

Critical Responses to Millet's *Man with a Hoe*

Jean-Francois Millet submitted his painting *Man with a Hoe* to the Paris Salon of 1863. Hunched over in a rocky field with a weary expression, utilitarian clothing, and a drooping neckline to match a slack-jawed mouth, Millet's farmer was the opposite of what Parisian bourgeoisie audiences were accustomed to seeing on the exhibition walls.

Critics accused the artist of making a political statement about the condition of agricultural laborers. One critic, Paul Saint-Victor, wrote the following:

M. Millet lit his lantern and went to seek a cretin. He must have had to search a long time to find his *Man with a Hoe*. Such types aren't common, even at the asylum at Bicêtre. Imagine a monster without a skull, his eyes extinguished, the grin of an idiot, planted crookedly like a scarecrow in the middle of a field. There is no gleam of human intelligence in this animal. Has he just come from working? or from murdering?

Saint-Victor's suggestion that the man could be a murderer stems from harrowing real events. Shortly before this painting was made, a serial killer named Martin Dumollard was on the loose, having murdered at least four women between 1855 and 1861. Some viewers saw commonalities between the figure in Millet's painting and Dumollard.

Despite the critics' assertions that the artist was a socialist or political agitator, Millet denied being interested in politics. He explained in a letter to a friend, "To tell the truth, peasant subjects suit my nature best, for I must confess, at the risk of your taking me to be a Socialist, that the human side is what touches me most in art." Millet was aware of the hardships faced by agricultural laborers, and he described their backbreaking work as "true humanity and great poetry."

References

Borowitz, Albert. *Blood and Ink: An International Guide to Fact-Based Crime Literature*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2002.