

Artist: Jean François Millet

Title: Gleaners (original title *Des Glaneuses*)

Date: 1857

Size and Medium: 1100 x 830 cm, Oil on canvas

Location: Musée d'Orsay, France

Describe

The Gleaners by Jean François Millet is a realistic landscape oil painting that emphasizes three female figures in the foreground. In the far distance of the background, we see what looks like a busy crowd of workers harvesting the field with grain haystacks that have been piled up, marking their horizon line along with warehouses. On the right side of the harvesters, we can notice a supervisor on horseback keeping an eye on the operation. The three main figures on the forefront, bent and arranged under the horizon line, are engulfed by the field landscape occupying two-thirds of the composition's space. The **colors** are muted throughout the painting, the **shapes** have soft edges, and the overall **texture** is smooth. The light **values** are mostly in the background accentuating the feel of an atmospheric perspective. Millet uses the light from the setting sun to highlight the volume of the **forms** of the three figures that look almost sculpted. Two of these women are completely bent over picking up leftover grains from the harvested field, while the third one, is slightly bent as the years of back-breaking work and old age are preventing her from adopting the posture for too long.

Analyze

Millet emphasizes the three women gleaners with the use of light and shadow creating a **contrasting** effect visually, but also in terms of his choice of subjects that represent the poorest of the poor class and placing them in the forefront of his composition. The size of the main figures in comparison with the diminished scale of the workers in the back speaks to the viewers of the hierarchy the artist is establishing in this painting. The muted colors create a sense of **unity** throughout the painting, and the value contrast between the figures and their clothing creates a great visual **balance** in the composition. The **repetition** of the rounded backs of the figures stooping and the forms of the piles of haystacks in the back form a **pattern** that leads the eye of the viewers through the painting. This repetition creates a sense of **rhythm** that also refers to the repeating movement of continuous back-breaking labor that is happening in the artwork.

Interpret

Millet paints a beautiful composition while choosing a subject that was uncommon at the time. The gleaners, who are practically beggars, and represent the poorest of the poor, are presented to the viewers as the protagonist, the main character, and are painted in the same way that heroic historical figures or biblical figures were treated. The space he puts between the women and the line of workers and the supervisor in the back can be seen as a representation of the social distance that existed between the working class and the gleaners. This painting can be seen as a socialist statement because the artist puts the lowest class in the foreground, giving the figures monumental scales in comparison to the working enterprise and the supervisor barely visible in the background due to their diminished scale and the attribution of similar values of the environment. He depicts his subjects truthfully, bringing them out of the shadows, figuratively and literally, and putting them in the spotlight, telling the public that they are people, and they are worthy.

Evaluate

I think this artwork by Millet is brilliant in the way he arranged the composition, putting the value in his subjects in the front with lights and shadows and gradually reducing the contrast as we move towards the background where the atmosphere seems to fade blending in the actual harvesting work with the landscape. In this way, I think Millet was successful in illustrating the respect he has for human labor and his belief that these gleaners deserve some dignity.

