



Gustave Caillebotte (French, 1848–1894). *Oarsmen Rowing on the Yerres*, 1877. Oil on canvas, 31 7/8 x 45 11/16 in. (81 x 116 cm). Private collection

Educator packet for the special exhibition

Gustave Caillebotte: Impressionist Paintings from Paris to the Sea

on view at the Brooklyn Museum, March 27–July 5, 2009

Gustave Caillebotte

Impressionist Paintings from Paris to the Sea



Gustave Caillebotte. *Self-Portrait at the Easel*, 1879. Oil on canvas, 35 7/16 x 45 1/4 in. (90 x 115 cm). Private collection

About the Artist and Exhibition

Following his enormous bequest to the French government of his personal collection of Impressionist paintings, Gustave Caillebotte has been known primarily as a generous friend and supporter of other well-known Impressionist painters, such as Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Edgar Degas. The exhibition *Gustave Caillebotte: Impressionist Paintings from Paris to the Sea* offers an opportunity to learn more about Caillebotte's own life and work as a painter of and participant in contemporary French life, particularly by presenting and raising questions about the body of work that engaged two of Caillebotte's primary interests: painting and boating.

Description of *Oarsmen Rowing on the Yerres*

Two figures in late nineteenth-century contemporary French boating attire—blue trousers, white jerseys, and yellow straw hats—are seated in a sturdy flat-bottom rowboat. The short-sleeve jerseys expose bare, muscular arms as both figures reach forward to heave the oars. The rowboat cuts through the calm water from their effort. One figure's face is obscured by the yellow hat; the other's is only partially visible as it tilts gently toward the left, gazing away from the boat and out of the picture plane. The painting's point of view suggests that the viewer may be a third member of the boating party, standing or seated in the stern of the boat facing the oarsmen.

Background Information

The two oarsmen featured in the *Oarsmen Rowing on the Yerres* were probably a familiar sight for Caillebotte in 1877. Pleasure boating was an extremely popular weekend activity for late nineteenth-century Parisians, including Caillebotte and his circle of friends. Owing to new train service, small towns by the water were a relatively quick ride from the center of Paris. Yerres, the scene of this painting and the location of Caillebotte's weekend home, was a ten-minute ride from Paris. Many of these towns quickly developed amenities that an "urban day tripper" might desire: inexpensive taverns, public swimming and fishing areas, and organized social events. The Parisian fashion industry also responded to this interest in leisure activities. Clothing and accessories made especially for pleasure boating were designed, purchased, and worn by Parisians concerned with wearing the proper attire while on or near the water.

Questions for Viewing

Create time to look closely at this reproduction or the painting on view at the Brooklyn Museum. Spend at least two minutes looking quietly before engaging in discussion or writing. The following questions can be posed in large or small-group conversation or as prompts for independent writing. They are all designed to encourage inquiry and close looking.

What is going on in this painting?

What evidence do you see of the natural world? What evidence do you see of the human-made world?

Where do you see evidence of motion?

Where do you see evidence of deep concentration?

Where do you see evidence of human effort or strength?

Where do you see evidence of balance and imbalance?

Where do you see evidence that this may be a leisure activity?

Where do you see evidence of the artist's skill or technique?

Where has the artist used color, line, and texture in an interesting or surprising way?

What do you think is the artist's main idea? Where do you see evidence for this?

What questions do you have about this painting?

Activities

Postcards

Look for additional paintings that show images of leisure or sporting activities in late nineteenth-century France. Make three lists for the different activities, environments, and clothing depicted in the images. Imagine you are one of the oarsmen in Caillebotte's painting. On a large blank index card, use one side to sketch your favorite part of the painting or to sketch what you think the oarsman might see. Use the other side of the index card to write a postcard describing your weekend activities to someone you imagine you have left behind in Paris.

Think about your own weekend leisure activities. What do you do in your leisure time? What do you wish you spent more time doing? On a large blank index card, use one side to sketch your favorite weekend activity. Use the other side of the index card to write a postcard describing your weekend activity to someone with whom you do not usually spend your weekends.

Dialogue Writing

Imagine you are on the rowboat with the two oarsmen. What would you say to them? What might they say in response? Write a short dialogue.

Zoom In/Zoom Out

Zoom in on an important detail in the painting. Sketch and label this detail. Imagine zooming out from the painting's edges. What more would you see? What would you hear? Smell? Sketch and label an expanded version of the painting, including more of the landscape not included in the original image.

The following activities and questions can be used as prompts for group or partner conversations or independent writing projects. They can take place at the Brooklyn Museum or elsewhere, using reproductions.

Color and brushstroke. When he was painting scenes that include small and large areas of water, from rivers and ponds to the glistening surface of the sea, Caillebotte used many different colors and brushstrokes to show how water reflects light and moves in different directions. Find a painting that shows water. How many different colors can you find in the water? In what direction might the water be moving?

Reflections. Caillebotte was interested in showing different ways that areas of water, from the sea to the wet surface of the pavement, reflect the surrounding environment. Find a painting where you see sky and water. Look closely. What do you see reflected in the water? Where can you find the colors in the sky reflected in the water? Look for reflections in other paintings.

Alienation or intimacy? Many writers have commented on the feelings of both alienation and intimacy in Caillebotte's paintings. Look closely at three or four of Caillebotte's paintings. Notice how the figures interact with each other. Do they look at each other? Where is their attention directed? What connects or separates the figures? Do you agree with these writers? Why or why not? As a viewer, do you feel alienated from or connected to the figures in the paintings?

Men working and playing together. Look for paintings with pairs or small groups of men. What do these paintings have in common with *Oarsmen Rowing on the Yerres*? Where can you see men engaged in these activities today?

New York vs. Paris. Look for details in three or four paintings that remind you of objects or people you see in New York. How are the details that you find similar? How are they different?

Figures at work. Look for two paintings that show human labor or effort. What kind of work is being done? When and where do you see people doing this work in your community?

Variations on a theme. Caillebotte often painted a subject or idea more than once. Look for pairs of paintings that show the same subject or idea in different ways. What elements are repeated? Where do you see differences?

Critique the critics. Compare and contrast the criticism of nineteenth-century writers included in the book by Kirk Varnedoe (see bibliography) with the criticism of contemporary writers responding to the exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum. Consider reading reviews by student critics as well as those by professionals. With whom do you agree? How is the language, including tone and attitude, similar or different?

Fashion. Find paintings of people wearing hats. Do the hats seem fashionable or functional, or both? What kind of hat would you wear today if you were doing that activity? Would you choose your hat based on fashion or function?

Resources

Fonsmark, Ann-Birgitte, Dorothee Hansen, and Gry Hedin. *Gustave Caillebotte*. Exh. cat. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008.

This catalogue offers a biography of Caillebotte, color images of many of the artworks and model boats in the exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, and art-historical and social commentary.

Distel, Anne, et al. *Gustave Caillebotte: Urban Impressionist*. Exh. cat. Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux: Musée d'Orsay; Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago; New York: In association with Abbeville Press, 1995.

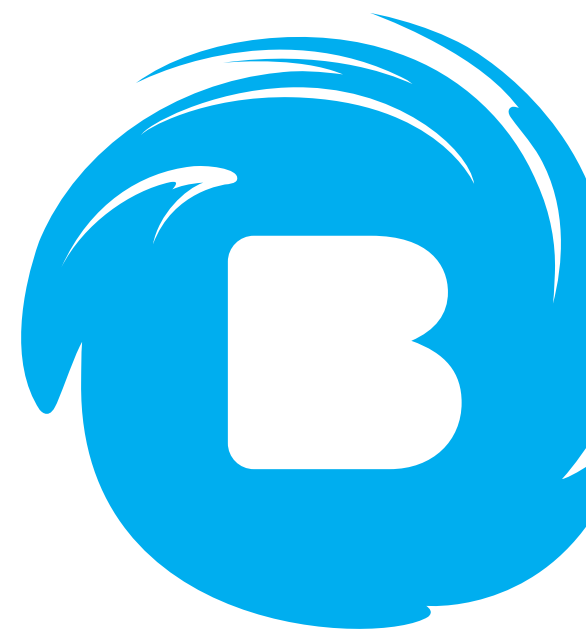
Published in conjunction with the second large exhibition of Caillebotte's work in the U.S., this catalogue includes color plates with art-historical commentary, a detailed chronology of his life, a complete inventory of his bequest to the French government, and an extensive bibliography.

Varnedoe, Kirk. *Gustave Caillebotte*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987.

This book provides color plates, an appendix with nineteenth-century criticism (in its original French and translated into English), and an argument about the relationship between Caillebotte's process and photography.

Fried, Michael. "Caillebotte's Impressionism." *Representations*, no. 66 (Spring, 1999): 1–55.

This article offers a close reading and deep art-historical analysis of several of Caillebotte's paintings, including *Oarsmen Rowing on the Yerres*.



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Brooklyn Museum

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