# The Wind

## « That which cannot be painted »

The wind, like the air, is invisible. However, we can feel it and hear it. It shapes the landscape, brings it to life, playing with objects and people, while concealing itself from view. “Wind itself is not visible,” declared Leonardo da Vinci, who added: “[We see in the air…] not the motion of the wind but only the motion of the things carried along by it.”

How can we give form to the invisible? Since time immemorial, this is the challenge that the wind has presented to humankind. How can we represent it? How can we signify or describe it? This exhibition explores the means by which artists have tried to solve the paradox of a real and tangible, yet invisible wind. By embracing a broad chronological period, beginning with the 4th century BC and continuing up the present day, putting into perspective works of different natures and periods by artists with diverging approaches and vocabularies, we see the development of a story to which this exhibition is dedicated.

The attempts made by artists to represent the invisible have evolved over time. They implicitly reflect the understanding of meteorological phenomena—this was an obscure science until the second half of the 19th century—, as well as beliefs, the conventions governing painting, the status of landscape as a genre, the working methods adopted by the artists, etc. Their attempts are also intimately connected to the technical possibilities afforded by the various artistic media.
During Antiquity, the winds were personified by deities whose exploits were recounted in the great classical texts. Personification appeared as an early solution to representing the wind, and this device lasted into the 19th century. However, in the Renaissance it was established that the wind should only be represented by the effects it produced. Therefore, artists and theoreticians endeavoured to compile lists of events that characterize or accompany it. These observations, shared in the form of writings or treatises, codified the representation of the wind for several centuries. It was until the emergence of a new sensitivity towards nature, in the late 18th century, that practices evolved. Leaving their studios to paint outdoors, artists began to represent a nature that was no longer idealized, but observed carefully and experienced physically. Their productions attempted to translate the emotions and sensations felt in nature. In the 19th century, the wind became a subject in its own right and artists found new plastic means to transcribe, on canvas, paper, photography, and glass, the moving forms of this phenomenon, until cinema, invented in 1895, brought the ultimate technical solution. Thus began another chapter, for the wind, a major element of our universe, continues to be an eternal subject of astonishment and fascination.

If the works shown here are graced by the presence of the wind, the very architecture of the museum, with its uninterrupted views of the maritime landscape, invites the gaze to focus on the constantly evolving spectacle it offers, caressed by the breeze or buffeted by strong winds. Outside the museum, an ephemeral plant bed, made up of anemophilous (wind-pollinating) plants, welcomes visitors, who are sure to discover over the course of this exhibition, works that resonate with this “little meadow where the wind plays.”

## Embodying the wind

Since early times, men have tried to interpret the meteorological phenomena that condition and punctuate part of their existence. For a very long time, it was believed that these were the manifestation of the gods’ will.

Circa 340 BC, Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote a treatise entitled Meteorology, where he attempted to explain certain phenomena like the wind. Within the air, traversed by invisible and unstable forces, two winds were identified, one from the north and one from the south. Four were later identified at the four cardinal points, then eight. These were the ones that appeared in the form of winged figures, each with an attribute, on the reliefs of the Tower of the Winds, erected on the agora in Athens in the 1st century AD.

These “embodied” winds therefore took on human or animal forms. They were credited with fantastic adventures. In Antiquity, they were represented under the guise of Boreas, Zephyrus, Aeolus, and their loves, intrigues, and fits of rage inspired the great classic texts of Homer, Virgil, and Ovid.

Boreas’ abduction of the Athenian princess Orithyia was a well-liked subject whose popularity continued until the late 18th century (François-André Vincent). Zephyrus appears in the guise of a winged man blowing a favourable wind that assists Ulysses on his journey (Theodoor van Thulden), or driving away the rain (Hendrick Goltzius). But it is by means of a clever subterfuge that Gérard evokes the wind without actually showing it: in his painting, Flora, the goddess of flowers, quivers in the wind’s springtime caresses. Aeolus, the god of the winds, is depicted, in turn, as benevolent (he entrusts Ulysses with a bag of wind, on the condition that he does not open it at risk of future misfortunes), and authoritarian with his cohort of winds (Cornelis II Bloemaert), or punishing Aeneas’ fleet.

“This populace of titans” as Victor Hugo nicknamed the wind, was “the base of this imaginary of winds, compensating for the centuries-old inability to explain them” writes historian Alain Corbin.

## “Of How to Paint Wind”

Pliny the Elder, in Book XXXV of his extensive Natural History, written in the 1st century AD, notes that the Greek painter Apelles (4th century BC) had surpassed all of his peers, by succeeding in painting thunder, bolts, and lightning, or in other words, “that which cannot be painted”! This example was the subject of comments by most of the authors of artistic treatises during the Renaissance, who raised the question of the “representability” of the unleashed and mobile elements of nature.

In the early 16th century, Leonardo da Vinci devoted several seminal texts to the air, tempests, the wind, the flight of birds, etc. “Of How to Paint Wind”, “Of Depicting a Tempest” are not questions but short essays that provide practical advice for painters. These treatises would determine for at least three centuries, the codes when it came to representing the wind. These are broken down thematically and descriptively: the wind is only perceptible through the effect it has. Vegetation, trees in particular, the fury of the waves, the angle of boat masts, the clothes of figures and their bodies bending into the force of the wind; everything that is flexible or mobile reveals the wind’s invisible presence.

In the late 18th century, the attraction for landscape painting grew, fuelled by the aesthetic theories of the picturesque and the sublime developed in England, in particular, by William Gilpin and Edmund Burke. The raging wind and the spectacle of the devastating effects it caused produced the “sensation of delicious horror” characterizing the sublime. Even if open-air painting was encouraged and practiced (Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes), storm and hurricane scenes were all painted in the comfort of the studio.

## Leonardo da Vinci: “Of Depicting a Tempest”

“If you wish to represent a tempest consider and arrange well its effects as seen, when the wind, blowing over the face of the sea and earth, removes and carries with it such things as are not fixed to the general mass. And to represent the storm accurately you must first show the clouds scattered and torn, and flying with the wind, accompanied by clouds of sand blown up from the sea shore, and boughs and leaves swept along by the strength and fury of the blast and scattered with other light objects through the air. Trees and plants must be bent to the ground, almost as if they would follow the course of the gale, with their branches twisted out of their natural growth and their leaves tossed and turned about. Of the men who are there some must have fallen to the ground and be entangled in their garments, and hardly to be recognized for the dust, while those who remain standing may be behind some tree, with their arms round it that the wind may not tear them away; others with their hands over their eyes for the dust, bending to the ground with their clothes and hair streaming in the wind. Let the sea be rough and tempestuous and full of foam whirled among the lofty waves, while the wind flings the lighter spray through the stormy air, till it resembles a dense and swathing mist. Of the ships that are therein some should be shown with rent sails and the tatters fluttering through the air, with ropes broken and masts split and fallen. And the ship itself lying in the trough of the sea and wrecked by the fury of the waves with the men shrieking and clinging to the fragments of the vessel. Make the clouds driven by the impetuosity of the wind and flung against the lofty mountain tops, and wreathed and torn like waves beating upon rocks; the air itself terrible from the deep darkness caused by the dust and fog and heavy clouds.”

Leonardo da Vinci, Of *Depicting a Tempest*, 1492, taken from The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, edited by Jean Paul Richter, 1880.

## The Tree or The Oak and the Reed

In the early 19th century, landscape painting established itself as a genre in its own right. The landscape gradually became more than just the setting for an episode or event, drawn from religious, mythological, and human history. It was now deemed a subject worthy of interest, viewed, and represented for what it was: the countryside, seaside, a forest clearing, mountains, etc.

In this new approach, the result of an increased sensitivity towards nature, the different elements of the landscape were carefully observed. Considered from the 17th century onwards as “one of the greatest ornaments of the landscape” (Roger de Piles), the tree was the subject of very special attention. Treatises on painting devoted an important place to it, and offered a great deal of advice for young artists. This subject seemed to be so fundamental to artistic education that it was the subject of a special test for the contest for the Historical Landscapes Grand Prix, created in 1816. Although this examination took place indoors, it was nevertheless preceded by long hours of painting outdoors, as recommended by Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes, author of a treatise published in 1800. According to him, these open-air observation sessions would assist the artist’s memory at the time of painting.

The example of 17th-century Dutch landscape artists inspired many young painters. In 1855, Charles-François Daubigny engraved a popular work by Ruisdael, entitled *The Bush*, housed at the Louvre. This tribute to an old master also ensured the dissemination of an image of which Van Gogh also had a copy hanging in his bedroom in 1875.

The wind moving the trees in this work reminds us that these two elements were very often associated. The wind breathes movement, energizing the composition, while the tree that bends

under the force of the wind is akin to a man struggling with opposing forces and his destiny (Victor Hugo). The wind could be moralistic too, on occasion, as in La Fontaine's fable of *the oak and the reed* (Jules Coignet), where the proud resistance of the oak is broken by the wind, whereas the humble reed survives.

*Hurricane* by Émile Breton (1863), painted in a realistic vein, draws inspiration from the representation of the forest by painters of the Barbizon School. However, *Poplars* by Claude Monet (1891) breaks with this tradition. Here, the trees are no longer a picturesque element or an anthropomorphized creature, but the medium through which the artist expresses the sensations arising from his direct experience of nature.

## The Sea Breeze

Since the 17th century, seascapes are without a doubt, the genre that has given the best role to the wind! Calm seas are rare, because they are less "photogenic" than scenes brought to life by the wind. At times, these winds are favourable, filling sails and pushing ships as they set off to trade in distant climes or in search of new continents (Ludolf Backhuysen, Seascape). Other times, painters depicted storms, with a hurricane smashing boats onto reefs, causing shipwrecks, resulting in feeble rescue attempts (Jacob Adriaensz Bellevois, *A Fishing Boat off a Rocky Coast in a Storm*), whose survivors were keen to show their gratitude to heaven in "storm-themed" ex-votos with precise captions François-Geffroy Roux).

Joseph Mallord William Turner was the heir to this tradition, and did not hesitate, like a modern Ulysses, to be tied to the mast of a ship in order to observe the storm he would later represent in a large canvas exhibited in 1842 at the Royal Academy of London. Nature, animated by these incessant flows, was a deep source of fascination for him, and the wind was the element that set the world in motion. Testimonies by his contemporaries confirm the painter's taste for violent atmospheric phenomena. At the end of his life, his landscapes would become impressive vortices where elements mingle and merge, and where the forms dissolve to become only movement, vital breath, and pure energy. (Turner, *Seascape*).

In exile on the Channel Island of Guernsey, Victor Hugo lived in direct contact with the ocean. His description of this little piece of land lost in the middle of the immensity of the sea, battered by the winds, is at the heart of his novel *Toilers of the Sea*, written in 1866, and of the dark washes he executed to illustrate it. Aware of the knowledge recently established on the phenomena of the swell, Hugo captured, in his writings, as in his drawings, sublime evocations. Here, "the winds rush, fly, swoop down, dwindle away, commence again, hover above, whistle, roar, and smile; they are frenzied, wanton, unbridled, or sinking at ease upon the raging waves. […] They mould and knead the supple waters as with a million hands."

In tribute to this monumental work, painter Julius Baltazar and writer Michel Butor, collaborated on a series of seventeen plates combining drawing and writing. In so doing, they reaffirmed the difficulty of representing the wind through poetic or visual language alone, proposing to remedy this by combining them in a powerful, hybrid, and doubly evocative work.

## Headwind

The representation of the human figure in the wind draws from a vast repertoire of situations. Traditionally shown as part of storm scenes in the classical and romantic periods to accentuate

pathos and provoke fear by playing on the compassion that such a human drama inspired, these figures saw their role evolve during the 19th century towards more complex registers.

The hostile wind is transformed into a metaphor with Ernest Meissonnier's *Le Voyageur* [The Traveller]. Representing an officer of the Empire on horseback, this sculpture was interpreted in the past as an illustration of an episode from the retreat from Russia. Whatever the officer's identity, the sculptor delivers a masterful representation of a man and a horse facing a headwind, evoking the harshness of fate, and perhaps of defeat.

The violence of climatic phenomena is treated in a more ambiguous way in Goya or Steinlen's work. The prostitute or the lowly employee, tasked with a delivery, are forced to struggle against the assaults of a wind whose sole aim seems to be making their task more difficult.

For many other artists however, the wind becomes joyously transgressive: first and foremost, for caricaturists like Isabey and Daumier, or the young Jacques Henri Lartigue. The wind is like a ghost who makes fun of things and people, seeking the viewer's complicity; the wind is what makes pretty women's scarves flutter and causes strollers to hunch into the wind as they hold onto their hats! It is an invisible force that blows and blusters, sometimes in storms, tousling hair and lifting dresses.

With Buster Keaton, the hurricane brings the violence and humour of the situation to its climax. Buffeted about like a wisp of straw in a cyclone, "Junior" reveals his heroism in a long, hilarious scene. Nevertheless, it is thanks to this headwind that there is a happy ending: the two lovers reunite.

## Images of the floating world

As a result of the commercial and cultural exchanges that developed in the Meiji era (from 1868 onwards) between Japan, Europe, and America, Westerners discovered Japanese art. Dealers played a major role in the spread of artworks from the Far East, supplying the first collectors, many of whom were artists themselves. Exhibitions and publications also contributed to the recognition of this art. Japanese prints in particular, were enthusiastically greeted by Western audiences.

Landscape prints, predominant in the 19th century, and brought to a new level of technical mastery by artists like Katsushika Hokusai and Utagawa Hiroshige, aroused particular interest amongst the Impressionists, and later the Neo-Impressionists and Nabis. Going beyond the simple quest for exoticism, Western painters were especially sensitive to the attention given by these engravers to nature, atmospheric effects, changing seasons, and climatic phenomena. The poetic rendering of the light, coupled with their desire to capture fleeting impressions or moments of daily life, resonated with the research of many Western artists.

The care taken to suggest the physical effects of the meteorological elements, evoked by these silhouettes bent in the rain, hurrying from the storm, clothes flattened by the wind, confers these climatic phenomena with a sensory and emotional dimension. In *Driving Rain at Shono*, Hiroshige excels at transcribing the violence of the tornado, with the gusts of wind that bend the trees, and the clever positioning of the surprised travellers in the foreground. These figures are seen struggling, as best they can, against the asphyxiating impetuosity of the storm. Humour is never absent from these scenes of everyday life, where the weather plays a lead role. Hokusai and Hiroshige present their small figures in pursuit of their windblown hats; Suzuki Harunobu lifts his young woman with an umbrella into the air with a tender irony.

Undoubtedly, these prints were instrumental in renewing, in France, the iconography traditionally associated with weather, by introducing a “domestic” dimension to the wind; an everyday wind represented in its most prosaic manifestations, such as the one moving the laundry drying on the line in Suzuki Haronabu’s *Rain Shower*.

## The world aquiver!

The practice of open-air painting that developed from the 18th century onwards was recommended by teachers and theoreticians as an essential exercise in painters’ education. Being outdoors in nature was necessary in order to hone one’s gaze and to transcribe the elements of the landscape, “to capture nature in the act” (Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes), in studies intended to enrich one’s subsequent work in the studio.

In the field, artists experienced a working environment subject to the vagaries of the weather (sun, wind, seasons, etc.), and to the effects of these on the landscape (stormy light, colours after the rain, the movement of trees in the wind, etc.). With a growing interest in these changing phenomena, and once landscape was finally recognized as a genre in its own right, artists began to devote accomplished works rather than mere studies to such phenomena.

In this catalogue of new motifs, the wind held a special place. Relieved of its symbolic charge (divine anger, human vulnerability), the wind was once again viewed as a simple essence: the movement of air with infinitely variable dynamics—the breeze that rustles Monet’s poplars trees, disperses the smoke from burning vegetation (Rivière), causes curtains to fly (Philippe Favier), or the more dynamic wind that inflates the sails of a fishing boat (Sorolla), or overturns parasols on a beach (Etcheverry). All of this resulted in a radical change in the pictorial treatment of the wind: artists sought to represent it at the very moment they experienced it physically. The simultaneity of the creative act and the meteorological event opened the field to new experimentation: wind as movement. Artists attempted to render the experience in a framed, fixed image, but in terms of duration rather than a suspended or frozen moment in time.

Artists wanted to render the sensations of the wind via visual correspondences. For some, the brushstroke was the way to achieve this: a quick brushstroke, small, rapidly applied, almost like a comma, as in Monet’s work (*Wind Effect, Meadow with Flowers*), translating the flow of the air, its abruptness, reversals… Thicker, unbridled strokes can be seen in the work of Kees van Dongen (*The Vineyard*), or scratched hatchings in Boudin’s (*Pointe du Raz*). Other artists opted for fluid strokes, applied quickly to still damp layers, blurring both contours and forms (Boudin, *Stormy Sky above the Beach at Trouville*), and creating a pulsating blur of energy (Auguste Renoir, *Bay of Salerno*).
Others still chose to dissociate the time of the experience and that of creation. For example, Félix Vallotton, Henri Rivière, and Louis Anquetin preferred to work in the studio, drawing from the formal vocabulary of Japanese printmaking masters, succinct means of expressing the wind: undulating lines, slightly off-centred framing suggesting movement, etc.).

In 1895, the birth of cinema seems to have definitively settled the question of the representability of the wind.

## A Contemporary Wind

To the problem of the representability of the wind, the cinema, from 1895 onwards, and then more recently video, brought a truly revolutionary solution by making it possible to restitute, albeit in a

framed image and in two dimensions, movement and time. Video, like experimental cinema or the digital image, offers an even more radical rupture, freeing itself from the narrative to which cinema is mostly bound.

In the works of Manuela Marques and Caroline Duchatelet on display here, the movements of leaves trembling in the wind and reflected in a surface of water, or those of clouds enveloping a barren mountain are recorded at length. But if Manuela Marques captures real time ("a moment chosen from a flux"), and the sound of the wind, Caroline Duchatelet fashions the recorded time material during editing, shortening it before redeploying it in a silent continuum that is disturbingly realistic. The animated image has in no way exhausted this interest in the wind and the aspiration to convey its expressive powers. On the contrary. Each of the artists presented here finds their own way of taking up the challenge of depicting the invisible, by freely exploring the possibilities of their medium, the history of representation, and their own sensory and emotional perception.

Questioning this history, others revisit works that are now iconic. For example, Corinne Mercadier explores Etienne-Jules Marey's experiments; Jeff Wall Katsushika Hokusai's print, and Julius Baltazar and Michel Butor Victor Hugo's wash illustrations and text. More indirectly, it is these same "anemophilous" motifs—this is how we call things with a penchant for the wind—favoured by the "old masters" for their evocative or poetic potential that we find here. These can be drawn, photographed, sculpted, and painted: trees (Alexandre Hollan, Eric Bourret), grass (Gloria Friedmann, Gilbert Garcin), waves (Véronique Ellena), clouds (Jacqueline Salmon), and figures in the wind (Corinne Mercadier), etc.

Amongst the procedures that bring into play new processes, let us note the approach of those artists who have made the wind the actor of their work. While Jean-Baptiste Née lets the dust transported by the wind (as well as drizzle and snow) settle in fine layers in the drawings he executes in the mountains, Bernard Moninot goes further. The latter limits his role as an artist to merely designing the device that will engender the work. In other words, he positions small round transparent boxes (Petri dishes), covered with lampblack, suspended above tall grass. The stalks of grass, agitated by the wind, leave scratched imprints on the blackened surface, a kind of signature or self-portrait of the wind whose multitude of forms the artist has captured since 1999, in a series entitled *Mémoire de vent* [Memory of Wind].