



REVOLUTIONARY DREAMS

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The Landscapes of Jean-François Millet

by Jessica Hoare

Much more than a simple decoration, landscape is a symbolic form in its own right. It may be read as a representation of a nation. Images of the French landscape entered circulation through painting, prints and later photography. In a country with a long agrarian history and a sense of national identity thoroughly rooted in the land, landscapes could be politically manipulated. The new Republican government sought to promote its political agenda through its cultural allegiances. From 1848 the state began to buy these 'portrait' landscapes at the Salon for national and regional collections. Placing landscapes within provincial museums aimed to foster a sense of both national and regional identity.

Artists were keen to link the painted landscape with France's people, in particular the peasants that worked the land were seen to have a special significance. Of the artists represented in Amgueddfa Cymru's collection, Jean-François Millet is most



closely associated with glorifying the rural citizen.

Jean-François Millet, *The Gust of Wind*, 1871-73, oil on canvas, 90.5 x 117.5cm, bequeathed by Margaret Davies, 1963 (NMW A 2475)

Depopulation was a widespread concern in France at this time. From 1800 to the start of the next century the population of Paris increased fivefold and this increase was at the expense of the rural populations. This increase in population was as a result of rural workers moving to urban areas. Millet's work displays nostalgia for the pre-industrial era and a desire to escape from modern industrial life. It has been argued that Millet is one of the few landscape artists of the period who attempted to bridge landscape and the reality of the worked countryside. Despite this, Millet only made landscape a primary subject in his work towards the end of his life. However these landscapes are representations of the worked land, *The Gust of Wind* depicts grazing land - a point made clear by the inclusion of the shepherd. Despite the dominance of the landscape the canvas champions the heroism of the French peasant - who bent double by the force of the wind still manages to stay on his feet.

One imagines that in a gale strong enough to uproot a tree that the human body would struggle to withstand its force. It has been suggested that eliminating the figure distances contemporary social issues and Millet can be seen to use the human figures to ground his work within its social context.

The nineteenth-century biographer Alfred Sensier made the following account of Millet's development as a painter of figures in landscapes:



Jean-François Millet, *The Sower*, 1847-48, oil on canvas, 95.3 x 61.3cm, bequeathed by Gwendoline

Until now, Millet has half feared his task. The landscape which surrounds his figures is secondary, and sometimes heavy. Except in *The Sower* and some little canvases, Millet retained the old tradition, the sacrifice of the landscape to the figure. Now all changes. Millet has found the key. From this time on, his figures, as principal subjects, will be luminous against a luminous sky, melt, and yet be accented in the same atmosphere.¹

¹ Sensier, cited Bradley Fratello, 'France Embraces Millet: The Intertwined Fates Of 'The Gleaners' And 'The Angelus'', *The Art Bulletin*, 85 (2003), p. 691.

This was Sensier's response to Millet's depiction of the human figure in his infamous painting *The Gleaners*. *The Gust of Wind*, painted over a decade later, allows us to witness a further development in Millet's treatment of the figure. The diffusion between figure and landscape, the 'melt' that Sensier identifies, has become much more pronounced.