Millet: Life on the Land—A radical depiction of rural transition

Until October 19, National Gallery, London

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Millet: Life on the Land at the National Gallery, London, marks the 150th anniversary of the death of French artist Jean-François Millet (1814–1875). Modest in scale yet rich in resonance, it is the first dedicated UK show of Millet's work in nearly fifty years, bringing together fifteen of his quintessential paintings and drawings that illuminate agricultural life in mid-nineteenth-century France.

Millet's art captures a vanishing peasantry and a newly emergent class of rural landless labourers—impoverished by capitalism and condemned to an endless cycle of back-breaking toil. He elevated agricultural labour to a near-sacred status, dignifying and monumentalising sawyers and wood gatherers, shepherdesses and milkmaids—figures long ignored, sentimentalised, or ridiculed in art.

Born into a farming family in Normandy, Millet's journey from provincial obscurity to the Parisian art world was shaped by a succession of artistic mentors. In 1849, amid political upheaval, he left the capital for Barbizon, a rural village fifty miles away, joining an artists' colony that included Théodore Rousseau and Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot.

The Barbizon School marked a decisive break from academic classicism, pioneering direct observation from nature—*en plein air*—and focusing on both the beauty and hardship of rural life. This was a radical gesture in an era dominated by history painting, mythological subjects, and elite portraiture, where rural labour was deemed aesthetically and socially inferior.

Millet's declaration that "It is the treating of the commonplace with the feeling of the sublime that gives to art its true power" encapsulates his ethos. Unlike Romantic predecessors such as Turner and Friedrich, who sought sublimity in nature's terror or grandeur, Millet found it in the ordinary and overlooked. He resisted sentimentality, insisting: "I want to put strongly and completely all that is necessary, for things weakly said might as well not be said at all."

The Barbizon School's innovations in technique, theme, and social engagement laid the groundwork for Realism and Impressionism, inspiring artists across Europe and beyond.

The exhibition opens with *The Sower* (1847–48), where a solitary peasant strides across a dusky field, arm swung wide as he scatters seed, silhouetted against a chilly sky. Rendered in earthy tones and blues, the image was condemned by the Paris art establishment as rough, menacing, and socialistic.

Millet responded: "I have never painted a single picture for the purpose of propaganda." Yet the American poet Walt Whitman saw in Millet's work a visual analogue to his own vision, praising its "sublime murkiness and original pent fury" as heralding a new prototype for the creative artist—one who sows both seed and the possibility of social change.

The Winnower (1847–48) depicts a lone man in rag-protected trousers and straw-stuffed shoes, shaking a wide basket to release a golden cloud of wheat seeds. In *Wood Choppers* (1850), Millet uses black chalk to portray two men: one tying a bundle of sticks, the other chopping wood, while a distant figure builds a pile. These scenes evoke the legally precarious labour of firewood gathering—criminalised under France's new forest codes that privileged private property and state control over communal rights.

Millet revisits this theme in *The Faggot Gatherers* (1850–55), where two women rest from their labour.

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Light falls on the gnarled hands and worn face of the elder, contrasting with her youthful companion. The fleeting nature of youth recurs in *The Goose Girl at Gruchy* (1854–56), where a weary girl leans on her staff amid a gaggle of geese, and in *A Milkmaid* (1853), where moonlight suffuses the figure in white, lending her an ethereal, almost religious aura.

The Wood Sawyers (1850–52) exemplifies Millet's naturalism and figural composition. Two muscular labourers, viewed from behind, grapple with a long saw as they cut a massive tree trunk. A third figure, clad in red, wields an axe. Though wood sawing was low-status work, the painting's palette—blue, white, and red—evokes the French tricolour and its revolutionary promise of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity.

The exhibition's centrepiece, *L'Angélus* (1857–59), depicts two peasants harvesting potatoes, bowing in prayer at dusk to the sound of a church bell. Millet recalled how his grandmother would make him and his siblings join in this Catholic devotion, recited three times daily in rural France. The scene is rich in symbolic detail: the sun has set but still bathes the workers' bowed heads, the hay bales, and the curved pitchfork in golden light.

The final work, *Winter: The Faggot Gatherers* (1868–75), painted near the end of Millet's life, is a haunting unfinished canvas. Three women, burdened with firewood, stagger across a stark winter landscape—a testament to exhaustion and endurance.

Yet despite the power of these works, the exhibition's curators offer little historical context for Millet's radical vision. His artistic achievements are attributed to his peasant origins and fortunate mentorship, while his departure from Paris in 1849 is vaguely explained as a response to "chaos."

But as David North noted in his 2011 lecture "The Revolutions of 1848 and the Historical Foundations of Marxist Strategy", "Europe was on the verge of a political explosion… Capitalism was in the throes of a major economic crisis that had a devastating impact on broad sections of the working population. The years 1846–47 witnessed human suffering on a scale greater than during any previous period in the nineteenth century. The economic crisis was compounded by a crop failure that produced widespread famine The unemployment rate skyrocketed."

The corrupt regime of Louis-Philippe—the "Citizen King"—was overthrown in 1848 by a popular uprising, in which Millet briefly participated. The revolt was crushed by the conservative bourgeois Provisional Government.

For Karl Marx, who had published *The Communist Manifesto* in 1847 and *The Class Struggles in France* in 1850, the suppression of the Parisian working class was a world-historic event. It revealed the brutal reality of class conflict behind the slogans of democracy and liberty. As Marx wrote, the bourgeois republic "was bound to turn immediately into bourgeois terrorism," confronting its "scarred, irreconcilable, invincible enemy"—the working class.

To exclude these events from an appreciation of Millet is to underestimate the true significance of his art: a consummate reflection of an epoch marked by contradiction, struggle, and transformation.

Today, the works of Millet and the Barbizon School endure not only as historical documents but as visionary meditations on humanity, nature, and the role of the artist in imagining a more just society.

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