

Basic Detail Report



The Gleaners (A study for the picture in the Louvre, Paris)

Date

c. 1850

Primary Maker

Jean François Millet

Medium

Chalk on paper

Dimensions

14.5 x 21 cm

Description

'The Gleaners', which appears from its size and shape to be part of a series devoted to field work, is thought to be Millet's earliest surviving rendering in any medium of peasant's gathering up grain after the harvest. The subject was one of the most important in the artist's oeuvre and, while it was also popular with other artists of the mid-19th century, Millet's treatment of it differs radically from all others and accounts for the notoriety of his ultimate 1857 oil painting, now in the Louvre. In all there are twenty surviving drawings and oils by Millet depicting gleaners. They range in date from the Dublin and the Louvre drawings of 1850-51 through to the 1857 oil. In addition to the surviving works there must have been many more working sketches and preparatory drawings, but even from those extant works it is possible to chart the slow and painstaking process by which Millet developed his visual ideas. In the Dublin drawing, which is a composition in its own right rather than a preparatory work, the artist depicts two gleaners bent down low to the ground, isolated by the vastness of the open plane. On the distant horizon the barely visible outline of haystacks is a reference to the bounty of the main harvest in which the gleaners may not share. The most important difference in terms of composition between the Dublin drawing and the Louvre painting, apart from the reversal of the movement from right to left, is the addition of a third figure to the group of gleaners, and of haystacks and harvesters to the background. The controversy, which attended the exhibition of the Louvre oil in 1857 centred on the socio-economic implications of the subject.

Gleaning, the backbreaking job of combing the already harvested fields for any remaining grain, was the preserve, regulated by law, of the very poorest in French society. Millet's depiction of the subject not only drew attention to the abject poverty of these people but more importantly, and in the eyes of critics more threateningly, to the inequality of a system in which some were allowed to prosper while others starved. Coming only a few years after the 1848 revolution, the painting's message was seen as politically provocative. The perceived power of Millet's image was greatly enhanced by his monumental treatment of the composition and by the anonymity and archetypal quality of his figures. It was these elements in the painting, also discernible in the Dublin drawing that set Millet's version of 'The Gleaners' apart from earlier

interpretations of the same subject including that of Jules Breton, exhibited in 1855 and now in the National Gallery of Ireland. (Extract from 'Images and Insights', Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin, 1993, p. 192)