

ART APPRECIATION

Millet and the Dignity of Labor



What gleaning meant

After the main harvest, poor women could enter the fields at sunset to gather stray ears of wheat. A few stalks could be carried home in one hand. The main crop leaves in sheaves and cartloads.

An ear is the part of the wheat stalk that holds the grain. Millet shows the women returning to the ground for what the reapers have left.



Jean-François Millet, The Gleaners (Des glaneuses), 1857. Oil on canvas, 83.5 × 110 cm. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

Three moments in one movement

The two women at the left reach down. The woman at the right has risen partway, her hand around several stalks. Together the three poses suggest a movement that each woman will repeat across the field.

The light catches a wrist, the back of a neck and the curve of a shoulder. Faces turned toward the earth leave the hands and backs to carry the action.



Detail of the three women. Jean-François Millet, The Gleaners, 1857. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

A handful and a cartload



Foreground detail. A hand reaches into the stubble.



Distance detail. A laden cart stands beside the stacks.

On a canvas only 110 cm wide, the largest bodies belong to the people collecting the smallest share. The cart and stacks look small because they are far away. The painting shows where the grain goes. Its ownership is a separate question.

Work below the horizon

All three women remain below the distant horizon. Their bent bodies repeat the effort of gleaning. Shawn Grenier reads this low position as an image of their subordinate place in society.

Their large scale also gives the women a commanding presence. The same composition can convey physical hardship and ask us to regard the workers with respect.



Jean-François Millet, The Gleaners (Des glaneuses), 1857. Oil on canvas, 83.5 × 110 cm. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

Between Normandy and Paris

Millet grew up in a farming family near the Norman coast. He worked on the land, trained as a painter, and moved to Barbizon in 1849. From that village south of Paris, he returned to the motif of gleaning over roughly a decade.

He knew the movements of farm work. The spacing of the three bodies is also the result of drawings, prints and decisions made in the studio.



Detail of the right-hand gleaner. Jean-François Millet, The Gleaners, 1857. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

Before the oil painting

> “He worked slowly from drawings, often returning to the same motif.”

John Berger, “Millet and the Peasant,” Portraits, p. 222

In this etching, dark strokes describe the women’s skirts. Lines in the field can stand for stubble, and bare paper lets light through. Millet was already arranging the three bodies together by 1855–56.



Jean-François Millet, The Gleaners, c. 1855–56. Etching. Cleveland Museum of Art, 1918.112.

The Salon of 1857

> “What inspired the change in Millet’s painting after 1847 was the revolution of 1848.”

John Berger, “Millet and the Peasant,” Portraits, p. 220

In 1857 Millet showed this painting at the Paris Salon, the official exhibition. The critic Paul de Saint-Victor compared the women to the Fates of Greek myth. He thought Millet had given poor farmworkers too grand a place in painting.



Jean-François Millet, The Gleaners, 1857. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

Poverty amid abundance

The women gather handfuls in a field filled with grain. Grenier argues that this contrast makes poverty look like a question of access to food, even when the harvest is abundant.

This reading connects respect for the women with criticism of their conditions. A viewer could admire their dignity while questioning why they receive so little.



Jean-François Millet, The Gleaners (Des glaneuses), 1857. Oil on canvas, 83.5 × 110 cm. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

Identification with the worker

> “Millet was a moralist in the only way that a great artist can be: by the power of his identification with his subjects.”

John Berger, “Millet and Labour,” Portraits, p. 216

Berger uses “identification” to describe a bodily knowledge. In his account, a painter imagines the effort of straightening a back or balancing a load. The curve of a shoulder can disclose something that a facial expression cannot.

The weight of a hand

“I suffered with the body, with the limbs, that I saw suffer.”

Jean-François Millet, quoted by Berger in “Millet and Labour,” Portraits, p. 216

Millet was recalling a Michelangelo drawing of a man fainting. In The Gleaners, the fingers reaching for a stalk belong to a body that has to bend almost double to reach it.



Hands and stubble, detail. Jean-François Millet, The Gleaners, 1857. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

A gathering and three workers



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The Harvesters, 1565. The Met.



Jean-François Millet, The Gleaners, 1857. Musée d’Orsay.

“The language was that of oil painting; the subject was the peasant as individual *subject*.”

John Berger, “Millet and the Peasant,” Portraits, p. 218

Bruegel spreads work and rest across a field. Millet’s three women fill the foreground. They share a movement, but their hands and postures give each a presence of her own.

The field as a view

> “the landscape is *his* view, the splendour of it is *his* reward.”

John Berger, “Millet and the Peasant,” Portraits, p. 223

The “his” in Berger’s sentence refers to a visitor from the city. That visitor can enjoy the sweep of a landscape at a glance. The woman who gleans encounters this same land a few inches at a time.



Detail of the main harvest and the village. Jean-François Millet, The Gleaners, 1857. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

Work on the land

> "But there was no formula for representing the close, harsh, patient physicality of a peasant's labour *on*, instead of *in front of*, the land."
>
> John Berger, "Millet and the Peasant," Portraits, p. 224

The hand and the stalk meet in the foreground. The bright field behind the women also offers a view for a spectator. Berger thinks Millet inherited ways of painting landscape that could pull those two experiences apart.

The weight of the figures



The Gleaners, 1857. Detail of the oil painting.



The Gleaners, c. 1855–56. Detail of the earlier etching.

“As a result the cut-out figures look rigid and theatrical.”

John Berger, “Millet and the Peasant,” Portraits, p. 223

The Musée d’Orsay sees the evening light giving the gleaners the weight of sculpture. Berger thinks monumentality can make Millet’s painted workers look fixed in place. The bent wrist and the edge of the skirt offer evidence for reading the figure either way.

When farmworkers saw the image

> “The depiction gives an historic resonance to their lives.”

John Berger, “Millet and the Peasant,” Portraits, p. 222

Berger describes Millet’s images reaching rural households through prints, cards and decorated objects. A picture first encountered by the Paris Salon public could later enter the home of someone who knew the work it depicted.



Jean-François Millet, The Gleaners, c. 1855–56. Etching. Cleveland Museum of Art, 1918.112.



Millet, dignity and the limits of painting

Berger thinks Millet changed who could become the subject of a serious painting. He also thinks many of Millet's paintings fail.

To understand that judgment, we need to follow what he says about the relationship between a working body, the land and the person looking at the picture.



Jean-François Millet, The Gleaners (Des glaneuses), 1857. Oil on canvas, 83.5 × 110 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

The ambition Berger respects

> “Having chosen the peasant as subject, his life’s effort was to do him justice by investing him with dignity and permanence.”

John Berger, “Millet and the Peasant” (1976), Portraits, class PDF p. 206.

Berger begins by taking Millet’s ambition seriously. The worker is given the sustained attention that painting had given to religious figures and classical subjects. Millet draws on that tradition to make a peasant’s life worth remembering. This describes the status of the figure within art. It does not mean the person’s life has become easier.

The worker moves into the foreground

> “Far from presenting these figures as something marginal seen in passing, he does his utmost to make them central and monumental. And all these paintings – in differing degrees – fail.”

John Berger, “Millet and the Peasant” (1976), Portraits, class PDF p. 206.

Before this passage, Berger follows the peasant out of the small scene glimpsed by a passing viewer. In Going to Work, the couple occupies the foreground. He compares them with Masaccio’s Adam and Eve. Their importance is clear. His objection concerns whether those substantial figures belong convincingly to the world around them.

Why the moment might feel held in place

> “They fail because no unity is established between figures and surroundings. The monumentality of the figures refuses the painting. And vice versa. As a result the cut-out figures look rigid and theatrical. The moment lasts too long.”

John Berger, “Millet and the Peasant” (1976), Portraits, class PDF p. 206.

I read the last sentence as a problem with the kind of stillness Millet creates. A bend that belongs to repeated work can begin to look like a pose held for us. The figure carries the weight of a monument, while the field remains scenery behind it. Berger’s criticism concerns that separation. It does not establish that the workers lack personality.

His next sentence changes the judgment

“By contrast, the same figures in equivalent drawings or etchings are alive and belong to the moment of drawing which includes all their surroundings.”

John Berger, Portraits, class PDF p. 206.

Berger immediately gives Going to Work as his example. Look at how the etched marks describe clothing, earth and sky. He thinks graphic work can record a shared visual experience without making the whole scene a finished view for a spectator. His objection is to Millet’s use of oil painting here, rather than to the subject of work itself.



Millet, Peasants Going to Work, 1863. Etching. The Met, 17.21.43. Public domain.

The inherited language of landscape

> “I believe that he failed because the language of traditional oil painting could not accommodate the subject he brought with him.”

John Berger, “Millet and the Peasant” (1976), Portraits, class PDF p. 207.

Berger rejects the easy explanation that Millet simply could not paint well. He argues that much European landscape painting was arranged for a visitor who could enjoy the land as a view. A peasant meets that land through work. Bringing a large worker into the foreground may leave the spectator’s comfortable relationship to the scene intact.

Working on the land

> “the close, harsh, patient physicality of a peasant’s labour on, instead of in front of, the land.”

John Berger, “Millet and the Peasant” (1976), Portraits, class PDF p. 207.

The distinction is between land offered to our eyes and land met through repeated bodily effort. In The Gleaners, a hand reaches into stubble and a back stays bent. Those contacts can support Berger’s concern. They can also challenge his verdict if we think Millet has made the women’s effort inseparable from this particular field.

Test Berger’s explanation against Millet

Berger next argues that Van Gogh joins worker and land through the energy of his brushstrokes. He also sees a cost: the artist’s personal vision becomes dominant. He ends by considering whether Millet’s pastels, half-light and night scenes resist a world made fully available to a privileged viewer.

John Berger, “Millet and the Peasant” (1976), Portraits, class PDF pp. 207–208.

In The Gleaners, the Orsay finds dignity in the women’s sculptural weight. Berger questions whether monumentality can hold a working body too still. The repeated bends may make the work feel continuous, or they may make the women seem posed. Explain which account fits the painting more convincingly.