

# Gallery texts permanent collection second floor

## The Mesdag Collection

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## **Hall at stairway**

### **Barbizon en het bos van Fontainebleau**

In the 19th century the village of Barbizon, about 55 kilometres southeast of Paris, was a favourite site for artists. From there they headed into the impressive Forest of Fontainebleau known for its fanciful trees and rock formations.

## **First space**

### **Flock of Sheep in the Woods**

Constant Troyon (1810-1865)

oil on panel

### **Winter, undated**

Anton Mauve (1838-1888)

oil on panel

### **Sunset over a stormy sea, c.1895-1900**

Hendrik Willem Mesdag (1831-1915)

oil on canvas

Mesdag drew at the beach almost daily and worked up his sketches into large seascapes back in his atelier. In this scene the setting sun pierces through the clouds, lighting up the caps of the turbulent waves. Mesdag reserved a central place for this seascape in this room, thereby consciously positioning himself among the French and Dutch masters.

### **Pasture with cows, n.d.**

Constant Troyon (1810-1865)

oil on panel

### **Homeward bound, c. 1881**

Anton Mauve (1838-1888)

oil on panel

### **The Tour de Chailly at Barbizon, 1873**

Jean-François Millet (1814-1875)

oil on canvas

Jean-François Millet, the great interpreter of peasant life, lived in the French village of Barbizon. In 1873 he portrayed the nearby tower of Chailly. The scene is so thinly painted that the ground and black underdrawing are partly visible. Only the tower and the sky have been elaborated. Possibly due to a stroke the artist never finished the painting. Even so, this work – in which the massive tower takes centre stage – makes an exceptionally monumental impression.

### **The crooked tree at the Carrefour de l'Épine, 1852**

Théodore Rousseau (1812-1867)

oil on canvas

### **Boating, 1868**

Lourens Alma Tadema (1836-1912)

oil on canvas

When Mesdag settled in Brussels in 1866 as a beginning artist, he took his successful cousin Lourens Alma Tadema as his role model. The latter painted *Boating* on commission for Mesdag. It depicts a young Roman drawing a boat up to a quay for his sweetheart. Alma Tadema was inspired by classical antiquity. This is one of the earliest works in which he depicted the pastimes of wealthy Romans.

### **The mirror, 1872**

Laura Alma Tadema-Epps (1852-1909)

oil on canvas

Lourens Alma Tadema gave his wife, Laura, painting lessons. The precise execution and elongated format of this still life recall Tadema's own paintings. This depiction also refers to the couple's life together: a self-portrait of the English artist is reflected in the mirror, while her husband is symbolised by the Dutch tulip.

### **Still life, 1872**

Laura Theresa Alma Tadema – Epps (1852-1909)

oil on canvas

## **Second space**

### **Through the eyes of Vincent van Gogh**

In 1882, Vincent van Gogh, still at the start of his artistic career, lived for a short time in The Hague. There, he visited a large exhibition of contemporary French art from private collections. Fifteen of the paintings on display were from the collection of Hendrik Willem Mesdag. It was just a year since Mesdag had begun purchasing large numbers of works by French masters, having been enabled to do so by an inheritance. Full of praise for what he had seen, Van Gogh wrote his brother Theo: "There are many beautiful things there by Dupré, Corot, Daubigny, Diaz, Courbet, Breton, Jacque &c." In subsequent letters, as well, he referred to works he had seen at the exhibition, some of which have now been hung together in this room.

### **Letter from Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo, The Hague**

Saturday 15, and Sunday 16 July 1882

Transcription: 'I recently saw the exhibition of French art (on the Boschkant) from the collections of Mesdag, Post &c.

There are many beautiful things there by Dupré, Corot, Daubigny, Diaz, Courbet, Breton, Jacque &c. I especially liked the large sketch by T. Rousseau from the Mesdag collection, a drove cattle in the Alps. And a landscape by Courbet: yellow hilly, sandy ground, with fresh young grass growing here and there, with black brushwood fences against which a few white birch trunks stand out, grey buildings in the distance with red and blue slate roofs. And a narrow, small, light delicate grey band of sky above. The horizon very high, however, so that the ground is the main thing, and the delicate little band of sky really serves more as contrast to bring out the rough texture of the masses of dark earth.

I think this is the most beautiful work by Courbet that I've seen so far.

The Duprés are superb, and there's a Daubigny, big thatched roofs against the slope of a hill, that I couldn't get enough of.

The same goes for a small Corot, a stretch of water and the edge of a wood on a summer morning about 4 o'clock. A single small pink cloud indicates that the sun will come up in a while. A stillness and calm and peace that enchants one.

I'm glad to have seen all this.'

### **Autumn, 1865**

Jules Dupré (1811-1889)

oil on canvas

Van Gogh was impressed with Jules Dupré's dramatic approach to nature. Concerning this work, he wrote: 'It expresses that moment and that place in nature where one can go alone, without company.' This tree's richness of character is an example of how Dupré, like many other painters of the Barbizon School, created 'portraits' of trees. Van Gogh indeed characterised the work as a 'figure painting.'

### **Hilly landscape, 1858-1859**

attributed to Gustave Courbet (1819-1877)

oil on canvas

Van Gogh wrote Theo: 'The horizon very high, however, so that the ground is the main thing, and the delicate little band of sky really serves more as contrast to bring out the rough texture of the masses of dark earth. I think this is the most beautiful work by Courbet that I've seen so far.' Nevertheless, doubt today exists as to whether the work should be attributed to Courbet.

### **Moonlight, c. 1870**

Charles-François Daubigny (1817-1878)

oil on canvas

Van Gogh admired the free and experimental style in which Daubigny captured nature, as in this moonlit landscape. He wrote: "I can understand, though, that there are people like Daubigny [...] who are absolutely and irresistibly carried away by the landscape itself [...]." Mesdag, too, derived inspiration from Daubigny's technique, and employed the same brush technique and light effects in his Harbour at Vlissingen.

### **Sunrise, ca. 1870-1872**

Camille Corot (1796-1875)

oil on canvas

'For that matter, in Corot every tree-trunk is drawn and modelled with attention and love as though it were a figure', wrote Van Gogh. During the creative process, Corot applied several layers of paint and modified the tree's shape a number of times. He rendered leaves and branches by means of colour and variations in paint thickness, as well as by making scratches with the handle of his brush.

### **The pool, ca. 1870**

Virgilio Narciso Diaz de la Peña, 1807-1876

oil on canvas

Both Van Gogh and Mesdag had much respect for the suggestive character of the works of Diaz de la Peña, which were nonetheless highly 'readable'. Regarding another work by Diaz, Van Gogh wrote: '[...] is only sketchy, but perhaps precisely because of this it was a real joy for me [...] to see one again'. Even for a work by Diaz, *The pool* exhibits a very free brush stroke.

### **Text on wall**

picture: Academie van Beeldende Kunsten, The Hague, c. 1870, Haags Gemeente Archief

The exhibition of French masters was organized by the international art dealers Goupil & Cie, for the benefit of the Hague Academy of Art. The exhibition was held at the Academiegebouw, or Academy Building, on the Prinsessegracht. Five leading private collectors, including Mesdag, lent 51 paintings. The exhibition was such a success that it was extended by a week, and thus was on view for a total of five weeks.

### **Villeneuve-lès-Avignon, 1836 and c. 1865**

Camille Corot (1796-1875)  
oil on canvas

### **The descent of cattle in the Jura Mountains (sketch), c. 1834-1835**

Théodore Rousseau 1812-1867  
oil on canvas

In the late summer of 1834, Rousseau travelled and worked for two months in the Jura Mountains, where he witnessed the spectacular descent of a herd of cattle that lasted several days. The sketch that he made on the spot served as the basis for this large, elaborate oil sketch, which he painted upon his return to Paris. The oil sketch, in turn, served as a preliminary study for an enormous canvas (259 x 162 cm), also in The Mesdag Collection, which has seriously discoloured in the course of time.

## **Large Gallery**

### **Girl sleeping in the dunes, n.d.**

David Artz (1837-1890)  
oil on canvas

### **Beekhuizen near Arnhem, before 1891**

Sientje Mesdag-van Houten  
oil on canvas

This painting by Sientje, like the two centrally placed works by Hendrik Willem in the adjacent rooms, was intended especially for this spot. The Mesdags gave a great deal of thought to the placement of their own art amid the French and Dutch masters. With this broadly painted picture of a path along a brook, Sientje was seeking to position herself among the other landscape painters represented in their collection.

### **On the lookout, c. 1889**

oil on canvas  
David Artz (1837-1890)

### **Sunset, c. 1871**

Charles-François Daubigny (1817-1878)  
oil on canvas

Painting sunsets gave Charles-François Daubigny the opportunity of introducing colour into his landscapes. The red glow of the last rays of sun is beautifully reflected on the hide of the bull at the right. The artist spread thick layers of brightly coloured paint with a palette knife onto the canvas to suggest the sky and the pasture.

**Abandoned quarry, c. 1850**

Camille Corot (1796-1875)

oil on paper on canvas

**Near Vries, c. 1880**

Anton Mauve (1838-1888)

oil on canvas on panel

**Sheep, c. 1860**

Charles-François Daubigny (1817-1878)

oil on canvas

**Sketch for *Haymaking*, 1876**

Jules Bastien-Lepage (1848-1884)

oil on canvas

**At Scheveningen, c. 1876**

Anton Mauve (1838-1888)

oil on canvas

**Towpath on the banks of the Oise, c. 1875**

Charles-François Daubigny (1817-1878)

oil on canvas

**Road in sunshine, c. 1873-1877**

Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) (toeschrijving)

oil on canvas

**Landscape, 1882-1903**

Johannes Hendrik Weissenbruch (1824-1903)

oil on panel

Bequeathed by Mrs. C.L. Kayser to the Mauritshuis, The Hague, transferred to the Van Gogh Museum in 2011

The perspective that Weissenbruch chose for this landscape suggests that he was on the water. Yet we know that he rarely painted in the open air. During his walks around the Nieuwkoopse Plassen (an area rich in ponds and waterways), he would draw sketches, which later served as the basis for finished paintings in his studio.

The impasto texture of the cloud-filled sky, with a wide range of grey tones, shows that he worked on this painting for a long time.

**A Mountain path, c. 1872-1873**

Adolphe Monticelli (1824-1886)

oil on canvas

Monticelli made this painting in the environs of his native Marseille. This work, which could just as easily represent a stormy sea as a mountain path, is a veritable explosion of paint and colour. Monticelli subordinated the faithful rendering of reality to the expressive and tactile qualities of the paint. As a result, it is one of the most radical examples in Mesdag's collection of the artistic shifts that occurred in the 19th century.



### **Sheep on the heath at Lunteren, ca. 1892-1898**

Willem Steelink (1856-1928)

oil on canvas

### **Neighbourhood gossip, 1855**

Honoré Daumier (1808-1879)

oil on panel

### **Hagar and Ishmael, 1848-1849**

Jean-François Millet (1814-1875)

oil on canvas

This unfinished work occupies an exceptional place in Mesdag's collection because of its narrative character. The biblical figure Hagar turns away from her son Ishmael in the desert because she cannot bear to see him die of thirst. Millet concentrated on the figures, poignantly conveying their suffering by depicting them nude and filled with desperation

### **Watchdogs, c. 1829**

Alexandre Decamps (1803-1860)

oil on canvas

Alexandre Decamps cleverly depicted these watchdogs performing their task in this exceptional composition. The farm that the animals are guarding is small and fairly sketchily rendered, while the dogs are imposing and very effectively captured on canvas. The brushy coat and the snout of the panting white dog are particularly lifelike.

### **Old neighbourhood, before 1888**

Antoine Vollon (1833-1900)

oil on canvas

### **Cow walking, n.d.**

Anton Mauve (1838-1888)

oil on paper on panel

### **Sheepfold at daybreak, 1861**

Charles-François Daubigny (1817-1878)

oil on canvas

### **Roman gardens, 1877**

Lourens Alma Tadema (1836-1912)

oil on canvas on panel

Lourens Alma Tadema had been fascinated by Italy since his stay there in 1863-1864. The setting in this painting consists of a park in which he assembled classical sculptures from different locations. The scene exudes an Italian atmosphere, which is further reinforced by the warm, golden light.

### **The harvest, c. 1865**

Jules Breton (1827-1906)

oil on canvas

Like Jean-François Millet, Jules Breton specialised in scenes of country life. Here we see a man sharpening his scythe and a woman harvesting the corn. Breton rendered the atmosphere of a warm summer day using bright colours.

### **Sunset near Villerville, c. 1876**

Charles-François Daubigny (1817-1878)

oil on canvas

In the 1870s Daubigny produced a series of sweeping views of the Normandy coast, including this sunset. In this painting, the red glow of the evening sky stands out brilliantly against the bright blue of the sea. The expanse of the coastline is underscored by the horizontal application of the paint.

### **In Luxembourg, 1854**

Willem Roelofs (1822-1897)

oil on paper on panel

### **Undergrowth, 1852**

Théodore Rousseau (1812-1867)

oil on canvas

### **My nurse's cottage, The house of 'Mother Bazot' in Valmondois (Seine-et-Oise), c. 1874**

Charles-François Daubigny (1817-1878)

oil on canvas

### **Napoleon on St. Helena, c. 1826-1827**

Alexandre Decamps

oil on canvas

### **Stormy Afternoon, Noorden, 1880**

Willem Roelofs (1822-1897)

oil on canvas on panel

## **Fourth space**

### **Algerian woman, 1891**

Adolf von Meckel (1856-1893)

oil on canvas

### **Moonlit night, c. 1895-1900**

Hendrik Willem Mesdag (1831-1915)

oil on canvas

### **Winter in Heelsum, 1884**

Marie Bilders-van Bosse (1837-1900)

oil on canvas

Like Hendrik Willem Mesdag, Bilders-van Bosse studied painting under Johannes Bilders, a precursor of the Hague School. The two later married and made their home in the artists' colony at Oosterbeek. The Mesdags visited them regularly.

Bilders-van Bosse painted this wintry scene in a nearby village. The landscape is blanketed with snow and you can almost feel the silence.

### **Caulking, 1874-1875**

Hendrik Willem Mesdag (1831-1915)  
oil on canvas

### **The crows, 1870**

Emile Breton (1831-1902)  
oil on canvas

### **Lost in Thought, c. 1895-1898**

oil on canvas

Mesdag greatly admired the progressive and experimental work of the Italian artist Antonio Mancini, whose benefactor he was for over twenty years. In this painting Mancini used coarse brushstrokes, particularly in the girl's clothing. Her face is more finely painted, making her pensive gaze seem even more intense.

### **The windmill, n.d.**

Georges Michel (1763-1843)  
oil on paper on canvas

Georges Michel's landscapes are strongly influenced by 17th-century Dutch paintings, which he was able to study closely while working as a restorer at the Louvre Museum in Paris. The powerful brushwork and strong contrasts of light and dark in this painting recall the work of Rembrandt. Michel was admired by the Barbizon School painters and is considered one of their forerunners.

## **Fifth gallery**

### **Under the spell of nature**

#### **Drawings by Rousseau and Daubigny**

Théodore Rousseau (1812-1867) and Charles-François Daubigny (1817-1878) were among the artists who moved to the French village of Barbizon in the first half of the 19th century. There, in the ancient forest of Fontainebleau, they painted and drew nature without idealizing it. The Mesdags built up a substantial collection of works by Barbizon artists, the drawings in which were mostly by Rousseau and Daubigny.

Rousseau's drawings combined meticulous observation with personal contemplation. Trees to him were the 'souls of the forest', something he wanted to capture in his work. In doing so, he experimented widely with materials and technique. Daubigny too was strongly attracted to nature. In his case, the atmosphere of his moody and expansive landscapes was more important than precisely representing the scene.

### **A Wood at Sunrise, c. 1845**

Théodore Rousseau (1812 - 1867)  
chalk on paper

While out walking, Rousseau came across this clearing with a large oak tree. He concentrated on the backlighting, using bright and dark accents on the rough paper to capture the diffuse morning light. In the drawing on the right, the trees catch the full intensity of the noon sunshine. Sadly, the powerful contrasts between light and shade have diminished over time due to the yellowing of the paper.

### **Landscape with Trees and Rocks, c. 1845**

lithographic crayon with watercolour on paper

### **A Walker on the Track, 1860-1863**

Théodore Rousseau (1812 – 1867)

pen and ink on paper

Rousseau admired and copied the work of 17th-century Dutch masters. He collected prints by the likes of Rembrandt (1606-1669) and Jacob van Ruisdael (1628-1682). Their sketches and prints are recalled in this drawing by the depiction of a figure walking along a path in the countryside and by the scribbled lines with pen and ink.

### **The Great Oaks of Old Bas-Bréau, 1857**

Théodore Rousseau (1812 – 1867)

pen and ink on paper

Bas-Bréau in the forest of Fontainebleau was a favourite spot of Rousseau's because of the ancient oaks with their lofty trunks. He was impressed by the majestic trees and studied them closely. They clearly play the leading role here, given their central position, the fall of the light and the detailed representation. Rousseau later based a painting on this drawing.

### **The Edge of the Woods at Bas-Bréau, c. 1845**

Théodore Rousseau (1812 – 1867)

charcoal on paper, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Rousseau always chose his subjects with great care. In this sober, powerful study, he drew an excerpt from the scene to highlight several of the trees. Their distinctive outlines are clearly visible now that they have virtually no leaves. With a keen eye for their eccentric shapes and gnarled branches, Rousseau portrays them here in all their dignity.

### **Landscape with Draughtsman, c. 1865-1870**

Charles-François Daubigny (1817 – 1878)

chalk on paper

An artist sits on a stool in the shade to draw the landscape in front of him. Daubigny himself often worked like this. We might be looking here at his son and fellow artist Karl Daubigny (1846-1886), with whom he often went out drawing in the countryside. There is a sketch of the same landscape on the back of the sheet.

### **Evening, c. 1870-1875**

Charles-François Daubigny (1817 – 1878)

chalk on paper

### **Moonlit Landscape with Flock of Sheep, 1859**

Charles-François Daubigny (1817 – 1878)

charcoal, chalk, pen and ink and watercolour on paper

Can you spot the two dogs helping the shepherd to guide his flock of sheep to their resting place by the haystacks? Daubigny subtly captures the atmosphere at the end of a long day. The wide, horizontally oriented paper he often used allows him to emphasize the vastness and stillness of the landscape. The artist conveys the fall of evening equally powerfully in the drawing alongside.

### **Waterfall in the Pyrenees, 1872**

Charles-François Daubigny (1817 – 1878)

pencil, chalk and watercolour on paper

Poor health led Daubigny to spend a brief time in the French Pyrenees, where he made this detailed drawing. Impressed by the overwhelming mountain scenery, he wrote: 'What you make is always too small and never gives the slightest idea of the sheer vastness of that region.' This might explain why he opted here to zoom in so strongly and to swap his normally loose draughtsmanship for a more precise drawing style.

### **A Valley, n.d.**

Charles-François Daubigny (1817 – 1878)

chalk on paper

Daubigny sketched this valley in thick lines of chalk. The trees on the riverbank are anonymous landscape elements – quite different to the individual characters that Rousseau would have made of them. We can only guess which varieties of tree Daubigny drew here.