

Audio Guide Transcript

***Millet and Modern Art:
From Van Gogh to Dalí***

February 16, 2020–May 17, 2020
Main Exhibition Galleries

SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

Introduction to Millet and Modern Art: From Van Gogh to Dalí

Speaker: Brent Benjamin
Barbara B. Taylor Director
Saint Louis Art Museum

Hello, I'm Brent Benjamin, Barbara B. Taylor Director of the Saint Louis Art Museum. Welcome to *Millet and Modern Art: From Van Gogh to Dalí*. The exhibition considers the artistic legacy of Jean-François Millet, a successful realist painter in the 19th century whose work subsequently inspired some of the most prominent names in Modern art. This audio guide offers expert commentary about 15 works of art by Millet and his successors, including Vincent van Gogh, Winslow Homer, and Edgar Degas. Each featured object can be located by following the floorplan on this web page or by identifying the audio icon on the object's label.

Throughout the galleries, you will hear from Simon Kelly, curator of modern and contemporary art; Abigail Yoder, research assistant; Sophie Barbisan, assistant paper conservator; and Amy Torbert, assistant curator of American art, all at the Saint Louis Art Museum. Together they share insights into Millet's life and work, draw comparisons between Millet's art and those he influenced, and guide you as you look more closely at a variety of Modern subjects, techniques, and stylistic characteristics. I hope you enjoy this audio guide and your visit to *Millet and Modern Art: From Van Gogh to Dalí*.

STOP 1

Introduction Gallery: *A Sheepshearer*

Speaker: Simon Kelly
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art
Saint Louis Art Museum

Hello, I'm Simon Kelly, curator of modern and contemporary art and curator of this exhibition.

This opening group of pictures by Jean-François Millet provides an introduction into the world of the artist and is anchored by the large-scale painting *A Sheepshearer*. Millet here shows a peasant woman intently focused on trimming wool from a sheep using delicately painted pale blue shears. In so doing, he highlighted the importance of women's labor to the rural communities of France. The man who holds down the sheep, in contrast, is placed in the background, with his face in shadow and his features radically abstracted and barely readable. At a time of rapid industrialization, Millet evoked a world of age-old customs and peasant rituals. Yet he represented such subjects in a path-breaking manner, giving dignity to a peasant class who had often been historically marginalized.

Alongside this picture is *Waiting*, another peasant scene. Here Millet's radicalism lies in his willingness to situate a biblical story from the Book of Tobit in a rural French village rather than the conventional, idealized setting in the Middle East. The aged parents Anna and Tobit anxiously await the return of their son, Tobias. The blind Tobit stumbles out of the cottage while Anna looks into the distance. Critics attacked Millet for not giving sufficient respect to the biblical story and representing his peasants with too much realism. One critic said that the peasants seemed to be waiting for a stagecoach at Barbizon. An interesting detail in the picture is the cat on the stone bench. Millet loved cats and often represented them in his pictures. Here the cat is probably yawning and arching its back after an afternoon nap, but it could be hissing at an unidentified object outside the picture space. Both *A Sheepshearer* and *Waiting* were shown at the 1861 Salon, the state-sponsored exhibition of contemporary art in Paris, and are important examples of Millet's exhibition pictures.

Millet was also a significant landscape painter. *The Church at Gréville*, alongside, was among the best-known of Millet's pictures in the 19th century, since it was acquired by the French state at the artist's studio sale in 1875. It hung in the Luxembourg Museum, the museum of contemporary art in Paris, where it was seen by visitors from all around the world. We know that the important Modernist Paul Cézanne was interested in this picture and owned a photograph of it.

STOP 2

Rural Labor in France: *The Sower*

Speaker: Simon Kelly
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art
Saint Louis Art Museum

Of all the artists in this exhibition, it is Vincent van Gogh who was most intensely devoted to the work of Millet. He saw Millet as a mentor and guide, describing him as “Father Millet,” and he considered that Millet had originated a tradition of modern art that focused on the importance of rural life, as opposed to the painting of cities. One of Van Gogh’s favorite themes in Millet’s work was the sower. Van Gogh represented this subject in more than 30 paintings and drawings. The picture in front of you, *The Sower*, is one of Van Gogh’s most well-known and iconic treatments of the theme. It was painted in Arles in the South of France in November 1888. Although Van Gogh idolized Millet, he was not afraid to challenge and modernize the work of the elder artist. He did this principally through color. At one point, indeed, he referred to Millet’s palette as “colorless,” and he sought to develop a bolder color palette. Here he has used intense yellows for the sky and setting sun, and these serve as a complementary color to the shades of violet in the fields. Van Gogh’s work was also radical in its composition, as he cropped the forms of the sower and the tree, creating a highly abstract effect that was probably informed by his interest in the work of Gauguin and Japanese prints. The sower is faceless as an example of what Van Gogh called “the type distilled from many individuals.” Like Millet, Van Gogh also shared an interest in the biblical connotations of the sower, and here he wreathed the sower’s head in a halo created by the citron yellow sun behind.

Alongside is an earlier and larger painting by Van Gogh of the sower theme in which he represents a more expansive field with a smaller sower in the middle distance. The jewel-like picture in front of you, although smaller in size, represents the subsequent culmination of his treatment of the sower theme.

STOP 3

Rural Labor in France: *In the Rice Fields*

Speaker: Abigail Yoder
Research Assistant
Saint Louis Art Museum

I'm Abby Yoder, and I'm a research assistant in modern and contemporary art at the Saint Louis Art Museum.

This impressive painting by Italian artist Angelo Morbelli comes from a series of pictures he made depicting laborers in the rice fields of his native Piedmont. The image illustrates a group of *mondine*—women who pulled weeds from the rice paddies. Working conditions for these women were notoriously terrible. They would spend as much as eight hours a day in the summer, knee-deep in muddy water, hunching over to pull small plants from the fields. In addition to working all day in the hot summer sun, the women were forbidden from talking to each other while working and had to contend with malaria-carrying mosquitoes.

Morbelli had great sympathy for the working class and often emphasized the squalid conditions in which these people lived and worked in his paintings. In this work he highlighted the vast expanse of the rice field, which extends far into the background, with a long line of *mondine*. This line of bending women is broken by a single worker who stands upright for a moment to rest before returning to her backbreaking labor. While he concentrated on this sympathetic view of the working women, he also experimented with new Modernist painting techniques. He used a pure, unmixed application of color inspired by the French Divisionist (or Pointillist) artists such as Georges Seurat and Paul Signac. In fact, for Morbelli and many of his contemporaries, it was equally important to achieve harmony of color and form as well as to engage with social issues. The resulting image here is beautifully vibrant and luminous, juxtaposing the aesthetic quality of the painting and its more pointedly sociopolitical content.

Visually and thematically, Morbelli's painting relates to earlier works by Millet, particularly his series of gleaning women, such as *Summer, The Gleaners*, on view on the wall behind you. Millet, too, was sensitive to the plight of peasant workers during his lifetime and focused his attention on their difficult labor in the fields of Barbizon.

Gleaners were women who would scour the fields following the harvest to pick up any remaining pieces of wheat. It was intense work that forced them to be hunched over for long periods of time. Millet's images of gleaners had become well known throughout Europe by the beginning of the 1900s, when *In the Rice Fields* was painted, and it is possible that in this painting, Morbelli was also responding to Millet's depictions of peasants from decades earlier.

STOP 4

Laborers at Rest: *The Bright Side*

Speaker: Amy Torbert
Assistant Curator of American Art
Saint Louis Art Museum

Hello, I'm Amy Torbert, the assistant curator of American art at the Saint Louis Art Museum.

The Bright Side, painted in 1865 by the American artist Winslow Homer, offers a glimpse of daily life in a camp during the Civil War. Four weary men rest against the sunny, or bright, side of their tent while a fifth pokes his head out and stares directly at us. Though dressed primarily in civilian clothing, these five African American men served in the Union Army as teamsters. It's likely that they've been up all night, risking their lives to drive the mules and wagons seen behind them to a new campsite within Confederate territory.

Winslow Homer experienced the war firsthand while he was embedded in the Union Army for nearly a year as an artist correspondent for a weekly news magazine. He asserted that he had encountered this exact scene at a camp in Virginia and painted it from memory. But take a glance in the nearby case at Millet's print *Midday*. The similarity between the two works of art suggests that Homer's memory was not the only source he consulted to compose this painting. Throughout his career Millet's works served as a touchstone for Homer, who also sought to explore the human condition and emphasize its relationship to nature. Homer first encountered the French artist's work in Boston, which was mad for Millet in the 1850s. Over the next four decades of Homer's career, echoes of Millet's monumental figures appeared repeatedly in his paintings.

Despite its small size, *The Bright Side* had a colossal effect on Homer's early career. When it was first exhibited in 1865, the painting was universally applauded by critics. It was also nearly universally deemed a humorous picture. Does this painting strike you as funny? Nineteenth-century critics found it humorous because of racist stereotypes that mocked African American men for their perceived laziness or equated their temperaments to those of mules. As a man of his time and culture, Homer could not have been unaware of this potential interpretation of the painting—perhaps he even

encouraged it, hoping this humor would increase its popularity. But he also paid specific attention to distinguishing the five figures from one another and investing each with a sense of self-possession and dignity.

Today, with this so-called humor drained from the painting, its power endures because of the care Homer took to paint these men as individuals and not as stereotypes or caricatures. Created at the end of the Civil War, *The Bright Side* alludes to the uncertainty that many Americans felt about prospects for an integrated society. Millet's observations of daily, ordinary life might have provided the structure for Homer's painting, but in replacing French peasants with African Americans, Homer encapsulated the most serious issues facing all Americans in the 1860s.

STOP 5

Laborers at Rest: *The Knitting Shepherdess*

Speaker: Sophie Barbisan
Assistant Paper Conservator
Saint Louis Art Museum

Hello, my name is Sophie Barbisan. As the assistant paper conservator for the Saint Louis Art Museum, I would like to bring your attention to the material aspect of art. You are currently in front of a pastel by Jean-François Millet. This technique is characterized by its powdery appearance. You will notice in the following galleries that there are a number of pastels and drawings in this show. This is a rare opportunity to see so many, because pastels are very fragile and seldom travel.

The term *pastels* refers both to the artwork and to the sticks that are used to make the art. Pastels are made with ground pigments or colorants mixed with fillers and held together with a small quantity of binder. Fillers generally consist of chalk or plaster of paris. The type of binder may vary but is often a vegetable gum such as gum arabic, a hardened sap from the acacia tree. Because pastels enable atmospheric effects in drawings, it became a popular medium.

This work, *The Knitting Shepherdess*, dates to the mid-1850s. The artist became more prolific in this technique in the years 1860–1865. His pursuit of this medium was primarily encouraged by two collectors: the civil servant Alfred Sensier and the architect Émile Gavet. Millet produced pastels mostly for Émile Gavet, who, in exchange, provided him with a monthly stipend and art supplies.

Because the amount of binder in pastels is very small, adhesion of the pigments to the paper is purely mechanical. This is why Millet used a highly textured paper here. The artist did not use a stump, a pencil-like tool made of tightly rolled paper that is used to blend pastel layers together. Instead, he is crosshatching and layering strokes, such as you can see in the background of the artwork. The figure of the shepherdess shows areas of flat color with a strong outline of black crayon. You will also notice that the paper, which was originally blue, has discolored to gray. This is an example of how artworks on paper can be affected by light. Because they are so sensitive, they receive lower light levels when they are exhibited. After being shown for a few months, they will have to

rest in the dark, in storage, for several years.

Speaker: Abigail Yoder
Research Assistant
Saint Louis Art Museum

Even more so than his paintings, Millet's pastels and drawings were highly influential to later artists, and they clearly showed his more radical stylistic innovations. His technique of layering pastel pigments often resulted in flattened areas of color, as seen here in the shepherdess's cloak and headscarf. If you look closely at the drawing, you can also see dark outlines around the shepherdess and the sheep behind her. This effect flattens the figures even more, making them look like decorative patterns on the surface of the paper rather than full, three-dimensional forms.

Millet's technique here relates to a painting style adopted by the Postimpressionists in the 1880s and 1890s known as Cloissonism. This style is made up of flat areas of vibrant color surrounded by bold, dark outlines, inspired by stained-glass and enameling techniques. Two prominent artists of the Pont-Aven school, Émile Bernard and Paul Gauguin, frequently used this style to depict peasant life in Brittany in the northwest part of France. This can be seen in Gauguin's painting *The Breton Shepherdess*, on the wall to your right. Gauguin admired Millet and often depicted similar subjects, such as, in this case, a shepherdess with her flock. You can also see Gauguin's use of heavy outlines around the forms and his application of bright colors, which creates an overall flattening effect reminiscent of Millet's drawing technique.

STOP 6

Millet and Van Gogh: *Evening: The Watch (after Millet)*

Speaker: Abigail Yoder
Research Assistant
Saint Louis Art Museum

The painting in front of you is Vincent van Gogh's *Evening: The Watch*, from 1889. It is based on the print *Night*, seen on your right, from a series of wood engravings called *The Four Times of Day*. Millet designed the images for this print series, depicting various peasant activities throughout the day: in the morning, they would leave for the fields; at midday, they would take their *sieste*; at dusk, they would depart from the fields; and at nighttime, they often continued to work, doing household labor by candlelight. Millet's designs were then made into prints by the engraver Jacques-Adrien Lavieille, who published them as a set. Van Gogh owned copies of these prints and, following his breakdown and hospitalization in 1889, used them as models to reintroduce himself to painting. Between the autumn and winter of that year, he made 20 paintings after Millet's designs, including this one and several others you see on the walls in this gallery.

Van Gogh had made copies after prints earlier in his career, but this was the first time he had attempted to translate the black-and-white printed image into color. To do so, he often relied on his memories of the older artist's works but added his own interpretation as well. In this painted version of *Evening*, he carefully selected a color palette that would suggest nighttime effects, using violet, green, and ocher to illustrate the dramatic shadows cast by the bright yellow candlelight.

Van Gogh's interpretations of Millet's prints were ambitious for their scale as well. As you can see, the print is quite small compared to the size of the painting. Van Gogh's earlier attempts at copying prints had been done on smaller canvases as he worked to regain his artistic confidence following his hospitalization. As he grew surer of himself, he requested larger canvases from his brother, Theo, and carefully translated the smaller printed image to a much larger scale.

Van Gogh considered *Evening* and his other paintings after Millet's *Four Times of Day* to be works of art in their own right. He wrote to Theo, "It seems to me that

doing painting after these Millet drawings is much rather to translate them into another language than to copy them. . . .” Theo agreed, saying: “Copied like that, it’s no longer a copy. There’s a tone in it, and everything is so harmonious. It’s really very successful.”

STOP 7

Millet and Van Gogh: *Starry Night* and *Starry Night*

Speaker: Simon Kelly
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art
Saint Louis Art Museum

Vincent van Gogh's iconic painting *Starry Night* has been exceptionally lent to this exhibition by the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. The picture was painted in the South of France and represents a view across the river Rhône toward the twinkling lights of the town of Arles on the far bank. Van Gogh painted the picture outdoors, placing his easel by the riverbank and painting under artificial gaslight. There is a popular myth that he wore a hat circled with candles, but there is no evidence to back this up.

Van Gogh, whose letters are among the most fascinating written by any artist, provided a detailed description of this picture. He wrote: "The sky is bluish green, the water is royal blue, the earth is mauve. The city is mauve and violet. The gaslight is yellow, and the reflections are reddish gold fading into bronze-green. On the bluish-green field of the sky, the Great Bear, twinkling in green and pink, its modest glow contrasting with the strong gold of the gaslight. Two colorful little figures of lovers in the foreground." Van Gogh's evocative words highlight his nuanced attention to color in his rendering of both the natural light of the stars and the artificial gaslight. This is, in fact, the only night scene by Van Gogh which represents an identifiable constellation, namely, the Big Dipper (or what Van Gogh referred to as the Great Bear), painted here in the center of the sky.

Van Gogh's interest in the night sky was inspired by the example of Millet, and to your right is Millet's carefully observed starry sky. Van Gogh and Millet shared an interest in astronomy and read popular books and articles on the subject. Millet often took night walks on the plains around his studio and wrote on one occasion: "If only you knew how beautiful the night is! There are times when I hurry out-of-doors at nightfall . . . and I always come in overwhelmed. The calm and the grandeur of it are so awesome that I feel actually afraid." Both Millet and Van Gogh also felt that the star-filled sky carried a spiritual significance.

The following year, in 1889, Van Gogh returned to the theme of the starry night in a second treatment of the subject, the well-known picture now in the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

STOP 8

Millet's Nudes: *Breakfast after the Bath*

Speaker: Simon Kelly
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art
Saint Louis Art Museum

In this large-scale pastel Degas shows a woman who bends down to dry her foot or ankle with a towel. She has just climbed out of a metal bath that is rendered in cool blue. In this quasi-abstract composition the foreground armchair creates a curving mass over which is draped the woman's dressing gown. In the background the woman's servant arrives with a cup of tea or hot chocolate. Degas repeatedly represented the female nude and once noted that "I have too often treated woman as an animal." Yet, despite the implied detachment and, indeed, misogyny of this comment, this carefully worked pastel can be seen in a more positive sense as an attempt to evoke, with some empathy, the private world and rituals of this affluent woman.

Degas produced a large number of pastels of bathers in a wide range of poses. These were undoubtedly indebted to the example of Millet's bather paintings, several of which are on view alongside. Degas owned drawings of nudes by Millet and would have known the artist's picture *The Two Bathers* that was in the Luxembourg Museum, the French museum of contemporary art. While Millet situated his bathers in rural settings, Degas moved his women into the very urban location of modern Paris.

Speaker: Sophie Barbisan
Assistant Paper Conservator
Saint Louis Art Museum

Edgar Degas's pastels are among the most technically complex artworks of the 19th century. Degas consistently experimented with the medium, which can make it a challenge for the conservator or art historian to understand how he made his art. For example, Degas would wet his pastel sticks, or steam them, to alter their colors and texture. Pastels would sometimes be crushed and mixed with casein, a milk-protein binder. The surface could be scratched or altered with a brush. Degas also experimented with the type of paper he used for his pastels. In the later part of the 19th century, tracing

paper became available to artists, and Degas enthusiastically adopted it as a support. Because the papers Degas used were thin and fragile, they were often mounted. Degas would generally develop his composition with charcoal and dark pastels. He would then take his work half-finished to his *colleur*, which means “mounter” in French. The mounter would adhere the fragile primary support to brown paperboard.

In *Breakfast after the Bath* Degas started his composition with charcoal to place the figures. He then layered pastel on top, sometimes letting the paper show through, such as in the lower left corner. Degas then reworked the outline of his composition by adding more charcoal on top of the pastel. The back of the bather was modeled by crosshatching. On the other hand, the smoothness of the pink fabric next to her was created by blending pastel layers together. The apron of the maid shows bright accents of white, likely applied with a brush.

STOP 9

Millet's Drawings and Their Legacy: *The Flight into Egypt* and *Peasants*

Speaker: Abigail Yoder
Research Assistant
Saint Louis Art Museum

Millet's skill as a draftsman is clear from this drawing depicting the Flight into Egypt. This religious image has been transformed into something of a contemporary genre scene, with peasants departing the fields at twilight, similar to many of Millet's other works from this time. This in itself made the work innovative, but Millet's radicalism comes through in his modern treatment of the forms and space. By building up pigment in certain areas while allowing the bare paper to show through in others, Millet created an array of black, white, and gray tonalities in the figures, field, water, and sky. He built up the figures in the foreground using dense crosshatching marks. Placing these darkened figures against the lighter background, the figures themselves become more like simplified, flattened silhouettes.

While many critics during Millet's lifetime criticized him for his simplification of forms, this technique was actually celebrated by numerous artists in the late 1800s. One successor to Millet's drawing style in the 1880s was Georges Seurat, who not only often used the same medium as the older artist but also chose to emphasize flat, simplified forms. His drawing *Peasants* derives from Millet in terms of subject matter, representing two peasants at work in the field. Also like Millet, he played up the contrasts of light and dark by building up pigment to form silhouettes, such as the peasant on the right, while also using the surface of the paper to create areas of light. Now Sophie will talk more about the media used in these two drawings.

Speaker: Sophie Barbisan
Assistant Paper Conservator
Saint Louis Art Museum

Both *The Flight into Egypt*, by Millet, and *Peasants*, by Georges Seurat, were executed with black media on paper. These types of drawing materials become more

difficult to identify in the 19th century. Since the 15th century charcoal and natural black chalk had prevailed. Charcoal was produced by burning vines or twigs of wood in an oxygen-free environment. Black chalk, on the other hand, is a mined material naturally rich in carbon. During the Napoleonic Wars, from 1803 until 1815, natural black chalk supplies were scarce in France. This gave the French painter and scientist Nicolas-Jacques Conté an idea. He had already invented graphite pencils in 1795 by combining graphite powder with white clay and baking it before inserting it in a wood casing. Conté then decided to repeat the same process for black chalk by combining white clay with carbon from burning oils, resins, and tar. Cooked at low temperatures, this gave the drawing material a certain softness, and thus the Conté crayon was born. The richness of the black made it especially popular among artists such as Millet and Seurat.

Millet used an array of techniques in *The Flight into Egypt*. He combined the use of black ink in order to draw precise lines with Conté crayon to achieve atmospheric effects. Seurat, on the other hand, used exclusively Conté crayon for his dark drawings, called *noirs* in French. By modulating the pressure of the crayon, Seurat could shape figures by achieving deep blacks or let the paper's surface peek through. Seurat is also well known for exclusively using a particular paper for his Conté drawings: *le papier Michallet*. Michallet paper was handmade in the small village of Saint-Mars-la-Bière in northeast France. Seurat used it exclusively because it was much cheaper than other varieties of laid paper and had an identical texture. The artist would always divide a whole sheet of Michallet paper into four smaller pieces. Like the drawing here, most of Seurat's black drawings have irregular borders and identical dimensions, usually 12 1/4 by 9 1/2 inches.

STOP 10

Rural Portraits: *Old Peasant Woman*

Speaker: Abigail Yoder
Research Assistant
Saint Louis Art Museum

This portrait by Paula Modersohn-Becker depicts a resident of Worpswede, an isolated farming community outside of Bremen, Germany. Worpswede was also home to an artists' colony whose members, including Modersohn-Becker, were inspired by Millet and his fellow Barbizon artists to paint the rural landscape and its inhabitants. We don't know this woman's identity, but she frequently sat for Modersohn-Becker and appears in other works.

While her male counterparts painted workers in the fields and scenic vistas from the surrounding hills and birch forests, Modersohn-Becker specialized in quiet subjects of everyday life. She excelled at depicting village children and the women who cared for them as complex individuals rather than generic types. This woman's plain blue dress and white cap identify her as a worker; her broad, heavy hands, which are enlarged for effect, represent a lifetime of manual labor. But in Modersohn-Becker's portrait, she sits at rest and gazes deeply into the distance with her hands crossed on her chest in an enigmatic gesture sometimes described as prayerful. The woman's mysterious pose, the yellow flower laying forgotten on her lap, and the curious leafy background are Modernist details that bring Millet's peasants into the 20th century.

Barred from the Academy because she was a woman, Modersohn-Becker frequently traveled to Paris between 1900 and 1907 to learn about the latest developments in Modern art. She wrote letters home to her husband in Worpswede filled with vivid descriptions of the art she saw. Alongside the great Postimpressionists of her day—Cézanne, Van Gogh, and especially Gauguin—she praised Millet, seeing his farms and haystacks in the French countryside and admiring his technique. After visiting Millet's Paris gallery in 1900, she described "wonderful pictures," including the "most beautiful" one of a fieldworker putting on a jacket against an evening sky. In later letters she admires the intimacy of Millet's paintings and writes in her journal: "I must strive for the utmost simplicity united with the most intimate power of observation.

That's where greatness lies." This quality of greatness in simple observation applies equally to Modersohn-Becker's best paintings, like *Old Peasant Woman* seen here, and to the Millet paintings that inspired her.

STOP 11

Millet's Landscapes and Their Impact: *Spring* and *After a Summer Shower*

Speaker: Simon Kelly
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art
Saint Louis Art Museum

In the final decade of his life, Millet focused increasingly on landscape painting. *Spring* is among the most successful and ambitious of his late landscapes. Millet represents a scene at Barbizon, focusing on the lush, verdant foliage in bloom. A single figure shelters beneath a tree from a passing shower. On the foreground path, Millet picks out those natural details that he loved to paint. To the right are tiny yellow dandelions.

Millet worked on *Spring* over five years, from March 1868 until May 1873. Despite this long process, he managed to evoke a sense of the captured moment, particularly in the imaging of the pair of rainbows at back left. Millet shared this interest in the capturing of transient light effects with his close landscape painter friend Théodore Rousseau as well as the younger generation of the Impressionists who painted around Barbizon in the 1860s.

Spring is the first in his *Four Seasons* series, a group of four paintings that was produced for Millet's Alsatian patron, Frédéric Hartmann. Hartmann's widow gifted it to the French state in 1887, ensuring that it was on view at the Luxembourg Museum, where it became among Millet's best-known images.

Speaker: Amy Torbert
Assistant Curator of American Art
Saint Louis Art Museum

The American artist George Inness deeply admired Millet, calling him "one of those artistic angels whose aim was to represent pure and holy sentiments." When Inness began to paint *After a Summer Shower* in the last year of his life, he turned to Millet one final time, as he had done so frequently over the course of his career. This

time, he recalled Millet's *Spring*, a work that the French artist had painted close to the end of his own life two decades earlier.

These two late, great landscapes rhyme visually, with the forms of one reflected in the shapes of the other. They also share symbolic meanings: a storm has passed, leaving a transformed and glorious world, verdant and lush with the signs of rebirth and renewal.

For Inness, a painting was not a record of physical vision, but the means to suggest a spiritual understanding of nature. As he remarked shortly before his death, "People ask why I keep on, old as I am—for I am 70—and I say, Simply because of a principle beyond me that goes on outside of me in developing higher and higher forms of truth."

STOP 12

Millet's Landscapes and Their Impact: *The Gorge at Varengeville*

Speaker: Simon Kelly
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art
Saint Louis Art Museum

Like Millet, Claude Monet came from Normandy, and both men felt a deep attachment to the sea. Monet even noted at one point that he would like to be buried at sea. This picture represents the rugged coastline at Varengeville on the Normandy coast in the north of France. On a bright, sunny day, Monet depicts the illuminated cliffs and the shadowed sides of a gorge that cuts through the cliff face. Perched on the cliff is a customhouse, built in the early 19th century to monitor shipping off the coast of France. By the time of Monet's painting, it was used by fishermen to store their nets and supplies. The cottage offers a sign of human presence in the landscape and formally provides an accent of red as a complementary to the dominant green of the composition.

Monet later reminisced about Millet that "I admired him so much." He remembered seeing Millet at a party as a young man and was too nervous to approach him because of the elder artist's reputation for being aloof and reserved. The plunging perspective and high horizon of *Gorge at Varengeville* is indebted to Millet's marine imagery, which Monet would have known well. A major example of Millet's marine painting, *The Cliffs of Gréville*, hangs alongside. Monet, however, used blonder, brighter colors, eliminating the bituminous, earthy tones favored by Millet.

Monet's interest in Millet continued into the 1890s in his famous *Haystack* series, an example of which also hangs close by. Monet here updated Millet's longtime fascination with the subject of the haystack but focused more intently on varied light and atmospheric effects.

STOP 13

The Angelus: *The Angelus*

Speaker: Simon Kelly
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art
Saint Louis Art Museum

The Angelus is arguably Millet's best-known painting and is an exceptional loan from the Musée d'Orsay. Millet here represented a scene during the potato harvest. A peasant man and woman have taken a break from their labor. A fork is to one side, and a wheelbarrow is behind, with bags of harvested potatoes. The two peasants pray in response to the sound of bells from the church spire in the distance. This is in many ways a painting about sound—one has to imagine the bells carrying across the Barbizon fields as a kind of call to prayer. The woman bends her head, praying intently, but the man's devotion is a little less clear, as he seems to twist his hat between his fingers. They recite the Angelus prayer, a Catholic devotion commemorating the Incarnation, when the angel Gabriel revealed to the Virgin Mary that she would conceive the baby Jesus. We may imagine that the two peasants whisper the opening words of the prayer, "*Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariae*" (The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary).

In the days before wristwatches, the Angelus bell, which was rung three times a day, at morning, noon, and dusk, provided an important way of regulating time for rural workers. Here it is dusk, and the setting sun throws pink light onto the underside of the clouds. Millet's figures are silhouetted against the light and strongly outlined, and thus abstracted and generalized. As such they seem to represent types of the French peasant rather than individuals.

In the late 19th century *The Angelus* came to symbolize the piety and devotion to labor of the French rural working population as well as the fecundity of the land in a nation that was still predominantly agricultural. This was also a painting that made people cry because of its intense emotion. In 1889 the Impressionist Camille Pissarro visited the World's Fair in Paris, where he met a friend who had been reduced to tears by the picture. For the atheist Pissarro, however, *The Angelus* was too sentimental and mawkish an image. This is an idea that has continued into the early 20th century in Modernist readings of Millet's work. It shouldn't, however, blind us to the iconic nature

of *The Angelus* image, which has been endlessly reproduced in prints and photographs and has become a part of popular culture in France and around the world. As can be seen in this gallery, it impacted a wide and international range of artists.

STOP 14

The Angelus: *Planting Potatoes*

Speaker: Simon Kelly
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art
Saint Louis Art Museum

Planting Potatoes is an ambitious work by the avant-garde painter, costume designer, and writer Natalia Goncharova, a leading artist in early 20th-century Russia. Goncharova grew up in the countryside on her family's estate in Tula province, some 200 miles from Moscow. As a result, she was intimately acquainted with peasant culture and sometimes wore peasant costume herself. *Planting Potatoes* was based on her observations of peasants firsthand during her frequent trips back to her family home. Goncharova once wrote, "I loved the countryside all my life, but I live in a city."

In her early career Goncharova repeatedly focused on rural subjects such as harvesting, gathering firewood, apple picking, and reaping. Despite the title of this painting, the scene seems to represent a potato harvest. To the left, a woman looks out directly at the viewer as another is about to pour a basket of potatoes into a sack. Alongside, two women bend over to dig up potatoes.

Goncharova tapped into the potato harvest theme that had been frequently treated by Millet, most notably in *The Angelus*. Millet's paintings were regularly exhibited in Russia in the late 19th century and early 20th century and would have been known by Goncharova. She, however, updated Millet's work. This picture highlights her innovative approach of bold, angular outlines and bright, flat color, both in the forms of the peasants and the geometrical patterning of the sky. The picture also suggests Goncharova's awareness of the Cubist technique of the faceting of forms. She noted modestly, "In France, Picasso is the foremost talented artist working in the Cubist manner; in Russia, it is your humble servant." *Planting Potatoes* thus speaks to the modernizing of Millet's work in the most innovative avant-garde artistic technique of the early 20th century.

STOP 15

The Angelus: *Meditation on the Harp*

Speaker: Abigail Yoder
Research Assistant
Saint Louis Art Museum

Salvador Dalí first encountered a picture of Millet's famous painting *The Angelus* as a small child. According to him, he promptly forgot about it entirely until 1932, when a sudden mental image of the painting reappeared to him without warning. This brought about Dalí's intense obsession with Millet's picture, both in his own paintings and his writings, including a manuscript called *The Tragic Myth of Millet's "Angelus."* Describing his vision of *The Angelus*, he referred to it as "the most troubling of pictorial works, the most enigmatic, the most dense, the richest in unconscious thought that had ever existed." Analyzing the painting based on what he called "delirious phenomena," including his own fantasies and references to the painting in popular culture, Dalí constructed a new symbolic interpretation of *The Angelus*. Rather than being an image of piety, Dalí argued that the painting's content was full of sexual aggression, incest, and death. According to this interpretation, Millet's peasant couple was mourning the death of their son. The woman is slightly larger than the man, and her bowed head suggests the form of a praying mantis, indicating her predatory nature. This interpretation followed Freud's psychoanalytic approach to analysis, but Dalí was more interested in examining *The Angelus* as a cultural icon. He thus examined not only the painting itself but also its cultural afterlife, including its frequent appearance in reproductions and kitsch objects.

Dalí incorporated imagery from *The Angelus* into numerous works during the 1930s, including the three paintings on view on this wall. Each painting illustrates Dalí's interpretation of *The Angelus* in different, often disturbing, ways. Millet's painting appears almost as a direct copy in *Gala and the Angelus of Millet Preceding the Imminent Arrival of the Conical Anamorphoses* (on your left), though Dalí has filled the composition with other strange figures and objects. In *The Angelus of Gala* (on your right), Millet's work appears in the background again. Dalí exaggerated the size difference of the two peasants, making the figure of the woman seem more threatening.

The largest of the three paintings, *Meditation on the Harp*, closely follows Dalí's "delirious" reading of *The Angelus*. The woman, still with her head bowed, is now nude and embracing the man in a sexually suggestive pose; the man strategically holds his hat over his genitals to conceal his arousal. The man and woman are now joined by a third strange figure, their dead son, depicted with a conical head and large, swollen left foot, and a skull-like appendage that extends from his right elbow. This phallic appendage and the figure's proximity to the nude mother further emphasizes Dalí's interpretation of sexual, incestuous desire inherent in the painting.