

Leonard on Marrinan (2016)

Marrinan, Michael. *Gustave Caillebotte: Painting the Paris of Naturalism, 1872–1887*. Getty Publications, 2016, pp. 400, ISBN 978-1-60606-507-5

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To call this book a labor of love understates the case. Gestated over many years, and beautifully produced, it lavishes attention on Impressionist painter Gustave Caillebotte, who, since his “rediscovery” in the 1970s, has garnered lively interest (and several exhibition catalogues), but never excessive adoration. Picture by picture, *quartier* by *quartier*, Michael Marrinan follows Caillebotte’s traces and guides the reader through his fifteen most productive years. Yet he is no blind idolizer of his subject: caveats and provisos dot the book, starting with an acknowledgment in the introduction of Caillebotte’s “spotty career” (14). Not seeking to change anyone’s mind on that point, Marrinan instead fills out our image of Caillebotte with painstaking analyses of many rarely seen paintings from private collections (where most of the artist’s oeuvre still resides) as well as old favorites like *Paris Street; Rainy Day* and *The Floor Scrapers*. Marrinan has performed, moreover, an impressive amount of archival sleuthing. If not radically altering our picture of Caillebotte, his monograph offers nuances that any specialist in the field will appreciate.

In his circumstances as *nouveau riche* in Haussmann’s Paris, Caillebotte most resembled Edgar Degas among his fellow Impressionists. But they fell out, and Caillebotte seemed to feel more comfortable in a position of economic superiority from which he could aid his more impecunious peers, notably Claude Monet. As is well known, Caillebotte’s relation to Impressionism depended as much on his financial support of the group as on his artistic contributions. On the five occasions he exhibited with the Impressionists, Caillebotte held a triple role: as an organizer underwriting many of the costs, as a participating artist, and—crucially—as a lender from his own collection. This gave him the luxury of shaping, by raw calculation or aesthetic affinity, an optimal “viewing context” (141) for his own paintings relative to those of other Impressionists. In individual exhibitions, then, as in his crowning bequest of Impressionist art to the French state, Caillebotte fashioned a “strong-willed and coherent view” (365) of the artistic movement once known as the Intransigents. But Marrinan’s claim that this defining corpus of paintings now in the Musée d’Orsay “ensured the place of Impressionism in the history of art” (365) goes too far. American collectors such as the Havemeyers, and certainly the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel, ensured that place just as decisively. The irony, of course, is that the narrative left behind by Caillebotte’s bequest largely excluded himself. His work languished for the most part forgotten while the dominant story of Impressionism was being written.

Like the dearth of Caillebotte canvases in public collections, the paucity of firsthand documentation has been a longstanding frustration in studies of the artist. Marrinan takes a compensatory approach, reading numerous paintings through the Naturalist lens of Émile Zola and J.-K. Huysmans, while offering psychological interpretations of others that sometimes, even by the author’s own rueful admission, strain credulity. Justly marveling at the failure of period critics to notice such key details as the double-mirror structure of *In a Café* or the figure peering out of the opposite building in *Interior: Woman at the Window*, he attributes this “blindness” to critics’ snobbish need to distance themselves from the seedy milieu of the café, or their desire not to see the irruption of a forbidden gaze into the space of a bourgeois marriage. With astonishing frequency, these are the kinds of uncomfortable spaces that Caillebotte, the well-off bachelor, chose to depict in his art.

Where the book feels most up-to-date is indeed in Marrinan’s insistence on questions of identity—class demarcations, gender roles, and social boundaries—as both a galvanizing and inhibiting force in Caillebotte’s art. Through painting, Caillebotte acted out his desire to be what he could not, performing identities that were not otherwise available to him. Thus, in Marrinan’s reading, *House Painters* enacts a Freudian displacement: “Their [the depicted figures’] attention to the act of painting on the street and in public is exactly what Caillebotte cannot bring to his own art” (108). The expectations of his social milieu were certainly factors that complicated his aspirations as an avant-garde painter. His success as a yachtsman was another. Three-quarters of the way through the book comes a sentence that brought this reader, at least, to a dead halt: “Over the summer of 1884 Caillebotte achieved renown on the water with his sailboats far greater than he ever obtained as a painter” (278). This matter-of-fact statement carries more poignancy than its author chooses to acknowledge. Can it be true that the artist who resurfaced in the 1970s as a “cultural coelacanth . . . dredged from the depths of early modern art” (in Kirk Varnedoe’s watery metaphor) was, in the mid-1880s, primarily a winner of regattas? (“Odd Man In,” 1995, 14). In producing this fine volume, centered on Caillebotte’s artistic production, Marrinan wishes to have it otherwise.

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