Cover:
Louis-Alexandre Dubourg
Honfleur, the Gardens
of the Auberge Saint-Siméon
Oil on panel, 28.4 x 37.4
Honfleur, Collection of La Ferme Saint-Siméon

Note:
Quotations give the text as originally written by the authors concerned, without correcting any mistakes.

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General plan of the port of Honfleur, showing the buildings of La Ferme Saint-Siméon (detail).
1875. Printed paper, 60 x 80
Honfleur, Archives Municipales

LA FERME SAINT-SIMÉON
A Legend in the Century of Impressionism

If we continue to be fascinated by the extraordinary artistic crossroads that was La Ferme Saint-Siméon in Honfleur in the 19th century, particularly during the formative period for the spirit and method that would soon give rise to Impressionism,[1] anyone trying to find out about the history of the place before the contemporary period will have been surprised by two things: firstly, the lack of in-depth studies to date, making this book the first on the subject;[2] and secondly, a certain ignorance of several literary and epistolary sources evoking the place, an ignorance which might lead to the belief that La Ferme's importance was only *pictorial*. This book therefore aims to offer a fresh invitation to explore this establishment, and in particular to navigate between these two facets of its role in the 19th century, as a Normandy refuge for landscape painting and as a coastal extension of the literary hub of the capital (by virtue of which it has been known, since the period, sometimes as the 'Normandy Barbizon' and sometimes as the 'Little Montmartre'). From Camille Corot to Claude Monet and from Gustave Courbet to Eugène Boudin, from Gustave Mathieu to Félicien Champsaur, and from Alphonse Allais to Marcel Proust, a rich iconography, some of it not shown before, and a corpus of literary texts and letters now allows us to relate, from the years 1825-1830 to the dawn of the 20th century, the history of this famous 'inn-cum-studio of byway painting'[3] that was long run by the famous Mère Toutain.

Still, we cannot properly understand what was going on at Saint-Siméon if we do not look further back in time and consider what was happening in French art before the 19th century. Of course, painting the subject directly existed before that century and, of course, landscape was a familiar genre, but the value and purpose defined for both by the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture was worlds away from their later status: the representation of nature was valued only if it was idealised, and the value of directly depicting the subject was recognised only as a preparatory method, involving above all drawn studies. The direct vision of nature could not be an end in itself.

One development in the interest taken in landscape – however timid – was the Academy's 1817 creation of a competition in historical landscape painting under the aegis of Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes

(Toulouse, 1750–Paris, 1819). However, the tests (including the famous 'tree competition') were still held in the studio and nature was expected to retain its ideal character. Even so, there was an incentive to travel and work outdoors, and soon various experiments would be conducted outside the rigid framework of the institution. Artists would soon find themselves representing what they really saw, without systematically recomposing the landscape from reusable studies and motifs chosen and then isolated from nature. The dynamic had begun, and soon painting nature for what it was would no longer seem incongruous.

Rediscovering the masters of the famous Dutch Golden Age, and inspired by the English, who popularised watercolour, a medium conducive to outdoor painting and immediacy of notation, draughtsmen and lithographers, both Romantic artists and painters with a classical training, travelled the highways and byways of France seeking, in different ways and to different degrees, a piece of reality: here, national history written in stone, there, a lived sense of the *actual size* (*grandeur nature*), or again, the sometimes anecdotal reality of peoples and places.

In this concert of painters increasingly attracted by nature and the taste for landscape in itself there emerged, more precisely, those who chose to work in the forest around Fontainebleau and who were later brought together under the name of the School of Barbizon. Later, a number of them would spend part of the summer in Normandy and in Honfleur, and for many, La Ferme Saint-Siméon. Among those who did, we can mention Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (Paris, 1796–1875), Théodore Rousseau (Paris, 1812–Barbizon, 1867), Charles-François Daubigny (Paris, 1817–1878), Narcisse Díaz de la Peña (Bordeaux, 1807–Menton 1876), Jules Dupré (Nantes, 1811–L'Isle-Adam, 1889), Camille Flers (Paris, 1802–Anet, 1868), François-Louis Français (Plombières-les-Bains, 1814–1897), Constant Troyon (Sèvres, 1810–Paris, 1865), Henri Harpignies (Valenciennes, 1819–Saint-Privé, 1916) and Alexandre Defaux (Bercy, 1826–1900).

The light of the estuary was without doubt essential for these artists emerging from the shadowy woodland, but it was also the relatively preserved nature of Honfleur,[4] which had long been untouched by the seaside tourism developing in neighbouring towns, and most famously Trouville and Deauville, that made it so popular with artists. By its isolation, halfway up the slope of the Côte de Grâce but on the edge of the city, its calm and the magnificent panorama it offered over the Seine estuary, La Ferme Saint-Siméon completed the attraction, as we shall see throughout this book.

But these geographical aspects were of course not the only assets of this farm similar to others along the Normandy coast or in the forest of Barbizon, such as the Auberge du Père Ganne. The light-hearted recollections of those who frequented the farm, especially up to the early 1880s, convey the image of a place that was sometimes a bit like a refuge, a long way from the social conventions prevailing in the capital. The diversity of the people one could meet there, too, must have had something to do with it: from the offshore fishermen (but also naval carpenters, caulkers and other sea folk) who came with their families on Sundays to rest from the work of the week, to the writers and impecunious painters called *rapins* who set up their easels there in the warm weather, and not to forget foreigners discovering the region, this was a cosmopolitan place where certain human frontiers no longer applied.

One family, one couple and one person in particular would add to this attractiveness: this was the Toutain family and, above all, the famous *patronne* of the place, Catherine Virginie Morin (Honfleur, 1810–1895), known as *Mère Toutain*, the wife by his second marriage[5] of Louis Pierre Toutain (Saint-Julien-sur-Calonne, 1801–Honfleur, 1863). Of their union was born a daughter, Marie (Honfleur, 1851–1886), who would marry one Alfred Louis Lemore. Père Toutain already had a son by his first marriage, Louis Dominique Toutain (Honfleur, 1833–1861).[6]

If Père Toutain was already a farmer in this spot in 1825-30, his second wife, Mère Toutain, does not seem to have set foot here until the 1840s. When her husband died, in 1863, she took over the management of the farm, assisted by her daughter Marie and her servant Rose.

Not much is known about Mère Toutain, even though she is a central character. She was 'the local Ernestine', as the journalist Mirliton[7] called her in an article for *Gil Blas*,[8] referring to Ernestine Aubourg, the famous innkeeper at the Hôtel de Paris in Saint-Jouin-Bruneval, near Étretat.

One of the rare textual appearances of Mère Toutain is in an article by Félicien Champsaur

(Turriers, 1858–Paris, 1934)[9] written for the *Figaro* on 14 November 1883 ('Oraison funèbre d'une ferme'[10]) announcing the coming end of Mère Toutain's lease and the establishment of an 'English hotel'. In this piece he does in effect present the septuagenarian, whom he describes as 'always alert, always the first to be up, at dawn […] and the last to bed, waiting up for the painter or the poet who is dallying on the strand, under the stars! Lean and solid, with frank eyes, her snowy hair sticks out a little from under her black coif, she is kindly, for she has a gaze that in all her life has not once been troubled by a dishonest idea. It makes a change from uncomfortable, murky gazes. And then she lives, with a simple soul, beside the sea, is therefore a neighbour to mysterious forces.' He continues with an evocation of the sea:

> What is more terrible than death in a storm, is to pass away in foggy weather, drizzle, in a peaceful horror. I can hear the farmer talking:
> 'I was getting up. Through the windows one could see neither the meadows nor the sea. Muted cries came. I got Louis, my little one (I have lost him, the good lad!):
> "Louis, it sounds as if Bidard is drowning… It is Bidard's voice, isn't it?"
> "Yes, it's Bidard… Nothing I can do."
> "But we must go, all the same. Louis, take a rope! You'll throw it to him."
> 'When Louis got back, he said it was impossible, that you couldn't see a single step ahead. That's the way it was, Sir. Bidard was shrimping, like all sailors, before making his way to his office, M. Bunout's, and, while he was trailing his net, the fog suddenly spread itself over the sea. How to find your way? The wife came, weeping:
> "Have you seen Bidard, my man?"
> Two days later, they fished him out near Harfleur. The current had dragged him from one side to another. Louis was very upset (I have lost him, the good lad!) They were friends and often went shrimping together.'

The place and its landlords were so popular in the 19th century that they ended up having a hymn, the 'Chanson de Saint-Siméon',[11] the couplets of which seem to have varied in keeping with the jobs done by their clients, whether sea people or bohemians. Here I shall give just two variants of the first couplet:

Run, faithful troupe
Run to Saint-Simion,
Mère Toutain is calling
To come and drink a *demion*

Run, faithful folk
All to Saint-Simion,
Mère Toutain is calling
To offer you her *béchon*

And now, of the second couplet:

Père Toutain more honest
Brings into his living room
That living room covered in straw
Is a sty fit for pigs

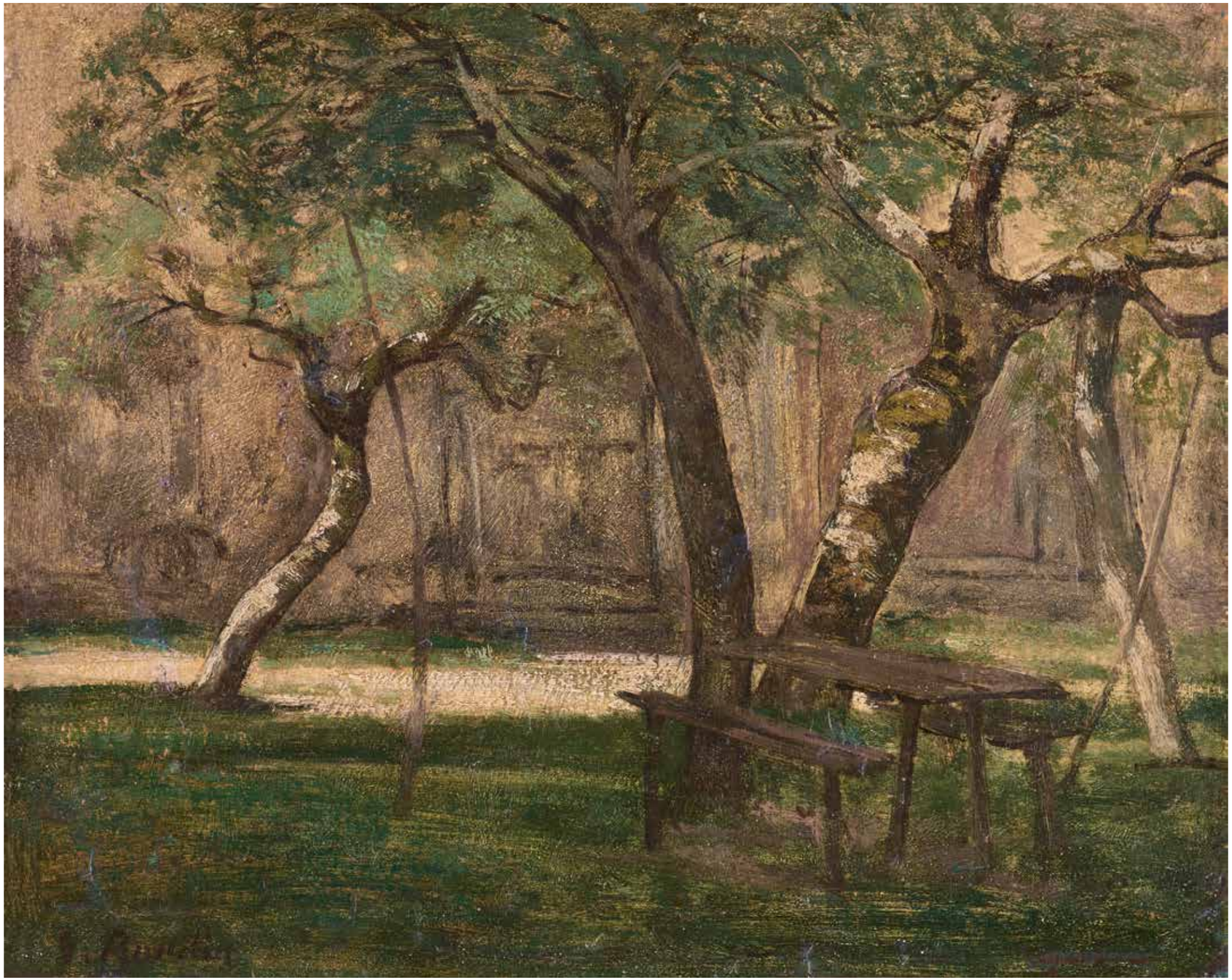
The more charitable servant
Leads us to a house
A house covered in straw
Is a sty fit for pigs

Alphonse Allais also gave Mère Toutain a role in *Les Zèbres*, as we shall see below (p. 121), and his sister, Jeanne Leroy-Allais (Honfleur, 1853–1914), took the time to describe her when evoking a 'childhood memory':

> The solid Mère Toutain, keeper of the inn, liked us a great deal and we would often go and play in her big courtyard. Sometimes we would take a break from all our dashing about to watch the artists painting pictures that filled us with admiration. They were amused by our babbling, by our sometimes absurd reflections, and we were solid friends […].
> The woman was dressed like the Honfleuraises of old, in a short petticoat, a camisole tightened at the waist and a *basin-plissé* hairband. Mère Toutain, at Saint-Siméon was, I do believe, the last person to wear this costume.[12]

This is one of the few physical descriptions we have of Mère Toutain, and for the time being no figurative representation is known. However, we do know that the painter Adolphe-Félix Cals (Paris, 1810–Honfleur, 1880) executed her portrait, which elicited praised from the painter Paul-Marc-Joseph Chenavard (Lyon, 1807–Paris, 1895), who had seen it at the farm.[13]

Eugène Boudin
The Tables at La Ferme Saint-Siméon
About 1857. Oil on cardboard, 22.5 x 28.4
Honfleur, Musée Eugène Boudin, inv. 99.1.23.



Eugène Boudin
Servant outside the Saint-Siméon
About 1857. Oil on cardboard, 28.2 x 22.5
Honfleur, Musée Eugène Boudin, inv. 99.1.24

As for other personnel in the house, we know that in 1933[14] there was still a sculpted representation, a bust, of the cook Catherine and her husband Léonard, a fisherman and supplier of the establishment, made by an artist who used to frequent the inn. The only painting we currently know of the 'team' is the oil on cardboard by Eugène Boudin (Honfleur, 1824–Deauville, 1898) representing a waiter at work there,[15] painted on the back of *The Tables at La Ferme Saint-Siméon* (pp. 12-15).

But of course, beyond the eminently sociable and courageous character of Mère Toutain, and her cooking combining products of the sea and diverse poultry (and of course naturally, her famous cider) which, added to the modest price of the accommodation, charmed more than one artist, what 'art people' come looking for in this pace was something else.

While we must probably resign ourselves to considering the question of the existence of a School of Saint-Siméon or School of Honfleur, one which has haunted the history of art for some time now, as not very germane, there is no doubt that painters came there looking, if not for calm,[16] then without doubt for a certain kind of emulation, for exchanges on this mode of direct working and also advice, to which those moments of communal life that were extended by the famous soirées were particularly conducive. There they found opportunities to compare each other's practices of direct painting, and to draw their own 'conclusions'. This was true for the youngest among them, such as Claude Monet (Paris, 1840–Giverny, 1926), who at the Ferme could frequent two painters he would later recognise as his masters, Eugène Boudin and Johan Barthold Jongkind (Lattrop, Netherlands, 1819–Saint-Egrève, 1891). Monet wrote to Frédéric Bazille (Montpellier, 1841–Beaune-la-Rolande, 1870) on 26 August 1864: 'I am sorry that you are not here, for in such company one can learn a great deal.'[17] But this was also true for a painter like Amédée Besnus (Paris, 1831–*location unknown* 1909), observing Français at work in 1857, and for Boudin when he saw Gustave Courbet (Ornans, 1819–La-Tour-de-Peilz, 1877) working in 1859 (and Courbet's own palette became singularly lightened in his dealings with Boudin and the estuary), as it was for Louis-Alexandre Dubourg (Honfleur, 1821–1891) who set up his easel with Monet 'in the middle of the docks, on board the boats, right in the middle of everyone'.[18]
To conclude on this question, it must be said that the notion of a 'school' itself implies, if not the existence of teaching in the strict sense, then at least that of shared theories from which rules of execution can be derived and, consequently, a relative aesthetic homogeneity. Now, none of this seems to have existed at Saint-Siméon; the only master there was nature, which artists tried to observe by a practice of intensive outdoor art-making, far from the hidebound teaching of the Beaux-Arts

It was therefore logical that this place that served as 'base camp' to a pioneering colony of artists who set out each morning to look for their subject in the town along the shore of the Côte de Grâce and the Côte Fleurie or in the surrounding countryside, should have given rise to a veritable legend, and a literary and pictorial heritage that has won it a lasting place in art history, at the sources of Impressionism. It was itself, therefore, a source of representations, few of which were shown at the Salon. The most famous concerned the "drinkers around a table" genre (sailors and their families), developed in particular by Boudin, Dubourg and Cals and often associated with the motif of apple trees twisted by the west wind, or again, what could today be considered as the first serial representation of a motif by Claude Monet, showing a road running alongside a farm. There are, too, numerous representations of the Ferme itself, naturally including both its two- and four-legged inhabitants.

Although the divisions between them are porous and they are above all a convenient way of structuring this history, we can nevertheless identify with some clarity four periods illustrating the history of the Ferme in the 19th century, from the 1825-1830 period to its end, involving successive generations of artists representing a fair variety of tendencies and questions. And this is the approach we have chosen to recount the 'legend' of La Ferme Saint-Siméon in the century of Impressionism.

THE ORIGINS OF LA FERME SAINT-SIMÉON
and the discovery of Honfleur in 1825-1830

First of all, let us begin by presenting the farm before the 'reign' of the Toutains. Its name is a distant tribute to a nearby chapel named after Saint Siméon, which may originally have been a leper house.[19] It would seem that the Saint-Siméon's land constituted the old garden with its outhouses. In any case, the known title deeds date back to 1631. They refer to one Ameline as the 'Sire of Saint-Siméon'. The land was sold several times during the 17th century: to Sieur Jacques Levillain in 1636; to Sieur Olivier Lecerf in 1664; to Sieur Rioult in 1695. In the 18th century, it belonged to the dramatist Jean Julien Constantin Renout (Honfleur, 1725–1785); his widow Marie Anne Marguerite sold it in 1793 to Rose-Françoise Quillet, who in 1826 sold it to her niece Adélaïde Tabary, widow of M. de Varin de Prêtreville, and to her son Jean-Baptiste. It was around this time that Louis Toutain became the farmer to M. de Varin de Prêtreville, a status which was again confirmed on 1 February 1835 by a notarial deed evoking a separating line to be established between the neighbouring property of Jean Simon Thierry. On 3 August 1836, M. de Varin was granted permission by the prefect to set up a pottery works.[20]

This was the period when the oldest known representation of La Ferme was made. This was by the painter Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, who played an important role making Honfleur and the Côte de Grâce popular with the generation of painters who would renew the landscape genre in the 19th century. Every time he was in Honfleur he saw Eugène Boudin, whom he nicknamed 'the king of skies', and is identified as one of the first painters to board at La Ferme Saint-Siméon. The highly graphic manner of his picture, still seeking a certain precision in the contours, is close to that of his studies of Italy, and a long way, for example, from the *Memory of Honfleur* painted some thirty years later.[21] Although based on open-air studies, this work was probably executed in the studio, in around 1845.

The *Journal de Honfleur* mention's Corot's presence in the town on 22 August 1829:

> This year, since the beginning of the summer, the town of Honfleur and the charming sites around it have attracted large numbers of landscape painters: we know of no less than eighteen, among whom we may note M. Smargens, a Neapolitan painter, M. Joinville from Paris, who has painted several views of Sicily which were acquired by HRH Madame la Duchesse de Berry, and

finally MM. Cognet, Barbot and Corot, from Paris. The subjects of their studies are the Côte de Grâce, the Harbour, the Coast and the Sea: several of them have been as far as Trouville, which also offers admirable views.[22]

To the representatives of that generation we should probably add Paul Huet (Paris, 1803–1869), whose presence is first attested in Honfleur in mid-June, 1828, and his friend Eugène Isabey (Paris, 1803–Montévrain, 1886), who may have begun frequenting La Ferme in 1826.

A notarial deed dated 2 June 1852, whereby Louis Raymond de Varin de Prêtreville, son of Jean-Baptiste and owner of La Ferme since 1849, rents it to Louis Toutain for nine years, includes the following description of the place:

> a grassy yard planted with fruit trees and with a house used as an inn, and the buildings requisite for its exploitation. 2. a garden with fruit walls planted with fruit trees that he will tend to with sticks. 3. the wood along the cliff. 4. a second yard planted with fruit trees in which there is a fountain of which the taker will have the use.[23]

Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot
The Toutain Farm at Honfleur
About 1845. Oil on canvas, 44.4 x 63.8
Ishibashi Foundation of Art, Japan

THE GOLDEN AGE OF LA FERME SAINT-SIMÉON
1850–1870

With no apparent discontinuity, even if we have no testimony to this effect, the frequentation of the farm by artists does not seem to have fallen off at the turn of the 1850s, in relation to the first visits. However, the fact that as of 1852 they could find bed as well as board must have made them stay longer, as Alfred Delvau noted in 1865: 'Some ten years ago now La Ferme Saint-Siméon changed its vocation and became the favourite hotel of artists and men of letters seeking an oasis'.[24] The earlier generation, wavering between naturalism and romanticism, now rubbed shoulders with and would soon yield to the painters (Courbet, Boudin, Jongkind, etc.) who, by their questioning of the medium paved the way for the rising generation of the Impressionists (Monet, Bazille, etc.).

Eugène Boudin seems to have been the first member of this young generation to lodge at the farm. Long before he started to divide his time between Paris and Trouville, in 1863, he was doing so between Le Havre, where he lived, and Honfleur, where he was born. His accounts for the year 1854 show payment of 115 francs[25] as rental for a stay at the farm. Likewise, the sum of 120 francs in 1855.[26] It was there that his friend the Swiss painter Auguste-Henri Berthoud (1829–1887), who also stayed at the farm, wrote to him on 29 August 1856 (p. 24):

> Please give my best regards to Madame Toutain and Captain who, I hope, has now fully recovered from his illness. Little Marie must be a big girl, give her a kiss for me.[27]

Also from this period we have a letter sent to Boudin by Louis Toutain[28] and probably written by a third party, asking him to have a word with J. Valls, one of his first buyers, about payment for the plums he sent him (p. 26). There can no doubting Boudin's closeness to his landlady. Toutain concludes as follows:

> My dear Monsieur Boudin
> I am expecting you next Thursday, for on Wednesday we are carrying out a dastardly murder on the person of our pig; you are welcome to come and try our tasty black pudding.
> Your must humble servant, L. Toutain

Another letter, dated March 1862, bears witness to Boudin's familiarity with the

Letter from Auguste-Henri Berthoud to Eugène Boudin
29 August 1856. Ink on paper
Private collection
© D.R.

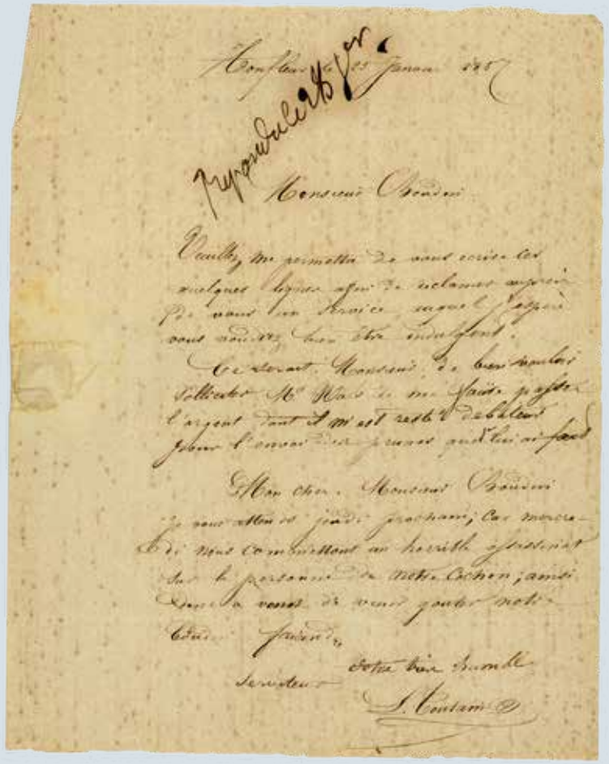
place. The artist complains about his writing tool to his friend, the Breton poet Alphonse Darnault:

> My dear friend,
> I made my way up to La Ferme St Siméon with the aim of plucking a few feathers from a goose's wing but I went about it too late – Christmas had been and gone & not one of those worthy fowl of which our neighbours the English are so fond was left, which means that you are going to have a new palimpsest to work out.[29]

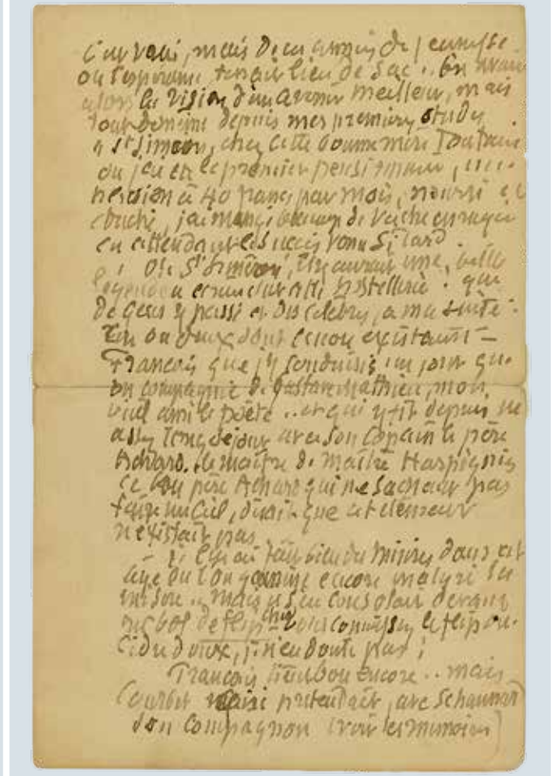
In 1896, in a famous letter to the Vicomte Emmanuel, known as Jehan Soudan de Pierrefitte (Paris, 1850–Honfleur ?, 1938), a chronicler of Paris high society and co-founder of the Société du Vieux-Honfleur,[30] the artist himself reflects on this period (p. 27):

> Oh St Siméon! A glorious legend could be written about this hostelry! So many people have spent time there in my footsteps, many of them famous: one or two are still around – Français whom I took there one [*illegible*] day in the company of Gustave Mathieu,[31] my old friend the poet […] and who later made quite a long stay there with his chum Père Achard,[32] the master of master Harpignies, this worthy old Père Achard who, because he did not know how to do a sky, said that this element does not exist.
> I made him suffer a bit at that age when one still kids about despite the poverty, but he consoled himself over a bowl of h[ot] *flip* – You know *flip* with sweet cider, I do not doubt!
> Français continues to hold out… but Courbet who claimed, with his companion Schaunard (see his Memoirs) that cider is only for washing your hands in, had dozed off after a copious lunch washed down by Père Toutain's little barrel.
> Another day I took there Troyon and Van Marck[33] who dined with cider […] they are dead now; the master, a sad, early death […] the student had been given the time to make his harvest of him x [*at the bottom of the page:* (x) I was forgetting my student Claude Monet!]
> I played epic skittle games there with Diaz, another good man who knows how to throw the ball with an energetic

Letter from Louis Toutain to Eugène Boudin
Honfleur, 25 January 1857.
Ink on paper, 15.4 x 19.7
Private collection
© D.R.



Letter from Eugène Boudin
to Jehan Soudan de Pierrefitte
Deauville, 25 October 1896.
Ink on paper, 17.8 x 11.4 (closed)
Honfleur, Musée Eugène Boudin, inv. 77.5.2
© Honfleur, Musée Eugène Boudin



arm and who would knock down your skittles with great vigour. The number of times he beat me… another glorious fellow.
Others too have been here, less illustrious ones perhaps, like Gauthier Amand,[34] Menard,[35] Rémy and Mathon,[36] who, in his free time, drew in the little room at the end of the house a part of Michelangelo's Last Judgement – all in écorchés: it was horrible! Toutain *fils*, a colossus, died there from a fit of delirium tremens, driven wild by those flayed, quivering figures. […] Later, Mère Toutain had these bloody frescoes painted over.
I do not mention the last occupants, like Gill and good old Cals… but all these memories have faded […] nevertheless, some forty years ago I saw there some joyous festivities when we were still surrounded by sailor folk and we danced after emptying our flagon of beer… when it cost six sous a flagon![37]

Sadly, the end of the letter has been lost, but its recipient transcribed it in an issue of the periodical *Le Petit Normand*[38] dated 8 July 1900 (p. 29), all about Eugène Boudin and the emergence of Impressionism, recalling on the same occasion the circumstances in which the two panels discussed a little further on in this book were created (p. 90–91), panels which re-emerged at an auction in 2011:[39] 'In the "studio" of St-Siméon I saw Karl Daubigny competing with the Russian painter Bogoluboft [*sic*] to paint a "piece" faster than the other man. I took the watch: the French master covered his canvas in ten minutes; but the Russian came in far ahead, with a panel on a door, in four minutes.' Still, given the recipient's propensity for over-emphasis and literary recreation, this ending needs to be taken with a pinch of salt.
Eugène Boudin himself left many representations of La Ferme (p. 32-41) – it ceased to be an inspiring motif in his work in the 1860s – including numerous sketches in pastel, a medium that enabled him, just as much as it did for the skies, to swiftly jot down the scenes he copied from nature, outdoors.

Le Petit Normand.
Traditions et arts populaires
8 July 1900, 7th year.
Printed paper,
50.2 x 32.7 (closed).
Honfleur, Musée Eugène Boudin, inv. 2018.0.3


Le Petit Normand
TRADITIONS ET ARTS POPULAIRES
Eugène BOUDIN