

Millet's *Peasant Spreading Manure*

M. Therese
Southgate, MD

Jean-
Francois
Millet (1814-
1875).
*Peasant
Spreading
Manure*,
1854-1855.
French. Oil
on canvas.
81.3 x
111.8cm.



The Revolution that swept Europe in 1848 affected Jean-Francois Millet (1814-1875) profoundly. From a neoclassically trained painter of religious and mythological subjects (and; to support himself and his family, portraits), he turned to the radical new style of Realism. The heroic historical figure was abandoned for the image of the "common man," the contemporary French peasant, the unsung tiller of the French soil. Over the next decade and a half he would make the peasant the hero in what have become some of his most familiar—and, in America—his most loved works: *The Winnowers*, *The Sowers*, *The Gleaners*, *The Angelus*, *Man With a Hoe*. Falling about midway in this period is *Peasant Spreading Manure*, which Millet painted when he was in his early 40s. He knew whereof he spoke. He was himself a "man of the soil," having been born into a peasant family in Normandy, albeit one that was prosperous. His education included the Latin classics, and he remained devoted to literature for the rest of his life. He was able to quote from not only Virgil and the French classics, but from Shakespeare, Milton, and Dante as well.

Millet commenced his art studies in Cherbourg at age 19 and won a scholarship to Paris where he studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Deemed "hopeless" by his teacher after two years, Millet responded by enrolling at the less rigorous Academie Suisse. Notwithstanding, by the time he was in his mid-20s, he had had a painting accepted at the Salon (one of two he had submitted that year) .On the other hand, Millet's peasant background did not dispose him to enjoy Parisian life; by 1849 he had settled at Barbizon, where he had more access to the land and its people. Not surprisingly, his reputation as a painter was colored by the political climate: owing largely to his choice of subject, he was termed "radical" and "socialist." Progressives liked him, the bourgeoisie found him threatening. In America, his admirers (and there were many) thought his work "epic." In Paris, the literary critics and his fellow painters were not amused. Baudelaire called his peasants "pedants," his attempts at "poeticizing" them disastrous; Delacroix found them merely "pretentious." (A decade after Millet's death, Van Gogh would idolize him, anguishing over whether, in his admiration, he was not plagiarizing him.) Still, the French government awarded him the Legion of Honor. He died at Barbizon on January 29, 1875, aged 60, and was buried there. Although his work had commanded good prices during his lifetime, his wife and children were left destitute and had to be helped by Millet's fellow painters.

As depicted by Millet, all of the tasks his peasants engage in are of the humblest nature: harvesting, hoeing, picking, sowing, winnowing, praying. Among the hierarchy of lowly tasks, however, few, it is ventured, could be more humble than spreading manure. (Interestingly, despite its modern connotations, the earlier usage of the word was concerned not with "fertilizing" but with "manual work," or "cultivating by hand.") In Millet's hands the task becomes an epic, the worker no less a hero than Hercules and the Augean stables. Much of the drama lies in Millet's draftsmanship, of which he was considered a master. Trained classically, he remains classical in his composition. Placed at approximately the Golden Mean, the figure of the peasant is the focal point of the work. All the lines of force—horizontal, vertical, diagonal—either meet in his body or radiate out from it like the rays of a sun. Two of the principal diagonals, that of the handle of the shovel and that of his torso, meet at right angles, the most extreme illustration of opposing forces. Millet suggests that such opposites can be reconciled only in a human figure. The cruciform construction could suggest class struggle, the tension existing between the worker and the bourgeoisie, or it could suggest an even more basic struggle: that between nature and man, which is reconciled only by the labor of his body. This tension is already implied in Millet's choice of the classical style of composition to portray a realistic theme. The "earthliness" of the struggle is emphasized by his palette, which is confined to the ochers and terra cottas of the French countryside, the so-called earth tones. A patch of blue sky, but only a patch, suggests the outcome.

Like the sun and clouds on his landscapes, Millet's reputation passes in and out of favor. Sometimes too liberal, sometimes too sentimental, he seems to be more at the mercy of the prevailing social winds than of his talent. Nevertheless, he left his mark: Besides Van Gogh, Camille Pissarro also paid him homage in his numerous paintings of workers in the orchards and farmlands of France. In fact, the influence went further: with his out-of-door scenes, shifting light, and everyday subjects, Millet could be considered to be the forerunner of the Impressionists, himself serving to reconcile, or to be the transition between, the traditional and the new.

Courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh (<http://www.ncartmuseum.org>); purchased with funds from the North Carolina Art Society; Robert F. Phifer Bequest.