

Drawing Farmer by the Hand of A Farmer

Interpretating Millet's Farmer Image Painting

Congli Zhang

Eastern International Art College
Zhengzhou University of Light Industry
Zhengzhou, China

Abstract—Millet, who was born in a peasant family, devoted his talent to depicting farmers in rural area. At his early years, he lived through a painful exploration stage to find his own painting style, but soon he found his amazing endowment in depicting farmers. He depicted farmers with great affection, themes of his works are almost farmers, which express farmers' simplicity and reflect reality of country life. He is known as the greatest farmer painter. Farmers painted by him give off solemnity and loftiness, not possessed by pastoral painting. The painting style is dignified and plain and the modeling is simple. He created a series of works taking farmers' living and labor as themes. His main representative works include *The Gleaners*, *The Angelus*, *The Sower* and so on.

Keywords—realism; genre painting of rural area; simplicity; loftiness

I. INTRODUCTION

After 1830s, the dominant realism literary thought trend and school appeared in European art scene. In fine arts, the realism paintings represented by "Barbizon" painting school and Courbet, Millet, Daumier and so on appeared. Took depicting nature and real life reality and reflecting essence of things as the purpose, they constantly innovated and developed in creative ideas and methods, orientated standard of artistic expression on reflecting true and current real life and requested to objectively, calmly, truly reflect social reality and life, attach importance to social meaning of creation, and form artistic characteristics of emphasis on reality, emphasis on science, emphasis on objectivity and emphasis on criticism. Millet was just such a faithful realism painter. He devoted his sincere deep emotion to the rural area, farmers and land depended on for existence he was familiar with and loved, he was known as the greatest farmer painter.

II. INTERPRETATING MILLET'S FARMER IMAGE PAINTING

Jean-Francois Millet was born in a small village, called Gruchy, Normandy, France in 1814, and his family had been farmers for generations. The childhood Millet also needed to help the farming, but his education was not interrupted ever. Millet showed painting talent as a child, he was sent to Cherbourg in 1833 to receive special education and become a student of a portrait painter named Mosier. Although young Millet was in learning stage, he often returned to the

village and helped farming. In 1837, he had opportunity to continue to study painting in Paris. In 1849, Millet settled down in Barbizon village, about 50km in southern suburbs of Paris and lived poor rural life for 27 years, and was engaged in agricultural labor and painting creation. This farmer's son found his own soul here and discovered his own artistic ideal.

Creation career of Millet can be divided into earlier stage and later stage. His earlier works were created to meet requirements of life and survival. He once imitated Watteau's and Boucher's works he didn't like at all, the painting style was showy and frivolous but catered for the taste of secular society. Millet felt painful in this stage because his works style was too far away from his nature of mind or too far away from reality of his life. Of course, at this time, Millet also explored form and language of works constantly, especially in relationship between form and color, the portrait painting, *Little Antwanette Abell Before the Mirror*, blended with color effect of Michelangelo and Kohler Wajo adored by him, the oil painting with simple and pure image and full of pastoral sentiment and with myth theme, *Priestess Bachant*, human body painting created by taking Delacroix's works as model, *Oedipus Taken down from the Tree* and so on were works at this stage. But soon Millet found his great way to home in life and sought his own emotion regression. He began to research laboring people image in Paris and Paris suburbs, and created his works *Winnower* in 1948, which depicted the process of a farmer exerted all his strength to shake and screen wheat with a winnowing fan. This stage was regarded as the boundary, Millet began his great creation of rural area genre painting, this is, and he began his most representative creation career of farmer realism painting.

The Sower created in 1850 was the first famous painting after Millet settled down in Barbizon. The figure in the painting was only a tall young farmer, he stood upright on his two legs between heaven and earth, occupied the central painting, he was dressed in red shirt and blue trousers, wore dark brown cap, walked with long strides in the field, sowed wheat seeds by raising his hands while walking. The flying wheat seeds glistened golden light under the sunset. The sower's majestic appearance was completely immersed in dark red backlight of sunset and shadow of twilight. Dark brown cap worn by the farmer was pressured lower; broad shoulders, strong physique stood out in the shining of the setting sun, but color and line on his face and body were not

vague, as if blended with this fertile earth. The composition of this painting was extremely simple, in addition to a farmer who hurried a cow to plough in the distance seen indistinctly on upper left corner of the painting, there was only the tall sower in foreground. The direction of the sower advancing was fluctuated, tilted horizon line strengthened kinetic potential of figure advancing, and showed great strength of the master of the earth—farmers, and educated and encouraged people.

Then, Millet created a series of immortal works, the most famous works include *Harvesters Resting* (1851 - 1853), *The Gleaners* (1857), *The Angelus* (1857-1859) and so on. *Harvesters Resting* depicted that a group of farmers who worked for the landlord rested and had lunch beside tall wheat stack, the girl gleaner who arrived later was shy, lowered her head and is embarrassed to have lunch. The young farmer at her side invited her to have lunch, other people also welcomed her with hopeful sight; her bashful and hesitant expression was simple and honest. Millet reproduced the farmers' life scene with sincere insight, watching his painting was just like watching the life. *The Gleaners* depicted three rural women were gleaning wheat ears in the field. The gleaning wheat what I've know and understood is gleaning wheat ears in the harvested field, maybe they were the owner of the field, and they didn't want to waste hard success, or maybe they were poor people without field, and they wanted to glean some grain ration to fill the stomach in the harvested field. Their clothes were worn out, their faces wore certain anxiety and tiredness. It could be seen from their movement in the painting, they were so careful, their hands stretched into wheat straw and turned over it; it seemed that they refused to leave out every wheat grain. Millet's paintings were so ordinary, which refined Millet's deep feeling for farmer's life; just this ordinary and personal feeling deeply touched the watchers' mind. *The Angelus* depicted the farmers' pious religious faith at that time. When a young couple working in the field heard bell of the church in the distance, they put down their tools and devoutly pried to the God, which make us realize the farmer couple's diligence and solemn heart. Millet once said, "I only know the land since I was born, so I will only truthfully express labor feelings on the land". Millet paid close attention to the farmers with deep emotion; he depicted the farmers' piety and simplicity with brush and color, even expressed the farmer's attachment to the land with his mind, eulogized the farmers' characters of simplicity, goodness and lenience and gave them personal dignity.

During Millet's lifetime and up to now, people have various interpretations for his works. Some critics believe that he was nostalgic and conservative, but some people believe he was a renovationist. The former believe that Millet's works just reflected his nostalgic conservative thought for pastoral life after he arrived in the city from countryside; while the latter believe that Millet's works included radicals style to publicize the farmers. Painting techniques applied by Millet were just integration of traditional and new painting skills. Millet who ardently loved works of classical masters doubtlessly blended their features into his own painting. The purpose of Millet's farmers

paintings were to express his identification and affirmation for men and women working on this land, but not to threaten or satire rich families living a peaceful and happy life by virtue of it. We can also see his long-term suffering and tough life experience from his works. The world he depicted is that in order to punish the crime committed by Adam and Eve, the god wants the human to suffer hard, and dull labor suffering and pain forever, they are exhausted, toilsome poor people who work hard all day, they are clothed in rags, their skin is dark and their bodies are hunched, and their palms are large, which are aesthetics of Millet.

"Silence" and "quietness", are words in Millet's works with which people often associate. In his works with most features usually include one or two farmers who silently work hard or rest in labor. These farmers who seemingly have missed gorgeous clothes and beautiful house during their lifetime still show graceful dignity in the brush of Millet. Certain solemn attitudes towards life are also revealed by depicting the farmers' daily life, as Millet said, "to express loftiness of common daily life."

Millet is not the first painter to leave masterpieces taking the farmers as the theme. Reviewing French art origin, there were Le Nain, Antoine, Louis and Mathieu in 17th century; date back to the Middle Ages, outstanding examples could be found from many paintings. If the range is expanded to western European fine arts, the most famous painter should be the great Dutch painter, Bruegel in 16th century; his farmer paintings were warm and full of life. Developed to 19th century, farmer paintings were popular temporarily, but they were sentimental works with a type of pastoral song, it seemed that the framers in the paintings did not work hard ever; their clothes were clean without dirt. Millet painted the farmers' world with distinct new techniques. In the integration of traditional religious feeling and progressive social ideas, the paintings showed magnificence and loftiness. Different from other farmer painters, although he said, "I am born to be a farmer and I am still a farmer after death." But actually, he had never painted in the open air. And his works had been considered carefully, without any impromptu component. Therefore, his paintings seemed like sketchy scenery, but were actually basically obstinate to his ideas. He observed the nature with fresh insight, then returned to the studio and depicted the farmers' labor and life; the paintings possessed rich rural life flavor, and were against the wrong concept that some academism believed that noble paintings must show noble figures.

Discussion or evaluation on Millet and his paintings should not simply start from techniques and styles of works. Almost in all his works with farmer themes, he omitted details beside the point without hesitation, and did not adopt fine expression techniques in image moulding as well as too much excessive specifics and details depiction and description. The paintings concentrated on crucial points and turned the remaining as the secondary, and strongly highlighted the themes, which was so proper and coordinated with contents themes he used to express plain, simple, poor and kind rural life and farmers; so blended and unified with sincere, pure interest, strict, lofty and positive thoughts, rich humanistic concern and emotion, life roughness and strength

as well as gritty spirit he pursued. Millet did not like people praising his painting expression techniques, or attempting to make explanation and judgment for techniques and styles of his works, “various explanation for my oil painting style is too verbose, because I have not yet considered it; in addition, if any style, it may come from my themes, or deep or shallow, also come from hardship of life and so on.” On April 23, 1867, he wrote, “I’m the farmer in farmers”.

Millet is the painter most beloved by people in French modern painting history. His simple and friendly art language is particularly loved by a large number of French farmers. Vicissitudes in *Winnower*, piety in *The Angelus*, magnificence in *The Gleaners*, placing one’s hope on land in *The Sower*, the farmer stooping and stranding in victory brilliance in *The Man With the Hoe*, all reflect that surging passion, that perseverance, that reality and sincerity, that simplicity and solemnity, that clearness and strength and other spirit and characters without exception. We can feel boundless love for life contained in the painter’s heart and diligent pursuit for art and beauty. Silently listen to Millet’s painting, you will only have a shocked soul. Millet once wrote a sentence in his book, “even if I know the socialist’s danger is mistaken, I still want to make confession first. The most charming thing of art lies in expressing humanity ... I don’t know what is true happiness for human, I also don’t know where do we pursue this happiness, because I have no similar experience before. For me, indulging in enjoying science and quietness of the forest and wilderness is just the happiest moment of my life.”

III. CONCLUSION

Whether in China or Western Countries, farmers are a group living in the bottom of society. They create huge wealth for society, finally, they always pay more and get little and struggle in survival line. Just farmers’ willingness to bear the burden of hard work and industrious simplicity deposition affect many artists and make them be always keen on painting creation for farmer theme. Through a general survey of Chinese and foreign art history, there are outstanding persons who express farmer theme almost in every stage. Millet is a great realism farmer painter in 19th century, even a simple, industrious and clinging cultivator. Simple and solemn, sincere and pure, plain and dignified, implicit and deep, his works are majestic epics to depict rural life. His praise for good character of the laboring people’s kind and plain mind, industrious and honest personality, broad and generous love makes his works generate resonance and shock in people all over the world. Millet said, “Mission of art is mission of love”, which may be Millet’s

REFERENCES

- [1] Romain Rolland (French). *The Son of the Earth: J.F.Millet[M]*. Beijing: Gold Wall Press, 2012.
- [2] Liu Ruli, Zhang Shaoxia. *Western Art History[M]*. Beijing: People’s Fine Arts Publishing House, 1990.
- [3] Jin Yuanpu. *Aesthetics and Art Appreciation[M]*. Beijing: Capital Normal University Press, 1999..

- [4] Wu Dazhi. *J.F.Millet[M]*. Beijing: People’s Fine Arts Publishing House, 1985.
- [5] Huang Zongxian. *From Principle to Form——Ordinary Art Theory [M]*. Changsha: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2003.