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Van Gogh Museum Articles

Jean-François Millet
and the Hague School

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Jean-François Millet, *Gleaners* (detail), 1857, oil on canvas, 83,5 x 110 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Jean-François Millet (1814-1875) is known today as the quintessential peasant painter of the nineteenth century, a reputation he already enjoyed in his own lifetime and in the decades after. He pioneered the dignified representation of harsh rural life and served as an example in this respect for many other artists, including those of the Hague School. Painters like Jozef Israëls, Anton Mauve, Matthijs Maris and Adolphe Artz were all influenced by Millet's radical compositions, as well as by his themes and atmosphere. The mechanism by which this occurred is inferred here from the French artist's 'presence' in the Netherlands: how widely his work was represented in exhibitions and was discussed by artists and critics. Visual comparison then provides an insight into the extent to which painters of the Hague School actively borrowed elements of Millet's art.

This matter has been raised before, mostly in monographic exhibition catalogues devoted to the individual artists in question, but it has not previously been discussed for the Hague School in its entirety. I have, moreover, consulted magazines, newspapers and artists' correspondence from the relevant period to lend weight to my findings through contemporary voices.¹

Millet's star rises

Hendrik Willem Mesdag submitted his first works to the Paris Salon in 1870 and promptly won a medal for his *Breakers on the North Sea*. He was informed of the good news by Jean-François Millet, a member of the Salon jury, on a postcard, which was duly given pride of place in Mesdag's studio.² Thirty-six years later, it was still important enough for him to show to a journalist, who quoted him in a subsequent article: "Look at this: I wouldn't part with it for thousands." He pointed towards a few lines penned in a robust hand, grandly displayed in a gilt frame: "Médaille le 17 Mars 1870", signed J.F. Millet. The glad tidings conveyed by the great French Master himself to the young painter of the Dutch seashore!³

Millet's star was rising in the 1870s in the Netherlands, but still very much so in France too. He was born in 1814 and grew up in the countryside around Gréville in Normandy. Beginning in 1837, he spent two years at the École des Beaux-Arts, where he was taught by Paul Delaroche. He mainly produced portraits and female nudes at first, but emerged towards the end of the 1840s as a painter and draughtsman of peasant life. From 1849 onwards, Millet worked in the village of Barbizon, located to the south of Paris near Fontainebleau forest, and is viewed as part of the 'Barbizon School'.

1. This article has been written in connection with the exhibition *Jean-François Millet and the Hague School*, held from 13-09-2019 to 05-01-2020 at The Mesdag Collection in The Hague. The author is grateful to Maite van Dijk, Marije Vellekoop and Aukje Vergeest for their valuable comments on this article, which was translated by Ted Alkins. The most relevant monographs in this respect are Dieuwertje Dekkers, *Jozef Israëls 1824-1911*, exhibition catalogue Joods Historisch Museum Amsterdam/Groninger Museum 1999; Tiny de Liefde-van Brakel, *Tussen Katwijk en Parijs. David Adolphe Constant Artz 1837-1890*, exhibition catalogue Katwijk Museum 2001; Saskia de Bodt and Michiel Plomp (eds.), *Anton Mauve 1838-1888*, exhibition catalogue Teylers Museum Haarlem/Singer Museum Laren 2009; and Richard Bionda, *Matthijs Maris*, exhibition catalogue Rijksmuseum Amsterdam 2017. Delpher is an invaluable web source providing ready access to all references to Millet, in contrast with the period in which most of the aforementioned publications appeared.
2. Nienke Bakker, "Een alsmaar groeiende reputatie." De receptie van Mesdag in Frankrijk en Nederland', in Maite van Dijk, Mayken Jonkman and Renske Suijver (eds.), *Hendrik Willem Mesdag. Kunstenaar, verzamelaar, entrepreneur*, Bussum 2015, p. 63.
3. "Kijk 's hier, dat zou ik dan ook voor geen duizenden willen missen." En hij wees op 'n paar regels heel kloek schrift, précieux in een vergulde lijst omsloten: "Médaille le 17 Mars 1870", ondertekend J. F. Millet. De blijde boodschap door den grooten Franschen Meester zelf gebracht aan den jongen schilder van Holland's kust!', N.R. Ct, 'Een gouden schilders bruiloft', *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 20-04-1906, p. 10.

The evolving reception of Millet's work in the 1850s and 60s is apparent from the many negative critical responses that his painting *Gleaners* continued to attract at the time of the 1857 Salon (fig. 1). Scavenging left-over ears of wheat was the preserve of the poorest women, who were allowed to glean what they could after sunset when the farmer was done with the harvest. The bent-over figures in Millet's painting personify this onerous work and the artist gave them an almost monumental status.

1. Jean-François Millet, *Gleaners*, 1857, oil on canvas, 83.5 x 110 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris



Although Millet never discussed his political views, his art seems to express a clearly republican and socially critical stance: he liked to depict the hard life of rural workers, thereby highlighting social inequality. At first, the heroic role he granted to peasants went down badly in many quarters.⁴ Ten years later, by contrast, the nine paintings Millet showed at the 1867 Paris World Exposition – including *Gleaners* once again and *The Angelus* – were much better received and he was actually awarded a medal. Many of the artists belonging to the Hague School will have seen his work on that occasion: Adolphe Artz and Jozef Israëls, for instance, are known to have visited the Exposition several times,⁵ while Jacob and Matthijs Maris were living in Paris at the time, making it reasonable to assume that they went as well. Mesdag lived in Brussels at that point and will no doubt also have made the journey to the French capital.

4. Simon Kelly, "'This Artistic Fauve': Millet as Modern Artist', in Maite van Dijk and Simon Kelly (eds.), *Jean-François Millet: Sowing the Seeds of Modern Art*, exhibition catalogue Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam/Saint Louis Art Museum.
5. Adolphe Artz to Johannes Knepelhout, 24-02, 14-04 and 26-04-1867, private collection. Thanks to Mayken Jonkman.

Many Dutch artists had the opportunity to see Millet's work in Brussels too, although reactions were once again divided. Apart from Mesdag, Willem Roelofs, Constant Gabriël and Jacob and Matthijs Maris lived in the city for shorter or longer periods of time. Millet was under exclusive contract in 1860 to the Belgian art dealer Arthur Stevens⁶ and a great deal of French art had, moreover, been shown at exhibitions in all the major Belgian cities from the 1850s onwards. For that reason, a strikingly large number of Millet's masterpieces wound up in later years in Belgian private collections, including that of Jules van Praet, and it was often in Belgium that Millet's work was seen for the first time.⁷

Millet's death in 1875 heightened interest in his work, as did a number of exhibitions and sales that same year. In 1881, his friend Alfred Sensier published a biography of the artist, *La vie et l'oeuvre de J.-F. Millet*, having worked since the 1860s to promote a more positive image of Millet's art. The book swiftly became a 'must-read' and established the myth of the misunderstood artist whose sole desire, as a peasant among peasants, was to depict humanity's destiny to labour onerously and forever in the fields. As a result, Millet's political and socially critical charge was defused, along with his work's emphasis on the class struggle, enabling a conservative art world to accept the artist's images more readily.⁸ The biography boosted Millet's popularity and was followed by a monographic exhibition in 1887 at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. In 1889, *The Angelus* became the most expensive work of art of the period. Accompanied by avid coverage in the press, it changed hands for the unprecedented sum of 553,000 francs before finding its way, albeit a little circuitously, to the Louvre.⁹

6. Étienne Moreau-Nélaton, *Millet. Raconté par lui-même*, Paris 1921, vol. 2, pp. 72-74.

7. Saskia de Bodt, *Halverwege Parijs. Willem Roelofs en de Nederlandse schilderskolonie in Brussel 1840-1890*, Ghent 1995, p. 127.

8. Neil McWilliam, 'Mythologising Millet', in Andreas Burmester, Christoph Heilmann and Michael F. Zimmermann, *Barbizon. Malerei der Natur - Natur der Malerei*, Munich 1999, pp. 437-446; Christopher Parsons and Neil McWilliam, "'Le Paysan de Paris": Alfred Sensier and the Myth of Rural France', in: *Oxford Art Journal* 6 (1984) 2, pp. 38-58; Kelly 2019 (note 4).

9. McWilliam 1999 (note 8), p. 437; Laura L. Meixner, *French Realist Painting and the Critique of American Society 1865-1900*, Cambridge 1995, pp. 72-75.

Millet in the Netherlands

Although many Dutch artists will have followed the news about Millet in the foreign press, he only began to receive attention in the Netherlands at a relatively late stage. His name does not appear regularly in newspapers and magazines until the 1880s and his work never featured at the 'Exhibitions of Living Masters' held in the Netherlands between 1808 and 1917 for the general public, which also began to welcome submissions from foreign artists in 1840.¹⁰ Surprisingly, the Hague branch of the French art dealers Goupil & Cie. rarely offered anything by Millet – just a single pastel (fig. 2) and a painting. This is remarkable, given that Millet's French contemporaries were better represented in the Dutch art trade in the latter part of the nineteenth century.¹¹ The only place where Millet's work was regularly displayed and offered for sale was the Van Wisselingh & Co. gallery. Hendrik Jan van Wisselingh, who was evidently less afraid of getting his fingers burned, brought Millet's art to the Netherlands from the 1840s onwards.¹²

2. Jean-François Millet, *Haystacks*, 1867-1868, pastel, chalk, on paper, 71.5 x 93.5 cm, The Mesdag Collection, The Hague



At the same time as they were embarking on their artistic careers, Hendrik Willem Mesdag and his wife Sientje Mesdag-van Houten also began to collect art not only by their Dutch contemporaries and colleagues, but also the French artists whom they considered their great examples. Mesdag bought four paintings and three pastel drawings by Millet in the years around 1887 when he opened his Museum Mesdag, as well as eight of the ten prints reproducing Millet's famous *Work in the Fields* series.

10. Hans Kraan, 'Barbizon en de Nederlandse kunstcritiek', in John Sillevius and Hans Kraan (eds.), *De School van Barbizon. Franse meesters van de 19de eeuw*, The Hague 1985, p. 64.
11. Unpublished list of paintings by foreign artists sold at the Hague branch of the Paris art dealers Goupil in the period 1861-1917, based on the ledgers of Goupil & Cie, RKD (Netherlands Institute for Art History), research material assembled by Aukje Vergeest for her publication *The French collection. Nineteenth-century French paintings in Dutch public collections*, Amsterdam 2000, of which I have made grateful use; Fred Leeman and Hanna Pennock (eds.), *Museum Mesdag. Catalogue of Paintings and Drawings*, Amsterdam/Zwolle 1996, p. 341.
12. J.F. Heijbroek and E.L. Wouthuysen, *Portret van een kunsthandel. De firma Van Wisselingh en zijn compagnons, 1838-heden*, Zwolle/Amsterdam 1999, p. 19.

Three of the four paintings were purchased at the Van Wisselingh gallery.¹³ In addition to a museum collection, the Mesdags assembled a private collection for their home, which featured a further fourteen drawings by Millet, an etching of *Gleaners* and two reproductions.¹⁴ Owning this many works made the Mesdags the biggest collectors of Millet's art at the time in the Netherlands. It is notable that all the paintings in their collection are somewhat atypical works by the Frenchman – they do not depict peasant life and, with the exception of *Hagar and Ishmael*, are not key works in Millet's oeuvre. The same does not apply to the pastels, for which Mesdag accordingly had to pay relatively substantial amounts (fig. 2).¹⁵

The opening of the Mesdag Museum in 1887 meant that artists in The Hague were finally able to study work by Millet and other Barbizon artists close to home. It goes without saying that there were other collectors of Millet's work in the Netherlands too, some of whom, such as Jacobus Rudolphus Neervoort van de Poll, allowed visitors to view their collection, or who later donated it to a museum, as in the case of Wouter Johannes van Randwijk. Even today, however, the number of Millet paintings in Dutch public collections runs to no more than a dozen.¹⁶

From the 1880s onwards, Millet's art also began to appear at various exhibitions in the Netherlands, most notably the one devoted entirely to works of his in Dutch ownership, held at the artists' society Pulchri Studio in The Hague in 1892. Mesdag naturally supplied many of the items that were shown, but other collectors contributed as well, including his brother Taco Mesdag, Jan and Jos de Kuyper and Neervoort van de Poll. The Hague School artist Jozef Israëls submitted seven etchings and a woodcut and wrote the foreword for the catalogue, in which he praised 'the important role that Millet has played in the world of painting. It is him we must thank for placing ordinary humanity on the throne it deserves. For showing that the scenes from which an exceptional artist might draw inspiration need not only be the histories of kings and conquerors, of saints and great men; and that as much study and as much beauty might be bestowed upon the labourer ploughing the soil and the mother suckling her infant as to anything else in the creation around us. In doing so, he has made a radical break with the conventional approach to treatment and execution.'¹⁷ Israëls thus placed the emphasis on how innovative Millet's work was and the way his themes and style prepared the ground for Dutch artists. The Dutch press, however, was divided about the exhibition. The critic David van der Kellen penned a highly negative article on the selection of works, in which he expressed a frequently heard objection: 'Why Millet had such a penchant for ugly people is impossible to comprehend.'¹⁸

13. Leeman and Pennock 1996 (note 11), pp. 23, 334-362.

14. Inventory of Hendrik Willem Mesdag's house, 1916, The Mesdag Collection, The Hague, hwm 838. The items in the private collection were not included in the transfer to the State in 1903 and were sold after Mesdag's death in 1915. The Triton Collection Foundation recently donated a Millet drawing of a cowherd, which originally belonged to this private collection, to the Van Gogh Museum. The Van Gogh Museum Foundation has managed The Mesdag Collection since 1990.

15. The highlight was the pastel *Vineyard Labourer Resting*, which Mesdag insured for 10,000 guilders after purchase.

16. Vergeest 2000 (note 11), pp. 226-230. By way of comparison, at the time of publication there were 59 paintings by Charles-François Daubigny in Dutch public collections, 24 by Camille Corot and 20 by Théodore Rousseau. Paintings by Millet currently feature in the collections of, amongst others, the Rijksmuseum and Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo.

17. '[...] de belangrijke rol die Millet in de schilderswereld heeft vervuld. Wij hebben het hem te danken, dat het gewoon menschelijke op den troon verheven is, die het toekomst. Dat niet alleen de geschiedenissen van koningen en veroveraars, van heiligen en beroemde mannen, de voorstellingen dienen te zijn, waarop zich een verheven kunstenaar mag inspireren; maar dat aan den arbeider, die het land beploegt, en aan de moeder, die haar zuigeling drenkt, evenveel studie mag besteed worden en evenveel schoonheid mag toegewezen worden, als aan wat ook in de ons omgevende schepping. Daarbij heeft hij het conventionele van behandeling en uitvoering grooten afbreuk gedaan.' Jozef Israëls, 'Voorwoord', in *Catalogus Tentoonstelling J. F. Millet. Pulchri Studio*, The Hague 1892, p. 7.

18. 'Waarom Millet zulk een voorliefde had voor leelijke menschen, is onbegrijpelijk.' D. v.d. K. Jr. [David van der Kellen Jr.], 'J. F. Millet en de tentoonstelling van eenige zijner werken in Pulchri Studio', *Het nieuws van den dag: kleine courant*, 18-10-1892, p. 13. Further examples of positive and negative criticism are Anonymous, 'Millet.', *Haagsche courant*, 23-09-1892, p. 2 and G. 'Haagsche Kroniek. Millet in Pulchri Studio', *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 02-10-1892, p. 1 respectively.

Prints as an example

Millet's original art was, therefore, only exhibited in Dutch cities relatively late and to a limited extent. Reproductions of his work, by contrast, had already been widely distributed for some time. Many Hague School painters, including Anton Mauve, Jozef Israëls and Bernard Blommers, are known to have owned works by Millet or reproductions of them.¹⁹ A photograph of the interior of Pulchri Studio around 1890 shows a commercial print of Rembrandt's *Night Watch* on the wall above a frame containing reproductions of works by Millet (fig. 3).

3. Prinsegracht 57, interior of Pulchri Studio, ca. 1890, photograph, The Hague Municipal Archive



Reproductions of this kind were mostly wood engravings for use as illustrations in publications or else photomechanical images of even poorer print quality. According to the painter and critic Willem Witsen, high-quality etchings of his work by Millet himself were scarce: 'One would be hard-pushed to claim that Millet's etchings are well known in our country. Only artists and people who truly care about fine art have occasionally had the opportunity to see them, whether here or abroad, where rare prints are cherished by refined collectors and perhaps a few art dealers, for whom they are precious merchandise.'²⁰

Matthijs Maris was the artist who looked at Millet's work most literally. He made a print in drypoint and etching based on Millet's lithograph after his iconic painting *The Sower* (fig. 4). In the course of several letters, Maris offered a detailed description of the creative process and his struggle to express the character of the artist in the print: 'to make a Millet. Not the painting, but the man himself.'²¹

19. Respectively Emke Raassen-Kruimel, 'Mauve en de schilders van Laren', in De Bodt and Plomp 2009 (note 1), p. 112; The Hague 1892 (note 1), p. 11; Theo de Veer, 'Van een schildersleven', *Elsevier's geïllustreerd maandschrift* 16 (1906), p. 147.

20. 'Men zal moeielijk kunnen beweren dat de etsen van Millet in ons land zeer bekend zijn. Alleen artiesten en menschen die wezenlijk om mooie kunst geven, zijn soms in de gelegenheid geweest ze te zien; hetzij in het buitenland, hetzij hier, waar schaarsche afdrukken met zorg bewaard worden door geraffineerde verzamelaars en misschien enkele kunstkoopers, voor wie ze precieuse koopwaren zijn.' Verberchem [pseudonym of Willem Witsen], 'Kunst.', *De Nieuwe Gids* 3 (1888) Vol. 2, p. 428.

21. '[...] een Millet te maken. Niet het schilderij, maar de man himself.' Matthijs Maris to Philip Zilcken, 04-01-1892, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, RP-D-1982-43-MARIS(MATTHIJS)-1C-2E; Bionda 2017 (note 1), p. 211.

4. Matthijs Maris, *The Sower (after Millet)*, 1882, etching and drypoint on paper, 77.2 x 56.2 cm / 50.5 x 40.5 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam



He was far from satisfied with the result: printing on a large press did not go according to plan and he felt that the finished print was ‘not for the market’.²² The critic and artist Jan Veth, by contrast, wrote glowingly of Maris’s copy after Millet’s *Sower*: ‘It is wrong to view this etching as a perfect reproduction of the painting. It is more than that. It presents Millet as Maris feels Millet’s work. It is Millet *plus* Maris. It is no longer just Millet’s “Sower”, one should speak instead of “*Thijs Maris’ Sower*”.’²³ All the same, Maris had a clear opinion about reproductions too: ‘I wish they w[oul]d stop reproducing pictures, reproductions as a rule are bad, are for no good to the public, besides painters themselves don’t like seeing their doings turned into public property. I feel sure if Millet ’d come to life again, he w[oul]d tear them all up’.²⁴ This is a striking opinion at a time when reproductions were an important source of knowledge and especially when expressed by someone who had himself made a copy after a print. First and foremost, however, it was presumably intended as an indictment of the poor quality of such prints and a plea in favour of the original.

22. Matthijs Maris to Pieter Haverkorn van Rijsewijk, 1883-1915, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, RP-D-M.MARIS-24, 24Ac. ‘not for the market’ was what he told Van Wisselingh on giving him a print.

23. ‘Men doet verkeerd deze ets als de volmaakte reproductie van het schilderij te beschouwen. Zij is meer dan dat, zij geeft Millet, zooals Maris Millets werk voelt. Het is Millet plus Maris. Het is niet meer alleen de ‘Zaaier’ van Millet. Men behoort te spreken van den ‘Zaaier’ van Thijs Maris.’ S. [J. Staphorst, pseudonym of Jan Veth], ‘Schilderkunst.’, *De Nieuwe Gids* 2 (1887) Vol. 1, p. 464.

24. Matthijs Maris to Felix Stone Moscheles and Mrs Moscheles, 1888-1906, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, RP-D-1988-1-1, 5Cb.

Put into words

For the most part, the artists associated with the Hague School were not great letter-writers, which means there is little by way of correspondence in which they refer to Millet's importance to their art. Aside from Maris, Adolphe Artz was an exception in this regard. Shortly after visiting the 1867 World Exposition in Paris, he wrote to his patron Johannes Kneppelhout: 'I have not encountered any famous painters here, but when I return I will spend a few hours in Barbizon and try to pay Millet a visit. I do not know if you are familiar with his work. It is a bit like Jules Breton, and I like it very much.'²⁵

The Tachtigers, by contrast, a younger generation of progressive writers and artists, were clear in their acknowledgement of Millet's influence on their own work and that of the Hague School artists. Willem Witsen visited the major Millet exhibition in Paris in 1887 and wrote an article praising it in the movement's journal, *De Nieuwe Gids*.²⁶ He also kept up a lively correspondence with friends like the artists Jacobus van Looy and Jan Veth and the poet Albert Verwey, in which he regularly praised Millet's work and did not begrudge the Frenchman his influence: 'Yes, it's in demand, that painting, but does that make it any less original? Is there something in it from another? Does it resemble Millet, by chance, in the eyes of the public? I don't really care, anyway. I just wish I could get some money for it instead!'²⁷

Millet's influence on the Hague School

Other artists associated with the Hague School did not make copies after Millet's work, but his modern formal idiom nevertheless guided their style and compositions. Millet depicted large peasant figures in the landscape and did not, as a rule, work out his backgrounds in great detail, as naturalist peasant painters did. In many cases, the only thing visible in the distance of his landscapes is an unidentifiable church tower or the suggestion of another scene with people labouring on the land. Millet's compositions are radical not only because of these imposing figures, but also for the swathes of canvas that focus entirely on the roughly turned earth.²⁸ Several of Anton Mauve's works include these typical Millet elements, which he must have known primarily from reproductions. The rural workers in his watercolour *Potato Diggers* form compact volumes through their bent-over postures, with ample space left for the land around them (fig. 5). Mauve's ambition was to submit a large painting on this theme to the 1888 Paris Salon, but he died prematurely.²⁹

Millet was seen by the Hague School painters not only as a stylistic model, but above all as a leader who depicted the onerous labour of the countryside and the domestic life surrounding it with a dignity that ran counter to the prevailing tradition. The same goal was taken up by many Dutch artists, who chose everyday rural life as their theme.

25. 'Schilders van naam heb ik hier niet ontmoet, maar in het terug keren zal ik een paar uren in Barbizon blijven en trachten een visite te maken bij Millet, ik weet niet of u zijn werk kent het is een beetje als Jules Breton, en ik houd er zeer veel van.' Adolphe Artz to Johannes Kneppelhout, 10-07-1867, cited in De Liefde-van Brakel 2001 (note 1), p. 22.

26. W.J. van Westervoerde [pseudonym of Willem Witsen], 'Kunst. J-F. Millet.', *De Nieuwe Gids* 2 (1887) Vol. 2, pp. 425-431.

27. 'ja 't is gewild dat schilderij, - maar vindt je 't daarom minder origineel? Is er iets in van 'n ander? lijkt 't bij geval weer op Millet in de oogen van publiek? Enfin, 't kan me niets schelen, hoor alleen wou 'k maar dat 'k er wat geld voor in de plaats kon krijgen!' Willem Witsen to Albert Verwey, 08-11-1888. Amsterdam University Library, XLI B, 18011.

28. Kelly 2019 (note 4).

29. Anton Mauve to his dealer Arnold & Tripp, cited in Raassen-Kruimel 2009 (note 19), p. 114.

5. Anton Mauve, *Potato Diggers*, ca. 1887-1888, watercolour on paper, 34 x 45.8 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (Gift of Mr and Mrs Drucker-Fraser, Montreux)



Many of them, including Israëls and Mauve, were probably motivated by commercial considerations too, as images of this kind were attractive to city people and hence readily sellable.³⁰ The Dutch omitted the political edge found in Millet's work, possibly for the same reason, although this generation was much less concerned about such matters in general.

What's more, there was less interest in and a smaller market for religious scenes in the predominantly Protestant Netherlands than there was in Catholic France. Religion is often present implicitly in Millet's work - his allusions to the Parable of the Sower, for instance - but also more literally, as in *The Angelus*. One powerful Dutch exception is Jozef Israëls' painting *The Shepherd's Prayer*, which offers the same kind of gratitude for the blessings of the land as is found in Millet (fig. 6).

6. Jozef Israëls, *The Shepherd's Prayer*, 1864, oil on canvas, 90.3 x 125.5 cm, Toledo Museum of Art (Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey)



³⁰ Dieuwertje Dekkers, 'Jozef Israëls en Millet', in Sillevius and Kraan 1985 (note 10), p. 110, Raassen-Kruimel 2009 (note 19), p. 114.

Israëls was referred to as ‘the Dutch Millet’ in the 1890s.³¹ At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, critics like Veth and, to a lesser extent, Max Eisler played down the French peasant painter’s influence on Israëls, probably for fear of casting doubt on the latter’s originality.³² The current view is that Millet’s influence can indeed be detected in Israëls’ choice of themes and above all in the composition and poses of his figures.³³

A clear difference also exists between Millet’s interpretation of his material and that of the Hague School artists for whom he was an example. The infinite gaze of the figures in Millet’s work (the women especially) lends them something incorporeal and timeless. The Hague School artists, by contrast, offer a more realistic representation of flesh-and-blood people in a specific setting, rendering the harsh life they depict more individual and sentimental. Israëls himself reportedly commented in this regard: ‘unlike Millet, the expression, what is going on inside, is almost everything to me; this might be because I feel more deeply with my people and seek to approach them more closely. And once I have achieved that, my efforts are focused entirely on the faithful, life-breathing expression of emotion. [...] that is what I wish to attain above all else. It is a question to me of the genuine expression of emotion.’³⁴ This difference in approach is apparent on comparison of Israëls’ *The Cottage Madonna* with Millet’s *The Baby’s Cereal (La Bouillie)*, which the Dutchman will have known from an illustration in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (figs. 7 and 8).³⁵

7. Jozef Israëls, *The Cottage Madonna*, ca. 1867, oil on canvas
134.6 x 99.7 cm, Detroit
Institute of Arts (Bequest of
Nell Ford Torrey)



31. See, for example, Anonymous, ‘Kunst en letteren’, *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 04-10-1890, p. 1.
32. Max Eisler, ‘J.F. Millet en J. Israëls’, *Onze kunst*, 10 (1911) 10, pp. 117-128; Jan Veth, ‘Eenzelfde compositie bij Jozef Israëls en bij Millet’, *Onze kunst* 21 (1912), pp. 41-48.
33. Dekkers 1985 (note 32), pp. 105-111. Examples of works that are clearly inspired in this way include *The Cottage Madonna* and *The Shepherd’s Prayer*, which are also discussed below.
34. ‘anders dan bij Millet is voor mij de uitdrukking, het innerlijk gebeuren bijna alles, dat komt misschien daardoor dat ik met mijn menschen inniger meeleeft en er naar streeft om dichter tot ze te naderen. En ben ik eenmaal zoover, dan is mijn geheele streven slechts op de echte, leven ademende uitdrukking van gevoel gericht. [...] dat is wat ik vóór alles bereiken wil, op de echte uitdrukking van het gevoel komt ‘t me aan.’ Eisler 1911 (note 34), pp. 126-127.
35. Philippe Burty, ‘Les eaux-fortes de M. J.-F. Millet’, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 11 (1861), p. 267.

8. Jean-François Millet, *The Baby's Cereal (La Bouillie)*, 1861, oil on canvas, 116 x 100 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Marseille



It ought not to be forgotten, particularly in the case of interior paintings like this, that both Millet and many of the Hague School artists looked back to the scenes painted by seventeenth-century Dutch masters like Nicolaes Maes and Pieter de Hooch, and to Rembrandt's intimate choice of subject matter. There are traces in Millet's work of the compositions of Jan Luyken too and of particular peasant figures from Pieter Bruegel the Elder. For Millet, the everyday realism of the Old Masters offered a solid foundation on which to build and in which to seek a more radical, less anecdotal form.³⁶ In turn, the artists of the Hague School probably felt an extra attraction because of the 'Dutch' character of French art. Gerard Bilders summed this up pithily after seeing paintings by Barbizon artists, including Millet, at the Exposition générale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in 1860: 'I am very French, yet [...] precisely because I am very French, I am very Dutch too, since today's great Frenchmen and the great Dutchmen of yesteryear have a great deal in common.'³⁷

36. Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, *French Realism and the Dutch Masters*, Utrecht 1974, pp. 37-39; Johanna Ruth Epstein, 'Incapable of that Sort of Thing: Millet's Dutch sources', *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish art* 5 (2013) 2; Robert Herbert, 'City vs. Country: The Rural Image in French Painting from Millet to Gauguin', in Robert L. Herbert, *From Millet to Léger: Essays in Social Art History*, New Haven 2002, p. 40.

37. 'Ik ben nu dus goed Fransch, maar [...] juist door goed Fransch te zijn ben ik goed Hollandsch, dewijl de groote Franschen van tegenwoordig en de groote Hollanders van voorheen veel met elkander gemeen hebben.' Gerard Bilders to Johannes Kneppelhout, 28-09-1860, quoted in Wiepke Loos, *Gekleurd grijs. Johannes Kneppelhout (1814-1885) en Gerard Bilders (1838-1865). Brieven en dagboek*, Zwolle 2009, p. 270.

Mauve's *Woman Carding Flax* also immediately recalls Millet's example, but once again is a more concrete representation than the French artist's almost incorporeal *Woman Carding Wool* (figs. 9 and 10). It was done in the period between 1884 and 1888, when Mauve worked a great deal with Witsen at the Ewijkshoeve country house near Lage Vuursche. They plainly shared an interest in Millet, as they both chose subjects at the time such as potato grubbers and sheaf binders.³⁸ Millet's influence on the work of the painters Witsen, Van Looy and Jan Toorop goes beyond the scope of this article, while the admiration for the Frenchman that was famously held by their contemporary Vincent van Gogh, who was closely associated with the Hague School at the start of his career, is a story in itself.³⁹ It is clear, nevertheless, that Millet's inspiration did not cease after the artists of the Hague School.⁴⁰

9. Anton Mauve, *Woman Carding Flax*, ca. 1885-1887, oil on canvas on panel, 43 x 32 cm, The Mesdag Collection, The Hague



38. Raassen-Kruimel 2009 (note 19), pp. 114, 120; Moniek Peters, 'Was Witsen een typische schilder van Tachtig? Stijlontwikkeling en plaatsbepaling', in Irene M. de Groot *et al.*, *Willem Witsen 1860-1923. Schilderijen, tekeningen, prenten, foto's*, Bussum 2003, pp. 75-80.

39. See Louis van Tilborgh (ed.), *Van Gogh & Millet*, exhibition catalogue Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam 1988.

40. See in this regard Van Dijk and Kelly 2019 (note 4).

10. Jean-François Millet, *Woman Carding Wool*, 1856, oil on canvas, 89.5 x 56 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (gift of J.H. van Eeghen, Amsterdam)



Millet's name and work were firmly established in the Netherlands in the final two decades of the nineteenth century. His images of sowers, carders and peasant women were widely known through original works but even more so from prints and reproductions. The Frenchman's rural themes and his dignified representation of the people featured in them clearly found fertile soil among the members of the Hague School. While the Dutch artists heightened the individual feel of their work, frequently downplaying the social or religious element as a result, this in no way diminished their adherence to Millet's views on art.

“There was a body of painters, writers, artists in short, who were united despite their divisions, and formed one force. [...] I’m speaking of the time when Millet, Daubigny, Jacque, Breton were young, in Holland Israëls, Mauve, Maris &c. One thing reinforced the other, it was powerful and noble.”

Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo, The Hague 1882

Curator Renske Suijver wrote this article at the occasion of the exhibition *Jean-François Millet and the Hague School* in The Mesdag Collection (13 September 2019 - 5 January 2020).

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