



## Relaxing on the river

An exhibition focusing on Gustave Caillebotte's depictions of water captures the essence of his art, writes **Jonathan Lopez**.

**G**ustave Caillebotte sold very few pictures during his lifetime – the commercial promotion of his work being a matter of almost complete indifference to him. He had a substantial fortune, bequeathed to him by his prosperous but short-lived father, and was by far the richest member of the Impressionist group (Fig. 2). His life was one of ease, devoted mostly to an assortment of passionately pursued hobbies. While his father was still alive, he had taken a degree in law and then studied engineering. But after coming into his inheritance in 1874, at the age of 26, he gave up any pretence to a conventional career, preferring to indulge his interests in painting, horticulture, stamp-collecting, and, especially, yacht-racing, in which he became known for his innovative keel designs. Indeed, specialists are often surprised to discover that Caillebotte, the yachtsman, was also an artist.

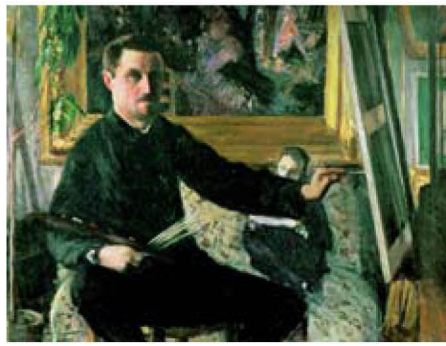
Prior to World War II, even art historians tended to ignore Caillebotte's painterly skills. If he was known at all in the annals of Impressionism, it was not as a contributor to the group's exhibitions but as a Maecenas figure, the generous benefactor who came to the aid of Monet, Renoir and Pissarro, offering much-needed loans with little or no thought to repayment. Equally important,

he bought his friends' pictures when almost no one else would, and bequeathed his collection to the state. This gift, which the government initially refused due to the then-shocking modernity of the art it contained, is now the core of the Musée d'Orsay's Impressionist collection.

If Caillebotte's reputation as an artist languished, it was due, in no small part, to the fact that his work was almost completely hidden from the public eye after his death. Most remained in his studio when he died in 1894, from a stroke, at the age of 45. His celebrated *Floor Scrapers* was included in his state gift, but it would take more than 50 years before other important items began to make their way out of family hands. Only with major retrospective exhibitions in the 1960s and '70s, and the acquisition by museums of now familiar works such as *Pont de l'Europe* (Petit Palais, Geneva) and *Paris Street, Rainy Day* (Art Institute of Chicago), did Caillebotte's prowess as a painter of modern life come to be properly appreciated.

The exhibition now at the Brooklyn Museum, after its run in Bremen and

The works illustrating this review are by Gustave Caillebotte (1848-94). 1 *Oarsmen Rowing on the Yerres*, 1877. Oil on canvas, 81 x 116 cm. Private collection



2 *Self-Portrait at the Easel*, 1879. Oil on canvas, 90 x 115 cm. Private collection

Copenhagen, offers a somewhat offbeat approach to the artist. With his larger reputation already established, it focuses on his relationship to water and the seaside and displays a marked preference for little-seen (but excellent) paintings instead of more readily recognisable works. The three principle Caillebotte masterpieces already mentioned are absent, although they are represented indirectly by associated pictures – a strategy unlikely to thrill crowds but successful from an intellectual standpoint. It is refreshing, for example, to see an alternate version of *The Floor Scrapers* (Fig. 3) rather than the larger one, so easily examined in Paris. The same could be said for the oil sketches for *Pont de l'Europe*, which appear to have been done *en plein air* and have a greater spontaneity than the final studio version.

The curator at Brooklyn, Judith Dolkart, has installed the show a little differently from her European counterparts, using a large, horseshoe-shaped suite of galleries that allows visitors to follow Caillebotte from his early Paris paintings to his rural retreat – initially at his family's property on the Yverres and later at his own estate in Petit Gennevilliers – and then back again to the city. Standing at the very end of the installation, beside such freely painted works as *Boulevard Haussmann*, *Snow Effect*, one can easily glance back to earlier, more tightly composed efforts, such as *House Painters*, a juxtaposition that tidily demonstrates how Caillebotte's involvement with nature loosened his approach to painting the urban scene.

The highpoint of the show is the Yverres period (Fig. 1). The visitor is surrounded by an entrancingly blue aquatic realm, populated

3 *The Floor Scrapers*, 1876. Oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm. Private collection

by bathers, *haut bourgeois* oarsmen in top hats, and idle anglers seated by the edge of the river, almost as if Monet's *Nymphéas* had been re-imagined with narrative storylines to augment the play of light upon the water.

Unlike Monet, Caillebotte seems never to have been entirely comfortable painting untamed nature. So long as there was some civilising human presence or a piece of built environment – a pathway, a row of houses, a cultivated flower bed – he could portray the countryside with great originality and insight. His *Factories at Argenteuil*, for instance, depicts the encroachment of industry upon the rural world to an extent unusual in the Impressionist canon. Renoir, who actually toiled for a time in a porcelain factory, was unlikely ever to portray one, but Caillebotte approaches this subject with an unflinching gaze. Yet, when faced with a completely natural motif he was apparently at a loss. His *Cliff in Normandy* is surprisingly incoherent, recalling the work of a casual Sunday painter.

The freedom to experiment, and sometimes to fail, was one of the luxuries that life afforded to Caillebotte. This show – which also includes several of his boat designs – offers an evocative portrait not only of his formidable artistic talent, but also of the gentle eccentricities that made him a figure of fascination to friends and contemporaries.

**Jonathan Lopez is the author of *The Man Who Made Vermeers*, a biography of Han van Meegeren, published last year by Harcourt.**

*'Gustave Caillebotte: Impressionist Paintings from Paris to the Sea'*, Kunsthalle, Bremen, 29 July-5 October 2008; Ordrupgaard, Copenhagen, 17 October 2008-22 February; Brooklyn Museum, 27 March-5 July (+49 421 32908-57). Catalogue by Anne-Birgitte Fonsmark, Dorothee Hansen Fry Hedin, et al., ISBN 9783775721912 (cloth),

