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French Impressionist Caillebotte Gets His Day in the Sun

Stephen West · Friday, February 28th, 2025

Gustave Caillebotte, the subject of a handsome [new exhibition](#) at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, may be the most impressive French Impressionist painter most people have never heard of.

Caillebotte (1848-1894) was born into a wealthy Parisian family, trained as a lawyer, but never had to work for a living. Instead, he became a painter as well as a friend and patron of other artists including Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, and Pierre-August Renoir. He enjoyed boating and gardening in the countryside and socializing with other men in the city. He never married and died young, at age 45.

Most of Caillebotte's paintings depict other men at work or play, which explains the title of the Getty show: *Gustave Caillebotte: Painting Men*. Its implicit theme is that the artist was probably gay, though it never really makes a strong case for the idea. Still, the show is overwhelmingly made up of pictures of men. Of the 105 plates in the exhibition catalog, barely a dozen include women.



Gustave Caillebotte (1848-1894), *Floor Scrapers*, 1875, oil on canvas; Musée d'Orsay, Paris, gift of the heirs of Caillebotte through his executor, Auguste Renoir, 1894; photo: Musée d'Orsay/Patrice Schmidt.

After serving in the Franco-Prussian War and studying briefly at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Caillebotte first exhibited his paintings publicly at the Impressionist exhibition of 1876.

Among his eight works in the show was the spectacular *Floor Scrapers* of 1875 (above and top image). Three shirtless workers on their knees are shown refinishing the wooden floor of what may be Caillebotte's Paris studio. The light from the window in the background reflects off the floor in subtle ways, creating a wavy pattern of light and dark. It also highlights the sweaty backs and arms of the workers, turning them into muscular sculptures. It's one of the artist's greatest works.



Gustave Caillebotte (1848-1894), *Boating Party*, about 1877-78, oil on canvas; Musée d'Orsay, Paris, painting listed as "national treasure" by the French Republic, acquired with the exclusive patronage of LVMH, major patron of the Musée d'Orsay; photo: Musée d'Orsay/Franck Raux.

Boating Party of about 1877-78 provides a clear contrast to the life of the laboring class. A blond-bearded dandy, wearing a top hat, bow tie, and vest, rows a wooden boat on a small river, following another rowboat in the distance. The scene is viewed from the stern of the boat, where the man's wife or girlfriend would normally sit. It's a classic image of the leisure class, with – again – a masterful depiction of the light reflecting off the slightly rippled water.



Gustave Caillebotte (1848-1894), *Paris Street, Rainy Day*, 1877, oil on canvas; The Art Institute of Chicago, Charles H. and Mary F.S. Worcester Collection; photo: Art Resource, New York.

The most spectacular work in the show, for me at least, is *Paris Street, Rainy Day* of 1877. The enormous canvas, about 9 by 7 feet, is divided in half by a tall black streetlamp. On the right a prosperous couple dressed in black and gray – he holding an umbrella, she holding his arm – walk toward the viewer. Behind them on the left is a panoramic view of the Place de Dublin, a broad square on the Right Bank defined by large neoclassical buildings. Pedestrians and horse-drawn carriages in the distance move across the shiny wet cobblestones, which the painter handles as deftly as the ripples on a river.

Caillebotte's perspective in the painting makes the view seem unusually broad and deep. If it were a photograph, it would have been created with a very wide-angle lens. A sharp-cornered building on the far side of the square seems to rise from the ground like a pyramid, adding to the geometric complexity of the scene and drawing viewers into the space.



Gustave Caillebotte (1848-1894), *Young Man at His Window*, 1876, oil on canvas; Getty Museum.

Along with these street scenes, Caillebotte also painted several pictures of men – always men – gazing out at the city streets below. In *Young Man at His Window* of 1876, his brother René stands at the double-wide window of the family apartment, hands in his pockets. His body language seems to suggest boredom as much as curiosity. Outside there are apartment buildings, the wispy green leaves of trees, a horse and carriage, and – perhaps the focus of his attention – the slim figure of a woman crossing the street.



Gustave Caillebotte (1848-1894), *The Bezique Game*, about 1881, oil on canvas; Louvre Abu Dhabi, image © Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi; photo: AFP.

Many of the works in the show are straightforward portraits of men at leisure (along with a few women, including the artist's mother). The men in these paintings are seated on chairs or sofas, or they're working at their desks, or playing the piano, or hanging out with their friends.

Two of these pictures depict groups of men playing cards, including *The Bezique Game* of about 1881. In this one, four men in suits are seated around a table covered in green felt. Another man stands nearby watching the action. A sixth, barely awake, slouches on a sofa behind the group. The players look far too serious about the game to be having much fun.

Though most of Caillebotte's paintings are set indoors, pleasure in this serious age seems to be found more often outdoors, while boating or strolling through gardens or the streets of the city.



Gustave Caillebotte (1848-1894), *Self-Portrait at the Easel*, 1879, oil on canvas; private collection, France; photo: © Caroline Coyner Photography.

Caillebotte himself seems to have been mostly an indoor man. When painting his *Self-Portrait at the Easel* in 1879, he places himself in his lavishly decorated apartment rather than, say, outdoors near a river or in garden, as many Impressionists would do. With a friend, or perhaps one of his two brothers, sitting on a sofa in the background, he turns his head to the viewer and, with a slight smile, seems to say, “This is who I am and what I do.”

Gustave Caillebotte: Painting Men runs through May 25 at the [J. Paul Getty Museum](#), 1200 Getty Center Drive, Los Angeles. The exhibition is organized by the Getty, the Musée d’Orsay, Paris, and the Art Institute of Chicago. The show, on view in Paris last year, runs in Chicago from June 29 through October 5, 2025. An extensive catalog, including 10 scholarly essays and color reproductions of each work, is published by the Getty.

(Top image: Gustave Caillebotte (1848-1894), *Floor Scrapers*, 1875, oil on canvas; Musée d’Orsay, Paris, gift of the heirs of Caillebotte through his executor, Auguste Renoir, 1894; photo: Musée d’Orsay/Patrice Schmidt.)

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