# The Hague School and its Influence on Millet and Van Gogh

*By Ricki Morse*

*Part of an ongoing series for the exhibition, "Through Vincent's Eyes."*

Vincent Van Gogh called the artists of The Hague School, the "mastadons." From the early genius of Rembrandt to the dark, earthy paintings of peasants working the land, this widely influential art school became one of the art centers of northern Europe in the late 19th century and flourished into the 20th, its subject the peasant and his family in the fields of the Netherlands. These paintings strike us forcefully with their humanity and their relationship to the soil in contrast to Corot's celebration of the poetry of nature. (See February *La Muse*).

Vincent Van Gogh, *Potato Eaters*, 1885, lithograph printed in dark brown, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. A copy of Jean François Millet's *The Potato Eaters*, 1885 oil on canvas.

Jean François Millet, though he painted with the Barbizon group and ultimately moved his family to Barbizon, remained the northerner, born in Normandy on the rugged Atlantic coast, reared on his father's farm, he remained true to his peasant roots, yet became the most famous artist of the Barbizon School. Van Gogh, who made many studies and detailed Millet copies, saw in his work the earliest steps toward expressionism.

Vincent Van Gogh, *Digger*, 1885, Black chalk on laid paper, Kroeller-Muller Museum, Otterlo, Netherlands

**The Hague School**

The Golden Age of 17th century Dutch painting was revived with the 1830's Romantic movement, which soon was replaced by the work of the Hague School in the second half of the 19th century. These emerging artists "drew their inspiration from the visible world, celebrated truth, and sought merely to evoke mood; tone was more important than color." The strong contrasts between light and dark, characteristic of Rembrandt and the Romantics, became the "supremacy of grey."

Vincent Van Gogh, *Two Women Digging*, 1885, Black chalk and grey wash on laid paper, Kroeller-Muller Museum, Otterlo, Netherlands.

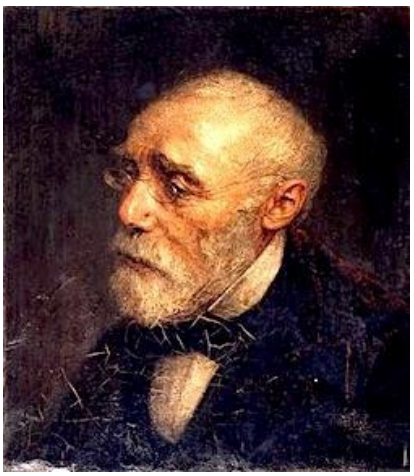
The rise in the Netherlands of an affluent class of art collectors replaced the need for and dependance on patrons and estab-

Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn (Dutch, 1606-1669) *The Three Trees* 1643, Etching, engraving and drypoint, LACMA.

lished the artist as part of an extended social network. They demanded higher prices for their work, entered the international market and gained wide recognition. Jozef Israëls and Hendrik Weissenbruch were prominent first generation Hague School artists. Both painted in Barbizon, adding to the popular notion that the Hague school was an offshoot of Barbizon; however critics point to the particular style of realism practiced by Hague School artists as deriving from Rembrandt. "The penchant for colour and exuberant brushwork can only be understood as a Dutch classicism inspired by Rembrandt . . . Ideas about perception were fundamentally different from those of Impressionism, whose aim was to capture the fleeting moment in light and colour, not to record what was timeless and lasting."

Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, *The Angel Departing from the Tobias Family*, 1641, Etching with touches of drypoint, Minneapolis Institute of Art. The Hague School family groupings are informed by Rembrandt's complex, lively Biblical story renderings.

Jozef Israëls (1824-1911) was perhaps the most widely collected and respected artist of this group. Reared in a Jewish family in the university city of Groningen, Netherlands, the third of ten children, he was expected to enter business or perhaps the rabbinate, but his artistic talent and his yearning to enter art school led the family to relent. His early work reflected the Romantic style of the time in historical painting and portraiture, but later shifted into the Hague School exploration of the lives of peasants. After a period of illness he moved to the seaside to recuperate and there focused on the lives of the fishermen he observed working on the boats and pulling in their nets. One of these paintings earned him a showing at the Paris Salon of 1861. His feeling for the lives of the working people, their families and their trials are evident in his sympathetic portrayals. In 1870 the moved with his family and two children to The Hague, where his son Issac also studied art, adopting an impressionistic style which may have influenced his father's late work.



Jozef Israëls, Self Portrait, n.d., oil on canvas.

Israëls' skill as a portraitist is displayed in this painting

Right: Jozef Israëls (Dutch 1824-1911) *Towards Home*, n.d. oil on canvas.

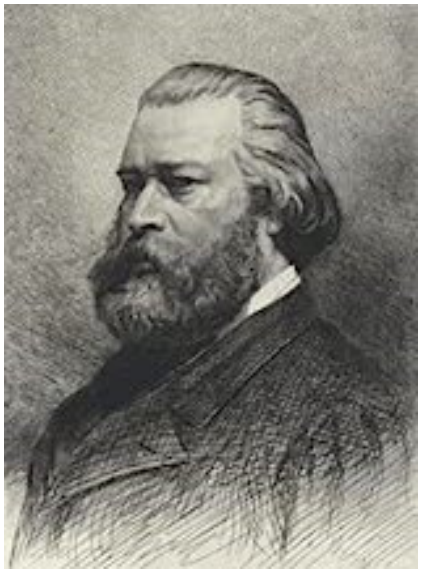
Jozef Israëls *Portrait of Hendrik Weissenbruch*, 1882, oil on canvas.

of his colleague Hendrik Johannes Weissenbruch (1824-1903), who was a native of The Hague and came from a family of artists—etchers, lithographers, and painters. His father was a chef, restauranteur and amateur painter who encouraged his son's aspirations. Influenced by the 17th century Jacob von Ruisdael's skies, his Romantic skyscapes/landscapes displayed meticulous attention to detail and he hung his first one-man exhibition in 1847. Two years later the Teylers Museum in Haarlem acquired one of his panoramic landscapes, but this early success was brief, and in the meanwhile he became one of the chief representatives of The Hague School with his own particular emphasis on the skies over the polders (land reclaimed from the sea). By the 1880s "his use of color gradually became more restrained and his application of paint increasingly broader and looser. This made his landscapes more atmospheric, the bearers of light and clouds. He stressed the importance of both of these elements when he said, 'The sky in a painting, that is what is most important! Sky and light are the great magicians.'" Weissenbruch had from the beginning preferred to work out of doors and in 1900, in his seventies, he made his first trip to Barbizon where he painted now famous forest scenes, honoring the French painters of the last decades of the 19th century.

Hendrick Weissenbruch (Dutch, 1824-1903) *Canal Near Noorden, Sunset*, 1893, private collection.

**Jean François Millet**

Millet had much more in common with the artists of the Netherlands than with his French compatriots. He grew up as the son of a landed peasant, and as such received a classical education, but worked the farm into his twenties. Their land on the outskirts of Grozny, bordering the stony cliffs above the North Atlantic, became a favored scene, and his attachment to the land and those who worked it remained his subjects of choice. The first son to a religious mother and art-loving grandmother, he was a somber, contemplative boy, devoted to his duties on the family farm. He first studied portraiture in nearby Cherbourg, later accepted at École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. But Paris did not suite his stoic temperament nor his values. He preferred hours at the Louvre to the cafes, and with the death of his young, frail wife of tuberculosis and with his teacher's refusal to sponsor him for the Prix de Rome, and the loss of his scholarship, he returned to Cherbourg. He was painting portraits and nudes, attempting to build a fol-



Jean François Millet, 1882 engraving by Etienne Bocourt

Jean François Millet, *The Sower*, after 1850,Oil on canvas, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburg.

Millet, *The Knitting Lesson*, 1869, oil on canvas, St. Louis Museum of Art.

lowing and soon took a new companion, a local servant girl, to Le Havre, there associating with young artists who became the Barbizon School. In 1848 he produced his first peasant paintings including an early version of *The Sower* and followed his friends to Barbizon.

The Paris Salon of 1850-51 displayed *The Sower* to both praise and criticism, but Millet's path was now set. Always true to his own spirit, he read the critics carefully, but continued on his path to express on canvas his deep response to the peasants and their land. During the 1850s he produced a two works which were to become world famous, The Gleaners (1857) and The Angelus (1857-60).

As we view Millet's work we are struck by the role of the female figures, sharing the work of the farm, no more or less important than the men, but integral to the life on the land. One of his six daughters appears with his wife in *The Knitting Lesson*, at first seen perhaps as touching, but also something more—the focus of the teacher, the attentive presence of the child, theirs is an important task, inherently necessary. This sense of broader meaning underlies each painting, drawing our close regard.

Van Gogh copied many of Millet's works (*The Potato Eaters)* and sketched his figures, but what drew him was the profound sense of something personally meaningful—a basic tenant of expressionism. Millet himself noted that his figures were not realistic depictions of specific individuals but "types." He was attempting to capture the experience of the peasant, his driving force. The figure was thus simplified and generalized to represent more than a single individual. During the Second Empire, the conservative press labeled him a socialist and a radical, which Millet vehemently denied. He said he found his scenes very beautiful, which seems to reflect his experience as observer.

Vincent Van Gogh, *The Sower*, 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Millet saw these peasant figures as heroic, often allowing the figure to fill the picture frame, as in *The Sower*, the relationship of figure to ground emphasized by raising the horizon line toward the top of the picture. Notice the simplification of the figure, becoming almost iconic in its power to hold our gaze. And the land itself becomes an actor in the narrative, filling the canvas and drawing our close attention. Millet's singular vision was new in the mid-19th century and enthralled the artists who followed him, from Van Gogh to Dali. ▪

*Quotations from:*
*The Hague School, Nineteenth Century Art*, catalogue 2000, Christie's, Amsterdam.
Simon Kelly and Maite van Dijk, *Millet and Modern Art: From Van Gogh to Dali, 2020,* Yale Univ. Press, New Haven