

The Unknown Impressionist



Gustave Caillebotte in 1878

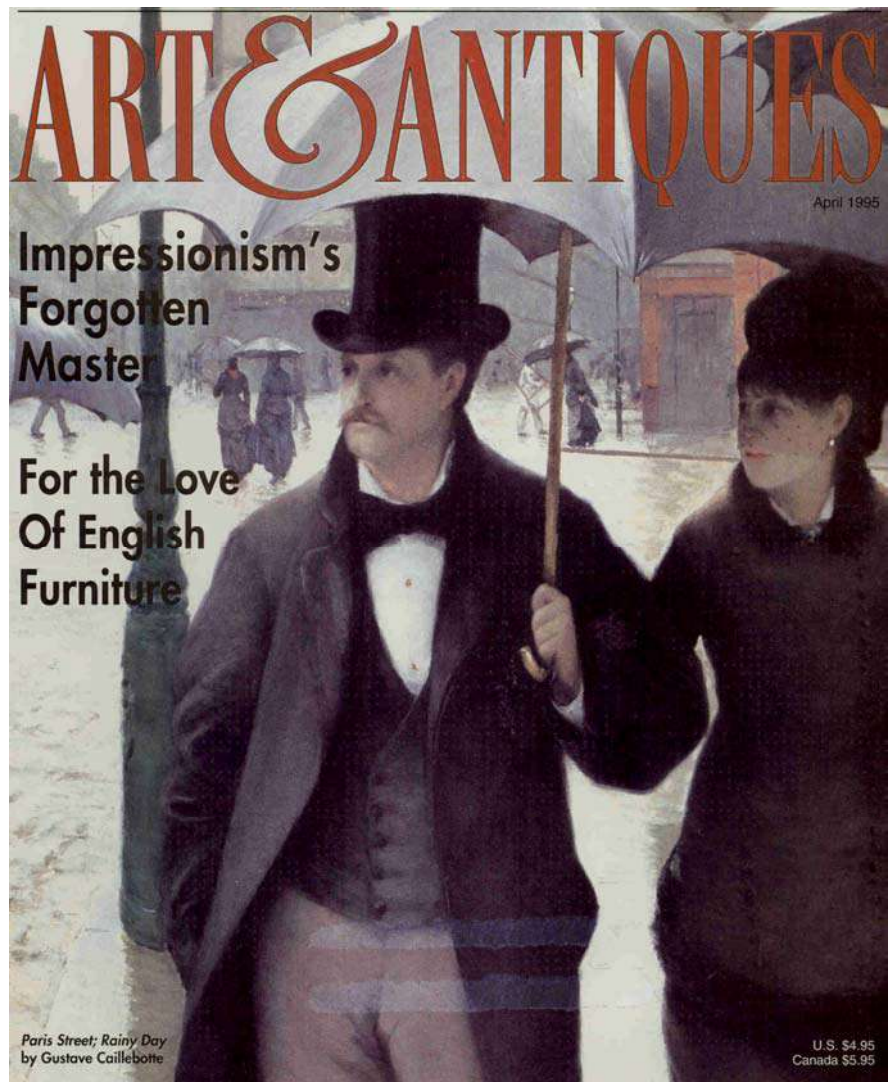
By Andrew Patner

IF ONE TRIED TO CONSTRUCT AN IDENTITY for the world's greatest unknown artist, one would probably imagine him—or her—having inhabited an unheated garret in some obscure Middle European town, away from critics, collectors, and artistic colleagues. After years of penniless existence, the artist would have died, a consumptive or a suicide, leaving an artistic legacy hidden in the back rooms of provincial antique shops. Our hero would only be discovered decades later by a doctoral student rummaging through a box of papers left behind by the artist's only admirer.

But the leading candidate for this honor fits none of these criteria. He was a fabulously wealthy man whose work was not seen for years because he had no need to sell it, or even to have a dealer. In fact, he was a purchaser of art on a grand scale, the greatest patron of his friends and colleagues Monet, Degas, Renoir, and other members of the circle that he himself helped to organize as the impressionists.

With unique foresight, he willed his collection of these modern masters to the French state, and the works formed the nucleus of the Musee du Luxembourg and its successors, the old Jeu de Paume and today's Musee d'Orsay.

And yet, only now, a century after his death at age



Caillebotte. On the Europe Bridge. 1876-77

forty-five, is a wide audience recognizing that Gustave Caillebotte was himself a painter of extraordinary ability, a keen observer of the growth of the modern city, and a bold prophet of entirely new ways of seeing.

Caillebotte actually furthered his own obscurity. Concerned more with the disposition of his defining collection of impressionists, the artist, who never married, willed his own paintings to his brother Martial; the bulk of them have remained in the family's hands until the present day. Even illustrations of most of Caillebotte's works were unknown until family members put a limited number of pieces up for sale in 1951.

It was not until the Art Institute of Chicago's 1964 acquisition of Caillebotte's mammoth 1877 masterpiece *Paris Street; Rainy Day* (right) that major public recognition began to come his way. Only one other of his pieces, *Floor-Scrapers* (1875), had previously entered a museum collection, when Caillebotte's executor, Auguste Renoir, insisted, with Monet's endorsement, that it be part of Caillebotte's legacy to the French nation. As art lovers noticed these two apparently isolated pieces, interest in the Caillebotte mystery began to grow. After seeing *Paris*



Street for the first time in 1969 (as a reproduction on the cover of an exhibition catalogue), Kirk Varnedoe, now chief curator of painting and sculpture at New York's Museum of Modern Art, devoted himself to reviving the artist's reputation. In 1976 he organized, in Houston and Brooklyn, the first Caillebotte museum exhibition since the artist's death and published a path-breaking monograph.

Now we have the first international retrospective of his work, featuring the full complement of his dozen masterpieces as well as an additional eighty paintings and some thirty works on paper, mostly intriguing studies for his major canvases. Organized by the French National Museums/Musee d'Orsay and the Art Institute, and originally seen at the Grand Palais in Paris last fall, "Gustave Caillebotte: Urban Impressionist" is on view in Chicago through May 28 and will be at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from June 22 to September 10.

So often it is said that a retrospective enables the public to see a familiar artist in a new light. This show instead sheds light on an artist of tremendous importance who was little known before. Assisted, as well, by a comprehensive catalogue published last year in France and this year in English in the U.S., interest in Caillebotte will surely reach a new—and deserved—peak. Looking back on his twenty-five years of contemplating the artist, Varnedoe writes in the catalogue's introduction, "I would value any one of Caillebotte's best works ...as more important, original, and rewarding paintings than any Pissarro, all but a handful of Renoirs, and a fair number of Monets from the same period."

Varnedoe admits that Caillebotte's career was not lengthy—he exhibited for only seven years. His greatest works came at the beginning of that period, when he was still in his late twenties, and he did not show the growth or development that makes a career "great." Evaluating the work "picture for picture," as Varnedoe does, however, we have little choice but to agree with his assessment.

Caillebotte's early life did not seem to point to a heady artistic career. His father had a lucrative contract to supply heavy textiles to the French army, and Caillebotte dutifully earned a law degree in his native Paris, presumably with plans to carry on in the family enterprise. He then studied with a lesser-known teacher of painting, the Spanish-trained Leon Bonnat, but little is recorded of his tutelage. He appears to have attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts only fitfully after entering in 1873. And he came into his inheritance when his father died the following year.

In the great French tradition, his paintings were refused by the Salon of 1875. More unusually, he was invited by Renoir and Henri Rouart, with whom he had some vague relations, to show in the second impressionist exhibition, in 1876. Only twenty-seven, Caillebotte contributed several works that displayed his highly finished style—and a perspective, technique, and palette markedly different from those of the circle's senior members.

The impressionists had already shocked the mainstream critics by turning to the out-of-doors and scenes of daily life for their subject matter. But with his first pieces, Caillebotte went much further. A child of the new Paris, he had grown up with the uniform apartment blocks and broad boulevards Baron Haussmann created for the Second Empire. (It has been observed that all of the buildings in Caillebotte's Paris paintings were erected in his lifetime.) And he took this world, with its anonymous streets, its changing fashions, and its sharp contrast between the private and public realms, as his principal subject.

In *Floor-Scrapers* (1875) (right), Caillebotte confronted his audience with a giant portrait of workmen in the family home at 77, rue de Miromesnil, in a newly-built quarter of the Eighth Arrondissement. While portraying peasants in the field was a time-honored tradition, observed by the salon and the impressionists alike, Caillebotte put urban craftsmen at center stage. And he did so not to explore the effect of light or a type of brushstroke, but to create a scene rich in both character and ambiguity. He humanizes the men by refusing to idealize their bodies, by giving one man a wedding band, and by placing an open bottle and glass of wine at arm's length from them.



Caillebotte employs the unusual perspective that characterizes much of his work to show a thoroughly contemporary scene. The viewer can see from the window that the scene is a city apartment, not a country manor, and the men's activity adds to the picture's immediacy. Critics, of course, equated this realism with vulgarity. One denounced a variant of this painting that Caillebotte included in the exhibition, wrongly

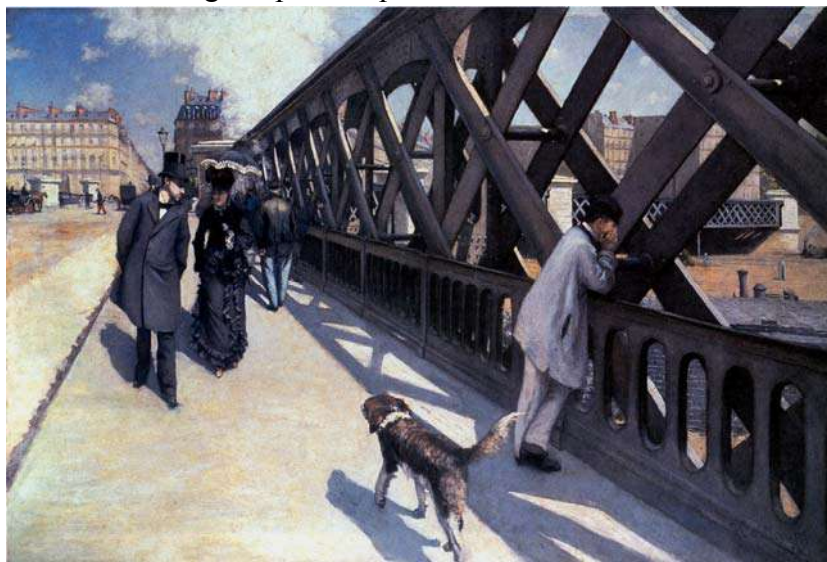
claiming that it showed an apprentice checking his body for lice. In any case, the scene of sweaty, proletarian labor was exactly counter to what the bourgeois public expected to see.



Caillebotte was intensely aware of these growing divisions in the urban fabric, and they would later play a part in his permanent move to the country. Another powerful work on this topic is *Young Man at His Window* (1875) (left). A male figure (the artist's younger brother, Rene) stands at an open window with his back to the viewer and stares out into a new world both bright and curiously cold. His face is not shown, even in the window reflection. It was Rene's death at twenty-six in 1876 that led Caillebotte to draft his will two days later. Except for a codicil for his companion, the young actress Charlotte Berthier, he left his entire collection to the state and never altered this testament.

Caillebotte's key role in the history of the impressionists is too frequently ignored, most recently by the "Origins of Impressionism" show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. From his own inclusion in the 1876 impressionist exhibition, the artist became the principal ringleader, financier, promoter, and goad of these exhibitions for the next six years. He used his wealth and charm to cultivate and support his friends Renoir; Monet, Cezanne, Degas, Pissarro, Alfred Sisley, and Berthe Morisot. "Nobody wants them?" he would say of their pictures. "Then I will buy them." In bequeathing the sixty-five works of his better-known colleagues, he was aware of the general hostility to their work. He wisely chose the genial Renoir as his representative, and even proposed a "cooling off" period of twenty years before transferring the canvases, to allow for a change in public opinion.

The 1877 impressionist show saw an even more spectacular group of works from Caillebotte. While he continued his tweaking of critical noses with a study of housepainters, it was the thoroughly novel *Le Pont de L'Europe* (right) and the enormous (nearly seven by ten feet) *Paris Street; Rainy Day* that marked his arrival as a bearer of a singular vision. Workingmen and a boulevardier on an iron bridge comprised one scene, and the time-frozen couples dropped onto a monumental radial intersection formed Caillebotte's most lasting, haunting creation.



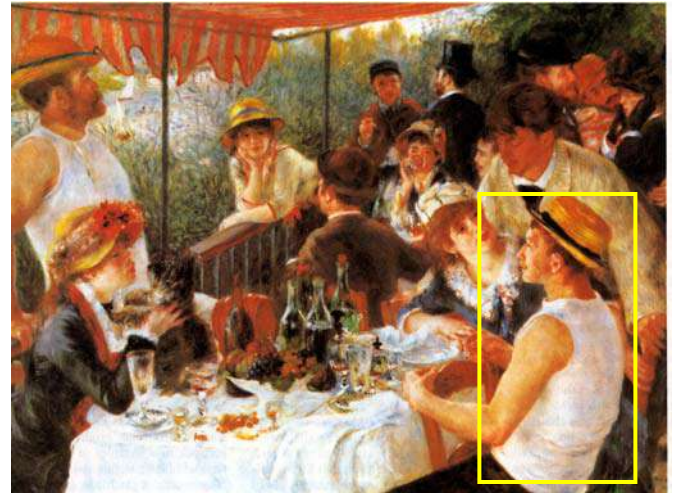
With its forced cropping and lack of a single point of reference, *Paris Street* forecast the development of the photographic and cinematic sensibility that has shaped our lives in the 20th century. With the aerial view of his *Boulevard Seen from Above* (1880), Caillebotte pushed this particular vision as far as it could go. By 1882, he had stopped exhibiting altogether and devoted increasing amounts of time to stamp collecting and then to sailing and designing his own racing yachts.

Caillebotte still saw himself as a source of assistance and companionship for the painters he admired. Through his estate at Petit Gennevilliers near Argenteuil, he introduced Monet to gardening. He nursed Renoir through illnesses and was immortalized by him in *The Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1881), now in the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. He was also one of the leading subscribers to Monet's 1890 effort to purchase Manet's historic *Olympia* for the state.

Upon Caillebotte's death in 1894, Renoir moved quickly to compel the state to accept the artist's donation. Even though Renoir was forced to reduce the collection to forty paintings (the leading Salon painter, Jean Leon Gerome, had denounced the collection as "filth" and "a blot on morality"), when the Caillebotte Room opened at the Luxembourg in 1897 it was the first exhibition of the impressionists in a French museum.

The current market-driven art world is obsessed with output. The value of Andy Warhol's silk-screens is calculated and then multiplied by their near-infinite number. The galleries search furiously for the next young art star, only to dispose of him two years later. But for reasons of both chance and choice, of circumstance and will, Caillebotte is an exception to this unfortunate trait of the modern world that he helped to usher in. When he felt it was time for him to stop exhibiting work, he just stopped.

Not every picture in this retrospective matches his most provocative works: His still lifes and floral studies, with a few exceptions, are unremarkable, and there are a few too many sailboats in his later years. But his oeuvre, an overview of the birth of the modern urban consciousness, is captivating and endlessly rewarding. A century after his premature death, we can only marvel at the brilliance of this brief though thoroughly untragic career. And we can also celebrate the fact that the greatest unknown impressionist is unknown no more.



Renoir pays tribute to his friend and patron Caillebotte, outlined above, in *Luncheon of the Boating Party*.