

# Rosa Bonheur's Dialogues with Culture

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*Landes Peasants Going to Market* (Figure 1) was painted in 1866 when Rosa Bonheur was 44 years old. This watercolor presents a view of peasants who make their journey across a barren landscape, an isolated, uninhabited area, as they move in a procession toward the viewer. The objects, people, and animals within the center of the image overlap, creating a feeling of unity and intimacy. The subjects appear to be casually posed as if this brief moment represents a pause during the journey between vast distances. Because Bonheur was known as a leading 19th-century French painter of animals, this watercolor emphasizing human figures is an atypical work. Although Bonheur is characteristically regarded as simply a realist, I wish to demonstrate her interest in traditional Christian iconography, an interest that is entirely consistent with her Saint-Simonian upbringing.

The rise of Realism in mid-19th century French art was an overt reaction against the NeoClassical and Romantic styles which had characterized the early part of the century. An important aspect of this new Realist painting was an emphasis on nature. A wave of animal painting in France was initiated by Constant Troyon (Figure 2) soon after his return from a visit to Holland in 1847. Troyon was excited by the tradition of 17th-century Dutch animal painting that included the work of Paulus Potter.

Bonheur demonstrated an early preference for rural subjects. As an adolescent, she received her artistic training primarily from two sources. The first source was the aesthetic and technical instruction she acquired under the tutelage of her father Raimond Bonheur, a painter who had been educated by a pupil of Jacques Louis David. Raimond encouraged his daughter to draw from plaster casts and to study subjects, including plants and animals, directly from nature. The other influence came through her preference of subject matter and the study of composition based on copying work of 17th-century Dutch landscape subjects at the Louvre. The theme of *Landes Peasants Going to Market* is reminiscent of engravings of provincial landscapes from the early 1800s in France: these always seemed to have included a cart, peasants and livestock placed in a barren landscape, a popular theme inspired by 17th-century Dutch art illustrating provincial life (Figure 3).

Although Bonheur's work clearly borrowed from Dutch-inspired subject matter, the technical qualities demonstrated in *Landes Peasants* more closely resembles the highly finished and detailed quality characteristic of British watercolor painting. In fact, it is closer to the British than the French

interpretation of this medium. Watercolor painting in the 19th century is known commonly as "The English Art." In England it was epitomized by such artists as Thomas Sandby, John Robert Cozens, Thomas Girtin, J.M.W. Turner, Richard Parkes Bonnington and Samuel Palmer (Figure 4). The height of British watercolor painting occurred in the 18th and early 19th centuries as the result of increased tourism. Watercolorists sometimes traveled with wealthy patrons who commissioned topographical memoirs of scenes encountered on their journeys. The medium conveniently lent itself to fast and portable documentation of familiar themes, including landscape and architecture. With the reestablishment of French and British relations after the Napoleonic Wars, English art was exhibited in Paris and was received enthusiastically.

19th century French watercolor (Figure 5) was still considered a preparatory medium. Watercolors in France were generally not intended to be viewed as finished works. They were regarded as inferior and unsuitable for exhibition in the Paris Salon until the 1870s. The Salon advised artists that watercolor was "an elegant and frivolous medium of no consequence"<sup>1</sup> and French watercolors were privately kept in artists' sketchbooks as studies, never seen by collectors or the public until after the artists' deaths. Often watercolor studies corresponded to large-scale, finished oil paintings. There is, however, no known larger or more finished version of *Landes Peasants* currently identified. Bonheur's watercolor was probably kept among the artist's archives and not intended for public view. She died on May 25, 1899. Her estate, including this watercolor, was liquidated at a sale in May and June of 1900. It included 892 paintings and roughly 2,000 drawings.

Unlike French watercolors which are usually studies, Bonheur's work is highly finished and carefully rendered. *Landes Peasants* measures 13 " x 21". There is an integrated softness about the work to which the medium and handling of the subject contribute. The watercolor technique is augmented with passages of crayon and gouache which display the painter's technical finesse and careful attention to details. Through her use of watercolor, a vulnerable and unforgiving medium, Bonheur had demonstrated the highest technical merit: radiant transparency, graduated wash, and transparent and white paper highlights. The paint remains transparent throughout with opaque color applied as delicate accents in the blossoms of the heather and in areas of darker value.

The color scheme of the picture is a split complementary arrangement. Red-orange is found in its most saturated

intensity in the woman's dress and is echoed in the distant landscape. The red-orange chroma transcends into a soft palette of sienna that is found in the bodies of the oxen, the cart, and the light sheep, and into umber in the dark sheep, the curly brunette hair on both oxen's foreheads, and the hair and hat of the man in the front. These warm rich tones are contrasted by the cool greens ranging from yellow to blue-green (in the grass and heather) to the faded indigo in the man's pants next to the cart. The sky extends this cool complement with a pastel colored atmosphere.

Crayon has been used in combination with watercolor throughout the lower half of the painting, in contrast to the sky which is pure watercolor. The crayon serves as a type of underpainting and is used as a preliminary step for laying down middle tones and shadows. It functions as a wax resist that envelops the lower half of the painting in a unified texture. The crayon only picks up the top surface of the paper while the watercolor is absorbed into the paper itself.

Above the blue horizon lies an open sky which is rendered by a graduated wash of robin's egg blue. There are a few stratus clouds above the horizon, which are rendered through careful restraint by Bonheur in preserving the white of the paper. This horizontal area of sky is linked visually to the foreground through dark lines representing shadows. Bonheur's brush work unites the painting through fine strokes which she has applied strategically with a small brush to imitate fur, grass, thistle, hair, and drapery folds. There are a few incisions in the grass that serve as blade shaped accents.

Bonheur's connection with England and with the British tradition of watercolor came through the phenomenal success of her most famous painting entitled *The Horse Fair* (Figure 6) which was exhibited at the French Salon of 1853. The painting was purchased by the English art dealer Ernest Gambart who also acquired the artist's copyright and mass marketed the image as an engraving. In 1856, during the enormous wave of this painting's popularity, Gambart invited Bonheur to make a celebrity tour of Great Britain. At that time she had the opportunity to meet John Ruskin, the famous philosopher, socialist, artist and critic. Ruskin was an important proponent of British watercolor. During his undergraduate days at Oxford, he had immersed himself in the watercolor paintings of J.M.W. Turner. In 1843 at the age of 24, Ruskin published a defense of Turner's watercolors entitled *Modern Painters, Volume I*. This publication established his reputation as the leading English art critic of the 19th century.

During her visit to England, Bonheur had dinner with Ruskin. At that time he advised her on two technical issues: he encouraged her to paint with watercolor and to render details with a fine sable brush, and to apply purple in the shadow areas of her paintings. He informed her to look for ingredients of red and blue.<sup>2</sup> A year following this meeting Ruskin publicly criticized Bonheur's *The Plow* in the publication entitled *Academy Notes of the French Exhibition of 1857* in which he wrote:

This lady gains in power every year, but

there is one stern fact concerning art which she will do well to consider, if she means her power to reach full development. No painter of animals ever yet was entirely great who shrank from painting the human face; and Mlle. Bonheur clearly does shrink from it...that if she cannot paint a man's face, she can neither paint a horse's or a dog's nor a bull's. There is in every animal's eye a dim image and gleam of humanity, a flash of strange light through which their life looks out and up to our great mystery of command over them, and claims the fellowship of the creature, if not of the soul.<sup>3</sup>

Less than a decade after this momentous meeting with Ruskin, Bonheur's *Landes Peasants* appears to respond to Ruskin's suggestions of 1856 and his criticisms of 1857. Her response has not been noted in any of the literature on Bonheur. The painting, for example, clearly displays an adept use of watercolor, including fine brush strokes that emphasize small details, and texture. It also contains purple shadows, consisting of red and blue, and an empathetic portrayal of both animal and human subjects. However, it is not known if Bonheur was aware of Ruskin's criticism concerning *The Plow*. Although her initial resistance to Ruskin's technical suggestions may have been largely due to cultural differences regarding the French and English traditions of watercolor painting, his insights seem to have had a lasting influence on her artistic development. This impact can be detected as early as the next decade. However, Ruskin was not known for his flexibility, and he continued to criticize Bonheur's work for another thirty years. He died in 1900, possibly never having seen any of her watercolors which reflected his technical advice. *Landes Peasants* was exhibited at the 1907 Royal Academy Winter Exhibition in London probably for the first time.

In addition to his fervent support for J.M.W. Turner, Ruskin endorsed the English artists Sir John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, and William Holman Hunt. In 1848 these artists founded the group called "The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood." This movement was based on the aesthetic notion that artists since the Renaissance had perpetuated a shallow imitation of the artist Raphael. The Pre-Raphaelites wanted to reestablish principles of academy training and to create paintings based on moral, literary and religious subjects rendered in a highly realistic and detailed fashion.

In 1855 William Holman Hunt exhibited three paintings at The Exposition Universelle in Paris. Bonheur no doubt became familiar with his work either in this French exhibition or during her visit to England. Since both Hunt and Bonheur were represented by the same dealer—Ernest Gambart—they may even have met. In *Landes Peasants*, Bonheur suggests morality through the use of subject matter in a manner akin to Hunt. Hunt's painting, *The Hireling Shepherd* (Figure 7) (1851), can be taken as an example of his approach.

It illustrates a story from the book of Job that expresses accountability to God for a day of labor. Rather than depicting devout themes only through overt religious scenes, Hunt and the Pre-Raphaelites also chose to express the concept of morality through a realistic genre portrayal of simple events where ethics and faithful details become inseparable and through iconic situations (the lamb and the shepherd are Christian icons). It is likely that Bonheur responded to the Pre-Raphaelites regard for subject matter and detailed handling in *Landes Peasants*. The impact that the Pre-Raphaelites made on Bonheur's art has neither been documented nor discussed in the literature.

*Landes Peasants* is a pastoral scene but it also contains elements with strong religious overtones. The interaction between the man leaning on the cart, the woman and the infant forms a trio that creates the central focus, drama, and theme of this painting. This trio suggests the Holy Family incorporating the Madonna and Child. There is even the disguised symbol of a diagonal cross strategically placed to the right of the woman and child, created by the railing on the cart. The dress of the woman is coincidentally reminiscent of Renaissance art. A white cloth covers her head and she is depicted with a white scarf around her neck and a long sleeved full-length gown free of adornment, with the exception of white cuffs (which might be considered characteristic of a later time). The use of red has been reserved for her alone. It conveys a sense of warmth, love, and health. This color together with a green or blue overgarment was commonly used for depictions of the Madonna.

*Landes Peasants* as both a picture of peasants and also as an icon of industrious life is entirely consistent with Bonheur's early indoctrination in the socialist and Christian beliefs of Henri Comte de Saint-Simon. The origin of the title *Landes Peasants Going to Market*—whether Bonheur's own (translated into English) or whether assigned by the broker when the painting was originally sold from the artist's estate—is unknown. However, the title should not mislead. Although the painting depicts a regional style of French provincial life, somewhat picturesque in its simplicity and selectivity, it also resembles the iconography of *The Flight into Egypt*, a grouping of man, woman, and child in transit.

To understand the attraction of this imagery for Bonheur, one must note that she was profoundly affected by her upbringing. In 1828 Rosa Bonheur's father, Raimond, became an active participant in the socialist cult of Saint-Simon. Throughout the period of his affiliation with Saint-Simonism, Rosa suffered tremendous ridicule and criticism. This difficulty apparently helped to fortify her beliefs. As a result of her early exposure to Utopian reform and feminist thinking that are part of the Saint-Simonian beliefs, she came to regard her independence and provincial sensibilities as her strongest assets. Throughout her life she also pursued the goal of emancipation for women.

Raimond Bonheur was an apostle in the Paris chapter of the Saint-Simonian society known as the "Brotherhood."<sup>4</sup> Members of the group adopted a reverent lifestyle with devout

practices. The Parisienne community of Saint Simonists had strongly incorporated feminist sensibilities, prophesying that a woman messiah would emerge to carry on after Saint Simon's death. St. Simon urged a return to the principles and doctrines of Christianity. Initially he founded his principles of reform on philosophical thought, but he concluded that this system of belief was morally and spiritually vacant. He believed that Biblical teaching promoted ethics and morality to create a harmonious society—although he rejected the divine aspects of the scriptures as antiquated and unacceptable.

St. Simon's emphasis on the role of woman as nurturer, life giver, and moral cynosure seems apparent in Bonheur's presentation of *Landes Peasants*. Additionally, St. Simon's desire to ground Christianity in daily living is echoed by this watercolor's emphasis on the naturalistic presentation of a scene from daily life which can be regarded as spiritual, iconographic, secular and regional. The peasants in this watercolor are wearing the typical dress of the Landes area that is still worn today for festivals (Figure 8). Bordering on the Atlantic Ocean, this department encompasses terrain which, as the painting demonstrates, is the plateau of the Massif Central where cattle and sheep herders migrate with their flocks during the summer months. The Michelin Guide for the Causses region of France describes this migratory practice as follows:

As soon as the spring comes the troops from Southern Lanquedoc leave their dried pasturage in order to go into the Cevennes and coastal mountains. This is called the 'trans humance.' For centuries they've been following the same routes....Until the end of October they live outdoors under the surveillance of shepherds and their dogs.<sup>5</sup>

*Landes Peasants Going to Market* appears to depict the migration home at the end of the summer season. It is likely that the feed for the cattle is being provided by the fresh green hay in the cart since oxen cannot survive on lands that can support sheep. The hay also symbolizes the harvest. Stilts are typically used by the men of Landes not only to protect their feet from injury while walking, but also to provide an elevated vantage point for locating and maintaining the flock while in transit. So, while the appointments are bucolic and specific—the stilts, the wagon, the sheep—the focus is more transcendent.

The painting emphasizes the peasants' creation of plentiful harvest, a harvest that is represented by the flock, the hay, and the child. Although Bonheur was regarded as one of the prominent animal painters of the 19th century, she on occasion attempted a wider range of subject matter as my analysis of this watercolor suggests. Even though she was sought by wealthy patrons that included prominent members of European royalty, she continued to make private works of art. I feel she responded to Ruskin's criticisms as well as integrating aspects of her Saint-Simonian heritage into her depiction of reality. In *Landes Peasants*, she pulled together both local customs and the traditional iconography of the flight

of the Holy Family to create a synthesis of spiritual imagery and humble contemporary practices.

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<sup>1</sup> François Daulte, *French Watercolors of the 19th Century* (New York: The Viking Press, 1970) 15.

<sup>2</sup> Dore Ashton, *Rosa Bonheur: A Life and a Legend* (New York: Viking Press and London: Secker and Warburg, 1981) 111.

<sup>3</sup> Ashton 112.

<sup>4</sup> Saint-Simon, a French aristocrat born in 1760, inspired the concept of "Technocracy" which consisted of a government ruled by scientific experts. His philosophy was based on linking science with industry. He defined *science* as the pursuit of knowledge whereas *industry* was labor. He proposed a three-tiered system of government which he regarded as an economic force rather than as a political structure. The first tier was to be occupied by artists and engineers. Their proposals were to be examined by the second tier consisting of scientists who were responsible for education. The third tier was comprised of industry for the purpose of organizing labor. St. Simon envisioned an ideal society in which every individual was employed through a redistribution of wealth and land ownership.

<sup>5</sup> *Tourisme Michelin Causses*, (Clermont-Ferrand, France: Michelin et Cie., owners and editors, 1982) 26.



Figure 1. Rosa Bonheur, *Landes Peasants Going to Market*, 1866, watercolor and crayon on paper, 13 1/4" x 21 3/8". Courtesy of the Appleton Museum of Art, Ocala, Florida.



Figure 2. Constant Troyon, *The Morning*. The Louvre, Paris.



Figure 3. Salomon van Ruysdael, *Road in the Dunes with a Passenger Coach*, 1631, oil on panel, 22" x 34", Szepmuveszeti Muzeum, Budapest, Hungary.



Figure 4. Samuel Palmer, *A Dream in the Apennine*, (exhibited 1864), watercolor on paper, 26" x 40". Courtesy of the Tate Gallery, London.

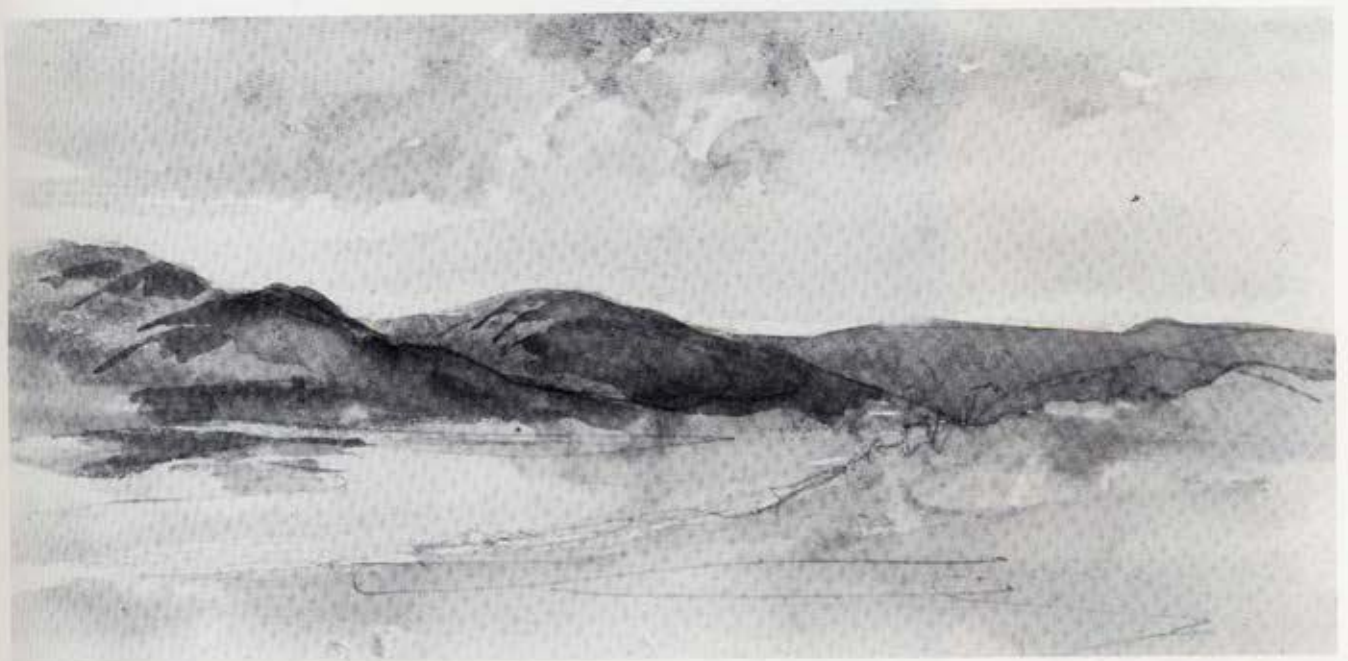


Figure 5. Ferdinand Victor Eugène Delacroix, *Landscape of Tangiers*, c. 1832, watercolor on paper, 4 1/8" x 8 7/16". Courtesy of The Seattle Art Museum.

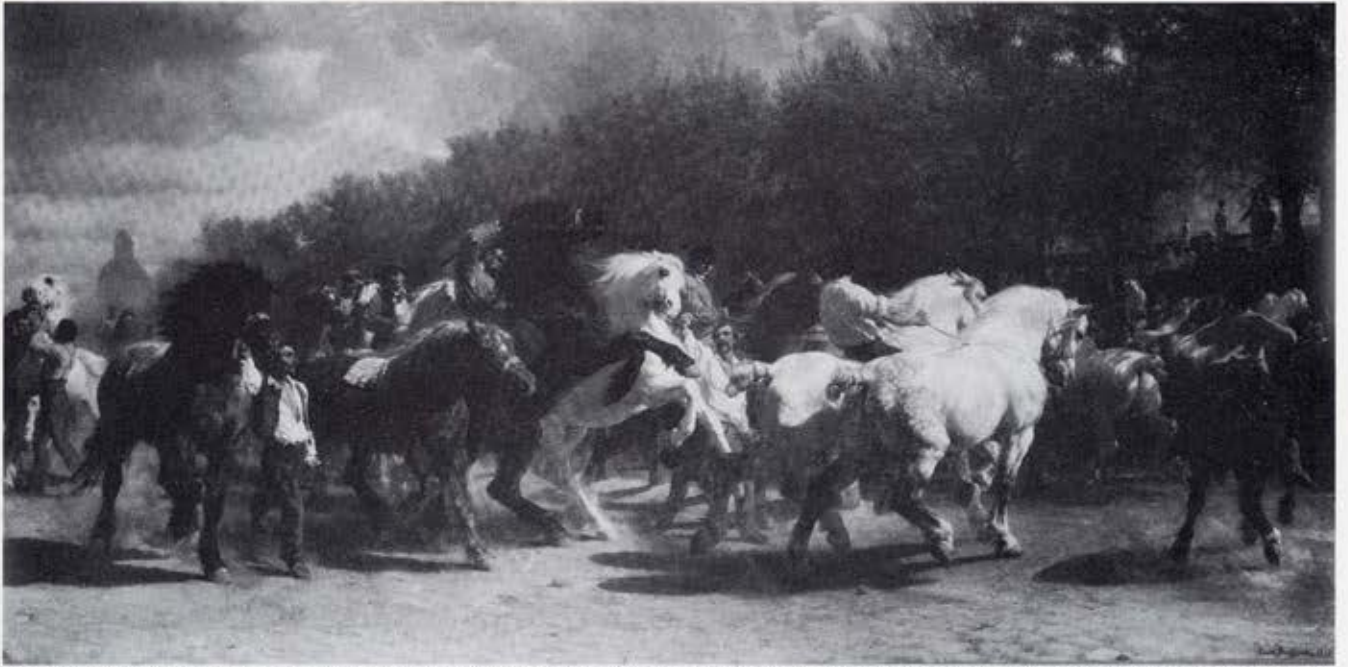


Figure 6. Rosa Bonheur, *The Horse Fair*, 1853, oil on canvas, 8' 1/4" x 16' 7 1/2". Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Detail of *The Horse Fair*.



Figure 7. William Holman Hunt, *The Hireling Shepherd*, 1851, oil on canvas, 30" x 42 1/2". Courtesy of the Manchester City Art Gallery.

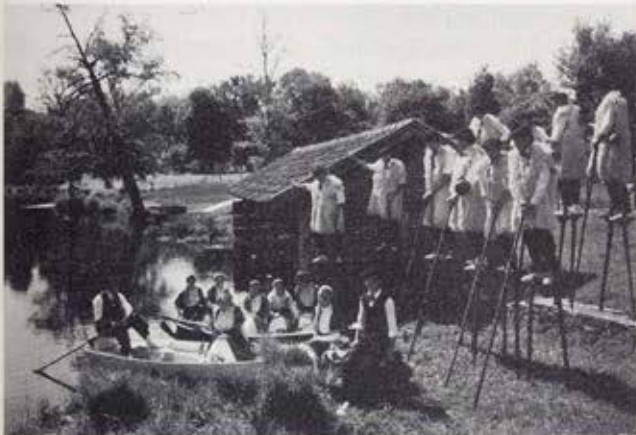


Figure 8. *Landes Peasants in Regional Costume*, 1983, photograph, (travel calendar from France).