Although it was painted shortly after France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and the bloody events of the Paris Commune in 1871, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot’s *Le chemin des vieux, Luzancy, Seine-et-Marne* (1871-72) remains uncomplicated by indications of the political and social strife of the time.¹ Its subject is simple: two peasants have passed each other on a dirt path that winds through grass, brush, and trees. Although a few distant buildings are visible along the edge of the horizon, the setting is resoundingly rural, without details to indicate the specifics of either historical time, or, despite the title, place. The countryside as Corot presents it is perpetually slow, bucolic, and untainted by the chaos, crowding, and violence that marked France’s urban centers throughout the nineteenth century. As this essay will show, Corot’s *Le chemin des vieux* expresses a desire to escape the demands of modern urban life through a retreat to a particular vision of the French countryside, one that was both informed by and manipulated

to appeal to an urban bourgeois audience.

To increase the appeal of *Le chemin des vieux* as an idyllic, if modest, scene, Corot omits details specifying time and even geographical location. The peasants’ plain costumes, rendered in neutral tones with a few loose strokes, could as easily place them in, say, 1672 as 1872, and the road upon which they walk bears no mark of modern improvements. The rural scenery around them likewise carries no reference to industrialization: the railroad, which dramatically transformed the pace of travel as well as the appearance and even the sound of the French landscape during the nineteenth century, is absent, as are any other signs of industrial commerce. In addition, the individuality of the peasants has literally been effaced; even in the figure of the woman, who is facing the viewer, no facial features can be discerned. Unlike mid-century Realist painters such as Gustave Courbet, who sought to reveal the plight of the rural peasant as one of unceasing, back-breaking labor or dull drudgery with no reward, Corot’s peasants are anonymous figures whose only task is to stroll slowly along a winding path, rendering the scene seemingly apolitical in comparison. Finally, Corot, in concert with his patron, further obscured any claims to specificity this landscape painting might have through a significant change to the view depicted. The work’s title explicitly identifies the location shown as Luzancy, a village in central France, far from any large body of water, yet the strip of blue on the left side of the horizon indicates an ocean in the distance. Alfred Robaut, the work’s first owner and Corot’s biographer, requested this alteration to the view, and gave the painting its title. Thus, although it was at least in part painted en plein air, *Le chemin des vieux* does not depict a particular landscape, but is

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2 For a discussion of the absence of such modern advances as paving stones, drainage gutters, and gas lighting in Corot’s landscapes, especially in contrast to the work of Corot’s contemporary, the Impressionist painter Alfred Sisley, see Michael Clarke, *Corot and the Art of Landscape* (London: British Museum Press, 1991), 111.

rather a carefully constructed composition designed to promote a specific view of nature and rural life.

Throughout his career, Corot sought critical acclaim with large-scale historical landscapes painted for Paris’s annual Salon exhibitions. These works were painted in Corot’s Parisian studio and often included historical, biblical, or mythological figures strolling through misty and mysterious forests; they were rarely depictions of specific locations. The success of these large Salon paintings with critics and patrons varied, but Corot found a more reliable arena in which to market his smaller landscapes in Paris’s burgeoning private gallery scene. As his reputation and popularity grew and his paintings sold in ever greater numbers, he struggled to keep his art dealers supplied with enough of his small canvases depicting the French or Italian countryside; as fast as he could paint them, they seemed to fly off the galleries’ walls. These works, which most often lacked the historical or mythological subjects of the paintings he created for the Salon, were largely painted for bourgeois patrons seeking calming landscapes populated by frolicking nymphs or rustic peasants to display in their city apartments. Thus, the nostalgic retreat from modernity offered in these smaller landscape works may also be understood as a market strategy. Many urban patrons were eager to purchase the pastoral vision that Corot’s art could provide.

Paradoxically, the time Corot spent in Paris while it was under siege during the winter of 1870 and 1871 was one of his most productive periods. He threw himself into the creation of ever more idyllic scenes even as the war raged around him. After the siege ended, Corot told his friend, the landscape painter Charles François Daubigny, “I will tell you, to calm your worries, that... I have produced more this winter than usual. I think that misfortune has obliged me to

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4 See Clarke, Corot and the Art of Landscape, 96.
witness the birds’ concerts. Next to that, to such tranquilities, what are the little endurable storms that men manufacture?”6 For Corot, it was imperative that, even in the midst of turbulent times and changing artistic styles, he continue to fill his meadows with flowers like those that dot either side of the path in Le chemin des vieux.

6 “Je vous dirai, pour calmer vos inquiétudes, que... j’ai produit cet hiver plus que d’habitude. Je pense que l’infortune m’a obligé de me assister aux concerts des oiseaux. Auprès de cela, de ces quiétudes, que sont les petites tempêtes indurables que fabriquent les hommes?” Corot, from a letter of 14 February 1871, quoted in Etienne Moreau-Nélaton, Histoire de Corot et ses œuvres (Paris: H. Floury, 1905), 250, author’s translation.