

A response to Millet

Jean-François Millet: Drawn into the Light

An exhibit at the Frick Art and Historical Center in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

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The following letter from a contributor to the WSWS comments on an exhibit of the works of nineteenth century French painter Jean-Francois Millet that was on display in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The exhibit is currently in Amsterdam.

I am, like many, underpaid and overworked. I work at least 10 hours a day and 1 day a weekend. I was feeling physically and spiritually spent one Sunday and preparing for my one day of weekend work. My neighbor called and asked if I would like to see the Jean-François Millet exhibition. I had seen the ads, but I was hesitant. I had so much work to do. When I learned it was free, I relented and the journey began.

The group of drawings that inspired the exhibit and pastels are a part of the permanent collection of the Frick Art and Historical Center in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This show was appropriately called *Jean-François Millet: Drawn into the Light*. Visitors enjoyed the exhibition's stay in Pittsburgh last spring. Its new home is in the Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh in Amsterdam. The exhibition is a summary review of Millet's work. Shown are his rarely seen pastels, watercolors and drawings. Various stages of works of art are shown and displayed for their own beauty and use of technique.

Millet (1814-75) is recognized as one of the founders of the Realist movement. He was also well known for his exceptional skill as a draftsman and his commitment to drawing still life pictures. His oil paintings are better appreciated as one sees how they were given life, form and detail by the preceding drawings of the subjects.

Why was I so moved by representations of domestic life? Why is anyone? I imagine that as we move about on a daily basis at a blinding pace to keep up with our sometimes unrealistic expectations, we are more than happy to stop and regain lost portions of our humanity. That is particularly true in a culture which values only that which can provide personal monetary gain. Or perhaps it is simply that we feel as Millet did when he said, "Peasant subjects suit my temperament best; for I confess, even if you think me a socialist, that the human side is what touches me most."

I believe that this human side is what touches each of us most when we allow it to. Indeed I simply know beyond a reasonable doubt that a stroll with my infant child, as I am thoughtlessly drawn to steal a kiss upon his soft tuft of hair and drink in his warmth and tenderness, is the closest thing to heaven that I'll ever know. Millet reminded me of that with the vivid three-dimensional imagery drawn with black conté crayon on paper used for *The Departure*. The oil on canvas of *The Knitting Lesson* evokes similar sentiments of simple joys, maternal protection, guidance and love.

Millet's influence on Van Gogh is clear. The sharp images and deep rich colors take one into the picture or allow the picture to emerge from the canvas. Every set of eyes which views a picture or a painting goes away with something different. The timelessness lies in the universality of the beauty. Anyone at any time will find something of recognizable beauty. Everyone looks in awe at the detail, the boldness of texture, and subject.

The Sower, in particular, is an example of that. It is an extraordinary moment when you come upon this nearly

life sized 40 x 32 ½ inches (101.6 x 82.6 cm) oil on canvas painting. The detailed muscular figure clad in a red shirt and blue trousers, the intense facial expression, the dark weather-worn skin. This simple yet electrifying motion of sowing seeds in a field takes one's breath away. The sheer momentum of the figure makes it evident that *The Sower* is not to be reckoned with. One gets out of the way or joins him. After sowing one imagines he will lead thousands of peasants to Paris to take issue with their poverty and humiliation. If you listen closely enough you are certain to hear his shouts of “Vive la revolution!”

Apparently, this 1850 painting was sold to a Boston, Massachusetts buyer around 1851-1852, but never sold in France. The tour guide's story goes that the bourgeoisie was trying to create its own image of a lazy peasantry that had to accept its station in life. The bourgeoisie called them lazy to justify its dominance. *The Sower* contradicted this claim by showing a man who was not lazy and had abundant muscle mass to substantiate it!

This may be putting things a little too simply. After all, the European bourgeoisie had just had an encounter, the first of its kind, with a peasantry turned urban proletariat that challenged its rule. The proletariat was defeated in 1848, but the confrontation marked the end of an era. The bourgeoisie did not want to encourage the birth of this new era—one which would emerge with great force in the 1871 Paris Commune, despite all attempts to smother it.

Millet's works were, therefore not necessarily popular or well received by his contemporaries, but he was committed to depicting the peasantry in positive ways. He was true to a heritage that also belonged to him.

Over the next 20 years, however, Millet painted more tempered images of *The Sower*, to be acceptable to a French audience. This sower did not have the same depth and intensity. Even his clothes were a bland light blue and tan color. The figure was not as prominent, allowing the landscape to encircle him, blend in. Even Millet's use of pastels on tan paper or black conté crayon and pastel on paper changed the essence of the subject and his message. The subsequent images also decreased to less than half the size of the original. *The Sower* had been for all intents and purposes emasculated. It is very sad. I am no expert on Millet, but I imagine a lengthy debate he had with himself

during this time wavering between his desire to express deeply felt passions and paying the bills.

Nevertheless dearest to my heart will be *The Sower* of 1850, whose figure appears to be on the verge of coming to life and leaping from the canvas.

The lasting impact of the great image of *The Sower*, and by contrast, *The Gleaners*, are vivid reminders of the need for art to be accessible to everyone all of the time. The Frick exhibit was free. What a delight and a rare treat it was.

The images and the life that were conveyed will remain with me forever. I left the exhibit with my step a lot lighter and my workload put into perspective. I was, without question, drawn into the light and comforted by its warmth. This was an exceptionally well-spent afternoon.



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