

Claude Lorrain's *Pastoral Landscape* (1645) at the Barber Institute



Pastoral Landscape, Claude Lorrain (1604/05-1682), 1645, oil on canvas, x cm © The Henry Barber Trust, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham (No. 53.6).

Transcript

Hello and welcome to this week's Tuesday Talk, part of a series of podcasts given by staff and students at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, at the University of Birmingham. I'm Robert Wenley, Deputy Director at the Barber Institute, and I'll be talking today about the history of one of the most sublime paintings in the Barber's collection, Claude Lorrain's *Pastoral Landscape of 1645* [No. 53.6]. This was treated by the conservator Ruth Bubb over the winter of 2019/20, and returned to the Barber just at the point we had to close, last March. One year on, what more appropriate picture could there be, to consider, and to delight in, as we finally emerge from the long dark months of lockdown, than this idyllic morning scene, bathed in warm and nurturing sunlight?

Claude Lorrain, born Claude Gellée in 1604 or 1605, was a French painter, draughtsman and etcher, who spent most of his working life in Italy. He was productive, with about 250 oil paintings, 1300 drawings and 44 etchings known today, large numbers when one factors in his reputedly painstaking and meticulous technique. Although one of the earliest major artists to concentrate on landscape painting, he turned many of his compositions into the more prestigious genre of 'history painting' by the addition of a few small biblical or mythological figures. Other landscapes, like the Barber's, are pure pastorals, or ideal landscapes, of which Claude has been acclaimed as the greatest ever painter, as well as the supreme master of the poetical effects of light.

Although Claude's patrons were mostly French or Italian, after his death and through into the early nineteenth century, he became very popular with English collectors, and his country retains a high proportion of his works, many still in country house collections. He

was also hugely admired by many English artists, not least JMW Turner, and also John Constable, who described Claude as ‘the most perfect landscape painter the world ever saw’, and declared that in Claude's landscape ‘all is lovely – all amiable – all is amenity and repose; the calm sunshine of the heart’. He might have been describing the Barber Claude.

Claude settled in Rome in the 1620s in a house near the Spanish Steps, remaining in that neighbourhood for the rest of his life. He did, however, travel quite widely and studied nature by sketching outdoors, making oil studies on the spot. He secured his reputation in the 1630s by winning commissions successively from the French ambassador in Rome, the King of Spain, and finally, the Pope. In about 1636 he started cataloguing his works, making pen and wash drawings of nearly all his pictures as they were completed, and on the back of most drawings he wrote the name of the purchaser. Claude collected these drawings in a volume he named the ‘Liber Veritatis’ (or ‘Book of Truth’), and we’ll be considering this precious resource, now in the British Museum, in more detail in a moment.

Joachim von Sandrart, a contemporary biographer who knew the artist, wrote that Claude ‘tried by every means to penetrate nature, lying in the fields before the break of day and until night in order to learn to represent very exactly the red morning sky, sunrise and sunset and the evening hours’. The Barber painting, with its golden morning light, is a wonderful example of the results of such study. In the left foreground are three figures, clothed in timeless loose robes, one of whom plays a pipe: hence the traditional title, ‘The Pipe Player’. But this is a picture purely about the landscape and the pervading sunlight, the figures providing little more than points of colour, and anchors to the compositional structure. Behind them

graze cattle and goats. In the middle distance on the right, beyond a pair of intertwining trees, is a group of peasants and horses. Above them, a cliff surmounted by a majestic but semi-ruinous castle. In the centre, a hazy distant view of a town.

The sense of perfect equilibrium in the *Pastoral Landscape* is no accident: the composition is carefully structured so that the ratio of the sections either side of a vertical line projected through the trunks of the central trees, is exactly the same as the ratio of the sections above and below the horizon line, which extends through the bridge. Furthermore, these lines intersect with the painting's top-left to bottom-right corner diagonals at the point the foliage springs from those same central trees. These ratios are close to, but not quite on, the so-called 'golden ratio' discovered by the ancient Greek mathematicians. Claude would have been aware of this ratio and is documented as having experimented with perspectival geometry, but it is believed that while he understood the principles, he used them instinctively. In other words, he wouldn't have set about his canvas with a compass and ruler but employed his experience and eye to create his own ideal, proportioned landscapes.

The complete composition of the Barber's Claude can be seen in the artist's copy in the *Liber Veritatis* [British Museum, London; LV 93]. The drawings in the *Liber*, as well as documenting much of Claude's output, apparently as a safeguard against forgers, are recognised as absolute masterpieces in their own right. Interestingly, the *Liber* drawing for the Barber painting, while indisputably recording its composition, is by no means an exact copy of it, with many details and even the scale of principal motifs differing significantly.

The back of this *Liber* drawing is inscribed, in Claude's hand: 'Quadro faict pour mr Fontenay' ['Painting made for Mr Fontenay']. This 'Mr Fontenay' can be identified as François du Val, the marquis de Fontenay-Mareuil, a French soldier, diplomat and historian. He followed a very distinguished military career under King Louis XIII, with an equally distinguished diplomatic one, which included stints as Ambassador to England between 1630 and 1633, and Ambassador at Rome from 1640 to 1650. He was a significant patron of the arts and a collector, also owning the very next painting to the Barber's in the *Liber*, a fine *Judgment of Paris*, now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. While presumably commissioned at much the same time, it is surprising that his two Claudes are in no sense pendants, being different in overall dimensions, figure scale, mood, composition and subject type.

The history of the Barber Claude after Fontenay's death in 1665 is obscure, until 1741, when it was engraved, in reverse, by François Vivares, with the lettering 'In the Collection of Thomas Walker Esq.'. This Thomas Walker [c.1664-1748], was a Commissioner of Customs and then, from 1731, Surveyor-General of the Crown Lands. Aged 69, he came late to a parliamentary career, making just one speech. He never married and died in 1748, aged 84, 'most immensely rich' – indeed said to be worth the vast amount of £300,000. He was closely associated with his friend Sir Robert Walpole, Britain's first Prime Minister. It was Sir Robert's own son, Horace, who described Walker as 'a kind of Toadeater to Sir Robert Walpole, a great frequenter of Newmarket, and a notorious usurer' – a toadeater being a sort of charlatan's sidekick, to add to the allegations of being a gambler on the horses and a loan shark.

Walker's main residence was Cannizaro House, Wimbledon; he also had properties in Lambourne, Essex and a Westminster townhouse. He used his wealth to become one of the major collectors of his time, acclaimed by a contemporary for his 'many well-chosen pictures, such as was recommended to him by the Virtuosi Club, called Vandyke's Club - or Clubb of St Luke'. The Society of the Virtuosi of St Luke was a small and exclusive social gathering mainly of artists, with some gentlemen, who met in various London taverns to discuss matters of taste and judgement. It has good claim to be the first organised artists' society in Britain, and Walker clearly benefited, no doubt for significant outlay, from their collective expertise.

Walker's collection, which was probably begun well before 1741, is well documented since it was kept intact for nearly a hundred years after his death, in 1748, and was published in several country-house surveys. It was closely comparable in taste with that of Sir Robert Walpole's in its particular mix of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century masters, with the Italian and Dutch schools predominating. There was a second, smaller and later Claude, with a mythological subject, even finer, according to an 1830 valuation, than the Barber Claude. The most valuable painting at this date was a fine Murillo *Holy Family* now at Harvard Museums in Massachusetts. Highlights among the eighty-or-so other pictures in the Walker collection included Italian paintings by Salvator Rosa, Carlo Maratta, Canaletto, and Guercino, and also a supposed Titian. There were superlative examples of English baroque portraiture by Dobson and Van Dyck, and several good Dutch works, including no less than twelve Willem van de Velde marine paintings, said to be the finest group in Britain.

Walker had no children and his entire collection, including our Claude, ended up with his niece, Emma Skynner. In 1750, she had married a William Harvey [1714-1763] of Rolls Park, Essex, which is where the Walker collection was displayed for the next hundred years or so. In 1819, the Barber Claude resurfaces when it was lent by Admiral Sir Eliab Harvey, Emma and William's son, to a London exhibition. Admiral Harvey [1758–1830] was eccentric and irascible, as distinguished for his lively private life as for his military record – which was considerable since he captained the famous *HMS Temeraire* at the Battle of Trafalgar. His volcanic temper led to frequent clashes with fellow officers, politicians, family and servants alike. And while he had inherited a considerable fortune, much of it was squandered in legendary bouts of gambling in London's clubs. Somehow through all this the Admiral kept the picture collection shipshape and afloat. It was only divided after his death in 1830, when, with no male heirs, it was shared out among his five surviving daughters. The Barber Claude then passed by marriage to the Lloyd family of Aston Hall, near Oswestry, where it remained until 1953. Soon afterwards it was sold by the London dealers Colnaghi to the Henry Barber Trust.

Claude's serene painting hardly betrays its distinguished series of colourful former owners - other than through the fine early eighteenth-century frame that surrounds it, which was almost certainly provided by Thomas Walker. While these men and their families were fortunate to be able to enjoy this masterpiece in their private mansions, it will soon be accessible again for everyone to enjoy at the Barber. I do urge you to visit when you can and escape your present cares for a moment by immersing yourself in Claude's idyllic and timeless vision.

Thank you very much for joining me here, and thanks to Jack Davies for playing his guitar compositions to accompany these talks. We have another in two weeks' time and look forward to welcoming you back then.

Select Reading List

Pamela Askew (ed.), *Claude Lorrain 1600-1682: A Symposium* (Studies in the History of Art, vol. 14), Washington, DC, 1984

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Richard Morris, *The Harveys of Rolls Park, Chigwell, Essex*, Loughton, 2005

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Marcel Röthlisberger, *Claude Lorrain. The Paintings: Critical Catalogue*, 2 vols, New Haven, 1961

Speaker's Biography

Robert Wenley has been Head of Collections and Deputy Director at the Barber Institute since 2010. He was previously a curator at the Wallace Collection, London, and for Glasgow Museums. He has published and lectured extensively on Dutch and Netherlandish painting and curated exhibitions at the Barber on paintings by Govert Flinck (2015/16), Jan Steen (2017/18) and Jan de Beer (2019/20).