

# Romanticization and Reaction

## Jules Breton's *The Song of the Lark*

[EM ALLEN]

French painter and poet Jules Breton's *The Song of the Lark* is a strikingly serene painting, evoking total stillness. The strong vertical-horizontal axis and stability of line, as well as the muted color palette, ground the calm motionlessness of the image. The earth-toned color palette, the dim, diffuse lighting, and the atmospheric phenomenon of the red rising sun establish the dawn moment of the piece and contribute to a sense of ephemerality, given the transitory nature of such moments of dawn or dusk. These formal elements of line and color convey a sense of tranquility and stability, which contrasts with the thematic elements of dawn and harvest that evoke ideas of change and growth. This juxtaposition suggests the tension between stasis and progression, reflecting a sense of anxiety about the turbulent socioeconomic changes taking place in the artist's lifetime. The carefully constructed sense of quiet peacefulness within the image both conceals and responds to the tumultuous period of Euro-American history in which it was originally created and displayed. Further compounding this historical context, international audiences interpreted the painting through culturally-specific perceptions of agricultural labor and female sexuality. These dimensions of the painting are no longer evident to contemporary viewers.

In *The Song of the Lark*, Breton, like other conservative French landscape artists at the time, romanticizes the vanishing rural landscape and imagines an Edenic life away from urban areas, where traditional social values could be upheld.<sup>1</sup> The well-established visual language which informed Breton's artwork connected to conservative ideals of its audiences at the time of its creation. In France, Breton's work fed into a long history of rural genre paintings that affirmed essentialist class

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1 Maureen Ryan, "The Peasant's Bonds to Gaul, God, Land and Nature: The Myth of the Rural and Jules Breton's *Le Chant de l'alouette*," *RACAR Canadian Art Review* 19, no. 1-2 (1992): 79.



*The Song of the Lark*, Jules Breton,  
French, oil on canvas, 1884, 43 ½" x 33 ¾".

hierarchies, and in America it fed into the new-world ideals of self-determination and individual merit. Over a century since its creation, *The Song of the Lark* has become less ideologically laden, now admired for its tranquil atmosphere and aesthetic beauty.

The painting depicts, nearly life-size on the canvas, a young woman standing barefoot in a freshly harvested field at dawn, the red sun rising at shoulder level on her left. The painting is done in a descriptive, naturalistic style with a slightly loose finish. The sun by the woman's shoulder could possibly be understood as setting instead of rising, but the woman is unladen and her clothes are clean, indicating that her work has not yet begun, so dawn is more plausible. The light across the scene is faint and diffuse, brightening above the horizon; the red sun casts little direct light but tinges the sky pink, then yellow, then blue-green at the edge. She is simply dressed, in a modest, off-white buttoned shirt, its sleeves rolled up past her elbows. Her brown underskirt ends at mid-calf, while her blue overskirt, tied at her waist, is bunched up around her hips. A red, patterned bandana holds back her hair. The woman's head is tilted back, eyes gazing out beyond the picture plane, her mouth slightly open and brows furrowed. She stands just right of center in the picture plane, on a narrow footpath running across the bottom right corner of the image, facing left. Behind her, a field of bare, tilled soil, dotted with budding plants, leads into a field of lush green growth and ends in a murky line of trees right at the horizon. A few small, rural houses populate the background to her left. In her right hand, the woman holds a sickle, suggesting the harvesting task she is about to undertake.

The physical sensations conjured by this scene are palpable, from the feel of the air to the way it could sound. The painting captures the dawn so vividly that the viewer is transported into the scene. Looking at *The Song of the Lark*, the viewer can imagine the feeling of the fresh, crisp morning air on their skin; but the air must not be very cold, given the woman's bare feet and exposed arms, neck, and head. As people and animals begin to stir, the hush of predawn is not yet broken, until the titular lark sings clearly into that silence. By promising an imminent eruption of birdsong, the title of the painting informs and expands the viewer's perception of the painting, thereby creating an implied auditory sensation and an explanation for the central figure's behavior: she stands still to appreciate the lark's song.

The time of day is fully conveyed by the muted colors of the painting, contrasted with the intensity of the red rising sun. The diffuse light of the setting results in an overall mid-tone value, characterized by a lack of deep shadows and bright highlights. This color choice also creates an overall unity in the piece through desaturated color. Color also establishes the dawn atmosphere by way of the sky, with its recognizable yellows and pinks and greens, as well as the saturated redness of the rising sun. The dawn is a time of liminality, fleetingness, and change, so the temporary nature of this moment can be read in this sense of the time of day.

The cluster of small, rough buildings and low skyline indicate a rural, agrarian setting. This is reinforced through the woman's simple clothing and the markers

of her role as a physical laborer: the sickle and the overskirt, gathered up to hold the fruits of her labor. The targeted use of vivid green against the sober browns and blues of dirt and tree also contributes to the setting's physical solidity, as the greenery of the field suggests the fecundity of farm life, as well as the beginning of the harvest. The remoteness of the scene is also apparent in the relationship between figures in space, particularly of the woman in relation to the setting. Dominating the foreground of the piece, the woman's larger proportions contrast with the minuteness of the field, houses, and trees arrayed behind her. She is far away from the background, separated by the large empty space of the field, reinforcing the remoteness of the setting and her own isolation. This sense of space also emanates from the disproportionate expanse of the sky, which takes up a third of the picture plane, to the rest of the painting.

The strong horizontal of the tree-line and the straight vertical line of the woman's form, echoed in the straight folds of her skirt, work together to create a sense of stability. This use of straight lines, especially in the woman's clothing, further emphasizes the stillness of the scene; no wind or movement sways her skirt. She stands slightly off-center, but this is balanced by the slight mass of the miniature buildings and the glowing ball of the sun off to her side. The sun, the brightest point of saturated color in the painting, is particularly useful in balancing out the dominant, darker figure of the woman. Together with the unity in palette mentioned above, this compositional balancing act of colors and values, as well as mass, contributes to the painting's sense of groundedness.

Beyond the tranquility and sense of incipient change evoked by the formal elements of the painting, its visual iconography carried its own meanings in the formal tradition of the time, reflecting the culture of its multinational audiences. Critical and public responses to *The Song of the Lark*, first in France and then in the United States, where it traveled to and remains to this day, focused on the idealized sanctuary of rural life and the icon of the peasant woman, but the cultural associations of this imagery were markedly different between the two countries.

Having made his name in rustic landscape painting, particularly peasant woman genre painting,<sup>2</sup> Jules Breton was intimately familiar with the visual iconography and meanings of the tradition of idealized landscape painting. Although he ran in Realist circles—a 1934 Art Institute of Chicago pamphlet describes his work as occupying “a middle ground between French Classic Painting and the poetic realism of Millet.”<sup>3</sup> Breton was also a conservative painter and member of the conservative French Academy of Fine Arts, which opposed the avant-garde Realist movement.<sup>4</sup> Official French idealist art, in the words of art historian Stephen Eisenman, “upheld the superiority of the ruling notables, the value of simple

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2 Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 40.

3 Art Institute of Chicago, *Have You Seen America's Best Loved Picture 'The Song of the Lark'?* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1934), 2.

4 Stephen Eisenman, *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2019), 271.

peasant virtues, and the need for proletarian subservience.”<sup>5</sup> These are all values which *The Song of the Lark* embodied in the context of the French Salon, where it was first displayed in 1885.

In France, the painting’s critical reception after its Salon debut, connected it to conservative reactions against the rapid progression of modernity. These reactions revolved around their conceptions of peasants and the landscape as embodiments of static, traditional ways of life. As *The Song of the Lark* illustrates, Breton’s paintings framed the peasant lifestyle as timeless and untouched by modernity, aligning with the authority of tradition.<sup>6</sup> French critics identified peasants with the land and nature, reducing them to a primitive “other,” unable to appreciate the aesthetic beauty of the landscape they inhabited. They believed this was due to the peasants’ perceived close bond to the land, which made them part of it and obscured any capacity for intellectual reflection.<sup>7</sup> This otherization was racialized; there was a prevailing attribution of peasant heritage to the pagan Gauls or Celts, in contrast to the Frankish or Germanic heritage of the upper classes. This separated the peasantry into a racial “other,” rightfully subservient after the triumph of the Frankish or Germanic tribes over their own pagan ancestors. Peasants were not just a class “other,” they were a racial “other,” set apart historically and culturally.<sup>8</sup>

The painting also intersects with late nineteenth-century debates over gender roles and female sexuality. Peasant women were perceived differently from urban women, their socio-economic status altering the terms of their womanhood. Their rurality meant they were “safely distanced from the sphere of problematic class identifications of the city.” The sensuality of peasant women was seen as natural and pure compared to the “corruption” of urban working women, who were seen as prostitutes, and were therefore incomparable to higher-class urban women.<sup>9</sup> The woman in *The Song of the Lark* was accordingly sexualized—Nochlin describes Breton’s work as “glamorizing and classicizing the erotic charms of the peasant girl”<sup>10</sup>—but in a subtle, earthy way. The identification of peasants with nature meant that peasant women were heavily associated with natural cycles and fecundity. This is echoed in the iconography of dawn and harvest in Breton’s painting.<sup>11</sup>

Rural landscapes and the peasants who inhabited them became symbols of a vanishing world and its class hierarchy. Maureen Ryan argues that the cumulative effect of these ideas about the peasant class was “conservatizing,” creating an essentialist hierarchy with which to differentiate country peasants from modern urban dwellers.<sup>12</sup> These stereotypes, and the painting which so readily embodied them, helped naturalize this depiction of life, presenting itself as an authoritative

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5 Eisenman, *Nineteenth Century Art*, 336.

6 Ryan, “The Peasant’s Bonds,” 81.

7 Ryan, “The Peasant’s Bonds,” 84.

8 Ryan, “The Peasant’s Bonds,” 81-83.

9 Ryan, “The Peasant’s Bonds,” 85.

10 Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*, 20.

11 Ryan, “The Peasant’s Bonds,” 90.

12 Ryan, “The Peasant’s Bonds,” 85.

view of the countryside.<sup>13</sup> Considering the turbulent social changes of the nineteenth century, this conservative painting was likely comforting for those disturbed by those changes—artistic recourse to asserting tradition and ideas of cyclic time often occurs in periods when change disrupts society.<sup>14</sup> Breton’s own political leanings certainly aligned with the conservative connotations of his painting; he often registered conservative sympathies and believed that in the past an ordered world of class harmony had existed where the peasants were happily subservient. Pointedly, Ryan claims, “Breton’s rural idyll thus upheld the authority of tradition and the past on a number of levels.”<sup>15</sup>

The French’s reception of *The Song of the Lark* was limited to its Salon display, after which it made its way to the United States, where it was seen in a different ideological context, that of new-world self-determination and American exceptionalism. Breton’s work was well-loved in American markets, and when *The Song of the Lark* went to the Salon, it was purchased by a dealer and sold to Chicago businessman Henry Fields, where it remained in his collection until his death. When Fields’s wife donated his collection to the Art Institute of Chicago in 1894, where it remains to this day, giving it a permanent home among the descendants of European immigrant farmers, who had carved their frontier homesteads out of very similar landscapes.<sup>16</sup>

For the first few decades of its tenure at the Art Institute, *The Song of the Lark* was incredibly popular, drawing crowds of devoted admirers. It became a pillar of the American populist canon, readily recognizable to the masses.<sup>17</sup> In 1934, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt unveiled the painting at a ceremony awarding the title of “Best Loved Picture,” hosted by the Art Institute of Chicago and using the results of a national poll run by the Chicago Daily News.<sup>18</sup> A brochure printed by the Art Institute for this event claims that “more reproductions of this picture have been made than any other painting in America,” and that audiences repeatedly requested that the museum display the painting whenever it was in storage. The brochure explained that *The Song of the Lark* was so popular “because this peasant girl, walking proudly erect, with a figure made muscular and strong by heavy toil, lifts herself out of her sordid surrounding when she joins her song with the melody of the lark.”<sup>19</sup> For its American audience, this idea of a woman rising above her circumstances transcribed itself onto the new-world ideal of individual merit and opportunity.

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13 Ryan, “The Peasant’s Bonds,” 81.

14 Ryan, “The Peasant’s Bonds,” 90.

15 Ryan, “The Peasant’s Bonds,” 91.

16 Paul Jones, “Listening to the Song of the Lark.” Art Institute of Chicago, accessed October 12, 2022, <https://www.artic.edu/articles/980/listening-to-the-song-of-the-lark>.

17 Stephen Eskilson, “Contesting the Canon(s): The Song of the Lark and the Art Institute of Chicago,” *Journal of the History of Collections* 15, no. 2 (2003): 258.

18 “The Song of the Lark,” Art Institute of Chicago, accessed October 12, 2022, <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/94841/the-song-of-the-lark>.

19 Art Institute of Chicago, *Have You Seen America’s Best Loved Picture*, 2.

The sexual connotations of the peasant woman present in the French reception of the painting disappeared entirely in the American context, while its appeal to traditional rural values was exchanged for new-world individualism and the hope for a better life. The “Best Loved Picture” brochure describes the subject as “a stalwart peasant girl who possesses, in the jargon of today, no sex appeal.”<sup>20</sup> Where Breton and the French conservatives used the visual language of rural genre painting to elevate a traditional class hierarchy of shared values over individual rights, American audiences saw the allusions of dawn and harvest to renewal and awakening spoke to the idea of a “classless” society of the new world, where individual merit was the sole marker of success and worth. The girl’s association with nature and reverent manner identified her with hope, liberating and removing her from peasantry, where in France she and the peasant class were associated to the land and with the preservation of tradition.<sup>21</sup>

While the American audience differed from the French in these significant ways, the two shared a dismissive view of peasants as unintelligent. The painting’s widespread popularity rather paradoxically underscored this, since populist culture was regarded by American elites as uncultured, because popular taste was usually influenced by media rather than (largely inaccessible) art historical education. Two novels used it as key elements within their narratives to communicate a dismissal of laborers’ capacity for intelligence. Willa Cather’s novel *The Song of the Lark* (1915) features a naïve peasant girl who has a revelatory experience seeing the titular painting and identifies strongly with the subject, whom the narrator speaks of disdainfully.<sup>22</sup> *Look Homeward, Angel*, a 1929 novel by Tom Wolfe, follows a schoolboy whose essay response to the painting, by echoing French critics’ ideas about peasants being unable to appreciate aesthetic beauty, leveraged his ascent into the Ivy Leagues and the social elite.<sup>23</sup>

Due to its prominence in popular culture, the painting was not well-liked by everyone, as some thought its popularity would render the masses insensate to quality art. The director of the Art Institute of Chicago, Robert Harshe, was vocally against its display, often moving it to cellar storage until public outcry forced him to return it.<sup>24</sup> Harshe’s commitment to resisting popular taste and removals of the painting from the galleries did not stick. Though its popularity waned throughout the twentieth century and it no longer draws crowds of devoted viewers,<sup>25</sup> in 2022, *The Song of the Lark* still hangs in the museum’s permanent nineteenth-century exhibition, though now hung in a side gallery. Although it is not nearly as popular or well-visited as it was in the early twentieth century, *The Song of the Lark* is still given a place of relative prominence in public view.

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20 Art Institute of Chicago, *Have You Seen America’s Best Loved Picture*, 2.

21 Ryan, “The Peasant’s Bonds,” 90-92.

22 Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915).

23 Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1929); Eskilson, “Contesting the Canon(s): *The Song of the Lark* and the Art Institute of Chicago,” 259-260.

24 Eskilson, “Contesting the Canon(s),” 261-264.

25 Eskilson, “Contesting the Canon(s),” 261-265.

In a culture so removed from the ideas around peasantry of one hundred years ago, the ideological context of *The Song of the Lark* is far less prominent. It is easier to read the peasant girl as a symbol of past labor revolutions and the working class rather than a reaffirmation of class hierarchy; the sickle in the woman's hand reinforces this reading, harkening simultaneously to agrarian life and, as a potent symbol of labor, the progress and turmoil of nineteenth century labor movements. As a culture changes, the meanings associated with visual forms do as well. Nowadays, admirers of the painting credit its aesthetic appearance and atmosphere as its main appeal. The museum space compounds the effect of the tranquility—the hushed atmosphere within echoing the quiet of the dawn and the stillness of the scene. Paul Jones argued that “Breton had no inkling of how the silence needed to fully appreciate the song would also disappear with the advent of the gas-powered engine.”<sup>26</sup> This is true, but the ritualization of museum visitation and its distance from the bustling city outside, as well as the reduced noise pollution of modern cars, have rendered this concern null.

*The Song of the Lark* uses a well-established visual language of diffuse light, muted color, stable lines, and compositional balance to communicate its rural scene as one of meditative tranquility, stasis, remoteness, and brevity, with hints of incipient change foreshadowed by the visual elements of harvest and dawn—both times of change and liminality. The interpretations of the painting by both its initial, limited French critical audience and its astounding American mass audience stemmed from this visual language and the connotated stereotypes embedded in the cultures of reception. For the French, the painting was a comforting harbor of rural tradition and a reaffirmation of their hierarchized world, where peasants were simple, symbolic staples, and for the Americans, it was an embodiment of self-determination and pulling oneself out of abject conditions. Together, the soothing visuals and reaffirming messages of *The Song of the Lark* contributed to its immense popularity in the decades following its creation, as well as its easy adaptation to conservative values and the comforting idea of stasis, for any audience, aesthetically and socially. The painting provides a potent case study for the malleability of art for various ideological purposes, both in the artist's use of established visual tradition and through the interpretive responses of its contemporaneous and future audiences.

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26 Jones, “Listening to the Song of the Lark.”