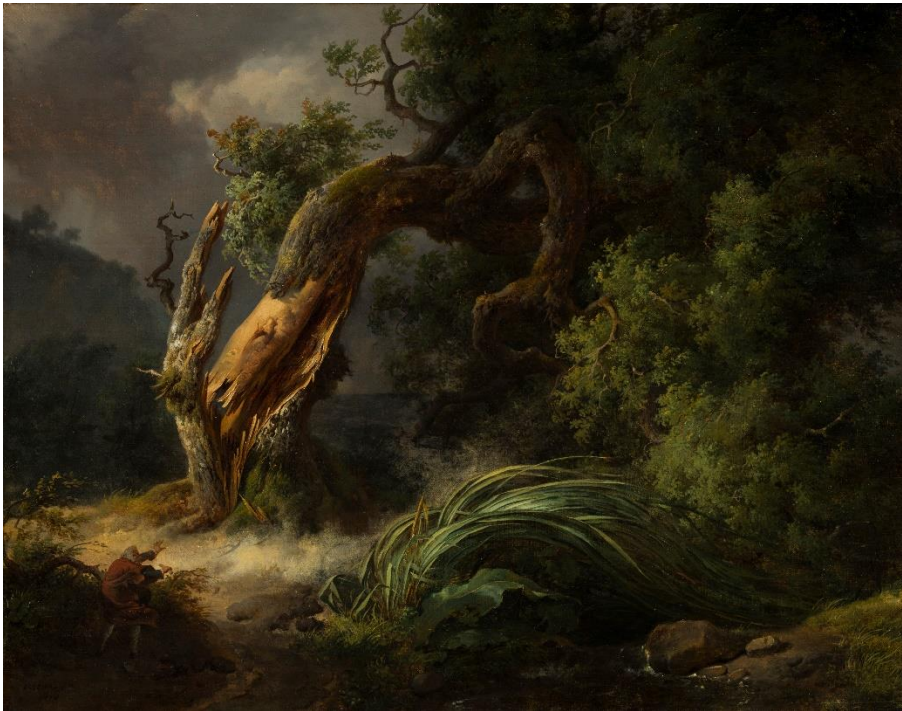


Trees



**Le Chêne et le Roseau
(The oak and the Reed)**
**By Achille Etna
Michallon**
1816
Oil paint on canvas
43.5 X 53.5cm
No: PD.180-1991

Activity Ideas

- Explore the properties of sticks from different kinds of trees
- Investigate how much must you bend each stick before it breaks
- Experiment with different ways of recording your observations and discoveries so that you can compare each stick
- Research other stories where a character is brave and shows resilience. Write a story, a poem or make a picture of a brave story of your own.

Questions to encourage big thinking

- Do you think it is better to be like the reed and give in to the storm or like the oak and stand tall and strong?
- Can you think of a time where standing strong like the oak might be a good idea?
- What do you think happens next?
- Is this the end for the oak tree and the animals that relied on it? Is it useful anymore?

Further information

Michallon was the son of the sculptor Claude Michallon and nephew of the sculptor Guillaume Francin. He studied under Jacques-Louis David and Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes. In 1817, Michallon won the first *Prix de Rome* for landscape painting. He died at the age of 25 of pneumonia, a tragedy which cut short the life of a talented and well-respected artist who could have gone on to win lasting fame.

The subject matter of the painting is taken from a fable by the French writer La Fontaine who was working in the seventeenth century.

A storm is approaching, and the mighty oak offers protection to the delicate reed. The reed replies that it knows what is needed to survive the storm. When the strong winds of the storm arrive, the huge tree that tries to face them with brute strength breaks, while the reed that bends and yields to the force of the storm survives. The lesson is one of humility and flexibility in the face of change. Some people, noting the year of the painting –1816 –, suggest that this fable was chosen as a commentary on the fall of Napoleon who was forced into exile the year before, having refused to accept the terms of a peace deal with allied European countries, insisting that France could win a war against them.

The story and moral lesson are much older than Michallon's painting, or even La Fontaine's writing. A version appears in Aesop's fables, and related proverbs can be found in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, the Ancient Chinese *Tao Te Ching* and the Jewish text, the *Talmud*.

This painting forms part of the exhibition 'True to Nature: Open-Air Painting in Europe 1780-1870' which will open at the Fitzwilliam Museum in 2022.

Other considerations

Some children might enjoy a version of this fable being told as a social story with human characters instead of plants. A real life scenario involving the need to be flexible sometimes could be used.

Links to other resources

<https://collection.beta.fitz.ms/id/object/2806>