In Narcisse Virgile Diaz de la Peña’s 1867 painting *Wood Interior*, sunlight bathes a forest clearing created by a break in a dense canopy of trees. Sparkling sunlight dances across the tree trunks and foliage at the center of the canvas; around its perimeter, gnarled branches interlace to form a rich tapestry of leaves and bark. This dark, tunnel-like frame simultaneously emulates the impenetrable depths of the forest and functions as a bridge between the viewer’s space and the forest’s interior. Diaz de la Peña, known in his day as a first-rate colorist and a master of light, harnessed dramatic effects of color and light to simulate the sensations of walking through a dense forest.¹ Serving as a portal into the furthest depths of Fontainebleau Forest, *Wood Interior* immerses viewers in what many understood to be a depiction of pristine nature, devoid of any sign of both man and modernization. The opportunity for a moment’s escape provided by such a painting would have been especially enticing to nineteenth-century urban dwellers desperate to connect with a natural world that seemed further and further removed from their experience of life in the modern city.²

The Barbizon school, a loosely associated group of landscapists working between 1830 and 1870, produced paintings of the French countryside that were much beloved as they offered viewers a brief reprieve from the realities of everyday urban life. At the same time, these artists were living out their own escapist desires in the rustic village of Barbizon, on the edge of the Forest of Fontainebleau.³ As a core member of the group, Díaz de la Peña shared their utopian aspirations to experience nature and rural life directly, and to depict such scenes poetically through painterly techniques that highlighted the subjective expressions of the artist.

More than any shared style or credo, however, it was the area’s landscape that bound these artists together. *Wood Interior* likely depicts the Bas-Bréau, one of the oldest sections of Fontainebleau Forest.⁴ About 30 miles outside of Paris, these expansive woods—full of ancient, craggy oaks, silvery beeches, and a thick undergrowth of shrubbery—were the background for the farming village-cum-artists’ colony of Barbizon. The area’s diverse landforms provided rich source material for the artists’ modest paintings of nature, and its reputation as an unspoiled natural enclave

¹ Of Diaz de la Peña, one critic insisted that “He thinks only of light. It is that which he pursues, that which is the inexhaustible subject of his work.” Kimberly Jones, *In the Forest of Fontainebleau: Painters and Photographers from Corot to Manet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 124.

² For more on this argument, see my essay “The Barbizon School and the Nature of Landscape,” exh. brochure *The Barbizon School and the Nature of Landscape* (St. Louis: Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, 2008).

³ The Barbizon school included Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, Jules Dupré, François Louis Français, Charles Emile Jacque, Jean-François Millet, Constant Troyon, and Théodore Rousseau.

appealed to their own desires to commune with nature. In an 1847 Salon review praising a painting by Díaz de la Peña, the art critic Théophile Thoré noted the appeal of this escapist impulse: “We all have quite enough worries in our political and private lives to forgive the arts for reminding us of natural nature, *natura naturans* as the ancients called it, that nature eternally fecund and luxuriant which contrasts so cruelly with our artificial ways…”

Thoré’s clear distinction between an “eternally fecund” nature—that for which Fontainebleau Forest was renowned—and the artificiality that defines modern life was, in reality, never so clearly delineated. This tension between notions of the natural and the artificial is key to our understanding of Díaz de la Peña’s painterly practice. In what follows, I will examine the aesthetic techniques Díaz de la Peña wielded in *Wood Interior*, paying close attention to the inherent contradiction between the artist’s studio practice and the popular perception of his unmediated relationship with nature, as well as the ways he knowingly appealed to his audience’s escapist desires and how his particular approach ultimately implicated him in the commercialization and commodification of the forest he so admired.

For Díaz de la Peña and the other artists of the Barbizon school, perhaps the most fundamental aspect of their practice—and that which led to the widespread perception of their paintings’ direct connection to nature—was working *en plein air*. Not only did it provide an opportunity to observe light effects directly, but it appeared to promise an unmediated engagement with nature that would ensure the artistic independence of their vision. To viewers, too, a painting executed *en plein air*—without the semblance of studio mediation—would have seemed to bring them one step closer to nature. The large brushstrokes, soft edges, and lack of fine detail in *Wood Interior* create the impression that the painting was executed quickly, with the spontaneity demanded by working outdoors. This unfinished quality was typical of Díaz de la Peña’s work, which led one critic to complain disdainfully: “M. Diaz, if we may use a vulgar expression, ‘chucks’ his pallet against his canvas, and adroitly takes advantage of the stain thus produced.” Although this lack of finish was one of his critics’ largest sources of irritation, it served the artist and the patron by creating the impression that his compositions were created entirely outdoors, appearing to underscore his paintings’ direct connection to nature.

The critic’s objection also suggests that Díaz de la Peña’s compositions were casually or even haphazardly organized. In actuality, Díaz de la Peña, like most of his peers, painted studies and sketches outdoors, but then typically returned to his studio to create final compositions using these studies. Upon closer examination, the clear oval composition of *Wood Interior* appears deliberately arranged, with Díaz de la Peña carefully working and reworking minute details in the composition to achieve his desired results. Starting with a careful layering of first sky, then trees, Díaz de la Peña constructed his composition logically and intentionally. In several areas, he went back in to

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6 By the 1820s, *plein-air* studies had become de rigueur practice for landscapists, largely through the advocacy of Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes. An early and extremely influential devotee of *plein-air* painting, Valenciennes published a textbook in 1800, *Elémens de perspective pratique, à l’usage des artistes*, in which he insisted that all landscape painters must paint outdoors, creating quick studies that could be used in the studio to create large, highly finished Salon paintings. For more on *plein-air* painting in the nineteenth century, see Philip Conisbee, Sarah Faunce, and Jeremy Strick, *In the Light of Italy: Corot and Early Open-Air Painting* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1996).


8 The compositional device of a dark periphery was likely borrowed from his friend and fellow Barbizon artist Theodore Rousseau. In fact, the entire composition may be based on one of Rousseau’s favorite compositions, *Edge of the Forest of Fontainebleau, Sunset* (1848-49), Musée du Louvre.
strategically place on top of the darkened areas pinpoints of blue sky that appear to be peeking through the trees. These very intentional azure dots play an important role in balancing the weight of the blackness framing the center of the canvas, as well as increasing the naturalistic effect of the scene.

Díaz de la Peña’s apparently spontaneous application of paint not only heightens the naturalistic effect of the painting, but it also simulates the natural (dis)order of the forest. Díaz de la Peña used several other methods to replicate the sensations of being deep within the forest. At first glance, much of the periphery of the painting appears black—dim, as though we have suddenly entered the forest. As our eyes adjust to the darkness, however, we find an unexpected richness of color and texture. Soft, loose brushstrokes comprise indecipherable forms in these dark corners of the canvas—like in the deepest recesses of the forest—and leave much to the viewer’s imagination. Díaz de la Peña created this depth of subtle color and sumptuous surface by applying thin glazes over very dry pigment, which accounts for the lack of fine detail and the clearly visible brushstrokes. The cool glossiness of the shadowed areas creates an atmospheric effect redolent of the cool, moist air of the forest. By attempting to reproduce aspects of the visual and tactile experience of a walk in the forest, Díaz de la Peña brings nature one step closer to his audience.

Díaz de la Peña’s aesthetic techniques succeeded in conveying the impression of great naturalism that led to the popular understanding of his paintings as faithful—almost scientific—in their depiction of nature. Indeed, critic Albert de la Fizelière was so taken with the impression of an empirically rooted naturalism in the work of Díaz de la Peña and his Barbizon colleagues that he proclaimed in 1853, “Barbizon has given birth to a new science of painting.”9 Rather than generating a scientific manifestation, however, Díaz de la Peña depicted nature viewed through the subjective lens of the artist—a lens that edited and manipulated, eliminating evidence of modernization or other outside encroachments into the landscape in order to heighten the poetry and emotional effect of the scene.

*Wood Interior* exemplifies Díaz de la Peña’s practice of selective editing. With not even a path visible, the scene is utterly devoid of any sign of man. Despite the area’s reputation as wild and untamed, its “pristine” quality was largely fictionalized, initially by entrepreneurial locals in an effort to stimulate economic development through tourism, and later by many of the artists who flocked to the area. In 1867 Díaz de la Peña would have been hard pressed to find such a location in the forest, which had become a popular tourist destination for Parisians seeking a quick break from the hustle and bustle of urban life.10 By the second half of the nineteenth century, in fact, Fontainebleau Forest had become a veritable amusement park of natural sites, packaged and marketed as a romantic destination for tourists to experience *natura naturans*. C. F. Denecourt, the area’s foremost author of travel guides and the leading force behind the region’s development as a tourist site, promoted a vision of a forest steeped in timeless otherworldliness; he whimsically bestowed trees and rocks with names suggestive of great importance, constructed fake landmarks, erected placards identifying

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10 The author Philippe Burty, writing in 1872, complained about the inescapable presence of man in the forest: “Man can be felt everywhere. Large red and blue arrows shoot forth from the intersections of all the trails, as if a forest wasn’t made for getting lost in!” Quoted in Jones, *In the Forest of Fontainebleau*, 19. Novelist George Sand penned a similar sentiment after returning to the area in 1856, “The surroundings have become a bit too like a pleasure garden. There are too many names and emblems on the rocks. There are too many of them everywhere.” Quoted in Jones, *In the Forest of Fontainebleau*, 19.
imagined events, and cleared paths—marked by large colorful arrows painted on trees—through the forest.  

Diaz de la Peña edited out any sign of these commercial activities, composing a woodland scene that was true to the commonly accepted myth that the area was untouched by the industrializing hand of man. Diaz de la Peña, with his keen business sense, dwelled on this theme, creating several sous-bois, or forest undergrowth, scenes—all similarly edited renderings of the forest depths intended for commercial sale—in 1867 and 1868. Offering an escape from modern life, these paintings promised nineteenth-century urban audiences a much-desired panacea for the ills of urban industrialization and modernization. By answering the public’s yearning for paintings depicting an impossibly pure idea of natura naturans, Diaz de la Peña bolstered the myth of the pristine nature existing just outside of Paris, thereby implicating himself in the commercialization and commodification of the area and further removing it from this ideal vision.

11 Jones, In the Forest of Fontainebleau, 17.

12 Pierre Miquel and Rolande Miquel, Narcisse Diaz de la Peña (1807–1876) 2 Catalogue raisonné de l’œuvre peint (Paris: Courbevoie, 2006). By the 1860s, Diaz de la Peña had achieved great commercial success and was able to live well solely from sales of his paintings. See Robert Herbert, Barbizon Revisited (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1962) and Arthur Hoeber, The Barbizon Painters, Being the Story of the Men of Thirty (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1915), 129-158.