

# Forestry and painting – how the two might shed light on each other

by A. J. Moffat

---

**SUMMARY:** This paper reviews the extent to which paintings of trees, woods and forests have been taken up and appreciated by the forestry and arboricultural professions. It selectively points to some works of art that illuminate from an historical perspective, and gives examples of paintings from which insight can be gained to the benefit of both forestry and artistic vocations. Further co-operation between these professions is encouraged in order that greater value can be obtained from works of art.

---

## Introduction

During man's evolution, trees have been ubiquitous over almost all global terrestrial landscapes. It is no wonder therefore that their images have been captured and developed in objets d'art from ancient Greek times onwards. Trees have been influential both as subjects in their own right, and as integral components of rural and urban landscapes. Almost all of the most well known painters in the western world have used trees as subject matter during their careers, and many have enjoyed reputations based partly on their ability to compose and paint pictures containing trees. Trees have also attracted amateur painters, for example Winston Churchill.

As well as components of landscape art, the size, shape and topology of a tree's roots, trunk and branches, plus the changing visual nature of a tree through the four seasons have allowed artists to use trees as metaphors for a range of subjects, including life, death, knowledge, religion and nature. Trees are almost infinitely adaptable in art, and have been used in a variety of ways to help frame a picture,

provide contrast and add meaning to it. It is therefore no surprise just how many paintings contain trees, either singly, in groups or as woodland and forest. Trees have also been used in abstract art, with the tree motif inspiring artists to experiment further with interconnecting shape and leave botanic relevance behind.

The importance of trees is well known in artistic circles, but it is in comparatively recent times that the role of art in the forest has been explored. Perhaps the earliest example of purposeful introduction of artistic objects into woods and forests in the UK was by the Grizedale Society. This was founded in 1968 by the Forestry Commission to further the arts in Grizedale forest (Grant and Harris, 1991). In 1977, approximately 90 sculptures were erected in the forest, an initiative widely copied since then. Today, there is a renaissance of interest in understanding how art can enhance the woodland experience for visitors, and thereby increase both numbers of visitors, and their sense of enjoyment.

There is also a growing appreciation of the interaction of forestry and aesthetics at the landscape scale, and the need to address this through forest design, often a result of consultation and agreement between the industry and local communities. High quality design can greatly enhance the appearance of woods and forests, and thereby add to the enjoyment and experience of those who live near or visit them.

The forestry sector is thus becoming exposed to the interplay between forestry and artistic movements. However, it has seemingly been slow to grasp the value that fine art, notably in paintings from the Masters, has in enhancing the appreciation of woods and forests, and helping to put an historic perspective to man's interplay with them. In addition, historic paintings and drawings of trees can help in the scientific understanding of anatomy and architecture and the influence of environmental and cultural factors on trees, woodlands and forests. Finally, looking at paintings through

the eyes of the painter, as far as this is possible, can give insight into the ways that trees and woodlands enhance well-being and sense of place for human society. This article introduces the place of trees in art, focusing on a small selection of European painters mainly active in the nineteenth century.

## **Previous interest**

The literature examining trees in art appears to be comparatively light. From an early review by Pythian (1907), Cole (1915) devoted a whole book to the artistic anatomy of trees, and how artists could approach their painting – it is still in print, testifying to the continued interest in this subject! More recent academic interest in the subject has mainly come from Europe (e.g. Malbos, 1984; Gercke, 1985; Schütz, 1994). Simon Schama published an important book in 1995 ‘Landscapes and Memory’ (Schama, 1995), in which he explored the interrelationship between culture and nature, including the influence of trees, woods and forests in art. In 1998, the Beyeler Foundation curated an significant exhibition entitled “*The Magic of Trees*” in Switzerland (Fondation Beyeler, 1998). A stated aim of this exhibition was to heighten awareness of ‘the gifts that trees give us, of how they protect us....’, - with early reference to the climate mitigation role of global forests. A good review of the value of art based around trees is provided by Hohl (1998). Subsequently, a few others have also sought to harness the accessibility of art to help explain forests and forestry to dominantly urban audience and to explore people’s understanding of forestry issues (e.g. Withrow-Robinson et al., 2002). In the last few years, Carey (2012) and Anderson et al. (2013) have discussed the influence of the tree in art, whilst Barringer et al. (2012), Skea (2013) and Charles and Shuvalova (2013) have

provided comprehensive catalogues of tree and woodland art for David Hockney, Vincent van Gogh and Ivan Shishkin (the ‘Tsar of the Forest’) respectively.

### **Some notable tree painters and paintings**

This article only permits a short review of this subject, and it is inevitably a selective and personal one. Table 1 presents a review of some well known artists and paintings where particular tree species have been the subject matter, and identified in the painting title. Table 2 gives locations of web-based images of the paintings named in the article – each is identified by a numerical subscript.

Durer (1471-1528) was perhaps the first to focus on the detailed anatomy of a single tree, with a skilled, detailed and well observed delivery of a linden tree (*Linden Tree on a Bastion*<sub>1</sub>, 1494) in the late 1400s. Constable (1776-1837) and Van Gogh (1853-1890) are amongst a few others to concentrate on the form and appearance of a single tree trunk. Mostly, however, artists choose to put trees of particular species in a landscape context. Many artists select broadleaved trees, notably poplars, but conifers are also well represented. Of course, painters in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have increasingly painted these in different styles and with increasing abstraction. Mondrian (1872-1944) is perhaps the best known exponent with his series of painting of Eucalyptus trees, starting with a recognisable tree form in *Evening; Red Tree*<sub>2</sub> (1908), before moving through increasingly abstract images where the tree form remains visible (e.g. *The Grey Tree*<sub>3</sub>, 1911/12) to *Composition Trees II*<sub>4</sub> (1912) where adherence to a Cubist methodology makes it impossible to discern a tree form at all. Nevertheless, all these paintings are valuable in providing an historical context for trees in their landscapes, and in many cases a reassuring link from the past to the present day.

## **Trees in the silvicultural landscape**

For the most part, modern artists have used trees for reasons other than to paint direct imagery of them. The use of the tree motif depends in part on the prevalent art movement in vogue at the time of the painting, and the chosen artistic path that the painter chose at this time. Not surprisingly, landscape artists such as Rubens (1577-1640), Gainsborough (1727-1788), Turner (1775-1851) and Constable have captured trees as a matter of some routine. However, care must be taken in interpretation if one wishes to study trees, woods or forests from an historical or geographical perspective. For example, artists like Lorrain (c. 1600-1682) and Constable used *repoussoir*, a technique whereby an object such as a tree is placed along the right or left foreground in order to direct the viewer's eye into the composition by bracketing or framing the edge. Inspection of Lorrain's tree images reveals that he selected from a small set of tree trunk, crown and tree architectural shapes, and used very similar ones in a number of his paintings. Indeed, early paintings in the landscape tradition were often produced in the artist's studio, and well before photographs were used to supply landscape images to base the painting on. In *The Leaping Horse*<sup>5</sup> (1825) by Constable, for example, there is clear evidence of the relocation of a tree (stump) during the transition from sketch to the painting of the picture, demonstrating that tree position in the landscape cannot always be taken literally.

Nevertheless, images of trees, woods and forests in the landscape fine arts can teach us a considerable amount about their nature, how they were used and managed, and how they fitted into the social fabric of the society at the time. From pastoral scenes painted by artists such as Rubens, Gainsborough and Constable, we can gain immediate impressions of rural life in general, and aspects such as the probable

disposition of young and mature trees in the agricultural and parkland landscapes (e.g. before significant browsing from deer and squirrels), the relationship between woodland management and stock husbandry, tree pollarding and cutting and the use of woodland products (e.g. in farm buildings and for firewood). For images of the social use of urban treescapes, those painted by Max Liebermann (1847-1935), an important Impressionist in Germany, are compelling: *Children's Playground in the Tiergarten in Berlin*<sup>6</sup> (c.1885) and *Terrace at the Restaurant Jacob in Nienstedten on the Elbe*<sup>7</sup> (1902) are excellent, and also show the use of shade trees in the settings of a restaurant and a children's playground. Certainly we must always acknowledge that painters will interpret what they see, unless motivated by artistic realism or naturalism schools of thought. However, even accepting artistic licence there remains an immense amount of valuable material for the student of historical woodland management – artists from the period under study will be significantly influenced by what they see!

Paintings can also give important reference points when we wish to examine current silvicultural and arboricultural issues. Thus, they can reveal the typical density of tree crowns before any possible reduction as a result of post industrial revolution atmospheric pollution – it is remarkable that many paintings in the 19th century illustrate that trees with poor crown cover were commonplace across a range of landscapes and countries, suggesting that current models of crown damage in the absence of atmospheric pollution (e.g. Lorenz and Becher, 2012 ) are probably too exacting. Another example is the nature of tree form where another useful benchmark is gained from the study of 19th and 20th century paintings, before significant breeding programmes were put in place to improve timber quality. Nevertheless, care must be taken to account for artistic interpretation – for example, tree forms offered

by Corot (1796-1875) are usually non vertical and lack apical dominance. A third example is to study the spatial distribution of different diameter classes of trees in natural or semi-natural woodland (e.g. via paintings such as *Forest of Beech Trees*<sub>8</sub> (c.1903), by Klimt (1862-1918)).

A final example is to examine tree planting methods used in a variety of European countries. Here paintings by Sisley (1839-1899) (*Montmartre from the Cite des fleurs*<sub>9</sub>, 1869) and Schiele (1890-1918) (*Bare trees*<sub>10</sub>, 1912) both reveal the use of tall wooden stakes, and by implication the nursery supply and use of tall tree stock, in contradiction to modern guidance. Smith (2000) discusses the use of stakes in Schiele's paintings. Whilst acknowledging the common sight of 'trees bound to firm props' in the Austrian landscape, she considers those in the paintings unlikely to refer 'back to some witnessed and identifiable scene', and instead used as an artistic device. An alternative view is that it was the prevalence of the stakes in the landscape which influenced Schiele how he would represent treescapes, and thus include them as an integral part. Certainly there is evidence that their form was represented realistically (for example, note the tie between stake and tree in *Bare trees*), though the use of coloured stakes in some paintings (e.g. *Spring Landscape with Red Sky*<sub>11</sub>, 1911; *Early Spring*<sub>12</sub>, 1913) is probably artistic interpretation.

## **Two examples of tree painting interpretation**

*The yellow log*<sub>13</sub> (1911-12) by Edvard Munch

Edvard Munch (1863-1944), the Norwegian Expressionist, used trees and forests in many of his works, single trees often separating a man from a woman in paintings denoting the relationship between them, and in at least two showing the sign of branch pruning, possibly signifying impotence. He painted a realistic but passive

picture of a tree logger (*The Lumberjack*<sup>14</sup>) in 1913, one of few paintings from this era that captures forestry activity. Forest scenes are almost invariably, and not unexpectedly of conifers. However, some seem to convey a sense of mystery or foreboding (e.g. *Children towards the Fairytale Forest*<sup>15</sup>, 1901-02).

The painting of *The Yellow Log*<sup>15</sup> (1911-12) is composed of a mature conifer stand of low tree density in a snowy, wintry scene. The colours, although vibrant, are realistic and the trunk colour and texture indicate that the main species is Scots pine. While suggestive of a singular log, the title is misleading as there are several yellow logs in the picture, suggesting that Munch was recording an actual forest scene rather than creating an artistic implant. Like *The Lumberjack*, this is one of very few nineteenth century paintings which depicts forest operations – here tree felling in advance of extraction. But it is notable that the felled trees have been both delimbed and debarked whilst in the stand. And, of course, the timber is bright yellow.

Why were the yellow logs delimbed and debarked? Obviously, it gave Munch the opportunity to give a yellow colour to the cambium, sapwood and heartwood, (the latter two seen in the cross sections of the trunks). But if a real forest scene, it is interesting to consider whether these operations did take place, and why. One explanation is that the timber was prepared for transportation by river – debarking improved buoyancy (Winberg, 1944, cited in Törnlund and Östlund, 2006), and most timber was transported to mills and markets by river in Sweden (Törnlund and Östlund, 2006) and elsewhere in Scandinavia in the early part of the twentieth century.

Why yellow logs? Certainly, Munch is well known for his expressive use of colour, and the eye catching exaggerated perspective represented by the logs reaching into the forest, in contrast to the vertical lines of the unfelled trees, creates a vivid

three dimensional view. But perhaps the logs were unusually yellow and perhaps, therefore, of artistic merit.

*The Four Trees*<sup>16</sup> (1917) by Egon Schiele

From 1911 until 1917, Schiele, the Austrian Expressionist, periodically used the tree motif as a base for a series of ‘treescapes’ (Smith, 2000). *The Four Trees* is an arresting portrait of four similar sized, presumably mature chestnut trees in front of an evening sky suffused with layers of alternating grey, yellow and orange hues caused by a sun set below the horizon. The leaves, individually painted and much larger and fewer than in reality, are brown in colour, suggesting autumn. The two trees at each end of the sequence of four show relatively full and symmetrical crowns but noticeably, one of the trees, the second in the sequence, has poor crown density, suggesting significant and premature leaf loss compared to the others. The third tree in the sequence shows a full but asymmetrical and misshaped crown.

What are the reasons behind Schiele’s choice of tree shape? Of the painting, Leopold (2010) suggested that ‘this is a compelling symbol of the beauty of the world but at the same time of the natural cycle that ends in death’, and it is not the place of this article to challenge such an interpretation. But it is worth considering whether the picture might have been inspired, at least in part, by actual trees displaying such phenomena. In addition, it is interesting to speculate why only one of the trees was shedding its leaves prematurely. The picture gives no clues about possible differences in site and soil conditions. However, it is noteworthy that whilst the trunks of the other trees are coloured brown, the tree with the thin crown has an orange trunk. Orange bark is a sign of chestnut blight (*Cryphonectria parasitica*), when covered by the yellowish or orange fruiting bodies (*pycnidia*) of the fungus although it is

unknown for this to spread across the whole of the trunk and branch network. Nevertheless, its occurrence on a diseased chestnut tree might have been the inspiration behind Schiele's use of this colour, and its association with a thin tree crown. The fascinating aspect of this conjecture is that it might point to the occurrence of chestnut blight in Europe several decades before it was formally recognised in Italy in 1938 (EPPO, 2004).

Similar studies in comparative leaf fall can be found in Hodler's (1853-1918) paintings of *Autumn evening*<sup>17</sup> (1892) and *Chestnut Avenue near Biberist*<sup>18</sup> (1898).

## Conclusions

This short review has sought to suggest that students of forestry and arboriculture have much to learn from the study of fine art, and that art historians, too, might gain from interaction with foresters. Further co-operation between these professions is likely to benefit both, at a time when the importance of trees, woods and forests needs to be communicated as widely as possible to all sectors of society.

## References

- Anderson, A., Craven, T., Hooke, D., Marshall, S. and Massey, I. (2013). *Under the Greenwood: Picturing the British Tree from Constable to Kurt Jackson*. Sansom & Co., Bristol.
- Barringer, T., Devaney, E., Drabble, M., Gayford, M., Livingstone, M. & Salomon, X.F. (2012) *David Hockney. A Bigger Picture*. Royal Academy of Arts, London.
- Carey, F. (2012). *The Tree: Meaning and Myth*. British Museum Press, London.
- Charles, V. and Shuvalova, I. (2013) *Ivan Shishkin*. Parkstone Press, New York.

Cole, R.V. (1915) *The artistic anatomy of trees*. Seeley, Service & Co. Ltd, London.

EPPO (2004) Data Sheets on Quarantine Pests. *Cryphonectria parasitica*.

[https://www.eppo.int/QUARANTINE/fungi/Cryphonectria\\_parasitica/ENDOPA\\_ds.pdf](https://www.eppo.int/QUARANTINE/fungi/Cryphonectria_parasitica/ENDOPA_ds.pdf)

Fondation Beyeler (1998) *The Magic of Trees*. Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basle.

Gercke, H. (ed.) (1985) *Der Baum: in Mythologie, Kunstgeschichte Und Gegenwartskunst*. Edition Braus, Heidelberg.

Grant, B. & Harris, P. (eds) (1991) *The Grizedale experience: sculpture, arts, and theatre in a lakeland forest*. Canongate Books, Edinburgh.

Hohl, R. (1998) Pictures about trees. In: Brüderlin, M., Gardi, B., Hohl, R. and Kaufmann, C. *The Magic of Trees*. Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basle, pp. 9-20.

Leopold, R. (2010) *Egon Schiele. Landscapes*. Prestel Verlag, Munich.

Lorenz, M. & Becher, G. (eds) (2012) *Forest Condition in Europe, 2012*. Technical Report of ICP Forests. Work Report of the Thünen Institute for World Forestry 2012/1. ICP Forests, Hamburg, 2012.

Malbos, L. (1984) *Célébration de l'arbre par les peintres du 16<sup>e</sup> siècle à aujourd'hui*. Musée Granet, Aix-en-Provence.

Phythian, J.E. (1907) *Trees in nature, myth and art*. Methuen & Co., London.

Schama, S. (1995) *Landscape and memory*. HarperCollins, London.

Schütz, Von B. (1994) Der wald in der kunst. *Forstwissenschaftliches Centralblatt* **113**, 35-64.

Skea, R. (2013) *Vincent's trees*. Thames & Hudson, London.

Smith, K.A. (2000) Egon Schiele's treescapes. Work and world: unframing the autonomous landscape. *Art History* **23**, 233-261.

- Törnlund, E. & Östlund, L. (2006) Mobility without wheels: The economy and ecology of timber floating in Sweden, 1850-1980. *Journal of Transport History* **27**, 48-70.
- Winberg, I. (1944) Flottningen i Sveriges allmänna flottleder fram till omkr. år 1935. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Stockholm University.
- Withrow-Robinson, B., Broussard, S., Simon-Brown, V., Engle, M. & Scott Read, A. (2002) Seeing the forest. Art about forests and forestry. *Journal of Forestry* **100**, 8-14.

Table 1. Examples of paintings focussing on particular tree species

Cezanne	Boulders, pine trees and sea at L'Estaque	1883-85
Cezanne	Chestnut trees at the Jas de Bouffan	1885-86
Cezanne	The great pine	c.1889
Cezanne	The large pine tree	1895-97
Constable	Study of the trunk of an elm tree	1821
Derain	The pine tree	1913
Durer	Linden tree on a Bastion	1489 or 1494
Durer	Pine	1495-97
Friedrich	Landscape with oak trees and a hunter	1811
Friedrich	Oak tree in the snow	1827-28
Hodler	The fir tree (near Chamby)	1905
Klimt	The Tall Poplar Trees II	1900
Klimt	Pine Forest	1901
Klimt	Beech grove	1902
Klimt	Beech forest Buchenwald I	1903
Klimt	Birch forest	1903
Klimt	The large poplar (II)	1903
Mondrian	Eucalyptus	1912
Monet	Weeping willow	1920-22
Monet	Poplars on the banks of the Epte	1891
Pissarro	Chestnut trees at Osny	1873
Soutine	Poplars, Civry	1939
Turner	Beech trees	1795-97
Van Gogh	Trunk of an old yew tree	1888
Van Gogh	Pine trees against an evening sky	1889
Van Gogh	Cypresses	1889
Van Gogh	The willow	1885
Van Gogh	Study of pine trees	1889
Van Gogh	Chestnut trees in blossom	1887-90
Van Gogh	Poplar trees	1884

**Table 2. Location of web images for paintings named in the text**

Subscript	Painting	Possible website access
1	Linden Tree on a Bastion	<a href="http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/albrecht-durer/linden-tree-on-a-bastion-1494">http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/albrecht-durer/linden-tree-on-a-bastion-1494</a>
2	Evening; Red Tree	<a href="http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/piet-mondrian/avond-evening-the-red-tree-1910">http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/piet-mondrian/avond-evening-the-red-tree-1910</a>
3	The Grey Tree	<a href="http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gray_Tree_1911.jpg">http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gray_Tree_1911.jpg</a>
4	Composition Trees 11	<a href="http://www.abcgallery.com/M/mondrian/mondrian31.html">http://www.abcgallery.com/M/mondrian/mondrian31.html</a>
5	The Leaping Horse	<a href="http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/constable/constable-great-landscapes-room-4">http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/constable/constable-great-landscapes-room-4</a>
6	Children's Playground in the Tiergarten in Berlin	<a href="http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Max_Liebrmann,_Kinderspielplatz_im_Tiergarten_zu_Berlin,_1885.jpg">http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Max_Liebrmann,_Kinderspielplatz_im_Tiergarten_zu_Berlin,_1885.jpg</a>
7	Terrace at the Restaurant Jacob in Nienstedten on the Elbe	<a href="http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Liebermann_Restaurant_Jacob.jpg">http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Liebermann_Restaurant_Jacob.jpg</a>
8	Forest of Beech Trees	<a href="http://explorationart.files.wordpress.com/2012/01/orest-of-beech-trees.jpg">http://explorationart.files.wordpress.com/2012/01/orest-of-beech-trees.jpg</a>
9	Montmartre from the Cite des fleurs	<a href="http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/alfred-sisley/view-of-montmartre-from-the-cite-des-fleurs-1869#supersized-artistPaintings-237917">http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/alfred-sisley/view-of-montmartre-from-the-cite-des-fleurs-1869#supersized-artistPaintings-237917</a>
10	Bare trees	<a href="http://paintingdb.com/art/xl/10/9720.jpg">http://paintingdb.com/art/xl/10/9720.jpg</a>
11	Spring Landscape with Red Sky	<a href="http://paintingdb.com/s/9719/">http://paintingdb.com/s/9719/</a>
12	Early Spring	<a href="http://graafland.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/egon-schiele-early-spring.jpg">http://graafland.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/egon-schiele-early-spring.jpg</a>
13	The Yellow Log	<a href="http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Edvard_Munch_-_The_Yellow_Log_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg">http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Edvard_Munch_-_The_Yellow_Log_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg</a>
14	The Lumberjack	<a href="http://uploads2.wikipaintings.org/images/edvard-munch/the-lumberjack-1913.jpg">http://uploads2.wikipaintings.org/images/edvard-munch/the-lumberjack-1913.jpg</a>
15	Children towards the Fairytale Forest	<a href="http://munch150.laboremus.info/novus/upload/tab1/file/pressebilder_NY/18_%20The%20Fairytale%20Forest,%201901-02.jpg">http://munch150.laboremus.info/novus/upload/tab1/file/pressebilder_NY/18_%20The%20Fairytale%20Forest,%201901-02.jpg</a>
16	The Four Trees	<a href="http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/egon-schiele/four-trees-1917#supersized-artistPaintings-232629">http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/egon-schiele/four-trees-1917#supersized-artistPaintings-232629</a>
17	Autumn evening	<a href="http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c5/Hodler_-_Herbstabend_-_1892.jpg">http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c5/Hodler_-_Herbstabend_-_1892.jpg</a>
18	Chestnut Avenue near Biberist	<a href="http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ed/Ferdinand_Hodler_-_Kastanienallee_bei_Biberist%2C_1898.jpg">http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ed/Ferdinand_Hodler_-_Kastanienallee_bei_Biberist%2C_1898.jpg</a>

**A.J.Moffat** is Director of A.J.Moffat & Associates. Email: [andy@ajmoffat.co.uk](mailto:andy@ajmoffat.co.uk)