JEAN-BAPTISTE-CAMILLE COROT
1796 Paris – Ville d’Avray 1875

Portrait of Honoré Daumier, in his studio

Oil on panel; c.1870-2.
34.9 x 26.6 cm


Corot and Daumier (1808-79), two major artists of the 19th century, became lifelong friends even though they each had a different approach to painting, and in the choice of subject matter. In the 1850s they both belonged to the circle of artists around Charles-François Daubigny. The artist Félix Braquemond recounted regular get-togethers at Daubigny’s house in Auvers-Sur-Oise: In my youth, I frequently dined at Daubigny’s house. Gathered there were artists whose conversations would abruptly change subjects — jumping from the antique torso to the boats filled with apples moored in front of the house. Animated conversations on the ‘direct study of nature’ or the comparative merits of paint dryers of Haarlem and greasy oil paints would often be interrupted by some funny comment — the product of the high spirits of one of these table companions who included none other than Corot, Daumier, Geoffroy-Dechaume and so on.¹ Both Corot and Daumier worked together and made major contributions to the decoration of Daubigny’s house.² Eventually, in 1868, when Daumier suffered from partial and intermittent blindness and became impoverished, Corot purchased a house for Daumier in the village of Valmondois-Sur-Oise. Corot had many works by Daumier in his collection, amongst them five paintings.³ How much Corot understood and loved the art of his friend is conveyed by Arsène Alexandre, who wrote about the collector Henri Rouart: M. Rouart fut avec le Comte Doria, celui qui (sauf Corot) comprit le mieux Daumier de son temps et l’aima le plus sincèrement.⁴

In the present painting, Corot has depicted Daumier in his studio at work on a painting. The subject of the painting on the easel is not clearly identifiable, but there are similarities with two of Daumier’s

¹ Madeleine Fidell-Beaufort and Janine Bailly-Herzberg, Daubigny, Paris, 1975, p. 41.
⁴ Arsène Alexandre, La collection Henri Rouart, Paris 1912, p. 35.
known compositions. According to Dieterle and Pacitti it is a version of Les Avocats (fig. 1), a painting that Daumier had given as a present to Corot in return for his generosity. Corot preserved it in his room, above his bed, until his death. Other scholars identified the work on the easel as a study for Un Wagon de troisième Classe, depicting a similarly arranged group of figures (fig. 2).

While the palette is primarily based on a monochromatic colour scheme of various shades of brown, the accoutrements of Daumier’s studio are clearly discernable. The only variation in colour is the white of Daumier’s hair and collar. The beholder looks over his shoulder and participates in the process of painting. In this aspect the composition is similar to Corot’s series of ‘atelier’ paintings depicting models seated beside an easel in the artist’s studio.

Corot painted another portrait of Daumier in his studio, showing him preparing a lithographic stone (fig. 3). In both paintings the image of Daumier is worked out in a monochromatic palette. The preference of a brown palette was also a trademark of Daumier and Corot may have adapted this technique for the portraits of his friend. On the other side it corresponds with a stylistic tendency in Corot’s work.

Gary Tinterow explained: He became increasingly suspicious of colour in the 1860s and 1870s. This turn of events perhaps reflected a shift taking place in public taste, or possibly a change in his own mood. Almost certainly it was bound up with the rise of landscape photography and the development of monotone calotypes printed in range of browns, greys, or greens. Corot was enormously interested in photography during the 1860s. His suppression of colour was something quite conscious and considered. He wrote: What there is to see in painting, or rather what I am looking for, is the form, the whole, the value of the tones. That is why for me the colour comes after, because I love more than anything else the overall effect, the harmony of the tones, while colour gives you a kind of shock that I don’t like.

---

6 Dieterle Pacitti, 1992, op. cit., p. 60.
Fig. 1: H. Daumier, *Les Avocats*, c.1860; oil on canvas, 32 x 41 cm.
UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA [Inv. no. AH.1990.1.4568]

Fig. 2: H. Daumier, *Un Wagon de troisième Classe*, 1863/66; oil on canvas, 65.5 x 90 cm.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer.

Fig. 3: J.-B.-C. Corot, *Portrait of Daumier*; oil on panel, 20.5 x 15 cm.
Private collection; (sold at Christie's, New York, 18 Feb. 1993, lot 11)