French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945
The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, Editor

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art
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Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *View of Lake Garda*, ca. 1865–1870

**Artist**
Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, French, 1796–1875

**Title**
*View of Lake Garda*

**Object Date**
ca. 1865–1870

**Medium**
Oil on canvas

**Dimensions (Unframed)**
24 x 36 5/8 in. (61 x 93 cm)

**Credit Line**
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Gift of Clarke Bunting in memory of his wife, Catherine Conover Bunting, 80-44

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**Catalogue Entry**

**Citation**

Chicago:  

MLA:  

In this painting, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot presents an idyllic view on the banks of Lake Garda in Northern Italy. Two peasants—a boatman and a contadina, an Italian peasant woman—rest by the shore, a path winding back to their right. In the distance, a town sits on gently rolling hills. Corot renders his trees in elegant outlines, with his characteristic feathery foliage. Flecks of yellow and peach in the foreground suggest the presence of flowers. *View of Lake Garda* has the silvery tones characteristic of the artist’s late work, when he focused on the role of memory and produced imagery as though seen through a veil. Twenty-seven of his exhibited works at the Paris Salon and in French provincial exhibitions between 1855 and 1874 were termed “souvenirs” (or memories).¹ The writer Théophile Silvestre, who produced an early biography of Corot, remarked on the artist’s remarkable visual memory.²

Corot traveled extensively throughout his career, visiting Italy on three occasions: in 1825–1828, 1834, and 1843. *View of Lake Garda* relates to the 1834 trip, which included travels to Venice, Genoa, and the country’s northern lakes.³ Corot spent sixteen days on Lake Garda, from September 10 to 26, at a time when the lake was emerging as a tourist destination. Indeed, a guidebook that explained its history and natural sites was published that very same year.⁴ Corot stayed at Desenzano, on the southern tip of the lake, from September 10 to 16, before taking a steamer to the town of Riva, on the northern tip, where he stayed until the 22nd. He then returned to Desenzano, remaining there until the 26th. The artist documented his visit in a sketchbook, which includes panoramic views of Riva and Desenzano as well as figure studies of Italian peasant women and his fellow steamer
travelers.\textsuperscript{5} Particularly relevant to View of Lake Garda is a pencil study of Desenzano (Fig. 1), including distant vistas of the Cathedral of Saint Mary Magdalene and Tower of Saint Martin (Torre di San Martino).\textsuperscript{6} Corot kept this sketchbook until the end of his life; it was one of around forty that appeared in his studio sale.

While Corot’s distant painted view has a degree of topographical specificity, the foreground of trees, peasants, and winding path is very much a studio concoction. Corot’s overarching tree was a standard topographical motif in his late work, employed to create a repoussoir effect. The addition of the staffage also adds coloristic interest to the scene. Corot is said to have remarked that he added such figures to provide color accents to offset the dominant tones of his work, whether complementary red (as in the peasant man’s cap) against surrounding green, or a touch of yellow (as in the contadina’s headscarf) to counterbalance blue-violet hues. Corot’s composition may also reflect his deep interest in the theater: the framing tree and distant vista in the picture suggest the effect of a stage set. Corot was indeed a regular visitor to the opera and theater, filling his sketchbooks with studies of stage sets as well as actors and ballet dancers.\textsuperscript{7}

Particularly in his later work, Corot pursued a practice of paring down his compositions. Often he would paint out trees in order to create a more spare and less crowded pictorial arrangement. Technical analysis has shown this, for example, in Shepherd Star (1864; Musée des Augustins, Toulouse), while photographs of other paintings in progress also reveal the same approach.\textsuperscript{8} The practice is evident, too, in View of Lake Garda. X-radiography has shown that Corot originally included an overarching tree to the left of his composition and that the horizon line was also higher (see technical entry, Fig. 3).\textsuperscript{9} As he re-worked his composition, the artist painted over these elements. Corot, indeed, noted in a carnet (or notebook) that he was “never focused on creating detail” since “the masses and the character of the painting interest me above all.”\textsuperscript{10}

The majority of Corot’s many views of Lake Garda, made from 1834 until his death, focus on the area around Riva. These have attracted significant attention in the Corot literature as a case study of the artist’s stylistic evolution over the course of his career: his move away from direct naturalism to works of poetic memory.\textsuperscript{11} A plein-air study of Riva in 1834 served as the basis for a larger studio painting, Vue prise à Riva (Kunstmuseum, St. Gallen, Switzerland), that was shown at the 1835 Salon. Corot then showed another Riva view at the 1850 Salon (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Marseille). Subsequently, in the 1860s and 1870s, he produced two later souvenir works: Souvenir of Riva: Evening Glow (about 1865–1870; Taft Museum of Art, Cincinnati) and Souvenir of Riva (1874; private collection). View of Lake Garda is unusual in that it relates to the Desenzano area of the lake, although it is not unprecedented in Corot’s oeuvre; he also produced a plein-air oil sketch of Desenzano in 1834 (Fig. 2).

As memory played a greater role in Corot’s late works, his pictures often evoked literary associations, particularly relating to the Romantic poetry of Alphonse de Lamartine (1790–1869) and Alfred de Musset (1810–1857). The painter’s well-known Souvenir de Mortefontaine (1864; Musée du Louvre, Paris), has, for example, been connected to the poetry of Lamartine.\textsuperscript{12} View of Lake Garda also relates to this same poet’s meditations on love and loss. “The Lake” (1820), most notably, is a

Fig. 1. Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, View of a Rocky Coast, 1834, lead pencil, 8 3/4 x 11 3/5 in. (22.2 x 29.4 cm), Département des arts graphiques, Musée du Louvre, Paris, RF 8714, 38–39, f. 21v/22.

Fig. 2. Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, View of Desenzano on Lake Garda, 1834, oil on paper glued on canvas, 13 2/5 x 17 1/2 in. (34 x 44.5 cm), private collection, Switzerland. Reproduced in Marina Botteri Ottaviani, Giorgio Marini, and Fernando Mazzocca, Corot e Canella: La nostalgia del lago, exh. cat. (Trento, Italy: Museo di Riva del Garda, 2008).
memory of the poet’s time spent with his muse by a lakeside:

O lake! Silent rocks! Caves! Dark forest!
You, whom Time spares or can make young again,
Keep of that night, keep, beautiful nature,
At least the memory!13

The evocative association of love and memory with the motif of the lake in Lamartine’s poetry suggests a romantic association between the peasant man and woman in the Nelson-Atkins painting.

View of Lake Garda was sold to an M. Basset around 1870 for 800 francs, a relatively small amount for Corot’s work, as his prices increased in his final years.14 It was subsequently acquired by the Belgian collector, painter, and member of the Barbizon community, the Chevalier de Knyff. In recent years, the work has attracted relatively little interest in Corot literature and has seldom been shown in exhibitions.15 It was, however, one of Corot’s better-known works in the late nineteenth century, appearing in his posthumous retrospective at the 1878 Exposition Universelle and in Georges Petit’s prestigious show of one hundred masterpieces from Parisian private collections in 1883. It also appeared in Corot’s impressive display of more than forty paintings—the largest of any Barbizon painter—at the 1889 Exposition Universelle. Subsequently it was acquired by the prominent American collector and founder of the National Gallery of Art, Andrew W. Mellon. Around 1912, the picture was displayed in the living room of Mellon’s house on Forbes Street, New York. As Paul Mellon, Andrew’s son, later remembered, it hung together with another Corot landscape and a landscape full of cows by the Dutch artist Aelbert Cuyp (1620–1691).16 The picture was inherited by Paul Mellon and later given to his sister-in-law, Catherine Conover Bunting. Her husband gave it the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in her memory.

Simon Kelly
June 2018

Notes


2. Corot told Théophile Silvestre, “When an amateur wants a ‘répétition’ of one of my landscapes, it is easy for me to give it to him without seeing the original; I keep a copy of all my works in my heart and in my eyes” (Lorsqu’un amateur désire la répétition d’un de mes paysages, il m’est facile de la lui donner sans revoir l’original; je garde dans le cœur et dans les yeux la copie de tous mes ouvrages). Quoted in Silvestre, Histoire des Artistes Vivants Français et Étrangers (Paris: E. Blanchard, 1856), 95.


6. Corot does slightly adapt, as he often did, the configuration of the architecture, but the overall view, with the hills descending to the lake edge, is very similar.


10. See carnet no. 68, p. 30: "Jamais pressé d’arriver au détail...les masses et le caractère du tableau m’intéressent avant tout."

11. They were extensively documented in the 1996 Corot exhibition (see Tintorow et al., Corot) and also explored in Vincent Pomarède, Corot: Naturaleza, emoción, recuerdo, exh. cat. (Madrid: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2005).


14. In 1866, for example, he sold his Solitude. Recollection of Vigen, Limousin (1866; Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection on loan at the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. Inv. no. [CTB.1999.27]) to the Empress Eugenia de Montijo for her private collection for 18,000 francs.

15. It was last lent for exhibition in 1997; see Gabriel P. Weisberg, Collecting in the Gilded Age: Art Patronage in Pittsburgh, 1890–1910, exh. cat. (Pittsburgh: Frick Art and Historical Center, 1997), 157–58, 173, 181, 196, 372n132, 405 (repro.), as Le Lac de Garde (View of Lake Garda).


**MLA:**


Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796–1875) simplified the initial composition of View of Lake Garda with four substantial changes.¹ The x-radiograph reveals a large, multi-branched tree that was once a strong diagonal feature within the landscape, located to the left of the figures and extending toward the upper left corner (Fig. 3).² The branches of a large coniferous tree in the upper center were modified with additions of gray and peach paint, and above this section of reinstated sky, Corot added a slender tree with delicate branches. A second mountain range, now covered by overlying paint, is also evident in the x-radiograph. Infrared reflectography reveals a narrow tree at the lower left corner and a dark rectangular shape near the central mountains (Fig. 4).³

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Fig. 3. X-radiograph, View of Lake Garda (ca. 1865-1870)

Above the off-white ground layer, no sign of an underdrawing can be detected with infrared reflectography or magnification. The numerous compositional changes make it difficult to differentiate the exact sequence of the paint application, but radiotransparent passages in Figure 1 suggest that the two largest trees and right foreground were in place early in the painting process. Early accounts of Corot’s technique describe his method of painting the trees of the landscape first in order to establish the strongest tonalities, and View of Lake Garda appears to follow this practice.⁴ Paint of the sky overlaps a tree trunk on the
right and thereby establishes the borders of the shape (Fig. 5). The edges of the lower left tree's reflection in the water were similarly defined by the surrounding pale blue paint of the water (Fig. 6).

![Fig. 4. Reflected infrared digital photograph of View of Lake Garda (ca. 1865-1870)](image)

![Fig. 5. Photomicrograph of View of Lake Garda (ca. 1865-1870) showing the peach paint of the sky on top of the right tree](image)

The landscape was executed using a rather limited color palette of peach, brown, green, blue, and gray, mixed to create a variety of tones. The paint application ranges across the landscape from thin scumbles and transparent washes to somewhat thick opaque paint that was dryly applied. The edges of many compositional elements are indistinct as a result of Corot's dry brushwork, and wet-over-dry applications throughout the landscape emphasize underlying paint textures. A combination of wet-over-wet and wet-over-dry painting is evident among the tree branches and central sky (Fig. 7). Quick, irregular dashes of paint create the flickering effect of the leaves on the somewhat bare trees. Corot applied fluid, dark brown paint with calligraphic strokes to render the finer tree branches and suggest vegetation alongside the path.

![Fig. 6. Photomicrograph of View of Lake Garda (ca. 1865-1870) showing the pale blue paint of the water covering the brown reflection of the tree](image)
paint surrounding the hair of the sitter in *Woman with a Pearl* (about 1868–1870; Musée du Louvre, Paris).\(^{7}\)

*View of Lake Garda* was painted on a lightweight, plain weave canvas that was commercially-primed. Two fragments of the original tacking margin are encapsulated on the painting reverse and confirm that the ground layer was present on at least a portion of these edges. The dimensions of the painting do not correspond to a standard stretcher size.\(^{8}\)

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Localized paint wrinkling in the water and left portion of the sky corresponds to the diagonal tree that was later covered by subsequent paint applications (Fig. 8). The differential drying rate of these paint layers may relate to a working varnish or additions of resin to the paint, both of which Corot was known to have employed.\(^{5}\)

Similar paint wrinkling is present in the green foliage of *Les Eaux* (1855–1865; private collection)\(^{5}\) as well as the

The painting was cleaned and wax-lined in 1971.\(^{9}\) At this time the five-member stretcher was replaced with a modern support (Fig. 9). The lining process caused some flattening of the paint texture across the landscape. Mildly cupping mechanical cracks have developed across the paint surface. Discolored retouching is present on the outermost edges, upper left quadrant, and on a few vertical damages in the lower right and left perimeters. A small amount of paint abrasion has occurred in the thin brown layers of the leaves, branches, and water. The synthetic varnish is slightly
discolored, causing darker passages within the landscape to appear somewhat unsaturated.

Mary Schafer
February 2020

Notes


2. See x-radiograph film, no. 283, Nelson-Atkins conservation file, 80-44. The x-radiographs were captured in 1994 under the following conditions: 50 kV, 7 mAs, and 20 seconds.

3. The rectangular shape, second mountain range, and tree branches on the upper left corner are more easily viewed with the longer wavelength range of the Hamamatsu vidicon camera. The rectangular shape is also evident as a radiotrue transparent area in the x-radiograph (Fig. 3).

4. See Herring, “Six Paintings by Corot,” 87. Herring notes that Corot’s practice, whether he was painting outdoors or in his studio, was to paint the trees first and the sky last. She quotes Corot from Carnet 17, ca. 1855–1860, R 3054: “a good method to follow: on your white canvas, begin with the strongest tone. Follow in order as far as the lightest tone. It is not logical to begin with the sky.”

5. Herring, “Six Paintings by Corot,” 87. Small quantities of natural resin were identified in a number of Corot paintings at the National Gallery of Art, London. “The resin would have been incorporated into the paint in the form of varnish, which Corot presumably added on his palette as he worked... The addition of a little varnish would have improved the working properties and increased the transparency and gloss of the paint, giving greater saturation of color.”


7. See x-radiograph and detail image of Woman with a Pearl in Madeleine Hours, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (New York: Abrams, 1984), 36–38.


Documentation

Citation

Chicago:


MLA:


Provenance

Purchased from the artist by M. Basset, ca. 1870 [1];
Jules-Frédéric Perreau (1821–1881), Paris;
Hector Defoë-Bey (1832–1905), Paris;
Chevalier Alfred de Knyff (1819–1885), Brussels and Paris, by May 1, 1878;
Albert Wolff (1835–1891), Paris, by June 1883;
Purchased from Albert Wolff by Georges Lutz (1835–1901), Paris, by November 19, 1885–1901 [2];

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To his son, Paul Mellon (1907–1999), Upperville, VA, ca. August 26, 1937–after September 10, 1941 [4];


To their daughter, Catherine Bunting (née Conover, 1913–1980), Kansas City, MO, by May 18, 1971–1980 [6];


Notes

[1] M. Basset appears to be an art dealer, though more specifics were not found. See *Inventaire général des richesses d’art de la France: Province*, vol. 1 (Paris: E. Plon et Cie, 1878), 20.


[3] Knoedler purchased the picture in half-share from Arnold and Tripp on July 7, 1902. See Knoedler and Company, New York, Stock Book 5, No. 9871, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. On the same day, Knoedler purchased Corot’s painting *Le Matin* (Knoedler No. 9872) in half-share. When Knoedler sold *Le lac de garde* to Andrew Mellon on September 8, 1902, they sold their half-share of *Le Matin* back to Arnold and Tripp for double the original price at the same time. There is no notation stating that Knoedler sold their half-share in *Le lac de garde* back to Arnold and Tripp, but the exchange of *Le Matin* seems to have been part of those negotiations.

[4] See letter dated May 9, 1937 from Paul Mellon to Andrew Mellon cited in David Cannadine, *Mellon: An American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 574, in which Paul tells his father “I don’t want to buy them [two Corot’s].” From this, we can surmise that Paul did not have the paintings until sometime around his father’s death in August 1937. An entry in the 1937 inventory of Andrew Mellon’s estate reads: “J.B.C. Corot, Le lac de garde/or, Landscape with castle in background”, noted as “purchased Sept. 8, 1902, M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.” and also noted as “being distributed to Paul Mellon” from Andrew Mellon’s estate. See correspondence from Beverly Carter, Estate of Paul Mellon, to Glynnis Stevenson, NAMA, August 22, 2019, NAMA curatorial files.

[5] See correspondence from Beverly Carter, Estate of Paul Mellon, to Glynnis Stevenson, NAMA, August 22, 2019, NAMA curatorial files. Mellon’s secretary noted that Mellon had sent the Corot to his wife’s family in Kansas City on loan on September 10, 1941. There is no note of it ever returning to Paul Mellon. Ms. Carter, the executor of Paul Mellon’s estate, believes he would not have asked the Conovers to return it after their daughter’s, Mary Mellon, passing in 1946.

[6] Relining fragments with a label on the back dated May 18, 1971 indicate that conservator James Roth relined this painting when the Bunttings owned it.

Related Works

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *View of Desenzano on Lake Garda*, 1834, oil on paper glued on canvas, 13 2/5 x 17 1/2 in. (34 x 44.5 cm), Private Collection, Switzerland.

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *View near Rivera on Lake Garda*, 1834, oil on paper glued on canvas, 11 2/5 x 16 7/50 in. (29 x 41 cm), Sturzeggersche Gemäldegemhllung, Kunstmuseum, St. Gallen, Switzerland.
Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *Landscape near Riva on Lake Garde*, 1835, oil on canvas, 38 4/5 x 55 7/10 in. (98.6 x 141.5 cm), Neue Pinakothek, Munich.


Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *View of Riva, Italian Tyrol*, ca. 1850, oil on canvas, 28 7/10 x 48 2/5 in. (73 x 123 cm), Musée des Beaux-Arts, Marseille.

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *The Boatman of Mortfontaine*, ca. 1865–1872, oil on canvas, 24 x 35 3/8 in. (61 x 89.9 cm), The Frick Collection, New York.

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *Memory of the Shores of Lake Garda*, ca. 1865–1872, oil on canvas, 24 x 35 3/8 in. (61 x 89.9 cm), The Frick Collection, New York.


Copies


Exhibitions

*Exposition Universelle*, Palais du Trocadéro, Paris, May 1–November 10, 1878, no. 203, as *Le lac de Garde*.

*Cent Chefs-d’Oeuvre des Collections Parisiennes*, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, opened June 12, 1883, no. 7, as *Le Lac de Garde*.

Exposition d’une collection particulière au Bénéfice du Bureau de Bienfaisance du 10e Arrondissement, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, November 19–December 1885, no. 15, as *Le Lac de Garde*.


A Century of French Painting: Exhibition Organised under the Auspices of his Excellency the Ambassador of France in Washington for the benefit of the French Hospital of New York, Knoedler, New York, November 12–December 8, 1928, no. 4, as *Le Lac de Garde*.

Loan Exhibition of Figure and Landscape Paintings by J.B.C. Corot, Knoedler, New York, November 12–December 1, 1934, no. 23, as *Le Lac de Garde*.


Collecting in the Gilded Age: Art Patronage in Pittsburgh, 1890–1910, Frick Art and Historical Center, Pittsburgh, April 6–June 24, 1997, no. 41, as *Le Lac de Garde (View of Lake Garda)*.


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Paul Mantz, “Exposition universelle: La peinture française,” *Gazette des beaux-arts* 18 (October–December 1878), 421, as *Lac de Garde*. 

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John W. Mollett, The Painters of Barbizon: Corot, Daubigny, Dupré (1890; repr., Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2009), unpaginated, (repro.), as The Lake of Garda.


Almanach Hachette: Petite encyclopédie populaire de la vie pratique (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1894), 256, as Le Lac de Garde.


Georges Lafenestre, La tradition dans la peinture française (Paris: L.-Henry May, 1898), 360, as Le Lac de Garde.

Georges Loiseau, “M. Georges Lutz,” Le Magasin pittoresque 2 (January 1, 1901): 305, as Lac de Garde.


“Commissaires-Priseurs: Collection de feu M. Georges Lutz,” Le Figaro, no. 135 (May 15, 1902): 6, as Le Lac de Garde.


“Mouvement des arts: Collection Georges Lutz,” La Chronique des arts et de la curiosité: supplément à la Gazette des beaux-arts, no. 22 (May 31, 1902): 175, as Le Lac de Garde.


“Berichten,” De Kroniek, no. 389 (June 7, 1902): 187, as het Gardameer.

“Échos et nouvelles,” Le Bulletin de l’art: ancien et moderne, no. 143 (June 7, 1902): 179, as Le lac de Garde.

“Letter from Paris,” Builder 82, no. 3096 (June 7, 1902): 558, as Lac de Garde.


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Possibly Ethel Birnthingl and Alice Pollard, Corot (London: Methuen, 1904), 169, as Le lac de Garde.

“In the Galleries,” American Art News 4, no. 7 (November 25, 1905): 6, as Lac de Garde.

Maurice Hamel, Corot and His Work, vols. 1-2 (Glasgow: James Maclehouse and Sons, 1905), unpaginated, (repro.), as The Lake of Garda.


Walther Gensel, Corot und Troyon (Bielefeld, Germany: Verlag von Velhagen und Klasing, 1906), 29, 114, as Gardasee.

Everard Meynell, Corot and His Friends (London: Methuen, 1908), 251, as Le Lac de Garde.


C van Malten, “De grondleggers der schilderschool van Barbizon (Slot),” Dietsche Warande en Belfort., no. 11 (1912): 374, as Gardameer.

“Foreign Art Auctions: Record Prices at Roussel Sale,” American Art News 10, no. 25 (March 30, 1912): 8, as Lac de Garde.


Emmanuel Bénézet, Dictionnaire Critique et Documentaire des Peintres, sculpteurs, dessinateurs et graveurs de tous les temps et de tous les pays, vol. 1, A–C (Paris: Ernest Gründ, 1924), 1014, as Le lac de Garda.

A Century of French Painting: Exhibition Organised under the Auspices of his Excellency the Ambassador of France in Washington for the benefit of the French Hospital of New York, exh. cat. (New York: Knoedler, 1928), unpaginated, as Le Lac de Garde.


François Fosca, Corot (Paris: Librairie Fleury, 1930), 160, (repro.) as Le lac de Garde.
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24 Masterpieces: Loan Exhibition to Commemorate the Hundredth Anniversary of the Knoedler Gallery and the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Metropolitan Museum of Art for the Benefit of the Committee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, exh. cat. (New York: Knoedler, 1946), unpaginated, as Le Lac de Garde.

Daniel Baud-Bovy, Corot (Geneva: Alexandre Jullien, 1957), 27, as Souvenir du Lac de Garde.


Michel Poletti, Monsieur Barye (Lausanne, Switzerland: Acatos, 2002), 310, as Le Lac de Garde.


Marina Botteri Ottaviani, Giorgio Marini, and Fernando Mazzocca, Corot e Canella: La nostalgia del lago, exh. cat. (Trento, Italy: Museo di Riva del Garda, 2008), 14, 46, (repro.), as Veduta del lago di Garda and Le Lac de Garde.


Paul Lang, Corot en Suisse, exh. cat. (Paris: Somogy, 2010), 58n12, as Lac de Garde.

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot: The Lady Leslie Ridley-Tree Collection in Context, exh. cat. (Santa Barbara, CA: