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Millet's Milkmaids

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Abstract:

A closer look at Jean-François Millet's re-use of a popular image from his home region of Normandy complicates the identity of "peasant-painter" claimed for him by his supporters and by his own assertions of "authentic" peasant experience.

## Millet's Milkmaids by Maura Coughlin

Home may be a place of estrangement that becomes the necessary space of engagement; it may represent a desire for accommodation marked by an attitude of deep ambivalence toward one's location.[1]

- Homi Bhaba [The] capacity of objects to serve as traces of authentic experience is ... exemplified by the souvenir. The souvenir distinguishes experiences. We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable. Rather, we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative.[2]

- Susan Stewart

In French realist painting and literature, references to popular culture in the form of printed broadsides, Epinal prints, poems, songs, and other forms of "folk art" are often taken to be expressions of an artist's left-leaning political tendencies. But even though Jean-François Millet collected and appreciated such peasant handcrafts as ceramics, costumes, and hand-worked copper pots, he did not seem to link these so-called arts *du peuple* with the same radical political sympathies that Gustave Courbet, George Sand, and many others in the late 1840s found in them. Because Millet's relationship to popular representations of rural life is ambiguous and fraught with contradictions, much more so than Courbet's, it has been little discussed.[3] This essay considers Millet's unusual representations of Norman milkmaids, familiar figures in the mass-produced tourist literature on his home region of Normandy. His use of this motif complicates the biographical and transparent lens through which his realism is generally viewed, for this cliché of mid-nineteenth-century book illustration and later mass media relates neither to his youth in coastal Normandy nor to a timeless form of authentic peasant culture.[4]

Millet's rural imagery has always been difficult to see apart from his biography. Ever since Alfred Sensier's homage *La Vie et l'oeuvre de Jean-François Millet* was published in 1881, biographers have invoked Millet's childhood in Normandy as the key to understanding his images of rural life.[5] The literature has repeatedly attributed the seemingly personal and authentic nature of his representations to his unique identity as a sympathetic peasant insider.[6] The artist was certainly complicit in establishing this identity. In his oft-cited letter of 1863, for example, he declared: "I have never, in all my life, known anything but the fields." [7] Millet's peasant past lent credibility to his persona [8] as a traditional rustic; at the very least, his early rural background made for great biographical detail. Nineteenth-century writers called him the "one true peasant" of Barbizon, never acknowledging the artist's own hand in crafting his peasant-painter persona. Because, for his biographers, this nostalgic, pious past alone was not enough to make him a "great" French artist, they attributed to Millet an aesthetic, intellectual, and individualist approach to the pastoral, and likened his artistic development to that of a protagonist in a *Bildungsroman*. [9]

What many of Millet's biographers avoid, or seek to normalize within their portrait-of-the-artist-as-a-young-man narratives, is the fact that the artist's 1837 departure for Paris mirrors the flight of "real" peasants from the countryside, that initiated the depopulation of rural France. [10] And although Millet's literary and artistic erudition is often remarked upon, the

notion that his work might be more than an unmediated window onto rural life was evidently unpalatable to many of his biographers. The well-educated Millet deliberately played the rustic "savage" and sat the fence between rural simplicity and urban sophistication.<sup>[11]</sup>

The common view of Millet's rural imagery as autobiographical, naïve, and instinctive fails to take into account the fact that he developed his mode of rustic painting only *after* working in the "higher" genre of history painting, with its depiction of the timeless, placeless, ideal world of the mythical, biblical, or pastoral.<sup>[12]</sup> In his early career, Millet met the Parisian art scene on its own terms, rather than playing up his peasant outsider identity. In the early 1840s, the latter strategy would have run the risk of his being perceived as a mere regionalist rather than a serious French artist.<sup>[13]</sup> However, his supportive critics privileged his rural origin as the unique root of his subject matter, and often claimed that he never partook of urban culture. Théophile Silvestre, for example, described Millet as having "the eye of a clairvoyant, the spirit of a stoic, the physical solidity of a rustic, the courage of a lion, and a horror of this *polichinelle* life led by most of the art students of Paris."<sup>[14]</sup> Other critics likewise professed belief in Millet's innate ties to his native land that bound all of his rural imagery—regardless of where he was working—to his past in Normandy.

The layering of memory onto the artist's immediate surroundings, however, renders problematic the realist claim that Millet was of his own time, and, more importantly, of his own place. For many realist painters of rural life, localizing a painting practice in a place the artist could call home was as important as being of his or her own time.<sup>[15]</sup> For Courbet, this meant a return to the Franche Comté, for Jules Breton, to the northern village of Courrières, and, later, for Cézanne, to Aix-en-Provence. Millet's relocation in Barbizon, rather than his native region of Normandy, is significantly different. Because Barbizon was already an established artists' colony by the time he settled there, it was not a place divorced from the urban where one could "go to earth." As an artists' colony, it was inherently a community made up of transient residents and more permanent transplants.

Through a character in her realist novel *François le Champi*, George Sand articulated the inadequacy of the traditional pastoral mode for expressing a true peasant's perspective: "What is the possible relation, the direct link between these two contrasting states of existence, between palace and cottage, between the artist and the created world, between poet and ploughman?"<sup>[16]</sup> What has long seemed unique about Millet is his position on the threshold between "poet and ploughman." His canonical realist images such as *The Gleaners* or *Man with a Hoe* are frequently related to the artist's famous claim to have known what it is to earn one's bread by the sweat of one's brow. Millet's own letters and pronouncements on his art invite a reading in which his rural origin functions as an index to the authenticity and personal resonance of his images, which, in turn, authenticate the genius and singularity of the peasant-painter Millet. However, as will be shown here, Millet sometimes appropriated motifs from popular illustrations rather than relying on direct experience. This practice is especially evident in Millet's numerous images of heroic female figures carrying traditional Norman copper milk jugs.

The only study of Millet's paintings of Norman milkmaids is Robert Herbert's 1980 essay, which traces the sources of the last of this series, done around 1870-74 (fig. 1).<sup>[17]</sup> Herbert

revealed that the artist repeated this motif over three decades, beginning with a small vignette in his neo-rococo style of the early 1840s (fig. 2), and concluding with the late, heroic *contre-jour* figures of 1870-74. The Norman milkmaids stand apart from Millet's other images of French peasant women performing daily and seasonal labors, because of their unusual specificity, which is indicated both by the paintings' titles and their iconography. The copper milk jug is the most obvious symbol of the region (fig. 3), and Millet kept two of these at his studio at Barbizon. Prior to his sister's death in 1853, during visits home to Gruchy, he had drawn these vessels either carried by women or sitting on pantry shelves (fig. 4). They were among the few items Millet later claimed from the family estate (evidently having none of the lust for farmland that, for Emile Zola, was the very hallmark of peasant identity).<sup>[18]</sup> But in spite of such an indexical, biographic link to Millet's family, these objects indicate a regional, popular iconography that would have been recognized by the contemporary viewer.



Fig. 1, Jean-François Millet, *Laitière normande de Gréville* (Norman Milkmaid of Gréville), 1874 (RF 1978-18). Paris, Musée d'Orsay, legs de James N.B. Hill, fils de James Hill, 1978. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 2, Jean-François Millet, *Norman Milkmaid*, ca. 1840. Watercolor. Location unknown. Photograph courtesy Musée Thomas Henry, Cherbourg. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 3, A traditional Norman milk pot, 19th century. Copper. Courtesy Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires, Paris. Photo taken by the author. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 4, Jean-François Millet, *The Pantry Shelves at Gruchy*, 1854. Drawing. Reproduced in Moreau-Nélaton, vol 2, fig. 102. [\[larger image\]](#)

The milkmaid is an icon of French popular culture that has long signified the region of Normandy both to outsiders and to Normans. This female figure appeared frequently in early nineteenth-century travel literature and popular art, and can still be found today. Her iconic status is demonstrated by the history of Arthur Le Duc's bronze sculpture *Norman Milkmaid*, first shown at the Salon of 1887. After its exhibition there, the statue was installed in the Saint-Lô public gardens, only to be melted down during the Second World War. In the 1980s, it was re-cast and re-installed (fig. 5). The motif of the Norman milkmaid remains today a powerful local symbol and is featured in tourist literature and on postcards from the coastal area of La Manche (fig. 6).<sup>[19]</sup> The image of the milkmaid also serves to mark the exported regional commodities of Normandy, especially Camembert cheese (fig. 7). Cheese boxes stamped with this motif date to the late nineteenth century, when the new railway lines enabled Norman dairies to form cooperatives and ship their cheeses to Paris.<sup>[20]</sup> The Norman milkmaid used in this way functioned not only as a personification of the region of La Manche but also as a guarantee of the purity and quality of its traditional products.



Fig. 5, Arthur Le Duc, *Norman Milkmaid*, 1888 (modern re-casting). Bronze. Public gardens at Saint-Lô.  
Photo taken by the author. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 6, The church in Jobourg (La Manche) and a local milkmaid, early 20th century [n.d.]. Postcard.  
Courtesy Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 7, Camembert cheese label. Reproduced in *Les grandes heures des laitiers en Normandie* (Lunery, France, 1991). [\[larger image\]](#)

Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, the depiction of French provincial places and peasant types had been the subject only of the "lower genres," such as popular prints and book illustration.<sup>[21]</sup> This regionalist imagery often overlapped with a picturesque notion of provinciality, even when attempting to nail down the specific character of a region. The Norman milkmaid comes from this kind of mid-nineteenth-century illustrated travel literature, produced for an urban bourgeois readership. These texts assume an



unacquainted visitor who is on the lookout for indications that he or she is traveling at a remove—both spatial and temporal—from the modern city.

In several travel books that describe the regions of France, Normandy is represented by a milkmaid carrying a copper jug on one shoulder, held in place by a leather strap, the exact pose used in Millet's paintings. These images and their texts, which were produced as a part of Louis Napoleon's folkloric project to record positive aspects of peasant culture and provincial customs, foreground the milkmaid as a primary sign of regional difference.<sup>[22]</sup> This is true, for example, in the multi-volume, illustrated series *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* of 1840-42, in which the Norman region of La Manche and its main city of Coutances are represented by a Norman milkmaid (fig. 8). The creator of this image is Hippolyte Bellangé, who, like many *juste-mieu* artists, worked as an illustrator in addition to sending paintings to the Salon. His milkmaid is barefoot, accompanied by a small boy, and she carries a copper milk can, in the particularly Norman way, upon her shoulder. The text remarks that travelers interested in the picturesque in Coutances should seek out both its Gothic cathedral and the local milkmaids, who have this unusual manner of carrying their jugs.<sup>[23]</sup>



Fig. 8, Hippolyte Bellangé, *Milkmaid in the Coutances Region* (La Manche). Illustration in *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes*, 1840-42. [\[larger image\]](#)

F. H. Lalaisse's version of the Norman milkmaid, from the large-format series *La Normandie Illustré* of 1852, depicts a petite and well-starched young lady rather than a farm worker who might have any acquaintance with dirt (fig. 9). It is curious but telling that, although Lalaisse had traveled extensively in Normandy and Brittany in the 1840s to sketch regional dress, he chose to depict his milkmaid in an elaborate, starched bourgeois *coiffe* and impractical fancy frock. This approach anticipates the exoticized, "primitive" peasant of the much later Pont Aven school.



Fig. 9, François Hippolyte Lalaisse, *Milkmaid in the Coutances Region* (La Manche). Illustration in *La Normandie Illustrée*, 1852. [\[larger image\]](#)

Art historians and others have discussed the subject of regional costume of the nineteenth century at length.<sup>[24]</sup> Griselda Pollock and Fred Orton have remarked that the wearing of traditional dress—especially the high *coiffe*—involved social codes understood within Breton culture but not necessarily by tourists (or visiting artists, for that matter).<sup>[25]</sup> The voluntary, or involuntary, wearing of so-called peasant costume could have different meanings. Eugen Weber has commented: "peasant costume was often despised as the mark of an inferior condition, not the least because so many bourgeois forced their servants to wear it."<sup>[26]</sup> Yet, as the historian James Lehning has noted, regional costume was also a means by which country dwellers could assert their difference, a negotiation of identity that became all the more important as their rural world was increasingly invaded by tourists.<sup>[27]</sup> Rather than being simple markers of provincality imposed by expectations of the outside world, certain types of dress expressed agency and cultural cohesion.

Millet's milkmaids, in their dimly adumbrated Norman costumes, avoid both the elaborate flourishes of Lalaisse and the dirt-poor, barefoot sentimentality of Bellangé. These figures instead seem to embody an everyday kind of Norman identity rather than simply offering the viewer an attractive post-carding of the provincial. But it is difficult, if not impossible, to say his sturdy, dusky-clothed figures embody the "true" Norman milkmaid or that they "undermine" or "transgress" the pastoral milkmaid stereotype that we see in the earlier book illustrations, for the difference is one of degree, rather than opposition.

Norman peasants held a certain fascination for urban viewers who bought the armchair-travel books illustrated by Bellangé and Lalaisse. Léon Curmer, the publisher of *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes*, often employed as authorities ex-provincials or part-time residents of the regions described. Thus Francis Wey wrote about the Franche-Comté, Philippe-Auguste Jeanron illustrated the section on Limousin, Pengilly L'Haridon wrote about Brittany, and Hippolyte Bellangé illustrated the section on Normandy.<sup>[28]</sup> As Luce Abélès has noted, Curmer's approach to the provinces follows a predictable pattern, in which the historical past is briefly surveyed, followed by a lengthy description of the effects of climate and geography on the character of the region and its inhabitants.<sup>[29]</sup>



Normandy is second in importance only to Brittany in Curmer's three-volume publication. There are extensive descriptions of local costume, customs, and agricultural production, which, taken together, were intended to present a "physiognomie morale," as stated in the long version of the series's title. Normandy's culture is characterized as intact, uncorrupted by urban contact, remote in both space and time.<sup>[30]</sup> The "primitive" Normans spoke *patois*, observed ancient religious rituals, and wore traditional costumes.<sup>[31]</sup> They could not have been further in moral character from either the Parisian or the corrupted "part-peasant, part-bourgeois" of the *banlieue*, the suburban zone that had been transformed by progress and the railroad.<sup>[32]</sup>

Issues of morality and space are crucial for a reading of the peasant imagery that Millet produced primarily in his studio at Barbizon. Only thirty miles from Paris, between the *banlieue* and the more distant provinces, lived the Barbizon peasants on the plains of La Brie, often described by nineteenth-century authors as having lost some of their authenticity through constant contact with the city. Millet's pupil Edward Wheelwright wrote that Millet often complained "of the utter want of appreciation of the charms of nature shown by the peasant population of Barbizon, of their discontented and pining spirit, their low aims, their sordid views, their petty jealousies. He knew that there... was a peasant life free from these degrading faults. Such life he had known in his own peasant home in Normandy, and in the traditions and memories of that earlier home he found the ideal peasant life he had drawn in his pictures."<sup>[33]</sup>

According to Wheelwright, Millet "corrected" the actual views of peasant life in Barbizon, drawing on an archive of personal experience mixed with utopian idealism. Such a creative reworking of reality fits neatly into the traditional, pastoral ideal that, in the words of Rensselaer W. Lee, treats the natural world, "not as it is, but as it ought to be, raised above all that is local or accidental, purged of all that is abnormal and eccentric, so as to be in the highest sense representative."<sup>[34]</sup> This practice of using biography and memory to locate an "authentic" version of rural life enabled Millet to create his "real" peasants. Infusing these images with nostalgia, Millet in effect re-invented his golden-age childhood in the artists' colony at Barbizon, far from the site of his original experience in Normandy.

Millet was highly selective in his representation of peasant life, favoring "the oldest agricultural and artisanal trades despite the growing modernization of the Barbizon region."<sup>[35]</sup> Moreover, Millet tended to amend, through his own memory, what he thought to be inauthentic aspects of the local peasantry. In this way—and in accordance with Curmer's standards—he restored to the Barbizon peasantry its prelapsarian morality, via the uncorrupted Norman prototype, thus effectively erasing its origin in a liminal zone between city and country.

It is curious, then, that Millet's milkmaid, a rural type from his home region, seems to owe a great deal to models provided by travel texts. Did he not adequately trust his own memory? Or might he have deliberately quoted this motif, knowing that his urban patrons would have recognized it as a part of the language of provincial otherness and thus assumed it as ethnographically correct? Most puzzling of all is how to reconcile Millet's claim of having seen "nothing but the fields" with his use of such a recognizable cliché. If Millet was indeed

interested in finding an image that articulated some aspect of his own Norman identity, then why choose one so closely linked with travel illustration?

In letters, Millet repeatedly insisted upon his "authentic" peasant perspective as the explanatory key to his imagery, claiming to speak for the peasant, to a Parisian audience, as one who had lived that life. But he was neither a peasant who earned his living from the soil, nor was he a lifelong resident of Normandy. And unlike Courbet's *Young Ladies of the Village* of 1852, or his own *Man with a Hoe* of 1860-62, Millet's pictures of milkmaids did not show them as inhabiting a "dark side" of the pastoral.<sup>[36]</sup> It is well known that Courbet frequently borrowed from the pseudo-primitivist Epinal prints, which were made for and marketed to rural people. By contrast, Millet chose, in the case of his Norman milkmaids, images made for urban viewers that *represent* "primitive" rural people.<sup>[37]</sup> Neither of these forms of popular visual culture was truly naïve or constituted authentic folk art, although both espoused a certain primitivism. Although they had different intended audiences, the boundaries between these kinds of images seem to have worn awfully thin by Millet's day.

Significantly, Millet began his last milkmaid painting (fig. 1) in 1870 while staying in Normandy, ironically in exile, first from occupied Barbizon, and then from what he saw as the excesses of the Paris Commune. Millet had often described his longing to get back to his beloved *pays natale*, to which he had returned only three times since 1844. By the time of this last visit, he was virtually a tourist to the place of his birth. In 1870, he wrote to Alfred Sensier: "this place makes a strong impression on me and has many aspects of the old days intact. One can imagine oneself, ignoring certain modernizations, to be in the days of Bruegel the Elder. Many villages here recall the scenes represented in old tapestries."<sup>[38]</sup>

Millet's reference to Pieter Bruegel both connects his image to a venerable pictorial tradition that showed peasants' seasonal labor and expresses personal longings for a provincial motherland, the feminine space of unchanging tradition, the pastoral space of the anti-modern. Keeping the fabric of tradition whole by "ignoring certain modernizations" involves the sort of longing for one's origins that the critic Susan Stewart has termed the nostalgic's "narrative utopia that works only by virtue of its partiality, its lack of fixity and closure: nostalgia is the desire for desire."<sup>[39]</sup> This final milkmaid painting, then, can be read as a kind of souvenir, a talisman capable of preserving "aspects of the old days intact," and also quite literally as a souvenir in its French usage, of a reality "whose materiality has escaped... that thereby exist[s] only through the invention of narrative" as Stewart has so aptly written.<sup>[40]</sup>

The milkmaid's figure, haloed by the setting sun and blurred by the *contre-jour* effect Millet loved so well, brings to mind Marcel Proust's much later description of a girl serving milk at a train stop:

I could not take my eyes from her face which grew larger as she approached, like a sun which it was somehow possible to stare at and which was coming nearer and nearer, letting itself be seen at close quarters, dazzling you with its blaze of red and gold.<sup>[41]</sup>

Perhaps Millet was similarly blinded by his own nostalgia for a life he had left behind, and was not bothered that his re-use of the Norman milkmaid was so rooted in the iconography of the popular and contemporary picturesque. His letters certainly invited his public to read these images as originating in the personal, rather than the popular—in unique experience rather than a post-carding of Normandy.

Millet's rural realism is a difficult amalgam of memory, nostalgic pastoralism, and popular prototypes. The realist canon's version of Millet has long needed an overhaul, for it ignores the artist's eclecticism and nostalgia, in favor of making him out to be a sort of lesser, softer, apolitical Courbet. The directness claimed for Millet's realism is belied by an examination of the sort of transformative nostalgia that mediated and filtered his version of rural life. Thus, we can position him, not as an "authentic" peasant-painter, but as an occasional and somewhat ambivalent tourist of his own life—that never quite was—that of a Norman peasant. Like the Norman milkmaid, fossilized in a regional iconography, the Millet produced by nineteenth-century biography has endured in its appeal to [post-]modern longings for authenticity, for innate, organic connections to native earth.

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Maura Coughlin received her Ph.D. in art history from New York University. This article is drawn from her dissertation, *The Artistic Origins of the French Peasant-Painter, Jean-François Millet: Between Normandy and Barbizon*. Coughlin teaches courses on nineteenth-century art, landscape, and women artists at the Massachusetts College of Art and Tufts University.

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## Notes

[1] Homi Bhaba, "Halfway House" *Artforum* May 1997, p.11.

[2] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984) p. 135. I am very grateful to Robert Herbert, Linda Nochlin, Robert Rosenblum, Petra Chu, Eric Martinson, Anna Wexler and Emily Gephart who all gave useful advice on various stages of this essay.

[3] The classic essay on Courbet's use of popular imagery is Meyer Schapiro's "Courbet and Popular Imagery" originally published in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 4 (1940-41) pp.161-91. Also see Linda Nochlin, "The de-politicization of Gustave Courbet: transformation and rehabilitation under the Third Republic." In *Art Criticism and its Institutions in Nineteenth-Century France*, edited by Michael Orwicz. Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press & St. Martin's Press, 1994.

[4] Robert L. Herbert, *Peasants and Primitivism: French Prints from Millet to Gauguin* (South Hadley MA, 1995) pp.11-19.

[5] Sensier's 'peasant painter' version of Millet was a highly influential model for artistic autobiography, as I argue for in the case of both Vincent Van Gogh and Jules Breton. See Maura Coughlin, *The Artistic Origins of the French Peasant Painter. Jean-François Millet: Between Normandy and Barbizon*. (Dissertation, New York University, 2001) pp 15-17.

[6] For the most influential Millet biographies, see Alfred Sensier and Paul Mantz, *La Vie et l'oeuvre de Jean-François Millet*. (Paris, 1881), Anon. (Bénézit-Constant), *Le Livre d'or de Jean-François Millet par un ancien ami* (Paris, 1891) and Etienne Moreau-Nélaton, *Millet raconté par lui-même*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1921).

- [7] This published letter was written in response to the outcry over perceived Socialist leanings of *Man with a Hoe* when it was first shown in 1863. Letter to Sensier of 30 May 1863, in Moreau-Nélaton, v. 2 p. 129.
- [8] For the most authoritative overview (and bibliography) of the construction of Millet's 'peasant persona,' see the series of essays by Robert Herbert, "Millet Revisited" *Burlington Magazine* 104 (July 1962), pp. 294-305; (September 1962), pp. 377-386, "Millet Reconsidered" *Museum Studies* (Art Institute of Chicago) 1, (1966) pp. 29-65, and the two slightly different catalogs of the exhibitions *Jean-François Millet*, (Grand Palais, Paris and Hayward Gallery, (London, 1975-76). These catalogs' bibliographies list all the full-length 19th-century Millet biographies and most of the articles. On the construction of Millet's peasant persona by his biographer Alfred Sensier see Neil McWilliam and Christopher Parsons, "Le Paysan de Paris": Alfred Sensier and the Myth of Rural France." *Oxford Art Journal* 6:2 (1983) pp. 38-58. And on the role of posthumous biography in depoliticizing Millet's oeuvre see Neil McWilliam "Mythologising Millet" in *Barbizon. Malerei der Natur—Natur der Malerei* (Munich, 1999) pp. 437-8.
- [9] Robert Herbert relates Millet's biography to the Bildungsroman hero in his essay "Millet Reconsidered" *Museum Studies* 1, (1966) pp. 29-30.
- [10] See McWilliam "Mythologising Millet" p. 441.
- [11] Herbert and McWilliam have both persuasively argued for Millet's own role in forming his unusual reputation. See for example, McWilliam and Parsons, "Le Paysan de Paris," and Herbert "Millet Reconsidered."
- [12] The enduring lack of critical perspective on Millet's mythic peasant persona was evident, for example, in many papers given at the recent Millet conference at Cérisy-la-Salle, Normandy in October, 2000.
- [13] There is a large body of literature that concerns itself with mocking regionalist culture for its provinciality, especially in the case of regionalist writers. See for example Paul Vernois, *Le roman rustique de George Sand à Ramuz. Ses tendances et son évolution 1860-1925*, (Paris, 1962); Anne Marie Thiesse, *Écrire la France: Le mouvement littéraire régionaliste de la langue française entre la Belle Époque et la Libération*. (Paris: PUF, 1991) and Nicole Mozet, *La Ville de province dans l'oeuvre de Balzac. L'espace romanesque: fantasmes et idéologie*. (Paris: Société d'édition d'enseignement supérieur, 1982).
- [14] "...l'œil d'un voyant, l'âme d'un stoïque, la solidité physique d'un rustre, le courage d'un lion et l'horreur de cette vie de polichinelle que la plupart des rapins mènent à Paris." *Jean-François Millet. Écrits choisis précédés de Jean-François Millet par Théophile Silvestre* (L'Échoppe, 1990) p.14-15.
- [15] Linda Nochlin discusses the importance of place for Realist painters in "Courbet, Oller and a Sense of Place: the Regional, the Provincial, and the picturesque in 19th-century art" in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society*. (New York, 1989) pp.19-32.
- [16] George Sand, *François le Champi* (Paris, 1849) translated by Eirene Colliss as *The Country Waif*. (London, 1930) p. 20.
- [17] Robert Herbert "La laitière normande à Gréville de J.F. Millet" *Revue du Louvre et des musées de France* (February 1980), pp. 14-20.
- [18] Herbert, *Millet* 1976 (Hayward catalog), p. 28.
- [19] See, for example, *Tout sur le département de la Manche*, ed. (Élie Guéné, Manche Tourisme 1987) p. 12. Le Duc's bronze was melted down during the occupation of Normandy in 1942; a copy was recast in 1986 and put back on its original public site. I am very grateful to M. Hubert Godefroy of the Musée Bocage Normand in Saint-Lô for information on this statue.
- [20] *Les grandes heures des laitiers en Normandie* (Luneray France, 1991). See especially Phillipe Jacob's personal collection of Camembert labels, p. 240ff.
- [21] See Linda Nochlin, *Gustave Courbet: A Study in Style and Society*. (Dissertation, New York University 1963). p. 117.
- [22] See Stéphane Gerson, "Parisian Littérateurs, Provincial Journeys and National Unity in France." *Past & Present* 151 (May, 1996) p. 159.
- [23] "Coutances a de remarquable sa cathédrale et ses laitières; non pas que celles-ci soient mises avec recherche, ou plus belles que les filles de Vire ou de Bayeux, mais elles ont adopté une façon toute particulière de porter leurs pots, qu'elles tiennent obliquement suspendus sur l'épaule droite au moyen d'une lanière de cuir." Émile de la Bédollière, essay on Coutances in *Les Français: La Province*, v.2 p. 177. For further description of the iconography of this type and its description in Norman *patois*, see J. P. Bourdon, *La Ferme du Bois Jugan*, Musée Municipal d'Ethnographie, Saint-Lô, 1992.



- [24] Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock "Les Données Bretonnantes: La Prairie de Représentation" reprinted in the volume of collected essays, *Avant Gardes and Partisans Reviewed* (Manchester, 1996) p. 80. Also see Denise Delouche, *Les Peintres et le paysan breton* (Baillé, 1988). Both of these studies point out that the *coiffes* that Pont Aven artists often put on the heads of women working in the fields were neither everyday dress nor timeless costume, originating in the 18th and early 19th centuries and reserved for Sundays and holidays. On primitivist representations of Brittany also see Michael Orwicz, *The Representation of the Breton: Art Criticism, Politics and Ideology in Paris, 1885-1889*. (Dissertation, UCLA, 1989).
- [25] James R. Lehning, *Peasant and French: Cultural Contact in Rural France During the Nineteenth Century*. (New York, 1995) p. 8.
- [26] Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1871-1914*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), p. 56.
- [27] Lehning, p.8. Also see Regina Bendix "Tourism and Cultural Displays: Inventing Traditions for Whom?" *Journal of American Folklore* (March 1989) p. 102.
- [28] Bellangé, who was then the director of the Rouen museum, is best-known for his military images, although Michael Marrinan discusses Bellangé's popular imagery related to the peasant's worship of Napoleon in *Painting Politics for Louis-Phillipe: Art and Ideology in Orleanist France 1830-1848* (New Haven, 1988). Bellangé also produced troubadour images for Jules Janin's *La Normandie*.
- [29] Luce Abélès "La Province vue par Les Français" in *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes: Panorama social du XIXe siècle*, Les Dossiers du Musée d'Orsay, ed. Ségolène Le Men (Paris, 1993) p. 56.
- [30] Gerson, pp. 162-3.
- [31] This treatment is typical of what David Sibley terms "the good stereotype...an unattainable fantasy ...locate[d] ...in the past or in a distant country...seen through a romantic mist...[this] stereotype is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation which denies the play of difference." David Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion* (London, 1995) pp. 17-18. On the 20th-century version of this stereotype, see Anne Marie Thiesse, *Ils Apprenaient la France: L'exaltation des régions dans le discours patriotique* (Paris, 1997) p. 39.
- [32] Curmer's words are: "espèce d'être métis, moitié paysan, moitié bourgeois" cited in Ségolène Le Men, *Les français peints par eux-mêmes: Panorama social du XIXe siècle*. Les Dossiers du Musée d'Orsay 1993. pp. 56-7. The beginning of the second volume of *Les Français* on the 'provinces' states that "Versailles n'est déjà plus Paris, et n'est pas encore la province." The peasant inhabitant of the extended *banlieue* in "Les paysans des environs de Paris" is personified by the grotesque character Jean Flottard, a sleazy produce merchant of les Halles. He cries out poverty when people try to bargain with him, loves to swindle the bourgeois of Paris. He is not religious, fears foreigners, has a hatred of authority and his town's *fonctionnaires*, and votes for Napoleon. Curmer, *Les Français: La Province*, v. 2, p. 14.
- [33] Wheelwright spent most of 1856 studying with Millet in Barbizon. See Edward Wheelwright, "Personal Recollections of Jean-François Millet" *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1876. p. 275. Millet corroborates this sentiment in a letter of 1866 to Sensier, writing that the peasants of the Vichy region "are much more peasants than at Barbizon; they have that good, stupid kind of awkwardness which does not remind one in the least of the neighborhood of fashionable baths." Sensier/ de Kay, p. 187.
- [34] Rensselaer W. Lee. *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting* (New York, 1967) p. 9.
- [35] Herbert, in *Peasants and Primitivism* p. 14.
- [36] I am using John Barrell's term from his now classic text, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730-1840* (Cambridge, 1980).
- [37] As Robert Herbert points out, many images that look like art of the people or 'folk' art (like Epinal prints) were in fact industrially produced using the latest printing technology and were mass-marketed. Herbert, *Peasants and Primitivism* p. 11.
- [38] "Ce pays-ci est réellement bien impressionnant et a beaucoup d'aspects d'autrefois. On se croirait (quand on veut éviter certaines modernités) au temps du vieux Breugel. Beaucoup de villages font penser à ceux qu'on voit représentés sur les vieilles tapisseries." Moreau-Nélaton, p. 72.
- [39] Stewart, *On Longing* p. 23
- [40] Stewart, *On Longing* p. 135

[41] Marcel Proust *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1982) vol 1, pp. 706-7.



## Illustrations



Fig. 1, Jean-François Millet, *Laitière normande de Gréville* (Norman Milkmaid of Gréville), 1874 (RF 1978-18). Paris, Musée d'Orsay, legs de James N.B. Hill, fils de James Hill, 1978. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Jean-François Millet, *Norman Milkmaid*, ca. 1840. Watercolor. Location unknown. Photograph courtesy Musée Thomas Henry, Cherbourg. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, A traditional Norman milk pot, 19th century. Copper. Courtesy Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires, Paris. Photo taken by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Jean-François Millet, *The Pantry Shelves at Gruchy*, 1854. Drawing. Reproduced in Moreau-Nélaton, vol 2, fig. 102. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Arthur Le Duc, *Norman Milkmaid*, 1888 (modern re-casting). Bronze. Public gardens at Saint-Lô.  
Photo taken by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, The church in Jobourg (La Manche) and a local milkmaid, early 20th century [n.d.]. Postcard.  
Courtesy Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 7, Camembert cheese label. Reproduced in *Les grandes heures des laitiers en Normandie* (Lunery, France, 1991). [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 8, Hippolyte Bellangé, *Milkmaid in the Coutances Region* (La Manche). Illustration in *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes*, 1840-42. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 9, François Hippolyte Lalaisse, *Milkmaid in the Coutances Region* (La Manche). Illustration in *La Normandie Illustrée*, 1852. [\[return to text\]](#)