

Jean-François Millet 1814 - 1875

Jean-François Millet, the French painter, was born in Gréville-Hague, not far from Valognes. He is noted for his scenes of peasant farmers and not to be confused with John Everett Millais, the Pre-Raphaelite painter of works like 'Ophelia' and later 'Bubbles', which advertised Pears soap.

Millet was the eldest son of a farmer and carried out all the varied tasks on a farm, which he later featured in his paintings. He was sufficiently promising at art that at eighteen his father paid for him to study at Cherbourg and then at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

Returning to Cherbourg and then to Le Havre, Millet devoted his time to the more lucrative painting of portraits. However, his desire to produce more realistic paintings, and influenced by the natural scenes of John Constable which had been exhibited in the Salon De Paris, Millet led a group of French painters who worked together in the village of Barbizon, near the Forest of Fontainebleau, to the south of Paris.

The Barbizon school were not initially appreciated as they were so different from the accepted Romantic Movement of artists like Eugène Delacroix.

Millet included peasants working in fields. 'The Gleaners (1857) shows three poor peasant women given permission to gather grain from a field after the harvest, contrasting with the wealthy farmers in the background. It was submitted to the Salon in 1857 and with the French Revolution still in the minds of the upper classes it was poorly received by an unenthusiastic and hostile public, who were not comfortable for poor people being the subject matter. Short of money he sold it for 3,000 francs, but after his death in 1889 it was sold at auction for 300,000 francs.

It is now in the Musée d'Orsay.