

# Nineteenth-Century French Studies

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Sagner, Karin and Max Hollein, eds. *Gustave Caillebotte. An Impressionist and Photography*. Munich, Germany: Hirmer Verlag, 2013. Pp. 248. ISBN: 978-3-7774-5921-9

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The exhibition *Gustave Caillebotte, Ein Impressionist und die Fotografie* opened at the *Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt* in October 2012. An ambitious project, it presented the paintings of Caillebotte along with nineteenth- and twentieth-century photographs in order to highlight the affinity of his pioneering compositions with the photography of *Neues Sehen*. The present book is the catalogue of this exhibition.

In the opening essay, Karin Sagner, the curator, broaches the main issues: the impact of the photographic process and the modernization of Paris on perception; the increasing importance of movement; Caillebotte's nonconformist depiction of the bourgeoisie; the modernity of his still lifes; and his increased interest for the representation of nature after his relocation to Petit Gennevilliers in 1887.

The first two sections, "Panoramas, Perspectives—a New Perception of Space" and "New Physiognomies—the City's Street Furniture," visually explore two aspects of the recently Haussmanized Paris in which photographers were interested: what was seen from one's window and the fragmentary dimension of what the *flâneur* perceived at street level, better exemplified in Caillebotte's painting by the 1880 *Boulevard des Italiens* for the former and *Vue prise à travers un balcon* for the latter.

In "Poetry of Technique—Aesthetics of Work" appear reproductions of two of the painter's best-known pieces: *Pont de l'Europe* and the 1875 *Raboteurs de parquet*, as well as Claude Ghez's critical essay, "Reading Gustave Caillebotte's *Pont de l'Europe* (1876)" (88-105). In this fine analysis, Ghez starts by showing that the realism of the painting is illusory, as different points of view are compounded to produce the image, and that the organization of the work in symmetrical panels centered on the dog creates a coherent narrative. This composition points to the painting's protagonist, the man of the left, a composite figure that is part abstraction, part Caillebotte himself, as Ghez demonstrates through a study of preliminary drawings and *pentimenti* uncovered thanks to ultraviolet and infrared light and X-rays. An appendix to this essay presents the historical 1894 photograph of *Pont de l'Europe* and details the 2011 restoration of the painting.

Movement is the focus of the sections "Active Optics—Flâneurs, Dandies, and Other *Dramatis Personae*" and "Citizens Seen in Close View." The former contains the last critical essay of this volume, "Everything as though under a magic spell—The Depiction of Street Life in Nineteenth-Century Photographs" (138-151), in which Ulrich Pohlmann follows the technical evolution of city life photography. Due to a need for long exposure times, early photographs were devoid of humans; making motion visible became the main challenge of those developing the photographic process. When technical progress gave birth to "spy cameras" (148), the photographer, looking like a *flâneur*, started taking *instantanés* (126), snapshots thus named by lithographer and amateur photographer Henri Rivière (1864-1951). In the 1920s, László Moholy-Nagy would come to criticize the kinship in composition of early twentieth-century art photography with Impressionism. Pohlmann concludes that had photographers of *Neues Sehen*

known about Caillebotte and his use of “shortened perspectives” and “elevated views” (151), they would have set him apart from other Impressionists and given him the recognition he deserved.

In “Staging of Objects,” a short notice by Kristin Schrader underlines the fact that some of Caillebotte’s still lifes used the same principles as his other paintings, as evidenced for example by the oblique perspective seen both in *Quatre vases de chrysanthèmes* and *Raboteurs de parquet*. This view, meant to function in the still life as that “of someone hurrying past” (181), mimics the view from or into a shop or restaurant window, and reflects the growing importance of consumption—of food or merchandise—in nineteenth-century Paris.

“Landscape and Abstraction” and “Unconventional View through Movement,” the final two sections, take the reader to Petit Gennevilliers with the painter, whose landscapes start pointing toward Abstract Expressionism (196). Away from the city, the *flâneur* vanishes: with the walker in search of relaxation, the gait becomes more leisurely, as illustrated by the three paintings of Père Magloire, paradoxically a laborer from Normandy. Leisure, or rather the emergence of a leisure culture, is also reflected in several canoeing and rowing paintings from 1877-1878 to the early 1890s coinciding with Eadweard Muybridge’s chronophotography and the beginnings of sports reporting (214). A biography by Gilles Chardeau concludes the book, illustrated with photographs taken by Martial Caillebotte, the brother of the artist.

What makes this volume noteworthy—its abundant and original iconography—finds its flipside in the small number of critical essays: three. Little theoretical background about *Neues Sehen*—of which Caillebotte is supposedly a precursor—is given. Readers are largely expected to accept that images speak louder than words, and to make an independent connection between paintings and photographs. Nevertheless, the (too-short) notices by Karin Sagner, Kristin Schrader, and Milan Chlumsky do open up interesting avenues of inquiry. Even though these avenues are not explored in depth in the present volume, they will hopefully give rise to fascinating new contributions to Caillebotte scholarship.