

The Dramatic Arrangement of Jean-François Millet's Caw Paintings and His Artistic Ideas beyond Realism

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Abstract. In the history of art, Realism advocates for artists to truly observe life and reproduce classical images in life. As a realistic artist, Millet mainly creates pictures showing what he saw in the countryside. Notable in his painting, he sometimes adds colors differently while painting natural views. This article expresses and confirms the difference between Millet by analyzing and comparing two of his works "Calling the Cows Home" and "Hunting Birds by Torchlight". The research compares the different structures, light directions, reflection from figures, and interaction with movements of two works. It is argued that Calling the Cows Home is a classical view painting with natural light. Meanwhile, Hunting Birds by Torchlight is work with human-made light and a specific structure to prove Millet's different use of light. His light often conveys temperature and time that is beyond the simplistic understanding of realism. It is also suggested that Millet has developed a kind of dramatic effect while it maintains the feature of natural light.

Keywords: Realism, Jean-François Millet, Calling the Caws Home.

1. Introduction

Realism and its historical scholars view Jean-François Millet as a representative artist [1, 2]. So has his life story confirmed. Millet was born in 1814 in the countryside. After being sent to Paris, he learned about luxurious settings favored by aristocrats, then began to paint portraits and Rococo to live. He realized what he wants to paint during twenty-seven years of living in Barbizon, which is rural painting. Most of his famous work was made there, some even entered Salon. Millet was poor since he can't afford to buy so many pigments. Each of his works may have charcoal or sometimes a pastel version. When realism has become the next generation of Romanticism in 1848, it emphasizes that works should reflect the real situation. Living in the same area as Millet, there are also Henri Rousseau and Chuck [3, 4]. Totally seven of them were celebrated. Among them, Millet focused on painting farmers [5]. it is notable that his paintings such as "L' Angelus" use lots of horizontal separation of brighter sky and darker land. Sometimes half or full of the character was put in the brightness of the background. At the same time, Millet had his work painted when there is artificial light. These uses of light not only follow the natural rules but also helped to create an atmosphere, like showing a particular time or highlighting the characters. Millet seems added his understanding of how light should spread and it is luminous. The interaction of light and figures made his work close to Romanticism, which is a scene full of coincidences.

Calling the Cows Home, 1872 is a picture that is not finished yet, using common techniques from Millet [6]. The painting was separated by a horizontal line. The dark figure was put behind a bright background. Cattle are in a comparatively warm color, close to the environment. In this painting, curved strokes on the sky are like surrounding the sun, less red color contamination gives viewers a sense of cold when looking at faint yellow and a small part of blue behind. The man is an attractive figure in the painting except for the clearest cow, the component color and special movements interacted with the sky. Lines are at the same angle with the man holding up his horn and centered at the furthest cow, it contains nearly the same color as the person. These details are leading to consideration of interaction with these two elements and recalling the title. These special characteristics of this painting are worthy to be discussed how realism is expressed and represented in Millet's countryside paintings.

Due to these reasons, this article expresses and confirms the difference between Millet and realism by analyzing and comparing two of his works “Calling the Cows Home” and “Hunting Birds by Torchlight”. The research compares the different structures, light directions, reflection from figures, and interaction with movements of two works. It is argued that Calling the Cows Home is a classical view painting with natural light. The calling the cows is not a single concept of Millet's creation motivations but a full series. To compare the two important works, this research also uses the whole cow paintings as illustrative series.

2. Comparison: Calling the Cows Home and Burning the Nest

The painting Calling the Cows Home depicted more than plain scenery. There are small hills and mountains in the picture. On the left side of the mountains, yellow sunlight spreads on the ground. Closer to the right side of the blue mountain, a bright line is painted along the rock edge. It is common to use brighter colors on shadow lines, but here, the line is nearly white and showed different colors with mountains. The most obvious effect is to make a distinction between two mountains. Looking at cows, the front most one was brown color, close to the ground, its right front leg shows completely same color to the ground. Millet uses reflection to highlight its' existence. Along the contour line, there is a high saturation of color separating it from the rock. However, the light is strange on the cow, the light on the right hind leg and left front means light should come from its' left side, but there is also a light on the right side of the cow's back, which means it comes above the cow, at least from the upper left. Light is not blocked by its' huge body but makes the contour line of hid leg. Back to the background, the light actually shines from the rear.



Figure 1. Calling the Cows Home, Oil on wood, ca. 1872, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 37 1/4 x 25 1/2 in. (94.6 x 64.8 cm)

So the edge of the cow's legs is covered with yellow shimmering lines. The cow has a light source behind it and another one from the upper left. Right legs have several reasons to have no reflect light. Firstly, the rear light can not be seen in front, as there is yellow around the edge. Secondly, the upper-left light was blocked by its' left leg or body, and it shouldn't be the mountain since the shadow of the mountain didn't reach here. Thirdly and most obviously, because it is not finished [7]. There is more possible to be the third reason, the leg has been colored, similar to the stomach, and distinct lines of the mountain and ground did not appear, so even though it is not finished, the main tune should be certain. According to its yellow contour, it should be only hit by the light behind. Except for this leg, Millet has created a rectangular space for the body shape with two legs on different sides. At the same time, these differences create a sense of moving for the cow and the man is comparatively still. This contrast also gives the painting a dramatic effect.



Figure 2. Chasse aux Oiseaux par lumiere des torches (Hunting Birds by Torchlight), stamped with signature 'J.F. Millet' (Lugt 1816; lower left) (Robert L. Herbert's 1894), charcoal heightened with white chalk on rose-gray canvas, 22.3/8 x 28 in. (57 x 71 cm.)

This painting was created just before Millet passed away. He preferred to paint these bright paintings at a later period. Compared to "Calling the Cows Home". This late-finished work included more details. It shows a scene of four people working together hunting birds, they bring down those birds by club while they are flying. In the picture, two of them are grabbing falling birds from the ground, with another two hitting down the birds. One of them lifts the torch high to the birds. Instead of hunting birds with a torch, with club probably fits the scene better. The figures' motion is essential for creating the atmosphere together with the one-point light. The left one on the painting is looking up, trying to see those birds, and he raised both of his hands, one hitting the birds while another one blocking the strong light from the torch. His cloak creates a place for Millet to show the light path by hay lit by the light. He draws some straight lines emitting from the torch, some are just the same as how that hay goes on the man's back. His left hand which has nothing was hung up and only contains the rear light, there is no light on his palm, this reminds viewers that the two standing men are not in the same horizontal line. The four people together made more space.

Looking at another man who holds the torch, he was a lot brighter than the others. His dynamic movement was like a snapshot that strongly interact with the light. The scene kind of recalls the Romanticism painting, figures are active and sudden. With the left leg lifting, the whole body contains a tendency to slump forward, this movement gives the figuring power. His leg and club all straightly point to the light source. In the scene, the light from the crevices of the bird flock was similar to sunlight shining down from the clouds, mainly enlightened standing people and a circular range of birds. Looking at their movement, interacting with light, their club is hitting birds, but also breaking kind of shackles. The yellow color was like cracks, making the whole bird flock a wall. Millet used mainly orange at the bottom, and brightly yellow above to make a distinction. Highlighting the torchlight is one of his means to serve the purpose.

3. Sketches and Oil Paintings

Through the comparison, it is discovered that Millet used to construct his painting with calm and stretch feeling and linear structure in a natural light situation while he creates intense, hollow structures in human-made, point light source. In "Hunting birds by torchlight", Millet uses strongly contrasting colors to create a tense atmosphere. All the elements in the painting are aggregated towards one point, which is the torchlight [8]. The ascending tendency of the light source and all the other elements together gives the work a dramatically intense feeling [8, 9]. In calling the cows home, the light source is stretched to the same distance as the skyline. It has a relaxing feeling by making cows separate from each other in different places. They are not straightly walking towards a point but facing different directions following the turning road. However, even though natural light paintings look naturalistic. They appear to be processed by Millet. he adds structure line to his paintings, some vertical lines in the scene help viewers to better understand the distance and space in the picture, and all his daytime works contains a long, horizontal skyline. Especially for daytime paintings, Millet often uses vertical lines. This kind of method is embodied in some of other Millet's sketches.



Figure 3. Millet's charcoal sketch with the same theme of caws oil paintings

As Figure 3 has shown, in this sketch, the scene is left-skewed because of the terrain and high trees, horizontal line is used to balance the painting such as the water ripple and fence appearing further above the skyline. At the same time, Millet included some vertical lines from cows' legs, humans, trees and houses. These increased the gradation of the picture. This skill is very common in both his sketches and finished oil paintings.

Secondly, this painting's background is nearly empty except for a few trees on the left as vertical images. And since there are not enough figures to create a sense of space, Millet chose to add lines following perspective rules on the grassland and strengthened the depiction of the cow and woman, and their sense of volume, including light reflection and texture. Their vertical structures including the cow's horizontal back, upright leg, and shoulder, also the woman provided obvious visual elements as an expression of space. To create the stability of the space, he also draws horizontal lines between those perspective lines on land, and clouds, the figure is stuck in the middle of a room.

Thirdly, Millet for most of his paintings prefers a darker light environment. The caw paintings are not exceptions. The painting is darker than the upper works, figures look like gathering at the brightest part of the picture. the crooked clouds and inclining cow pointing to the light source have got similarities to "hunting birds with torchlight". There are no exactly straight vertical lines shown in the scene, but among the woman and cow's motion, for example, their legs, still have an inclination of perpendicular to the skyline.



Figure 4. Millet's charcoal sketch with the same theme of caws oil paintings

Millet sometimes also uses a rotating perspective constructed by multiple vertical lines to direct the eye. As Figure 4 has shown, most portion of the painting is filled with those trees, the strength is different from other paintings. He puts higher trees on the left and smaller trees on the right, and the interval between trees on both sides are gradually decreasing as they gathered at the vanishing point of vision. Their shadows provide the scene with lines 90 degrees from the tree. This moving and turning view creates an active feeling to the work.

After viewing these paintings, a caw painting series can be established within these three caw painting pictures. A discovery can be made that Millet has made balance to his work through perpendicular lines in the scene. Except for the water ripple in the first one, the second one also has shallower horizontal lines between every two lines stretching forward. At the same time, Millet has also paid attention to his brush strokes. The ground in the last sketch was made up of slightly undulating horizontal lines which go in the same direction as the shadow helping stabilize the picture. Back to "Calling the Cows Home", this work shows some differences from other Millet's artwork. Millet used mostly tilted lines on the left, so it seems higher than the right side. He then added a further horizontal mountain with dark blue or purple behind the cowherd and put a bigger cow in front. These together lift the lower side. Meanwhile, as the man formed a vertical line toward the skyline, his staff was painted opposite with other sketches mentioned above. Compared with his right arm towards the upper left and curved body form, the staff provided support to the figure itself. In the scene, the most conspicuous line standing upright comes from a continuous linear relationship including the human body, the mountain, and the cow's front leg. The leg was printed with high brightness of color, and there are no other bright parts nearby. While looking at the picture, the line can be easily realized with the light reflection. By using brushstrokes and the tendency of cattle to move, Millet gives up drawing multiple parallel lines, but builds up the balance through the light, brush strokes, and motion of figures in his painting.

There are different usage and certain effects of figures appearing on the skyline. Among these examples, the difference in the amount of the figures caused different effects on it. The first and last work contains the greatest amount of figures along the skyline. The other two of them got only a few smaller figures above the line. While viewers are looking at pictures that have higher complexity of things near their skyline, which means bigger figures, and with the bottom lower than the ground, these simply pulled the line closer to people since they will feel it closer if they can collect more details. In contrast, other paintings do not lower the skyline, so the scene feels further. At the same time, a split skyline similarly decreases the distance. Most of the line is covered with trees. The fence

in the first painting contains a clear vertical board, black along its edge made a clear distinction between it and the bright sky. The bright side of the house on the right refers to that light coming straightly from the left.

The essential figure in Figure 3 is the vertical trees on left. They are only constructed by simple vertical lines without any details inferring to viewers that they are far away from the main character in front. Being put in the brightest portion of the work, their job is to remind people of the changing space. The third one is a backlighting scene. Among those few fuzzy figures, their color and shape are similar to the cloud, some even fly to the same height as the cloud, viewers can not easily recognize their species, Millet painted a thin, curved moon on top of the light source. This highlighting figure has great particularity among Millet's works [10]. It is not only out of the skyline but also bright among all skyline figures. Skyline in the last picture is separated by trees. Through the trunk, there appear cattle and houses which made a distinction between sky and land. Millet used mainly profile and shadows to describe the structure of the figures, but spend less time showing sunlight coming from the left side.

Distant figures also interact with closer characters, for example, the cowherd may live in houses behind, or they may come from the herd as in sketches. In the last sketch, the woman and her cow seem walking to the front alone on the turning road with trees on both sides. By correlating front and back figures with objects that are logically related or making direct connections by lines from extending roads.

"Calling the Cows Home" has multiple skylines with different distances. Closer one slants downward to the right with lots of cows standing. But most of them are shaded by another mountain line further away from sunlight except for one cow exposed under bright background. Millet used almost the same color with the farthest mountain and the lighted cow expressing distance. And its dark color can to a certain degree improve brightness around through comparison. Most cows with bright yellow are gathered on the inclining mountain to make a distinction between the two skylines. The whole picture forms a "z" shaped path similar to the last sketch, obvious distinction lines between mountains showed how cows walk step-by-step to viewers.

4. Conclusion

After analyzing a series of Millet's works as a realism painter, he is to be believed also meticulous in light arrangement and with deep consideration of details rather than simply choosing different times or perspectives. Through elements like triangle composition in "Hunting Birds with Torch Light", vertical lines, and a variety of colors, Millet harmonized between the dynamic environment and stable structure. It is argued that different from a simplistic realism view, Millet has his peripheral sensation in describing the light environment. The balance he deliberately shows in his cow paintings is beyond the notions of realism or romanticism. It is suggested that more details analysis can be drawn from the comparison of Millet's sketches and oil paintings on wood and canvas.

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