

# PEASANTS IN PASTEL

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JEAN-FRANÇOIS MILLET AND THE PASTEL REVIVAL

“Je suis paysan paysan” (I am a peasant’s peasant), the artist Jean-François Millet (1814–1875) once declared. Born into a farming family in northern France, he astonished the Parisian art world with his frank portrayals of agricultural labor in the late 1840s. *Paysan*—defined in the principal French dictionary of the age as “a man from the country”—was and is a word fraught with social meaning, evoking both backbreaking labor and an ideal of rural life.

Nineteenth-century Europe witnessed drastic changes in agricultural methods and modes of transport. Railroads and mechanized farm equipment altered traditional relationships between country and city as well as between the land and those who worked it. With these changes came nostalgia for disappearing peasant traditions and a new taste for depictions of rural life and labor among urban collectors like those who first purchased the pastels exhibited here.

A medium of choice for aristocratic portraits for much of the eighteenth century, pastels fell out of fashion around the time of the French Revolution (1789–99). It is therefore somewhat surprising that the artist most responsible for reviving this aristocratic medium was the “peasant’s peasant,” Millet. This exhibition explores Millet’s turn to pastels and presents a selection of works by his followers, encouraging us to consider how artists’ choice of medium inflects our understanding of their subject matter.



Non-flash photography and video for personal use are welcome in the exhibition.



# JEAN-FRANÇOIS MILLET

A member of a prosperous peasant family in northern France, Millet earned a scholarship to the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris but failed to find his way as an academic artist. In the mid-1840s, he began to paint scenes of farmworkers winnowing grain, tending sheep, and sowing seed, often at a grand scale conventionally reserved for subjects from classical mythology or the Bible. His oil technique became increasingly bold, with thick, dark paint applied like “trowel scrapings,” as one critic put it. The seeming crudeness of both Millet’s subject matter and his style shocked contemporary audiences, who often suspected that he harbored a radical political agenda.

By the early 1850s, his work had nevertheless begun to sell, thanks to an arrangement with Alfred Sensier, an art dealer, critic, and historian who provided Millet with materials and a steady income in exchange for his pictures. Sensier especially admired eighteenth-century pastels, and he encouraged Millet to produce small, bright, salable works in this medium. Millet had used pastel at the beginning of his career, but now, returning to it around 1860, he saw immediate commercial results. Eager to corner the market, one collector commissioned no fewer than ninety pastels from Millet.

# PASTELS AFTER MILLET

The collector Emile Gavet exhibited and dispersed his vast holdings of Millet's pastels at a public auction shortly after the artist's death in 1875. The critical and commercial success of the venture encouraged other artists to try their hand at pastels, which quickly gained widespread acceptance, graduating from a medium used primarily for sketching to one commonly employed for fully realized, independent works. Manufacturers of artists' supplies now offered a wide range of paper and even canvas supports specially designed for pastels, and in 1880 the Salon designated a room for work in the medium. Five years later a group of artists formed the independent Société des Pastellistes de France with the intention of presenting an additional exhibition each year. Pastels were in vogue.

Pastels also played an important role in the Impressionist movement, which formally launched in 1874 and helped set the course of European painting for the next quarter century. Nearly all the key Impressionists experimented with pastels; the sticks' brilliant colors and potential for bold, graphic handling suited the daring, independent spirit of the group. Thanks to their portability, pastels proved useful for working *en plein air*—outdoors, often in the countryside—as the Impressionist landscape painters preferred to do.



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