

# Reckoning

with

# Millet's

# Man with

# a Hoe

Presenting an agricultural worker bowed by brutal toil, Jean-François Millet's *Man with a Hoe* may be the most historically significant painting in the Getty Museum's collection of nineteenth-century European art. It is certainly one of the most provocative icons of manual labor ever painted.

This exhibition situates the painting in the arc of Millet's career and traces its fascinating and contentious reception from its scandalous debut at the 1863 Paris Salon, through its transformative movement on the exhibition circuit and art market after the artist's death in 1875, to its arrival in California as a celebrated masterpiece in the 1890s. In turn-of-the-century San Francisco, Millet's painting again became the subject of heated controversy, this time thanks to a popular but polarizing poem that spoke to contemporary social inequities in the United States. *Man with a Hoe* had retained its power to disturb, provoke, and divide opinion, even as it entered the art-historical canon as a modern classic.



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



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# 1 The Peasant Painter

Moved by the democratic energies unleashed during the 1848 Revolution in France, Millet pioneered an innovative mode of genre painting that focused squarely on rural labor. The subject was personal for Millet, who grew up in a small farming community in Normandy. Though he spent part of his career in Paris, Millet eventually returned to the countryside, settling in the nearby village of Barbizon in 1849. Quite capable of wielding a farm tool himself, he proudly cultivated the persona of “peasant painter.”

Begun in 1860, *Man with a Hoe* represents the culmination of an idea that had been germinating for years (see *Digger Resting*, at left). It joined precedents like *The Gleaners* and *The Diggers* (at right) in an epic suite of rural subjects that Millet was developing in paintings, drawings, and prints. Centering humble yet monumental figures in the foreground of vast plains, these carefully meditated works aimed, in Millet’s words, “to make the trivial serve in the expression of the sublime,” and earned him comparisons to Michelangelo, paradigmatic genius of the Italian Renaissance. Conservative critics, however, suspected a dangerous political agenda in Millet’s solemn efforts to aggrandize lowly subjects. *Man with a Hoe* was a provocative work in the repressive context of the Second Empire (1852–70).

# 2 Scandal at the Salon

*Man with a Hoe* scandalized many viewers when it was first exhibited at the 1863 Paris Salon. For some critics, the painting represented an ugly new low in modern realism, and they attacked Millet for making a spectacle of human degradation. Using contemporary medical language, they described Millet's laboring figure as an "idiot" and a "cretin," an unpatriotic insult to French peasantry. Even worse, they saw in him a threat of murderous violence. In the lingering shadow of the 1848 Revolution, conservatives feared the rural proletariat rising up and suspected Millet of being a socialist agitator, which he was not. Some even went so far as to liken his laborer to a notorious serial killer.

# 3 Millet's Response

Millet had anticipated the negative reaction to his painting, writing in 1862, "*Man with a Hoe* will shock many people who do not like being occupied with things from a world other than their own and being disturbed; but here I am on this ground and here I will stay." He was in fact more responsive to criticism than this defiant rhetoric would suggest. After the Salon debacle, he published a passionate artist's statement in the form of a letter and issued reproductions that linked his painting to the writings of Montaigne, the esteemed sixteenth-century French philosopher. He also explored less confrontational subjects aimed at broadening critical support and securing his footing in the art market.



# 4 Posthumous Acclaim

In 1864, *Man with a Hoe* entered a private collection in Brussels. When the painting resurfaced in Paris in 1881, six years after the artist's death, critics were quick to declare it a masterpiece: a deeply compassionate work that distilled Millet's artistic philosophy in a single, memorable figure. Its new status was reinforced at exhibitions throughout the 1880s: in a dealer's showcase of modern "chefs d'oeuvre" (1883); at the first Millet retrospective (1887); and during the centenary exhibition of French art at the Paris World's Fair (1889). Meanwhile, the market for Millet's work exploded, with the value of *Man with a Hoe* increasing exponentially as it changed hands numerous times between 1881 and 1890.

# 5 Migration to the United States

In 1890 San Francisco collectors Ethel and William H. Crocker— heirs to a great railroad fortune—bought *Man with a Hoe* from Paris dealer Paul Durand-Ruel for the colossal sum of 340,000 francs. Millet's star was at its zenith, and the painting quickly became the most famous European picture on the West Coast. "We Have a Millet Now," exulted the *San Francisco Examiner*. Dedicated philanthropists, the Crockers lent their new prize possession to several charitable exhibitions in San Francisco, and in 1893 they sent it to Chicago for the World's Columbian Exposition, where it garnered international attention as one of the most notable French paintings in the United States.

# A Controversial Poem

In 1899 the California poet Edwin Markham published “The Man with the Hoe” in the *San Francisco Examiner* (reproduced at right). Inspired by Millet’s painting, the poem describes the brutalization of humanity by oppressive labor, blames the ruling classes, and intones prophetically about a future reckoning.

Markham’s composition triggered a national debate that went to the heart of social issues bedeviling the United States at the end of the Gilded Age—a period of appalling inequality, explosive class tensions, and increasing agitation for structural reform. Across the political spectrum, people argued about the cause of the working poor’s terrible state. Was it deplorable labor conditions and an unjust social system? Or fateful nature, whose stern laws of heredity and evolution inevitably produced inequities? What material and spiritual remedies might there be? Who was responsible for lifting up the proverbial man with the hoe? Government? Faith leaders and educators? The self-reliant individual? Millet’s painting had become an ideological flashpoint in a divided country.

Photo mural: Edwin Markham, “The Man with the Hoe,” *San Francisco Examiner*, January 15, 1899. Image © 2023 Newspapers.com. All rights reserved.

# 7 Forgeries

In the 1930s investigators exposed a shocking forgery scheme in France. The swindlers? Millet's own grandson Jean-Charles Millet and a painter associate, Paul Cazot. The two had been collaborating in the production of fakes that they "authenticated" with forged documents. Among the fakes, as the ensuing trial revealed, was a purported oil study for *Man with a Hoe* (at right), which Jean-Charles had sold to the British dealer David Croal Thomson. Long known through a photograph in one of Thomson's catalogues (see the case below), Cazot's painting has only recently come to light. It attests to the extraordinary status of Millet's work in the early twentieth century.

## WHERE'S MILLET 'MAN WITH HOE' KIN IN SWINDLE

### MILLET'S SCION FACES CHARGE OF ART FRAUD

Claimed He Sold Fake Pictures  
as Those of Famous Artist.

### WELL-KNOWN PAINTER COPIED MASTERPIECES

Numerous Persons on Both  
Sides of Atlantic Duped by  
Schemers Paid High Prices  
for Worthless Paintings

### HONORED ART IS FAKE

MAN WITH A HOE IN MILLET  
MUSEUM IS A FRAUD

Grandson of the Painter Admits  
the Goods to Work of Amom-  
piles to Parisian—A Short-  
day Victimhood.

### Grandson of Millet Reveals Himself As "Old Master"—of Big Art Swindle

ALLEGED TO BE GENUINE COPY AND PAINT DEPICTED BY MILLET  
WAS PROBABLY BY HIS SON AND SELLER TO THOMSON

### ART DEALER IS PROUD OF RECORD IN FRAUDS

Grandson of Master Boasts of  
Ability To Sell Faked  
Paintings

### Millet's Grandson Bars Gigantic Art Swindle



Many Pictures Long Thought Genuine Prove  
To Be Forgeries, Outright Fakes

Heads of Fake Painting Mill  
Largest known Are Arrested

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