuberculosis, a disease that will lead to death two years later. This last stage highlights bright forest landscapes such as *The Edge of the Forest in Les Monts-Girard, Fontainebleau* (1868) and *In the Forest* (1874), both today in the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. In fact, today Diaz's works can be seen in prominent museums in both Europe and America, including the the Victoria & Albert and the Wallace Collection in London, the Metropolitan Museum in New York or The Orsay Museum in Paris, among many others like the Mint Museum in Charlotte.

Thematic analysis

Landscape painting as a modern genre was born in Flanders between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when we see the first natural scenarios without figures, that is, without a narrative theme as an excuse. During the 16th century, precedents are given: Dürer painted numerous landscape watercolors, and artists such as Joachim Patinir or Pieter Brueghel the Elder reduced religious or traditional themes until they became a mere anecdote or detail within the main natural landscape. In the first years of the 17th century we found in Spain an important precedent of the "pure" landscape: the *View of Toledo* from El Greco. It will therefore be in the Baroque when landscape painting is definitively established as a genre in Europe. Linked to the development of the bourgeoisie and Protestantism, it had its main core in the Netherlands, in Flanders and Holland. Painters such as van Goyen, Ruysdael, Hobbema and Avercamp specialized in pure landscape painting, and with them the

modern conception of the naturalistic landscape is born. In parallel, during the 17th century, the classicist landscape was born in Italy by the French painters Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain. Theirs will be scenes inspired by the ancient Greek Arcadia, mythical and idealized, set in natural environments arranged in the classical way, of harmonic compositions. Poussin, Lorrain and their followers tried to raise the appreciation of the landscape genre not only through the integration of nature with themes considered noble, but also by endowing the natural elements with allegorical sense and, above all, by emphasizing the heroic Nature's supremacy over humanity, something they shared with their Dutch contemporaries.

During the 18th century, the central focus of landscape painting passed from Italy and the Netherlands to England and France. The French Watteau, Fragonard and Boucher captured lyrical and romantic scenes – *fêtes galantes* – in their natural settings, glorifying the landscape through a delicate color and a precise and detailed treatment. The British Rococo, in parallel, has Richard Wilson as its main representative, who painted both calm and peaceful landscapes in Italy and in his native country.

The panorama will change radically with the arrival of romanticism, a movement that tried to replace the great canvases of historical or religious theme with the landscape. Their teachers Constable, Turner and Friedrich intended that the pure landscape, almost without figures or totally devoid of them, reach the heroic significance of the history painting. They were based on the idea that human feeling and nature should be complementary, one reflected in the other. That is, the landscape should arouse emotion and convey ideas. As the century progresses, however, the appearance of the Barbizon school will open a new path for the landscape, in pursuit of realism. Rousseau and his companions shared an interest in capturing nature through careful observation, and broke with the formal and balanced compositions of their predecessors in search of a more authentic description of nature, not caring that the result was less harmonious.

In the nineteenth century, American painters also burst hard, especially the Hudson River school. Cole, Durand and Doughty, founders of the group, celebrated the unique beauty of American virgin landscapes through dramatic effects of light and shadow and the detailed representation of the natural environment.

Finally, the last third of the nineteenth century is dominated by the Impressionists who, inspired by the ideas and practice of the outdoor painting of the Barbizon school, created a radical new conception of the landscape. They moved away from romanticism and realism looking for a

more subjective way of expression, and directly captured the effects of light and atmosphere through a flamboyant and material painting and a completely revolutionary use of color. The century ends with its direct followers, the post-impressionist Cézanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin, who opened the way for the arrival of the avant-garde in the twentieth century.

Historic context

In 1789 France initiated the change of political and social course that was going to completely transform Europe. The Revolution ended the Old Regime, based on the power granted by land ownership and inherited rights, and gave way to a modern world based on democracy and industry. The 19th is the century of revolutions in France; between violence, crisis and wars came the great changes that would profoundly transform not only the state, but also the mentality of the people. It was therefore not a fluid and constant process, but was characterized by conflict, by advances and setbacks.

At the fall of Napoleon, European attempts to return to the previous situation on the continent led to the restoration of the French monarchy, with the coronation of Louis XVIII in 1814. His supporters will then fight for the return to the Old Regime, but the new king who was conciliatory, dictated a constitutional letter that limited the powers of the monarchy and maintained some laws of the revolution and the Napoleonic era. However, at his death, in 1824, his successor Carlos X will develop a policy based on the idea of restoring the absolutist monarchy. The loss of much of the rights achieved with so much blood in 1789 caused, little by little, various social sectors to revolt. Revolutionary winds were running all over Europe, and again France was the first to rise in arms: in July 1830 there was a great uprising in Paris that culminated in a new monarchical restoration, this time of liberal court. A new constitution recognized national sovereignty again; the king would no longer be from the French land by divine right, but from the French by their will.

The first "king of the French", Luis Felipe I of Orleans, will govern until the arrival of a new revolution in 1848. The last months of his reign were characterized by the general crisis that was plaguing the country at a financial, economic level, political and moral, further exacerbated by the ultraconservative policies of François Guizot, one of the main representatives of the government. On February 25, 1848 the Second French Republic was proclaimed, initially markedly social. However, from June a moderate regime will be imposed, that of Luis Napoleón Bonaparte, who was first president and, since 1851, emperor of the French as Napoleon III, following the coup d'état of December 2.

Thus begins the Second French Empire, marked by the attempt to combine an authoritarian and personalist government with the maintenance of bourgeois liberal principles. Trying to restore the greatness of France, Napoleon III developed an active imperialist policy that would end with his defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71. This unstable context led to the Paris Commune in 1871, which will formally and definitively establish the republican regime in France. During the last decades of the 19th century, the Third French Republic will enjoy a certain social and economic development, while launching into the colonization of Africa and Asia.

School

Although Díaz participated during his youth in the French Orientalist movement, he will carry out the bulk of his work, the one of greatest artistic interest, integrated into the Barbizon school. This is a group of painters who gathered from the 1830s in this village near Paris, on the edge of the Fontainebleau forest, headed by Théodore Rousseau. Following the ideas of John Constable, whose works had been seen in the Paris Salon of 1824, these artists were interested in representing reality objectively, without embellishing or modifying it, moving away from any idealization and abstraction, whether intellectual or lyrical. To do this, they based their work on the careful observation of reality, painting directly in nature and paying special attention to light and atmosphere. They will therefore be painters focused on the landscape, who worked outdoors and practically did not retouch later in the studio. The Barbizon school was, therefore, an artistic movement that pursued realism, reacting to the romantic idealization and formalism prevailing at the time.

The painters of the Barbizon school were the main predecessors of Impressionism, not only because of what was already mentioned but especially because of their intention to capture a unique, fleeting and unrepeatable moment, a concrete moment of light and color. Large names in the history of French art from the second half of the 19th century, such as Corot or Millet, were part of the school. Already in the 1860s the painters of Barbizon will call the attention of a new generation of French artists, who would create a new language: Monet, Renoir, Sisley and Bazille, who in ten years later would develop impressionism.

Comparative study

Within the corpus of forest landscapes of Díaz we can find various representations close to our work under study, with a composition tending to symmetry and a landscape of trees that open towards the center, showing us the sky above and a clearing with a pond below. Especially close to our canvas is *The Forest of Fontainebleau*, 1874 (Metropolitan Museum, fig. 1), which also includes a female figure on the left side of the pond. However, we do not see here silver tones, but predominance of the ochre, and the space does not open up to the mountains, as in the painting under study, leaving a more closed, circular composition. Something similar occurs with *Claro in the forest* (Courtauld Gallery, fig. 2), also painted by Díaz in 1874, and with *Pond in the forest*, dated in the 1860s (National Galleries of Scotland, fig. 3). This last painting is characterized however by a more loose and material brushstroke, without the glazes characteristic of the final stage of Díaz that we do see on our canvas.

In fact, the work we studied could also be dated in the 1870s, in the last years of Díaz, judging by these remarkable compositional and formal parallels. Other works worked in a similar way, all of these years, are “*In the forest*” (1874, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, fig. 4), “*Forest scene*” (1874, idem, fig. 5) and “*The storm*” (1871, National Gallery, London, fig. 6), the latter close to ours not in its composition but in its chromatism, based on the contrast between cold and warm tones.



Fig.1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig.5



Fig.6

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