

## To know Jean-Francois Millet better

Jean-Francois Millet is born the 4. of October 1814 in Normandy near a town named Cherbourg, in a very close-knit family of modest but not poverty-stricken farmers. This family who takes pleasure in reading and learning had given Millet a solid education. Based on this educational background, he'll gain the respect and admiration of his friends and his visitors throughout his life.

His father who, in his free time, did wood and clay sculpting, noticed that his son had a very pronounced talent for drawings; he encouraged him to cultivate it. In 1833, he registered him at Cherbourg in a painter's studio of David Dumouchel's school. In November 1835, at the death of his father, Millet returned to the farm but his grandmother persuaded him to obey the signs of God and to return to Cherbourg, in the studio of Langlois, a student of Gros, this time. In 1837, thanks to his mentors, the town of Cherbourg granted him a scholarship so he could enter the "Beaux Arts" in Paris where he registered himself in Paul Delaroche's studio, a historian artist.

Despite his first success at the Salon, he returned to Cherbourg where he made a living as a portraitist. In 1841, he married Pauline-Virginie Ono and returned to live with her in Paris. At the death of his wife in 1844, he returned to Cherbourg then to leave it definitely in 1845, with Catherine Lemaire, a maid who became his lifetime partner.

Came 1849 and its Cholera epidemic. Millet, Catherine Lemaire and their three children left with the Jacque family to seek refuge at the edge of the Fontainebleau forest, in Barbizon, little hamlet of the Chailly plain where painters came to work on the "motif". Gone for a few weeks, he will stay there the rest of his life and that is where he will produce the essential of his work. There, he will find a place, a scenery, some friends, some buyers...a circle. In this hamlet of woodcutters and of poor plowmen, he will live between his studio and his vegetable garden, raises his nine children and will not stop thinking of the link between man and nature.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of January, 1875, Millet passed away in this house. Three weeks earlier, the priest had accepted to marry him religiously to Catherine Lemaire, the mother of his nine sons, that he had married civilly in 1853, a few months after the death of his mother.

**Let's begin the visit**

## The house/studio of Jean-Francois Millet

House of memories, sentimental museum, private collection, your visit here is not guided. The authenticity of this place, the preserved atmosphere, the "Belle Lumière" (beautiful light) and the intimacy makes it worthwhile.

To help you to find the string of a simple walk through the objects and the paintings, we then give you only a few indications and a few marks.

### The studio

It is here, in this studio, oriented towards the north, that Millet has created his principal pieces of art: "The Angelus, The Gleaners, The man with the hoe, The Sower, the Maternal Precaution, Springtime..." Millet has renovated through the years which, at the start, was only a barn. And so, the high bay window, the roof, the tiles and the wood floor are the idea of the painter who had, in a past time put his trestle in a mezzanine which was truly unhealthy "Toad house", as he called it.

In this room, which stays in the state where his widow and the heiresses of the owner have left it, you will be surprised by the untouchable presence of the painter: The light of the paintings. Because Millet painted in his studio some scenes that he recomposed based on souvenirs, observation and sketches, of dressed models or, mostly of live models. He liked to make them unchangeable, stop the movements of the man at work and give his characters a universal reach.

Master of the dark-clear and of the shadow zones, he knows also how to elevate his paintings of delicate tones and refined touches. "Son of farmer and painter of farmers" he was -with Eugene Delacroix-one of the most cultivated artist of his time.

A picture of the "Belle Marie", taken by Esparcieux father, keeps the souvenir of the woman who posed- when she was seventeen- for the "Angelus". She is facing the trestle, under a boat, evocation of the trawlers that we used at La Hague, in Normandy, childhood place of the artist of which he always keeps the nostalgia.

Another picture, taken by the son of Karl Bodmer, shows the studio in its original state and gives a good idea of the atmosphere that prevailed here at the time of Millet.

On each side of the entrance doorway, two drawing boards made of 24 portraits, puts together the forerunners, the contemporary and the follower of this artistic house that an English critic named the "Ecole de Barbizon" (Barbizon's school), to be different from "Ecole de Fontainebleau". Among them were the first defenders of Millet, Theodore Rousseau, his two American friends coming from Boston, William Morris Hunt and William Babcock who have largely contributed to his international glory. And extraordinary figures of all trades like Alfred Sensier (who was at the same time his agent, his owner and his friend), Diaz, Charles Jacques, Ziem, Barye, Troyon, to whom can be associated a few merchants and a few art critics of which Teophile Gautier, Edmond About, Castagnary and Th. Silvestre. This group of admirers, first and second circle of a public which will grow starting from 1860, has built the Legend of Millet, painter of the farmers.

Being a collector himself, Millet had accumulated all sorts of object. A head of the Egyptian antiquity and several little Bruegel passed between his hands. He liked also the Japanese prints, medieval scenes, the drawings of Delacroix and Rembrandt's prints.

The three monkeys "see nothing", "hear nothing" and "say nothing" stand as witness of the Millet's World which makes the charm of his house.

Except the very accurate copy of the great Theodore Rousseau by Eugene Masson and the copies of Millet's two pastels created by Lucien Lepoittevin, all the works presented in the studio are originals.

Vincent Van Gogh, who kept him as a sort of father, would later say: "For me, it's Millet' the essentially contemporary painter, thanks to whom the horizon was opened in front of us."

### **The dining room**

With a fireplace decorated with copied medallions of David d'Angers, a window opens into the garden and an outdoor staircase and a clock stopped at six o'clock (time at which Millet died), this room is particularly touching. We can guess, without elaborate speeches the stoic and frugal character of a painter in clogs who lived here with his wife, his nine children, his brother, his maid and his passing through friends.

Some pictures, a few auto portraits, a drawing of Achille Deveria, a palette, a mass book and diverse documents show that, below an artist's beard and a melancholic stare that express his permanent missing of his homeland, was hidden an exceptional sensitivity.

Some etched engravings, etchings in their different states, drawings, a charcoal sketch on canvas touched up with white, witness of the drawer's dexterity and of his capacity to stop the instant to give it a nearly mythic presence.

Even if these touching evidences only show anecdotal moments at the opposite to big pieces of art at the Orsay Museum, in Boston, in Philadelphia or at the Ermitage, all of Millet is here, in his house...

Note: on the fireplace: the bronze statues of Antoine Barye and Rosa Bonheur.

Millet was fascinated by photography; he collected postal cards and pieces of art reproductions and insisted that his work shall be the subject of photographic reproductions. He himself willingly posed for the photographers, and less known, tried himself at picture taking. Three of his photographic plates, preserved at the national library, have made possible the numeric printing exposed in this room. His biographers never mentioned it.

### **The Georges Richard Room**

This room took the name of Georges Richard who, between 1952 and 2002, dedicated himself to keep this place as a painter's house opened to painters' friends.

This room, which has once been the studio of Charles Jacques, and has been the living room of the Millet family after 1860, has become the exhibition room and sales point of the house/studio of Jean-Francois Millet.

After the death of Millet, a colored paneled ceiling and an Italian fireplace, designed by Gallici who worked for the castle of Fontainebleau were added to this room. The top of the fireplace is decorated by a raphaelique "Madonne and child".

In this room, you will find etchings, engravings, books and postal cards...

Also in this room, a thematic exhibition is organized every three months. The painters who exhibit here are contemporary artists who continue the historical work of the French landscape as the school of Barbizon had started to write it.

**We thank you for your visit**