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Millet and Modern Art: From Van Gogh to Dalí and *Jean-François Millet: Sowing the Seeds of Modern Art*
Reviewed by Christopher Hunt

Millet and Modern Art: From Van Gogh to Dalí
Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis
February 16–September 7, 2020

Jean-François Millet: Sowing the Seeds of Modern Art
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
April 10, 2019–January 9, 2020

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“Millet! Millet! How that fellow painted humanity and the ‘something on high,’ familiar and yet solemn,” Vincent van Gogh wrote to his sister, Willemina, on February 19, 1890. “To think that that fellow wept as he started painting.”^[1] Exultation similar to van Gogh’s was surely present at the reopening of the Saint Louis Art Museum’s impressive and expansive Millet exhibition, *Millet and Modern Art: From Van Gogh to Dalí*, on June 16, 2020. Years in the making, the paintings, drawings, and etchings on display are all arranged corresponding to the simple, yet multifaceted thesis included in the wall text of the first room: that “the works on view by Millet and his successors present an alternative and novel narrative for the history of Western modern art, emanating from his work.” Guided largely by concerns of imagery and, later in Millet’s career, style, the exhibition curated by Simon Kelly, the Saint Louis Art Museum’s Curator and Head of Modern and Contemporary Art, succeeds in rich and sometimes surprising ways.

Millet's reputation has always been contested. His art was esteemed if controversial during much of his career, and he achieved both substantial institutional and critical success from the mid-1860s until his death in 1875. Following his death, his work achieved enormous popularity and market prices. At the same time, however, reassessments in the later nineteenth century labeled his widely reproduced paintings as kitsch, cloying in their peasant piety, and artificial. To a degree the critical well had been poisoned from the beginning, by none other than Charles Baudelaire: "His peasants are pedants who think too highly of themselves," he wrote in an 1859 review. "Instead of simply extracting the natural poetry from his subject, M. Millet is desperate to add something to it."^[2] In the 1870s, Millet's reputation suffered among French tastemakers for his popularity with a supposedly gauche, nouveau-riche clientele from across the Atlantic. Avant-garde critics often lumped him in unfairly with the various academicians whose stolid canvases were still exhibited at the increasingly irrelevant Salon. Avant-garde artists, however, were much more appreciative of Millet's originality, as Kelly explains, with the Impressionists and Postimpressionists in particular viewing him as a model of artistic innovation, if not revolution (62–63). It is from these figures that the narrative of *Millet and Modern Art* largely flows, positioned as Millet's artistic charges who in turn serve as the guarantors of his legacy. The artists called upon to realize this goal are diverse, in period and geography, to be sure, but also in what they gleaned from Millet's artistic practice.

The exhibition begins with a self-portrait by Millet from circa 1840–41, painted in the manner of a twentysomething bohemian with long hair and an intense gaze emanating from a deeply shaded face (fig. 1). This is Millet the rebel, the future artistic firebrand of the Salon. Hung to its left are five oils of the countryside and rural work (fig. 2): this is Millet the peasant. Born in the small town of Gruchy to a relatively affluent peasant family, Millet nonetheless knew the toils and hardships of the farmyard (31). The peasant depictions that would characterize his art were borne from firsthand experience and deep sympathy, traits that undoubtedly influenced his latent republicanism as well. In these five canvases one can trace a neat summary of Millet's diverse subject matter and style, early Realist farm tasks and Biblical allegories to late proto-Impressionist landscapes. The peasant figures, in particular, reveal the egalitarian aspirations of Millet's rural oeuvre. Portraying the repetitive and unpleasant tasks of sheepshearing and animal slaughter were calculated provocations when seen beside the academic painters who still dominated the Salon.

Fig. 1, Jean-François Millet, *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1840–41. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 2, From top left to bottom right: Jean-François Millet, *The Pig Killers*, 1867–70. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The second room, entitled “Rural Labor in France,” continues this theme of peasant work and contains paintings that reveal the enormity of Millet’s influence on European artists working in similar themes from the final third of the nineteenth century. Immediately visible is Vincent van Gogh’s *Sower* from the Van Gogh Museum, painted in 1888 (fig. 3). Casting seed onto a darkened, purplish-grey field, the faceless peasant is backlit by a rising sun, illuminating the sky with gentle hues of green. Van Gogh continually returned to the biblical parable of the sower, finding in the figure aspects of Jesus and the poet, and a fertile motif for spiritual and artistic exploration.^[3] Millet served as the crux of this fervid enterprise until the end of van Gogh’s life. Van Gogh developed the bright palette and short, broken brushstrokes here employed out of Millet’s scenes of rural laborers, and not in reaction against them. Kelly reinforces this point through the inclusion of another van Gogh *Sower*, from the Kröller-Müller Museum and also painted in 1888, alongside a Millet *Sower* from after 1850 (fig. 4). The thematic similarities are plain to see: Millet’s friezelike sower, astride in a field scattering seed, has been appropriated by van Gogh. But, as the exhibition is intent on showing, communion between Millet and van Gogh exceeds the paradigmatic *Sower*.

Fig. 3, Vincent van Gogh, *The Sower*, 1888.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 4, From left to right: Vincent van Gogh, *The Sower*, 1888. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The gallery also includes artists not normally associated with Millet. In contrast to the vivid colorism of van Gogh, subtle Conté crayon drawings by the Italian painter Giovanni Segantini reveal that he understood Millet through black-and-white reproductions (153)—another recurring theme in the exhibition. Paired with Segantini's *Sower* (1897) is the provocative Belgian Symbolist Félicien Rops, whose color aquatint *Satan Sowing Tares* (1882) perverts Millet's rustic piety (fig. 5). Standing astride the Seine, a deathly figure casts handfuls of women (for Rops, a symbol of satanic corruption) across Paris, ostensibly poisoning the city with this evil seed.^[4] Much staidier are a pair of drawings of reapers on the abutting wall by American portraitist John Singer Sargent and Paul Cézanne, who were drawn to Millet by the novel poses of his figures and the respect he then commanded generally.

Fig. 5, Félicien Rops, *Satan Sowing Tares*, from the series *Les Sataniques*, 1882.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Both Sargent and fellow American Winslow Homer produced rustic scenes inspired by Millet and are unexpected and welcome additions to the show. While in Paris to attend and exhibit at the 1867 Exposition Universelle, Homer painted *The Return of the Gleaner* (fig. 6), featuring a stalwart female peasant posing with one hand on her hip and the other grasping a

shouldered hay fork (143). The figure and composition clearly owe much to Millet and the affiliated Barbizon School, and yet, were one to replace her clogs with boots, she might easily be placed in a homestead west of the Mississippi. In Homer's 1865 painting *The Bright Side* (fig. 7), featuring African American camp attendants in the service of the Union Army, figures drawn from Millet appear in a manifestly American setting. Reclined against the side of their sunny tent, the figures were apparently inspired by a similar composition in Millet's 1860 *Mid-day* print, widely disseminated through engravings by Jacques Adrien Lavieille.^[5] Sargent also produced a pencil sketch of *Mid-day* for his scrapbook, likely inspired by the rash of retrospective exhibitions staged following Millet's death in 1875 (144).

Fig. 6, Winslow Homer, *The Return of the Gleaner*, 1867. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 7, Winslow Homer, *The Bright Side*, 1865.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The French artists included in “Rural Labor” are a diverse group. *The Gleaners*, painted in 1887 by the mainstream, naturalist painter Léon-Augustin Lhermitte, shares space with more innovative canvases by Georges Seurat, Émile Bernard, and Paul Sérusier (fig. 8). Seurat's small (6.3 x 9.84 in.) *Peasant Laboring* (1882–83) provides a Neoimpressionist version of Millet's hunched peasant, while the radical simplification of figures and flattening of space by Bernard and Sérusier foretell much more profound artistic innovations to come. The grounding of these artists in Millet, particularly Bernard and Sérusier, is largely thematic—harvesters, ready with sickle in hand or bent binding wheat stalks. Gauguin's 1886 oil *The Breton Shepherdess* (fig. 9) is similar. Painted in the rural town of Pont-Aven, whose peasant inhabitants donned distinctively archaic dress, Gauguin, Bernard, and Sérusier based their renderings of them on Millet's archetypes (106–11). Although all three would later move on from Millet, either stylistically, thematically, or both, the exhibition connects their early creative genesis to the master. The importance of Millet's work for landscape painting—exemplified by, among others, the work of Claude Monet—renders the breadth of his influence apparent.

Fig. 8, From left to right: Georges Seurat,
Peasant Laboring, 1882–83.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 9, Paul Gauguin, *The Breton Shepherdess*,
1886. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The third room, “Laborers at Rest,” was inevitable given Millet’s penchant for this subject. The centerpiece is Millet’s *Harvesters Resting (Ruth and Boaz)*, a canvas completed in 1853 (fig. 10). Millet considered it one of his most important, perhaps because it combined potent religious symbolism with peasant subject matter. Like van Gogh, Millet grew up reading the Bible, whose stories he also appreciated in illustrated form (31). An engraving of *The Eucharist* (1647) by Nicolas Poussin likely cemented Millet’s belief in the seriousness conveyed through solid, friezelike compositions. He used Poussin’s composition to organize his peasants resting in the midday sun, a scene he perhaps witnessed at a farm near Barbizon (38–41). This marriage of Biblical stories to peasant subjects reoccurs in Millet’s work, perhaps a sign of his desire for Salon success through narratives deemed acceptable by the Academy (38–41).^[6] The tale, in which a wealthy landowner, Boaz, becomes enamored of the Moabite Ruth because of her industriousness and dedication to her widowed mother-in-law, romantically collapses any differentiations of class or ethnicity, but the scene is otherwise filled with notably peasant figures. Yawning, scratching, and lounging in the mid-day sun, the workers appear impassive at Boaz’s announcement that he is soon to marry Ruth. Perhaps their indifference is warranted: were she not presented by Boaz and clothed in blue, there would be little to distinguish her from the generalized peasants with whom she previously worked. She even holds a sheaf of wheat, symbolizing her continued diligence even though she has been released into a life of relative luxury.

Fig. 10, Jean-François Millet, *Harvesters Resting (Ruth and Boaz)*, 1851–53.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Because of his artistic and spiritual affinities with Millet, van Gogh receives a dedicated exhibition space. In their catalogue “Introduction,” Kelly and Maite van Dijk, Senior Curator of Paintings at the Van Gogh Museum, begin by quoting a sentence from van Gogh: “Millet, not Manet, is that essential modern painter.”^[7] Mentioned directly in some 182 letters, from his earliest correspondence in 1873 to the month before his death in July, 1890, Millet served as a considerable source of both inspiration and solace for the artist.^[8] “Millet and Van Gogh” focuses upon painted copies made from Millet’s oeuvre while van Gogh stayed at the mental hospital in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. With these copies, van Gogh continued his “translations in color,” as he referred to them, of Millet’s works, transforming Millet’s earthy, solid color tones into bright oils. The indoor *Evening (after Millet)* (fig. 11), from 1889, features tremulous strokes of light radiating from the lone lamp and shadows cast by the figures. Meanwhile, his 1890 *Snow-Covered Field with a Harrow* (fig. 12) evokes the frigidity of winter in Chailly-en-Bière, its Barbizon locale covered in strokes of snowy blues, whites, and greys, and its barren landscape punctuated only by a disused fortress and a few craggy trees. Van Gogh based his work on etchings after Millet’s 1862 canvas *Winter: The Plain of Chailly*, and the placement of the two paintings side-by-side reveals their shared compositional and stylistic aspects (128). There could be much to sensationalize with these copies, completed as they were during van Gogh’s most famous attack of mental illness. Kelly, however, is keen to focus upon the temporal, leaving whatever spiritual or psychological exegeses to gain from the works—particularly *Starry Night* (fig. 13), of which the Musée d’Orsay’s 1888 canvas features prominently—to visitors.

Fig. 11, Vincent van Gogh, *Evening* (after Millet), 1889. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 12, From left to right: Jean-François Millet, *Man with a Hoe*, 1860–62. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 13, Vincent van Gogh, *Starry Night over the Rhône*, 1888. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

A small section devoted to Millet's nudes explores this important and often overlooked aspect of his painting. *The Bather* (oil on wood, 1846–48) and *The Goose Girl* (oil on canvas, ca. 1863) (fig. 14) curiously amalgamate Millet's athletic laborers with a bourgeois prurience. After training for two years under Paul Delaroche at the École des Beaux-Arts, Millet turned his academic training towards salable nudes, a welcome source of income during his relatively impoverished early career. To the left of these nudes is Millet's audacious *Hagar and Ishmael* (1848–49; fig. 15), a canvas measuring almost five feet high and eight feet in length, commissioned by the French government.^[9] Although left incomplete in Paris due to his 1849 departure for Barbizon, Millet's painting apparently made its mark on the muralist Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, whose small *Orpheus* of 1883, hung nearby, features a similar figural arrangement of the eponymous hero. The inclusion of a bather by Edgar Degas again reminds attendees of Millet's "modern" *bona fides*; according to Walter Sickert, Degas' exuberance for Millet was tempered only by similar admiration for the earlier Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and contemporary Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot.^[10]

Fig. 14, Jean-François Millet, *The Goose Girl*, ca. 1863. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 15, Jean-François Millet, *Hagar and Ishmael*, 1848–49. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Facing the section with Millet's nudes is an alcove of judiciously chosen drawings by Millet and his mentees (fig. 16). Kelly notes that for Millet drawings served both preparatory

purposes and as ends in themselves, and that his Conté crayon works grew more colorful and layered as his career progressed. Early drawings showcase his indebtedness to fundamental academic instruction. This includes *The Lovers* of 1850 (fig. 17), which is tenderly composed but still imbues the figures with qualities found in mythological scenes. Millet's shift to peasant subjects from the 1850s onwards coincides with a general shedding of academic foundations in his drawings. These peasants are unidealized, sketchily drawn, and contorted by the demands of rural labor. Millet's delicate use of light conjures the Rembrandtesque, particularly in his alluring *Flight into Egypt* from around 1864 (fig. 18), in which the illuminated Christ child and watchful stars play within the thin crayon lines. Millet's drawings had a special resonance with Seurat, who appropriated their lighting in several drawings of intriguingly posed peasants. Millet's simplified human forms certainly lie behind Seurat's *Woman Bending, Viewed from Behind* from around 1885 (fig. 19). As with Millet's *Flight into Egypt*, only broad outlines of the body remain, but the bent body projecting into space undoubtedly drew inspiration from the master.

Fig. 16, Installation view of “Millet’s Drawings and Their Legacy” at *Millet and Modern Art: From Van Gogh to Dalí*.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 17, Jean-François Millet, *The Lovers*, 1846–50. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 18, Jean-François Millet, *The Flight into Egypt*, ca. 1864. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 19, Georges Seurat, *Woman Bending, Viewed from Behind*, ca. 1885. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Many of the likenesses in “Rural Portraits,” the penultimate room dedicated to Millet’s peasants, seem more like archetypes than specific individuals. The sitter for Camille Pissarro’s *Washerwoman, Study* from 1880 has been identified (fig. 20), but the inclusion of the work—beyond its rural subject—depends less on her individual identity than on her characterization as one of “true women of Millet,” as noted by the critic Alexandre Hepp when the painting hung at the Seventh Impressionist Exhibition.^[11] More notable is the German Expressionist Paula Modersohn-Becker, whose *Old Peasant Woman* (fig. 21) from circa 1905 relied on Millet’s precedent for the figure (174). This connection with Expressionism extends Millet’s Modernist influence to the north, where it is also evident in the work of Max Liebermann (fig. 22) and, in the final room, Edvard Munch. Kelly also traces Millet’s influence into Scandinavia and Central Europe through the inclusion of Andersen Ring, Ferdinand Hodler, and others throughout the exhibition.

Fig. 20, Camille Pissarro, *Washerwoman, Study*, 1880. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 21, Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Old Peasant Woman*, ca. 1905. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 22, Max Liebermann, *Dutch Lacemaker*, 1881. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Millet’s landscapes are granted a large room. Millet dedicated himself especially to views of the sea and the countryside in the final decade of his career and developed innovative formal devices, such as Japoneseque foreshortening and elongated foregrounds, for the genre (56).

Some of these, such as the *Old House at Nacqueville* from around 1872 (fig. 23), are moodily picturesque and use feathered brushstrokes to create a warm illumination. Others are more enigmatic. For example, in *Haystacks: Autumn* from ca. 1874 (fig. 24), clustering storm clouds crowd out a pleasant sky, gathering above large grain stacks that loom over the scene or even appear to project forward in space. *Spring* (fig. 25), completed around 1873, is similarly meteorological, with a fleeting spot of sunlight illuminating sodden fields surrounded by dark clouds. Rain, rainbows, and dramatic lighting characterize two works exhibited alongside *Spring*, one by Willem Roelofs of the Hague School, and one by the American George Inness (fig. 25). In Roelofs one can see the marriage of Ruisdael to Barbizon, especially as the latter was exemplified by Millet, while in Inness one finds an artist who embraced an encompassing spiritual philosophy in a manner similar to Millet (148). It is Monet, however, who is of the most interest in this room. One of his grain stacks (fig. 24), from around 1891, is included to the right of *Haystacks: Autumn*; the similarity in motif is unmistakable. Beyond this, Kelly presents a pair of Monet seascapes on either side of Millet's *Cliffs of Gréville* from 1872 (fig. 26). Monet's Impressionist *Gorge at Varengeville* from 1882 and Postimpressionist *Gorge of the Petit-Ailly, Varengeville* reveal the stylistic developments away from Millet's more subdued palette and inky, black outlines. The locale of Normandy inspired both men's creative vision, as did Monet's enthusiasm for Millet (80), whose paintings at the 1868 Salon Monet declared "the only beautiful pictures" exhibited.^[12] That such a central figure of Modernism as Monet would praise Millet in these terms and emulate his art so closely cements Kelly's thesis regarding the importance of Millet for modern art.

Fig. 23, Jean-François Millet, *Old House at Nacqueville*, ca. 1871–72.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 24, From left to right: Jean-François Millet, *Haystacks*, ca. 1867–68.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 25, From left to right: George Inness,
After a Summer Shower, 1894.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 26, From left to right: Claude Monet,
The Gorge at Varengeville, 1882.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Millet's *Angelus* (1857–59) is featured in the final room on a protruding wall above a step and behind a safety cord (fig. 27). Its prominence in the exhibition reflects the fact that it was the best-known oil painting in the world in the late nineteenth century and sold for an astonishing 553,000 francs at auction in 1889 to the American Art Association in New York. [13] The sale demonstrated Millet's continuing popularity in the United States, but the painting was soon acquired by French art collector and businessman Alfred Chauchard, who bequeathed it to the Louvre following his death in 1909. It can be difficult to disentangle this painting from its myriad subsequent appearances, on objects as diverse as matchboxes to wine labels. But here alone against a simple brown-grey background, Kelly invites the audience to experience the canvas again. The bells of a distant church tower sound out, and two figures stop working to bow their heads in prayer. A gentle evening light is cast over them; their difficult daily labors are nearly complete. Punctuated by this devotion to God, the ancient cycle of planting and harvesting continues.

Fig. 27, Jean-François Millet, *The Angelus*, 1857–59. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Among the innumerable works influenced by the *Angelus*, Kelly chose to include works by Munch, Jan Toorop, and Natalia Goncharova (fig. 28), but the inclusion of Salvador Dalí here was inevitable. During the 1930s, *The Angelus* served for Dalí as a bizarre sort of cipher (166). The particularities of his psychoanalytical investigation need not fully concern us, but

needless to say he returned obsessively to the work, characterizing it generally as an oedipal disaster in which the mother consumes her spouse after coupling (166–67).^[14] This interpretation translated into equally idiosyncratic images, notably *Meditation on the Harp* completed around 1933 (fig. 29). Here, the husband maintains his original position, head bent in seeming piety, but the now nude wife and the inclusion of a deformed son kneeling in front of the man more than suggest a bizarre sexual scene. The protuberance from the son's right arm—a phallus-like appendage inscribed with a distorted human skull—rests on a supporting fork, likely a reference to male sexual anxiety and impotence. Millet's oeuvre continued to inspire well into the twentieth century. A 1975 photograph of Dalí laying flowers at the base of a Millet monument in Gruchy (fig. 30) brings this exhibition review to an appropriate end: a century after his death, the master of peasants continued to garner admiration and respect from one of the most famous creators of modern art. Dalí is an unexpected coda to Kelly's argument, but one that fits seamlessly into it.

Fig. 28, From left to right: Jean-François Millet, *The Sheepfold*, *Moonlight*, 1856–60.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 29, Salvador Dalí, *Meditation on the Harp*, ca. 1933. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 30, Salvador Dalí in front of the statue of Jean-François Millet, Gruchy, 1975.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The exhibition catalogue, edited by Kelly and van Dijk, is lushly illustrated, and features six insightful essays by them as well as Abigail Yoder of the Saint Louis Art Museum and Nienke

Bakker of the Van Gogh Museum. The first of these, by Kelly, is titled “‘This Artistic Fauve’: Millet as Modern Artist” and traces the trajectory of Millet’s career. Its sections correspond closely to the rooms of the exhibition. It also examines in detail the controversy surrounding Millet’s *Gleaners* when it was shown at the 1857 Salon, the appearance of female labor in his oeuvre, and his late turn to landscapes. Subsequent essays explore the artist’s international popularity. “Millet and Impressionism,” also by Kelly, concerns Millet’s influence on Pissarro, Degas, Monet, and Cézanne. Kelly notes that while there is little evidence Millet ever met the leaders of the Impressionist group, they shared an interest in Japanese woodblock prints and *plein-air* painting (67). He describes the Impressionists’ relationship with Millet as “one of competition as much as emulation” (66). The largest entry in the essay is devoted to Pissarro, whose peasant paintings demonstrate a sustained interaction with Millet. Degas responded far more to Millet’s nudes. He offered few comments on Millet, but Kelly bases his connection through the assessment of Walter Sickert and Degas’ own collection of Millet drawings. Monet, Kelly argues, shared with Millet a love of Normandy and seascapes, and Cézanne was drawn to Millet’s cultural caché. Kelly notes that besides Millet’s imagery and palette, the Impressionists responded to his republicanism and disparagement of the Academy.

Abigail Yoder’s essay, “‘That Great Poet’: Millet and the Post-Impressionists,” develops further Millet’s impact on a later French generation. Her overarching thesis—that Millet’s reduction of figures into broad shapes and silhouettes prefigured artists including Odilon Redon and Georges Seurat—is straightforward and bolstered by rich examples. She cites characterizations of Millet as a *synthétiste* made by both friends and foes, and in particular by Redon, who pointed to him as an important source for his own Symbolist works. Félicien Rops and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes chose selectively from Millet’s work. Seurat dominates Yoder’s discussion of Neoimpressionism, and for good reason: his captivating Conté crayon drawings reveal a great affinity with Millet’s own shadowy drawings, something that translated well to his pointillist canvases. Yoder closes with a discussion of Millet’s importance for the Pont-Aven School, whom she describes as the “successors to the earlier Barbizon School, and to Millet specifically” (104). The peasant subjects of Paul Gauguin, Émile Bernard, and Paul Sérusier obviously draw upon Millet, but one does not normally associate their Synthetism and Cloisonnism with Millet’s figures as well. Yoder’s text brims with letter excerpts and critical discourse that draw Gauguin and Bernard into conversation with Millet, and it is certainly notable that many of Gauguin’s Pont-Aven canvases share Millet’s Christian spiritual ponderings (106). Sérusier is harder to pin down, but the abstruse nature of his aesthetic theory and Milletesque subjects suggest a dialogue.

Nienke Bakker’s contribution, entitled “Van Gogh and ‘Père Millet,’” tells the familiar story of Van Gogh’s reverence for Millet, but it animates this with poignant details from Van Gogh’s biography. Van Gogh was introduced to Millet when he worked as an art dealer, and adhered to the Frenchman’s example from his earliest days as an artist. He adorned his room with engravings after Millet’s *Four Times of the Day* (1873),^[15] struck at first by its figures’ rustic spirituality, and later their artistic innovation (119–20). Alfred Sensier’s overdrawn biography of Millet only reinforced his conception of his hero as a simple and pious artist living in communion with the peasantry (120). Van Gogh took what he wanted from Millet’s life, using it to justify his own spiritual and artistic explorations (122). Van Gogh’s early paintings followed the imagery and palettes of the Hague and Barbizon schools, holding steadfast to the peasant and what he saw as its seminal importance to modern art (123). Earthy tones gave

way to more colorful hues after his stays in Paris and Arles. Eugène Delacroix served as the impetus for this shift, but Millet's evocative subjects remained. The final portion of Bakker's essay details van Gogh's Millet copies while in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence.

The concluding two essays investigate Millet's broader influence before and around 1900. Kelly writes the first of these, exploring Millet's extensive reach in Europe and the United States. Reproductions and the international sales of his artworks were critical to the spread of Millet's influence in the latter-half of the nineteenth century. Kelly begins with the Americans William Morris Hunt and William Perkins Babcock, who were both companions of Millet in Barbizon. More important is Winslow Homer, whose encounters with works by Millet in Boston and Paris informed his depictions of farmers, seascapes, and other motifs. In Germany, Max Liebermann also turned to Millet, describing him in 1890 as "our master for us all."^[16] Like Millet, Liebermann found political resonance in the peasantry, though in his case he imagined them as a force for social reform (148). Kelly cites numerous other artists whose work grew out of Millet, including those in the Low Countries and Scandinavia. Italians Segantini and Angelo Morbelli continued with the French painter's characteristic theme of rural labor, while Sickert translated them into working-class women, proclaiming himself the "Millet of Camden Town."^[17] The last essay, by Van Dijk, studies still later Modernist reclamations. Focusing on *The Angelus*, van Dijk traces both the direct and indirect influence of Millet among artists ranging from Pierre Puvis de Chavannes to Salvador Dalí. Dalí's peculiar iterations of *The Angelus* receive special attention; more unexpected is van Dijk's section on Paula Modersohn-Becker, whose denizens of the countryside show much kinship with those of Millet. Van Dijk also examines Suprematist compositions by Kazimir Malevich and Natalia Goncharova that draw on Millet, and closes with a brief examination of Pablo Picasso's treatment of the artist.

Millet and Modern Art: From Van Gogh to Dalí is a captivating exhibition that reveals the curators' heartfelt desire to reassess the position of Millet in modern art. The show succeeds in positioning Millet as an indispensable source for some of the greatest artists who followed in his wake. If Modernism is to remain a vital subject for the general public and in universities and museums, it must be through projects such as this one, which combines popular appeal with audacious and original curation and scholarship. The exhibition unambiguously demonstrates how much Millet had to offer modern art, and suggests that his influence may still be felt today.

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Notes

- [1] “Ah Millet! Millet! Celui là comme il a peint l’humanité et le ‘quelque chose là-haut’ familier et pourtant solennel. Se dire de nos jours que celui là s’est mis à peindre en pleurant.” Vincent van Gogh to Willemmina van Gogh, February 19, 1890, *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, accessed August 9, 2020, <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let856/letter.html>.
- [2] “Ses paysans sont des pédants qui ont d’eux-mêmes une trop haute opinion”; “Au lieu d’extraire simplement la poésie naturelle de son sujet, M. Millet veut à tout prix y ajouter quelque chose.” Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 661.
- [3] Judy Sund, *Van Gogh* (London: Phaidon, 2002), 211.
- [4] Edith Hoffmann, “Notes on the Iconography of Félicien Rops,” *The Burlington Magazine* 123, no. 937 (April 1981): 209.
- [5] Nicolai Cikovsky and Franklin Kelly, *Winslow Homer*, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1995), 48–49.
- [6] See also Ruth 2–4 NIV.
- [7] “Voor mij is niet Manet doch Millet die essentieel modern schildert die den horizon opende voor velen.” Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, February 3, 1884, *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, accessed August 9, 2020, <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let428/letter.html>.
- [8] See search on the Van Gogh Museum’s *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters* website: <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/search/simple?term=millet>
- [9] De Mesdag Collectie Den Haag, “Hagar and Ishmael,” accessed August 23, 2020, <https://www.demesdagcollectie.nl/en/collection/hwm0262>.
- [10] Walter Sickert, *A Free House! or, The Artist as Craftsman*, ed. Osbert Sitwell (London: Macmillan, 1947), 150.
- [11] “Vraies femmes de Millet.” Alexandre Hepp, “Impressionisme,” *Le Voltaire*, March 3, 1882, 1.
- [12] “Il n’y a de vraiment beaux que les tableaux de Millet et Corot.” Frédéric Bazille to his parents, April 1867; reproduced in Michael Schulman, *Frédéric Bazille, 1841–1870: Catalogue raisonné, peintures, dessins, pastels, aquarelles—sa vie, son oeuvre, sa correspondance* (Paris: Editions des catalogues raisonnés, 1995), 373, no. 237.
- [13] W. Walton et al., *Chefs-d’œuvre de l’exposition universelle de Paris, 1889* (Philadelphia: George Barrie, 1889), 53.
- [14] See also Salvador Dalí, *The Tragic Myth of Millet’s Angelus: Paranoiac-Critical Interpretation Including the Myth of William Tell*, trans. by Eleanor R. Morse, ed. by Reynolds Morse (St. Petersburg, Florida: The Salvador Dalí Museum, 1986) for Dalí’s dedicated psychoanalytical treatment of the painting, and his philosophy more broadly.
- [15] See Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, July 6, 1875, n. 16, *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, accessed January 30, 2021, <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let037/letter.html#n-16>; Jacques Adrien Lavieille created the wood-engraved reproductions, publishing *The Four Times of Day* in *L’Illustration* in four installments during 1873.
- [16] “Millet stammte aus dem Volke. Er kannte aus eigener Erfahrung die Arbeiten des Feldes, die das Gesicht Braun machen und die Hände schwielig. Auch in Barbizon lebte er wie ein Bauer [. . .] Er verkehrte mit Bauern [. . .] wie Ein Mensch.” Richard Muther, *Jean-François Millet (Die Kunst: Sammlung illustrierter Monographien)* (Berlin: Bard, Marquardt & Co., 1907), 34.
- [17] Walter Sickert to the editor, *The New Age*, September 8, 1910, 452; quoted in Rebecca Daniels, “Walter Sickert and Urban Realism: Ordinary Life and Tragedy in Camden Town,” *British Art Journal* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 58.

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Fig. 15, Jean-François Millet, *Hagar and Ishmael*, 1848–49. Oil on canvas. The Mesdag Collection, The Hague. Artwork in the public domain; available for noncommercial use from: De Mesdag Collectie, www.demesdagcollectie.nl. [return to text]

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Fig. 29, Salvador Dalí, *Meditation on the Harp*, ca. 1933. Oil on canvas. The Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg.
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Fig. 30, Salvador Dalí in front of the statue of Jean-François Millet, Gruchy, 1975. Reproduced in Simon Kelly and Maite van Dijk, "Introduction," in Simon Kelly and Maite van Dijk, eds., *Millet and Modern Art: From van Gogh to Dalí* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 27. [\[return to text\]](#)