

Gustave Caillebotte: Anatomy of an Urban Realist

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In 1894, Realist painter Gustave Caillebotte (born 1848) died suddenly in the garden of his home at Petit Gennevilliers, bequeathing to the French government sixty-eight works by Cezanne, Degas, Manet, Monet, Picaroon, Renoir and Sisley. This group represents a majority of artists who would come to be known as “Impressionists,” many of whom Caillebotte (who enjoyed a sizeable allowance and later a significant inheritance) had helped support by purchasing their work. For a period of art history, this generous endowment would overshadow his artistic contribution to Impressionism. While a generous patron of the arts and his Impressionist comrades, Caillebotte’s work, particularly his studies of urban subject matter, stand as excellent examples of optical reality and conveyance of fleeting emotion that characterize the Impressionist movement.

Although Caillebotte has been long regarded as a Realist, the three works I will examine mark his passage from Realist to Impressionist. Caillebotte’s work can be divided into two logical parts: before his participation in the Franco-Prussian War and after. In the years preceding the Franco-Prussian War, the subjects of Caillebotte’s drawings and paintings largely consisted of portrayals of friends, family and rural scenes. After his stint in the war, Caillebotte’s focus turned to everyday people and activities that occupy urban environs. Many explanations have been offered as the specific impetus in Caillebotte’s change in focus, the most logical reason may be found in the freedom he attained after the 1874 death of his father.¹

Raboteurs de Parquet, completed in 1875, is a visceral representation of men hard at work stripping wax and varnish from a floor in the pale light of midday. Caillebotte utilized the negative space between the two groupings of figures to contrast the rich hues of the unstripped floor with that of the stripped. The perpendicular motion relative to the orientation of the painting are provided by the strips of flooring, creating the sense of a vanishing point occurring beyond the far wall of the room: this motion is punctuated by the strong dynamics of the workers drawing their planes across the floor. A rear light source casts shadows on the partially obscured workers

¹ Pierre Wittmer, *Caillebotte and His Garden at Yerres* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991), 11.

and creates a near photorealistic glare on the unfinished portion of the floor. The figure on the right seems to be conversing with the figure in the center, and a third figure is partially removed from the scene as he leans toward the other two. The palette of the painting consists of brown, white and ocher, lending a sense homogeneity and lustrous chroma.

Caillebotte returned to this subject again in the 1876 painting also entitled *Raboteurs de Parquet*. In this painting the viewer's perspective has been shifted almost 90 degrees so that the light source is to the left rather than in the foreground. This painting shows two workers—an adult and an adolescent. The adult is positioned on all fours similar to the workers in *Raboteurs de Parquet*, 1875. The adolescent, however, provides the viewer with a small glimpse of aspects of this type of work as he sharpens or changes the blade in his plane.²

We see a palette similar to the earlier iteration of this subject, except that in the 1876 *Raboteurs de Parquet* a brick red molding draws a line between the rich browns and the generic beige of the wall above. Another major difference between these two works is the style of the rooms. 1875 shows a very ornate room with an intricate bronze doorway. The inlaid molding on the walls is typical for residences of the wealthy in this period.³ The room in 1876, however, is simple and indicates an upper-middle class dwelling.

In the third painting, *The House Painters*, from 1877, Caillebotte trades interior for exterior. Painters finish and admire their work along a row of shops in midday. Again, Caillebotte makes use of a natural vanishing point and creates great depth with figures and carriages in the background. Scale plays a large part in creating this effect, along with gradually washed out tones and detail. As in *Raboteurs de Parquet* 1875 and 1876, the urban worker is again the subject. One painter squats as another mounts a ladder, and in the foreground, a painter in a hat contemplates his work as another mimics his pose and posture behind the ladder. Caillebotte partially or totally obscures all faces in the scene except for that of the observing worker. This is the same dynamic as can be found in *Raboteurs de Parquet* 1875, in which only partial views of the workers' faces are visible.

Caillebotte augments the simple palette used in *Raboteurs de Parquet* 1875 and 1876 with autumnal reds and pale ochers. The treatment of light is softened in *The House Painters*, with the exception of the blacks and reds of the door and storefronts that connect the eye to the dark figures in the background and foreground.

The paintings of Caillebotte before and after this brief focus on urban scenes and peoples consist mainly of landscapes, street scenes and nudes, and lack the vigorous movement and

² Michael Fried, *Caillebotte's Impressionism* (jstor.org, Spring 1999), 13.

³ Armstrong, Philip. "["G. Caillebotte" 's The Floor-Scrapers and Art History's Encyclopedic Memory of Art History: Boundary 2](#), Vol. 16, No. 2/3, 199.

depth of his urban portrayals. Perhaps his upper class upbringing and existence shed a novel light on the toiling proletariat, driving him to execute brilliantly the work-a-day scenes all around. Returning to Paris after the war, Caillebotte may have been captivated by what he formerly took for granted, forcing him inward, if only briefly.



Raboteurs de parquet, 1876



The House Painters, 1877