Woodsmen of Privilege

Three men are in the woods, in their dirty parks department uniforms. All wearing gloves. One wearing a backwards baseball cap. Another wearing sunglasses. Another with a beard, wearing neither.

To the left, the man with the backwards hat and the man with the sunglasses are working together to move a fallen tree. There is an axe at the feet of the man in the sunglasses. Naturally, we wonder whether it was used to chop down this tree, or used only to trim branches off this tree that had already fallen on its own, so as to make it easier to carry. The clues lie in the details, in how the fallen tree is drawn, but the painting is not meant to be that complicated of a mystery. It can be, if you know your botany and/or are willing to perform a kind of forensic study on the behavior of branches, but it doesn't have to be. The fact that the men are wearing parks department uniforms should be sufficient circumstantial evidence enough.

But the viewer is not meant to dwell on this point. The true intrigue of the painting lies in the relationship between the scene described above and what the man with the beard is doing. To the right of the men moving the tree, and closer to us, in the foreground, the bearded man is kneeling beside a baby tree. The base of the baby tree is painted white. The bearded man is planting a wooden support beam into the ground. A hammer and a pile of wooden support beams at his feet. Behind the baby tree is another baby tree painted white at the base, supported by three wooden support beams that have been planted into the ground; and these wooden support beams are connected higher up by three smaller, horizontal, wooden pieces.

Dead wood guiding young wood.

Dead wood on the left. Dead wood guiding young wood, on the right.

This, the viewer thinks about. The immense trees on the left are natural. The baby trees being planted on the right are not, insofar as they did not spring up here on their own accord, but by the work of these woodsmen. These baby trees were chosen to be planted here by people. The privileged human race, remodeling the woods.

Or ultimately, you might say, growing more support beams.