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exhibition review of

Armand Guillaumin (1841–1927)

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Armand Guillaumin (1841–1927)

Galerie Pierre Levy and Dominique Fabiani
18 September 2009—25 November 2009

Armand Guillaumin took the road less traveled, and as a result art history's path has mostly passed him by. Outliving even Claude Monet seems to have been a mistake, for unlike his illustrious contemporary, the second half of Guillaumin's equally long career did not do justice to the first. It is easy to suggest that the seminal event that set Guillaumin awry was winning the French lottery in 1891. The 100,000 French francs jackpot made him financially secure for life. One often disparages the effects of money on art; Pissarro thought Monet's work was too "romantic" because he was looking for sales. In Guillaumin's case, money may have set him free to become a kind of Fauve painter *avant la lettre*, with the misfortune that he was too old to become a part of the new movement, and not hungry enough to crave the publicity. That part of his career, and whether he was an undisciplined Impressionist or an avant-garde Fauve, is not part of this story.

The first half of Guillaumin's career was featured in this exhibition at the Galerie Pierre Levy in Paris last fall, which has only two works from the 1890s and none from later. Together, there were seventeen paintings, all from private collections, ten of which were unknown in 1971, when the catalogue raisonné by Georges Serret and Dominique Fabiani was published.^[1] Guillaumin's work is known by pitifully few examples in public collections, although many of them are outstanding. The Musée d'Orsay owns several because Doctor Paul Gachet was an early collector and supporter of Guillaumin, but they do not travel. More are in the equally non-circulating Collection Personnaz at the Orsay. A few fine examples do exist in the United States—in the Lehman Collection at the Metropolitan Museum, and at the Art Institute of Chicago. At a certain point, the Swiss collector Oscar Ghez seems either to have been completely enamored of Guillaumin's pictures, or wanted to corner the market on them. His private collection became the Musée du Petit-Palais in Geneva, which possesses between 35 to 40 works by the painter.

There have been exhibitions of Guillaumin's work before, mostly in French provincial museums, and usually spanning his entire career. Their catalogues are only moderately useful, containing only the most general biographical and scholarly studies, and mostly quoting from one another, and from Serret and Fabiani's work. It would appear either that there is little documentation remaining from Guillaumin's career, or that it is still in private hands and unavailable to scholars.^[2] The beauty of the Paris exhibition, then, was not new information or insights published in the catalogue, but the astounding quality of the pictures themselves. The slim catalogue's reproductions do more justice to Guillaumin's work than in the museum exhibitions mentioned above, but they still cannot equal the paintings in scale or coloristic intensity. You have to have been there in front of the pictures. I urge art historians interested in Impressionism to look more closely in the future, since the opportunity is relatively rare.

I have argued elsewhere that Armand Guillaumin was a significant member of the Impressionist group.^[3] I believe his lack of popularity was related to both circumstance and choice. First, is the fact that his productivity and relations with other artists was hampered by the need to support himself through full-time employment. He worked first for the Orléans

Railroad line, then later for the National Department of Bridges and Roads (Ponts et Chaussées). Second, following the Realist and Impressionist commitment to the painting of modern life from direct observation, Guillaumin's pictures often represented the working class, industry or urban labor with which he was familiar. He lived on Quai d'Anjou, Ile Saint-Louis, in Paris while major renovations of bridges and riverbanks were taking place. More than any other Impressionist, he specialized in scenes of industry or modern infrastructure. I, therefore, would argue that Guillaumin went much further toward the Impressionist engagement with modernity than his colleagues. Such pictures never had great sales. In addition, he was overshadowed by the colleagues with whom he worked most closely—Camille Pissarro and Paul Cézanne, then later Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh.

The question of why Cézanne and Van Gogh looked to Guillaumin as both loyal companion and painting partner in forays to the suburban countryside has never been explored. (It will be on the agenda for the *Cézanne en Ile de France* exhibition to be held in 2011 at the Musée du Petit-Palais.) The exhibition at the Galerie Levy, through which the organizers told me they wished to emphasize Guillaumin's "Impressionist" works, has brought that question forward. Based on the choice of pictures in the exhibition, I take the organizers' use of the word "Impressionist" to mean scenes of primarily aesthetic rather than social or political interest, as well as works before 1900. Only one painting in the exhibition has a vaguely industrial setting. *Les Quais de la Seine aux environs de Paris* (1873) shows barges anchored along the riverbank, most likely near the Paris city limits at Charenton. It dates from the early 1870s, when Guillaumin was doing many far more explicit images of factories in the same outskirts as well as post-Haussmannian renovations nearer to his residence. The undeveloped riverbank in this picture is a place from which Guillaumin made many views looking south towards the factories at Ivry. The Pont National, built under Haussmann, is in the background to the north. The picture's surface is about eighty percent devoted to a cloudy sky worthy of Monet and the riverbank is covered in snow. It is probably because of its proximity to Monet that this picture was chosen from among other, more industrial and workaday possibilities. Other paintings, too, were chosen according to the prevailing view of Impressionist landscape painting as an art of natural beauties and unspoiled scenery. Indeed, by suppressing Guillaumin's industrial subjects, the exhibition has deprived him of what is most obviously original and progressive in his work. Yet it also has featured Guillaumin as a sure, methodical, and coloristically daring painter of themes that parallel Pissarro's.

The exhibition demonstrates the power of Guillaumin's technique and what might be called the concentration of his eye. Perhaps the most beautiful picture in the exhibition is *La Plaine de Bagneux au sud de Paris*, signed and dated 1874. Paris is in the background, as indicated by the Panthéon and church towers that might be Notre-Dame cathedral (fig. 1). The location, therefore, is in the close suburbs south of Paris where Guillaumin painted a number of other pictures, such as the *Route de Clamart à Issy* (c. 1876, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, Birmingham, England), which has what looks like the Invalides Church as a marker in the background, and *Aqueduct at Arcueil, Sceaux Railroad Line* (1874, Art Institute of Chicago). The *Plaine de Bagneux's* gorgeous colors, which include pinks and violets as well as an azure sky with puffy white clouds, show a bourgeois couple in a carriage, sharing the road with a worker walking towards the painting's left. Worth noting is that they appear headed down a road distinct from two offshoot pathways that lead towards the right, and from which the painter is working. One finds a similar device in paintings by Monet of about the same period—that is, figures passing by anonymously rather than heading towards the viewer, as if they might know

him. Another connection to Monet is Guillaumin's adoption of a device from the 1860s—highly contrasting shadows in the foreground—that Monet invented in his *Women in the Garden* of 1866, and which was taken up by Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Pissarro as signatures of early Impressionism. Guillaumin's theme, too, is reminiscent of pictures from the late 1860s, especially by Pissarro, who painted a number of promenades near the Jallais Hill and the Hermitage in Pontoise in which workers and pleasure-seekers share the terrain. However, Guillaumin was already more coloristically daring than his colleagues (or eccentric, some might say), using a pinkish tint for soil as a foil for violet shadows. And the quality and confidence of his technique is on a par with them.



Fig. 1, Armand Guillaumin, *La Plaine de Bagneux au sud de Paris*, 1874. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

[\[larger image\]](#)

Despite what might seem to be an indictment of Guillaumin as a follower rather than a leader—that is, forgetting his industrial subject matter—there is no mistaking Guillaumin's particular take on the suburban and rural themes featured in this exhibition. However much the *Plaine at Bagneux* seems derivative, it represents, so to speak, the temperature of Impressionism at the time taken by a distinct individual. Two other pictures from the 1870s, *Paysage de l'Ile de France* and *Pommier, en Ile de France* also derive from the thematic repertory of Pissarro, but they differ markedly in the range and intensity of color, even though they represent the same agricultural landscape dominated by different shades of green. In Guillaumin's version of these scenes, colors are more saturated, there is a greater sense of reds, oranges and violets being present, and the greens are richer than in Pissarro's work. He seems uninterested in the tonal unity sought by Pissarro and eventually by Cézanne. In *Pommier, en Ile de France*, a single relatively young apple tree sits in the middle of a swath of cabbage planted on a small farm. At the outer edge of the bold yet subtly modulated, distinctly cabbage-colored foreground third of the composition, two workers bend over to harvest the adjacent crop. One might argue that the picture reflects the compositional coherence Pissarro and Cézanne were seeking towards the later 1870s. However this painting, which stands up well by comparison to the others, might suggest that the quest for structural clarity was a collaborative enterprise rather than simply the influence of one painter on the other.

In general, the landscapes in the Galerie Levy exhibition are intensely luminous with a density, crispness and sharpness that shimmer in rich greens, oranges and violets. As Guillaumin's works crossed over into the 1880s, they also attained a spatial clarity that counterbalanced and provided a firm framework for his coloristic boldness. These are precisely the characteristics that would have appealed both to Cézanne and Van Gogh, although not all of them would have appealed to both, and not the same ones. For Van Gogh, of course, Guillaumin's handling of space and color would have been eye-catching. It also caught the eye of Paul Signac, who markedly adopted Guillaumin's clarity and bright colors in a few of his own paintings, just before he adopted Neo-Impressionism. In the case of Cézanne, it would have been less Guillaumin's boldness than his concentrated focus and structural solidity during the late 1870s and early 1880s, before Cézanne more or less abandoned Paris. It is not possible to say that Guillaumin actually influenced Cézanne; indeed Guillaumin, like Gauguin, temporarily adopted Cézanne's famous "constructive stroke" technique of parallel hatchings. But unlike Gauguin, Guillaumin did not copy Cézanne's technique almost literally, but rather made his own version of it. What Cézanne, Guillaumin, Signac temporarily, and later Van Gogh shared was the notion of drawing in color. Indeed, it is likely during those years that Guillaumin and Cézanne painted together as equals, much as Cézanne did with Pissarro, whereas Cézanne was deeply suspicious of Gauguin. One must not project Guillaumin's current reputation as inferior back onto the period when the three painters were developing together. It makes more sense to say that the exchanges between them were mutually reinforcing.

In 1886, shortly after Van Gogh's arrival in Paris in March, Guillaumin's work was recognized by a powerful new art critical voice. Responses to his work had always emphasized his color, but Félix Fénéon dramatized the reputation of this "*coloriste furieux*" with exceptional rhetorical skill:

Here we are before the Guillaumins. Immense skies, overheated skies, where clouds push one another back and forth in a battle of greens, purples, mauves and yellows; others are set in twilight, where the huge amorphous mass of vaporous cloud pushes up from a low horizon swept by crosswinds. Under these weighty and sumptuous skies, huddle violet countrysides, painted with broad impasto, where laborers and grazing alternate. The trees cringe. . . [4]

In that exhibition, which Van Gogh certainly saw, Guillaumin had exhibited a number of views of Damiette, only one of which has been identified. The Galerie Levy exhibition has another, which if not included in 1886 nonetheless exemplifies what Van Gogh probably saw. Guillaumin's technique differed from the Impressionist dabs and sketch-like markings, Pissarro's small pre-pointillist spots, or the pointillist work Pissarro and his son Lucien showed in the exhibition along with Paul Signac and Georges Seurat. Guillaumin retained a far more marked sense of line than the painters who adhered to the new wave called Neo-Impressionism. For Guillaumin, line was a structuring device as in the formation of village houses or even a forest background as, exemplified in the painting *Epinay sur Orge* of about 1883 (fig. 2). [5] Even in areas where Guillaumin's colored lines resemble hatching assembled in Cézanne-like patches, the individual strokes stand out as lines more than in Cézanne. His colors are more saturated and his palette brighter than Cézanne's; he is thus closer to what one will recognize in Van Gogh. I think it far more likely that he, and not Signac as has been

suggested (unless by intermediary), was at the origin of Van Gogh's shift to brilliant color and line.



Fig. 2, Armand Guillaumin, *Epinay sur Orge*, c. 1885. Oil on canvas. Private Collection, France. [\[larger image\]](#)

Rather than characterizing Guillaumin's work at this time as halfway between Cézanne and Van Gogh, or resembling in some ways Pissarro and Gauguin, this exhibition simply puts Guillaumin forward as a stunning painter of luminous and highly crafted images. In a letter to his brother Theo, Van Gogh commented that Guillaumin "...has so much style and such a personal manner of drawing."^[6] He was struck by the draughtsmanly quality of Guillaumin's work. By style, he meant originality apart from mere observation of nature. Even if one overlooks Guillaumin's industrial themes, his originality was understood by his contemporaries. His colors blend less easily than in mainstream Impressionism, suggesting how he and Gauguin might have sympathized, or how in his later boldness, he might be considered a harbinger of Fauvism. In any case, the exhibition at the Galerie Levy certainly makes a case for rescuing Guillaumin from the near oblivion to which he has been relegated by both the conventional scholarly view of canonical Impressionism and the conventional taste of collectors of Impressionist pictures.

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Notes

[1] Georges Serret and Dominique Fabiani, *Armand Guillaumin (1841-1927), Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre peint*, (Paris: Editions Maier, 1971).

[2] In 1972, a monograph by Christopher Gray, *Armand Guillaumin*, (Chester, CT: Pequot Press, 1972, 2nd ed.) was published posthumously by Alice Darling Gray, with a new edition in 1991. It contains some correspondence from the years 1914–1922.

[3] James H. Rubin, *Impressionism and the Modern Landscape: Productivity, Technology, and Urbanization from Manet to Van Gogh*, (Berkeley: University of California, 2008).

[4] Nous voilà devant les Guillaumin. Des ciels immenses: des ciels surchauffés, où se bousculent des nuages dans la bataille des verts, des pourpres, des mauves et des jaunes; d'autres,

crépusculaire alors, où de l'horizon se lève l'énorme masse amorphe de nues basses que des vents obliques strient. Sous ces ciels lourdement somptueux, se bossuent, peintes par de violents et larges empâtements, des campagnes violettes et alternant labours et pacages; des arbres se crispent. . . " Félix Fénéon, "Les Impressionnistes," *La Vogue*, 13-20 June 1886, 261-275 from Ruth Berson, ed., *The New Painting: Impressionism, 1874-1886* (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1996), I, 443.

[5] Dominique Fabiani, *Armand Guillaumin*, exh. cat. Galerie Pierre Levy, Paris, 2009, no. 25. (Serret and Fabiani, *op. cit.*, no. 126.)

[6] Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Saint-Rémy, c. 2 November 1889 (<http://www.webexhibits.org/vangogh/letter/20/613.htm>).

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Armand Guillaumin, *La Plaine de Bagneux au sud de Paris*, 1874. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.
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Fig. 2, Armand Guillaumin, *Epinay sur Orge*, c. 1885. Oil on canvas. Private Collection, France.
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