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# An excursion into the French landscape

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May 1999

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## Introduction

Recently on the back of a business trip to [France](#), I carried out an excursion relating to my studies and interest in [European Art](#).

There were two stages to the excursion. On the first day, a visit to the [Musee d'Orsay](#) and a focus on visual art of the Second Empire, Third Republic: notably [Realism](#) and [Impressionism](#), with a view to finding an intellectual issue to explore. This was followed by an excursion around the streets of [Paris](#) to view "scenes from real life". On the second day, I headed out to [Fontainebleau](#) and the [Barbizon](#), for a taste of the environment in which French masters were born; also sporting a look at the [Château](#) and snippets of life in a provincial town.

I aimed to gain an insight into theory (the landscape) and practice (the paintings). It is fascinating to visit these places to observe the colour, light, ambience and feel of the environment. In retrospect, there are numerous lessons I have learnt that will help future trips of this sort.



*Top: France in more ancient times, with the many provinces reflected through nineteenth century French art.*

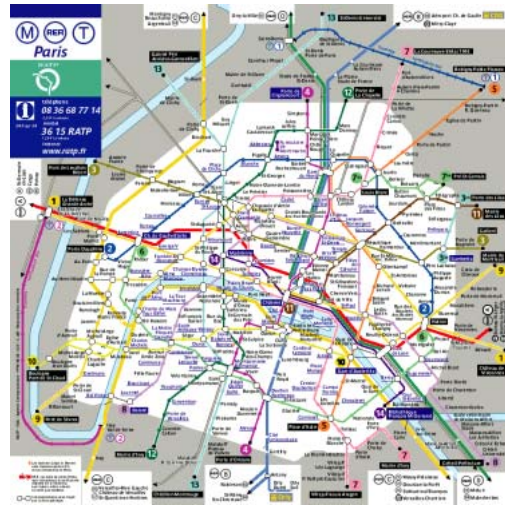
## A scenic excursion through France

Quiet Sunday morning streets near the Odeon were far removed from the bustle of the previous days markets. Sauntering under a heavy morning sky, then descending into the catacombs of the [Metro](#), the RER funneled my luminescent mind to the [Musee d'Orsay](#). Quickly, my palette began to savour the pleasures of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century French masters, while the mind [explored a theme](#). After some hours of digestion I bid adieu and the streets called once more.



From the Musee, to Opera and back to the Seine,

the boulevards turned my head again. Formed in squalor, poverty and abhor, now they look of grandeur, extravagance and more. These are the streets that inspired [Baudelaire](#), and puffing that resulted in much venting of air. [Zola](#) and others must have come this way, but now with historical maps to guide, the view of Paris Republic Three could not hide.



[Paris Visite](#) I have an insight for a day. With



Through dark streaming woods in a landscape like haze, [Barbizon's serenity and tranquillity would anyone daze](#). By streets and quiet Inns, to the forest edge: this where artists would wander in! The

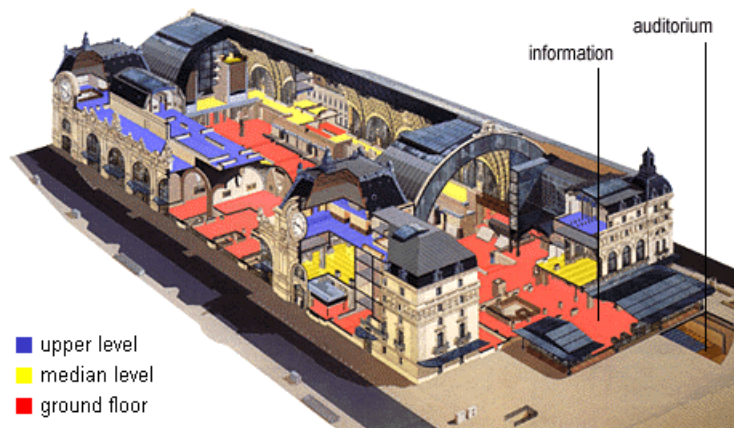
On Monday morning I woke to the commuter crowd; I planned to head somewhere not so loud. A train to [Fontainebleau](#) to escape from the affray: here I planned to spend a day. The impressive [Château](#) offered another look at something grand from a sort of French cook. Local cuisine nearly led me astray, but soon in a taxi I was on my way.



Top Right: The Paris Metro  
Top Left: Paris Visite card  
Bottom Right: Charles Boudelaire  
Bottom Left: Emile Zola

influence on their works became quiet clear, but I could not stay long here. Back in a taxi, and somewhere into [Paris](#) at the end of the day: I'd gathered up much to say.





## Light explorations at the Musée d'Orsay

On entering the [Musée](#), I began with a whirl around [Venus at Paphos \(1853\)](#) then into the curvaceous, smooth and soft romantic forms that seem to characterise works by [Ingres](#). [La Source \(The Spring\) \(1856\)](#) particularly stands out with its silky

balanced structure and sensuously erotic face. These faces appear as a common theme through his other works, nearby in [Jupiter et Antiope \(1851\)](#): all strive to embody classical mythology, but wrapped in soft sensitive skin.



Further along the route, [Chasseriau's Le Tepidarium \(The Tepidarium\) \(1853\)](#) appears superficially as a thermal bath scene, but stylistically is a congregational work that experiments with human form. There are several points to focus on, the most significant of which is the forward female figure with dreamy eyes, cast out towards the observer. The picture's aesthetic high point is another female form: torso in an erotic stretch to heaven, she straddles an earthly female below. Her outstretched arms draw a symbolic line towards an upper window, through which an outer visible sky provides a radiant light source, and allegorical feelings of the divine. A glance at the museum guide states that the subject was "suggested to the painter by the thermal baths excavated at Pompeii" with it being a "marriage of line and colour which celebrates the oriental languor beloved by [Delacroix](#) and [Ingres](#)". In this case, languor perhaps is an appropriate way to summarise the overall feeling of the piece.

Strolling along, various uninspiring works – impressive though they may be – illustrate favoured constructions of the Salon, at a time when its Prix de Rome offered an

artist divine immortality through the earthly realisation of a brilliant and successful career. [Cabanel's La naissance de Venus \(The Birth of Venus\) \(1863\)](#) attracts attention by way of its similarities to [Chasseriau's](#) feminine forms: albeit in a more socially acceptable allegorical composition. [Zola](#) apparently wrote "The goddess, drowned in a river of milk, looks like a delicious harlot; she is not a woman of flesh and blood – that



would be indecent -- but made from a kind of pink-white marzipan": quite tasty. Other exhibits presenting and reflecting the Salon's style are less mentionable.

Top: Musée d'Orsay map

Left: Ingres' "La Source"

Bottom: Chasseriau's "Le Tepidarium"



Leaving [Classicism](#) and [Romanticism](#) the journey proceeds through a transitional landscape into the works of [Daumier](#), the reputed link to [Realism](#). His series of [sculptures](#), witty characterisations of Parliamentarians, offer a humorous exploration into a study and representation of the cogs of power. These stately servants

are captured in a colourful roughness that maintains the ideal, but highlights the individual: warts and all. Although just as historically important, his [paintings](#) did not inspire interest – in retrospect I should have taken greater notice!



As the journey heads into the wild west that is [Realism](#) – with its adventurous explorations and more – [Millet](#) emerges with “down to earth” depictions of rural life. Now a subject for further exploration emerges, as a common thread in his work becomes apparent. There appears to be a consistent use of a central radiant light source. Close by, the theme is also visible in [Rousseau](#). His *Une avenue, forêt de l'Isle-Adam* (An Avenue in the Forest of l'Isle-Adam) (1849) is framed by a canopy of trees, within



which a congregation of animals scatter around the forest floor. The thin veneer of sky through the trees provides a source of light that radiates out: sufficient to illuminate god's creatures, before they are swallowed by the dense canopy.

[Dupre](#) in *La mare aux chenes* offers a similar exposition. In this case, cattle and a water hole provide an expansive view into a rural scene, again bounded by trees and the sky. Like Impressionism itself, the watery pool reflects a hazy interpretation of the surrounding greenery. [Millet's L'Angelus du soir \(The Angelus\) \(1858\)](#) with its soft central offset light, and his *Le*



*parc a moutons, clair de lune* continue the theme: more radiant light from the centre. In this case, the moon is employed to illuminate the sky and watch over the flock gathered on a bleak

**Top:** Cabanel's "La naissance de Venus"  
**Centre Right:** A Daumier figurine  
**Centre Left:** A Daumier painting  
**Bottom:** Millet's "L'Angelus du soir"



landscape below. The bleakness resulting from a very dark foreground instituted through soft brushstrokes.

In [La bergere gardant ses moutons \(Shepherdess with her flock\) \(1864\) Millet's](#) flock are now guarded by an earthly shepherd, under a bright sunburnt cloud edges and radiant light. [Millet](#) employs impressive detail in the sheep and the dominant figure. This work is worthwhile of a more detailed consideration of form: the structural properties of the picture provide an aesthetic balance. The open sky contrasts with the expansive landscape, which itself contains lines that harmonise with beams of light from the sky. The central complexity revolves around a congregation of sheep, to the side of which the large and detailed figure of the shepherd looms. This heavy structure is itself in opposition to, but balanced with, the solar source that stares out from the clouds in the sky.



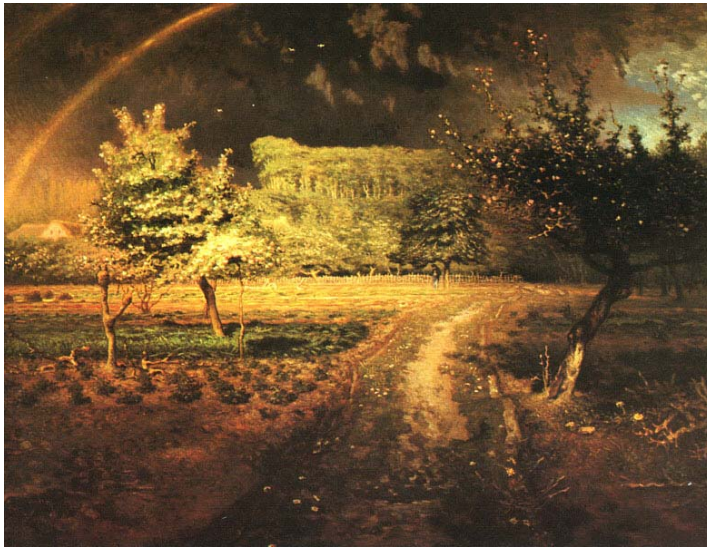
[Corot](#) in [La clairière Souvenir de Ville d'Avray \(????\)](#) provides yet another addition to the thematic expos—. Yet another forest scene depicts individual and animal, with a central light source diffusing itself amongst the mosaic of foliage. The soft and supple characteristics of the picture are embodied in the prance of a deer on centre stage. Other [Corot](#) works display similar stories: forests with gay settings of frolic and play. Although, his *La danse*

*des nymphes. une nymphe jouant avec un amur* (????) of the Salon 1857 is a strange collage of a soft landscape, somehow intruded upon by classical forms. Perhaps this is a result of attempts to adhere to the necessary requirements of the Prix De Rome. *Souvenir d'Italie (Souvenir of Italy)* (????), *Souvenir des Landes (Souvenir of Landres)* (????) and *La danse de nymphes (Nymphs Dancing)* (1850) provide clearer harmonies.

[Corot's](#) *Une matinee La danse des nymphes* (1850), again on a similar theme, but with its clarity reveals by difference a sharpness and structured style that is common to his works. *Mme Eugene Felix Le courtious* (????) has a strong rigid firm style, but the rigidity is tempered by a soft supple influence. In *Le rotour du troupeau* (????) and *Femme nue couche* (????) there is a more definite and apparent impressionist feel, as these clearly play with soft and supple light.

*Top: Millet's "La bergere gardant ses moutons"*  
*Centre: Corot's La clairiere Souvenir de Ville d'Avray*

Back to the light source theme, [Millet's \*Le Printemps \(Spring\)\* \(1868\)](#) provides the eclectic mix of a rural backyard looking towards a sky recovering from a passing storm. A moonlight glow unfolds onto the field, with surrounding trees that balance and give directive shape to the form. Finally, [Charles](#)



[Jacque](#) in *Boeufs a l'abreuvoir* (????) focus light upon central cattle and play with realist images of soft reflections in water; an interesting construction to encapsulate different styles.

Stopping and pondering for a moment, the preceding works show very definite similarities, not only in the observable realm of their physical concern for forest scenes, but in more hidden metaphysical concerns. The allegorical nature that is suggested by recurring

patterns of sheep, flock and animals amongst a forest with centrally revealing sources of light could have biblical and religious worth. Whether or not these were deliberate acts by the artists at the time is possibly an issue for investigation and debate.

The peak of [Realism](#) is reached with [Breton's](#) almost photograph works, such as *Le rappel des glaneuses (Calling the Gleaners home)* (1859), although without the religious connotations present in works by nearby [Tassaert](#). The luminous *Une famille malheureuse (An Unlucky Family)* (1849) and later *La veuve ou Famille de pecheus* (????) are [Tassaert's](#) very "real" social commentary on the suffering of those poor in life. The former is picture of pilgrimage, as one woman adopts the role of proverbial Moses: leading others over a rocky outcrop far from the valley below and forward into the Holy Land. In the latter, a central figure looks towards pictures of a nun with child while she herself comforts a sister in her lap.



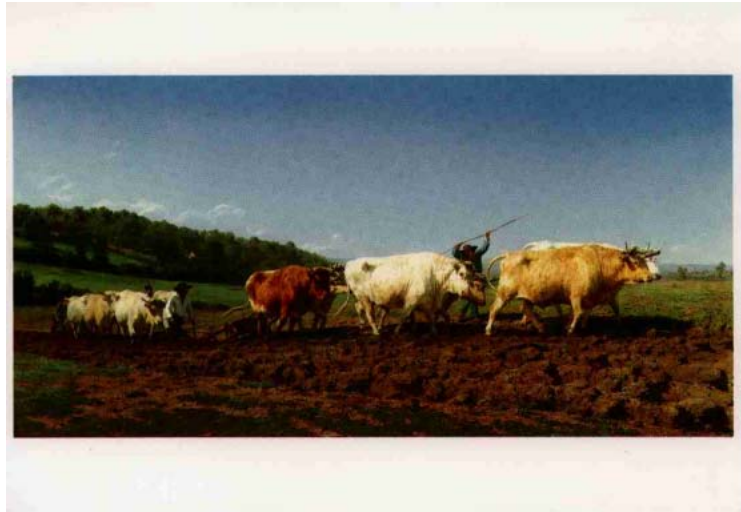
Through these works, it is interesting to observe levels of complexity. Realist techniques may provide a clear, photographic representation of a subject. The subject though, may depict events and scenes from real life, a social commentary, or maybe not. Even so, embedded within this can be religious form. Overall composition may make structural and aesthetic balance, techniques to lead the eye and direct observation; but offset by the desire to depict the real, which is often not so offering.

**Top: Millet's "*Le Printemps*"**

**Bottom: Tassaert's "*Une famille malheureuse*"**



[Bonheur's](#) *Labourage nivernais: le sombrage* (Ploughing in the Nivernais Region) (1848) caught my eye with an overpowering photographic image of an oxen ploughing the field. Described as a masterpiece of realism, there is immense strength conveyed through the line of cattle and dirt mounds; almost thrusting forward for observation.



[Courbet](#) is next on the agenda. The museum houses his works in a magnificent enclave which affords clear views of [Un enterrement a Ornan](#) (A Burial at Ornans) (1849), [L'Atelier du peintre](#) (The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory) (1855) and the very erotic [L'origine du monde](#) (1866). In class, we discussed these in considerable detail, so rather than attempt any analysis I stood back to soak up the collage of figures with detailed faces. On closer observation, [Courbet](#) does lack the skill for fine and intricate work.



A painting that has received much comment is [Puvis de Chavannes' Le pauvre pecheur](#) (The Poor Fisherman) (1881), apparently exercising "a strange fascination", so that many "critics, poets and men of letters" have "never been able to resist the temptation to write about it". If that is not a call to arms, I know not what is. There is something stirring here. The desolate landscape reflects the sad mood of the fisherman, who seems to bow his head in resignation: the world is carried on his shoulders. He turns his back to his wife and child, off in solitary sail to a lonely

task. The woman's body, a wife I presume, has a very strange stretched taunt look about it, almost mechanical and lifeless. The whole background shouts vastness and desolation.

Other works by [Puvis de Chavannes](#) are reminiscent of moral themes in monastic strained glass windows. A tripos depicts vigilance, history and "recueillement". The symbolism is very clear, and the chalky look harks to the roughness of religious pavement art, but could have equally been at home as a fresco.



I passed through [Moreau](#) and [Degas](#) with little interest, perhaps my energy and enthusiasm waning. Soon my

attention turned to [Manet](#), as the journey headed out of realist waters; into some new age.

*Top: Bonheur's "Labourage nivernais: le sombrage"*  
*Centre: Courbet's "L'origine du monde"*  
*Bottom: Puvis de Chavannes' "Le pauvre pecheur"*

A former train station on the left bank, the Gare d'Orsay was converted into a museum in 1986. It now holds a collection of 19th-century French art from Impressionists, Symbolists and post-Impressionists, covering sculpture, paintings, photographs, art objects and furnishings. Artists include Renoir, Manet, Monet, Rodin, Gauguin, Degas, Cézanne, Van Gogh, and Seurat. (Source: <http://www.geocities.com/TimesSquare/7205/orsay.html>).

## Fontainebleau and the quiet Inns of the Barbizon

From [Paris](#), the train to [Fontainebleau](#) shuttled along at sufficient speed, reaching the old town in the recovering morning mist. The "la gare" a mere gateway to a place steeped in history and power. The [Château](#), once the palace of kings is now a historical museum ranked alongside [Versailles](#). The town was once the UN seat of power: now [INSEAD](#) breeds future leaders with its management expertise.



The journey to [Barbizon](#) heads swiftly north west, through brown and hazy forests that stream past the windows of a brisk taxi. Arriving in [Barbizon](#), I'm immediately struck by peaceful serenity: this is a place of quiet contemplation, conducive to creative forms. Although modernity raises its hind, much old world charm remains.

The town is split by a main street, which harbours most



interesting places. A post office has its utilitarian peers: newsagent, café, hotel and patisserie, all standard charter for daily bread. More in tune with a cultural past, numerous small galleries display contemporary works: scattered amongst old world facades, with vines and growths adding to the charm. Several museums and historical places of interest provide a testament to its place in history.

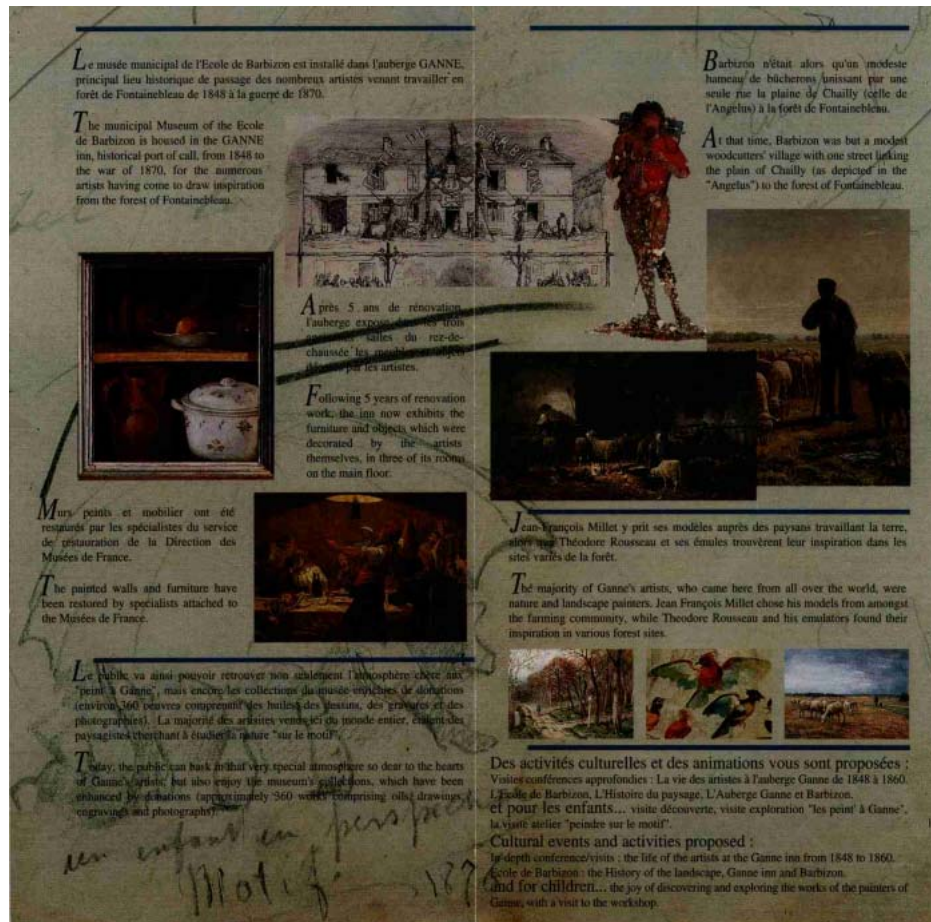
*Top: Fontainebleau regional map  
Bottom: Ganne's Inn at Barbizon*



The [Musée de l'Ecole de Barbizon](#), the most notable museum, invites a willing student into reconstructed rooms, depicting the environment in which the artists stayed. Nineteenth century simplicity:

tables, chairs and utensils with wooden cupboards and floors. Upstairs, a gallery of assorted visual works provides a broad view of artists once in residence. While Rousseau is associated with this place, it is clear that many practiced here. Signs in gallery windows

along the streets indicate that an artistic community still actively exists.



The most overpowering experience here is the feeling of peace and serenity. It's one of those places where you hear yourself think, and sitting down resting with a warm coffee, the mind tumbles with thoughts from the past. Another taxi with tourists enters the main street and somehow it feels like an intrusion: any bustle is an obvious scar.

The end of the main street leads into the Forest, with the point of departure marked by the town's hot nightspot. The trees, bare from summer vibrancy, are strung with winter's dull mist. Dark rocky outcrops add to the sombre hue. It is easy to imagine artists in the early morn, with paints, easel and canvas under arm, walking into the forest like fisherman off to sea, returning as the light grows thin; back from a day of hunting.

I wandered around the town, looked into stores, admired influences in contemporary visual works, and somehow reached a more peaceful state of mind. This is town where to call the taxi, you knock on the door near the stand, and they call "headquarters" for you. Eventually my taxi arrived, and the streaming forests beckoned once more.

That taxi ride was like no other. I sat on the back seat, with written notes in hand, sketching out my observations of the day, reclining in peace, taking in the occasional therapy of those streaming trees; and wondering about how to capture the experience. It could in some ways be described as "reflections on a visit to a small town": there are many such towns, all havens of peace for the soul, conducive to creative craft.

**Top: Barbizon Museum**

From [Fontainebleau](#), the train ride was

uneventful. At [Gare de Lyon](#), the journey back to the real world of business started. By nearly missing the TGV from [Gare Montparnasse](#) to [Rennes](#) there was a reminder that minutes are important in some places.

*The Barbizon school reputedly flourished between 1830 to 1870, with Théodore Rousseau the primary leader of the group, which included Charles Daubigny and other minor artists (Jules Dupré, Narciso Diaz de la Peña and Constant Troyon). Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, and Jean-François Millet are often associated with the school, but stood outside of its main line of development. The school had an influence on late-19<sup>th</sup>, early-20<sup>th</sup> century American landscape painting. (Source: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/articles/01114.html>)*

## Real protagonists in the French artscape

An excellent reference site for navigating through to information about many artists is the [Artcyclopedia](#). It is possible from here to reach the [WebMuseum](#), with its wealth of detail and resources, amongst other institutions, including galleries.

The [WebMuseum](#) provides a reasonable reference site for western art history, covering evolution and developments in France. A treatment of [Revolution and restoration \(1740-1860\)](#), moves through [Classicism](#), [Romanticism](#) and [Realism](#). The further theme of [Impressionism \(1860-1900\)](#) is then explored in [detail](#).

References to information and works of art from the artists mentioned are found in the [Artcyclopedia](#), which includes [Bonheur, Rosa \[French, 1822-1899\]](#); [Breton, Jules \[French Realist, 1827-1906\]](#); [Cabanel, Alexandre \[French, 1823-1889\]](#); [Chassériau, Théodore \[French, 1819-56\]](#); [Corot, Jean-Baptiste-Camille \[French Realist, 1796-1875\]](#); [Courbet, Gustave \[French Realist, 1819-1877\]](#); [Daubigny, Charles-François \[French Barbizon School, 1817-1878\]](#); [Daumier, Honoré \[French Realist, 1808-1879\]](#); [Degas, Edgar \[French Impressionist, 1834-1917\]](#); [Delacroix, Eugène \[French Romantic, 1798-1863\]](#); [Dupré, Jules \[French Barbizon School, 1811-1889\]](#); [Ingres, Jean-Auguste-Dominique \[French Neoclassical Artist, 1780-1867\]](#); [Jacque, Charles Émile \[French, 1813-1894\]](#); [Manet, Édouard \[French Impressionist, 1832-1883\]](#); [Millet, Jean-François \[French Realist, 1814-1875\]](#); [Moreau, Gustave \[French Symbolist, 1826-1898\]](#); [Puvis de Chavannes, Pierre \[French Symbolist, 1824-1898\]](#); [Rousseau, Théodore \[French Barbizon School, 1812-1867\]](#) and [Tassaert, Philippe Joseph \[1732-1803\]](#).

## The usual reading material

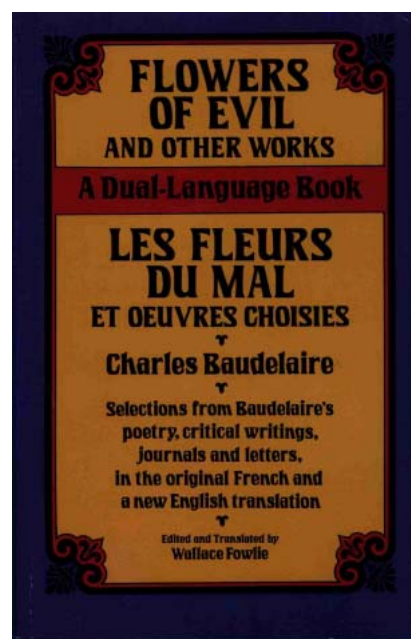
The following reference material assisted in the trip; no doubt there are many other good —and better — sources of material. I purchased the first three of these while in Paris, as a souvenir of sorts.

[“La planète bourse: de bas en hauts”, Michael Turin. Gallimard, 1993. ISBN 2-07-053206-2.](#)

A French guide to the history of stock markets, a great pictorial book which more than anything helps practice the language; I thought I could double up on my French while getting a better picture of the markets path through time.

[“Flowers of evil and other works: A Dual-Language Book”, Charles Baudelaire – edited and translated by Wallace Fowlie. Dover, 1992. ISBN 0-486-27092-0.](#)

An English and French dual-language book covering Baudelaire's ‘Flowers of Evil’, ‘Spleen of Paris’, Critical Writings, Art Criticism, Music Criticism, Literary Criticism and Letters. Provides a good picture of Baudelaire.

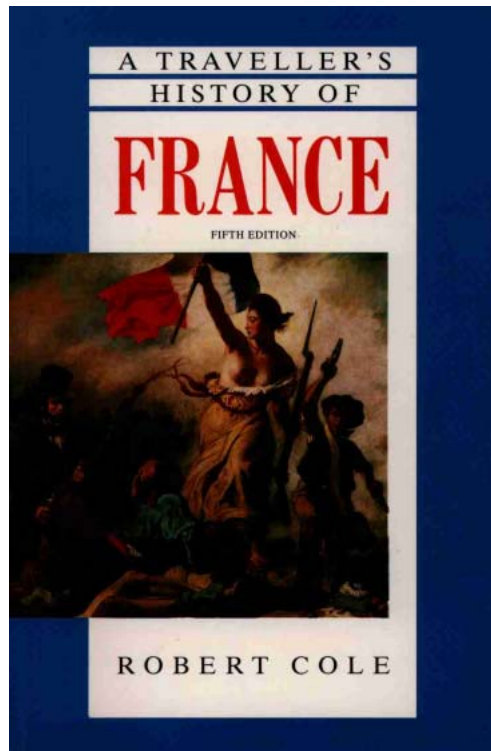




["A Traveller's History of France", Robert Cole. Windrush Press, 1996. 5th Ed. ISBN 0-900075-98-8.](#)

A decent short reference to France from early times, through to the contemporary situation.

["Guide to the Musee d'Orsay", Caroline Mathieu, 1992 – translated by Anthony Roberts. Adagp, 1992. ISBN 2-7118-2714-3.](#)



The curator's guide spans the museum's collection, interspersed with relevant historical linkage and cultural background.

["Insight guide: Paris", Caroline Radula-Scott \(ed\). APA Publications, 1998. 9th Ed. ISBN 962-421-411-5.](#)

A guide to put Paris in historical and cultural context, before laying it all out to see, well presented with numerous images from all facets of the town.

["Michelin green guide: France". Michelin Tyre Plc, 1998. 3rd Ed. ISBN 2-06-149103-0.](#)

With cultural background, the guide systematically describes all places of interest around the country, most notably with a rating system that ranks places to see.

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