Millet's Peasant Image: The Receptive Phenomenon in Asia*

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1. Introduction

Jean François Millet (1824-75) is one of the few artists blessed with high popularity. Millet’s The Sower (fig. 1), The Angelus (fig. 2) or The Gleaners (fig. 3) are well-known, even amongst lay people.

However, when Millet’s works were first shown in Paris, the reaction was mixed and they aroused controversy amongst the critics. The Winnowing (fig. 4), which was exhibited at the Salon of 1848 only several weeks after the February revolution of 1848, and The Sower, exhibited at the 1850 Salon, met with hostile criticism because it was felt that these peasant images implied a socio-political connotations. The conservative critics and salon goers felt uncomfortable with this

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powerful, full-scale peasant replete with coarse detail. The progressive critics, on the other hand, praised Millet's portrayal of peasants as a
potential social force. The Cleaners of 1857 also led two different interpretations. Some felt that it expressed the passage of time in nature and evoked the harmonious idyll of the farm. This painting could also be analyzed from a socialistic perspective. The three figures scavenging for the leftovers are the poorest of the peasant class who have license to glean, and are juxtaposed against the stacks of the harvest of a wealthy farm, shown on the distant horizon.

Yet, as the intense political atmosphere of 1848 eased, Millet’s reputation changed from the mid-1860s. Millet’s peasants were read as following the laws of nature, and his works were received as nostalgic and pastoral depictions of rural life. Millet, the peasant painter, was widely recognized internationally.

The person who played the biggest role in creating the myth of Millet was his friend, civil servant, critic, and art dealer, Alfred Sensier (1815-1877). Early on, Sensier was interested in the Barbizon school and bought many of Millet’s early works, befriending him in the process. Acting as Millet’s representative, Sensier sold Millet’s works at high prices from the 1860s onward. In 1880, Sensier published Millet’s biography where poverty-stricken Millet was portrayed as being deeply religious and devoting his life to the peasantry. Sensier particularly idealized Millet’s private life and personality, and elevated Millet’s family as the ideal family of a rural landscape painter.

In the United States, Millet was known around the Boston area from very early on, since several people from Boston were in and out of Barbizon. For instance, William Morris Hunt studied with Millet in Barbizon for two years and introduced Millet’s works to his Boston friends, including Martin Brimmer, who was the director of
the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.1) After Millet’s death in 1875, his popularity was not limited to the Boston area. His works were frequently mentioned in journalism or in religious preachings. Millet’s biography was translated into English in 1881 in the United States, and constantly quoted afterwards.

His works had spread and reached a zenith during the 1880s and 90s, and they were being collected by wealthy Americans. The religious connotations and serene landscape with the recurrent rhythms of farm labor inherent in his works was extremely popular in the Puritan-minded United States. Not having France’s feudalism and class structure, the Americans did not have to fear the representation of the peasant class.

Gradually, Millet’s works became popular icons. His works were reproduced in huge numbers. In 1890, The Chicago Tribune printed an ad that sold Millet’s reprints for $5.2) In 1907, his The Angelus appeared in the farmer’s seed catalogue (fig. 5) and also became the logo of the Bank of America.3)

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Upon entering the 20th century, as modernism and abstract art prevailed, Millet's works appeared in Western countries, to be old-fashioned and sentimental. Art historical interest in Millet's works also decreased. It was not until the 1960s when the art historian Robert L. Herbert presented articles on the relationship between Millet's works and the modernization of society that research on Millet's works was revived.4) Most recently, Laura L. Meixner published a book on Millet phenomena and how Millet was perceived in the United States.5)

In Asia, the belated interest in Millet started in the first half of the 20th century. By the mid-1930s, Millet had become the most widely known Western painter in Korea, Japan, and China. The reproductions of The Angelus or The Gleaners could be seen in magazines, homes or public places.

This paper started out as a simple question as to why Millet was

5. Laura L. Meixner, Ibid.
so popular in Korea. The recollection of having to memorize the text of Millet’s *The Angelus* in the fifth grade of elementary school in the 1960s is still fresh in my mind. In this paper, my main focus will be how Millet was introduced to Asia and what the Korean people saw or read in Millet’s peasant images.

2. The Myth of Millet

Before examining the receptive phenomenon of Millet’s peasant images in Asia, I would first like to begin with a quotation from Korea’s elementary school fifth grade textbook that was used during the period of 1955-1972.

*Millet’s *The Angelus*

Have you seen the painting of a young couple holding work-roughened hands together while quietly praying in the fields at sunset? This is the world-renowned painting, *The Angelus.* The famous artist Jean-François Millet painted this work. Millet was born 150 years ago in a small village called Gruchy in France. He was the son of a poor peasant couple. Ever since he was a child, Millet loved to paint and was extremely talented. When Millet was twenty-one years old, the first to recognize his aspirations to paint was the village priest. Eventually, Millet left for Paris to pursue his dream to study art. …

In Paris, Millet was soon nicknamed the "savage of the forest" by his friends. Millet was so poor and couldn’t live like his friends who were well off. But Millet did not care about that and said to himself, "A country boy doesn’t have to emulate city people. It is nothing to be ashamed of to be like a country boy."

… Millet worked very hard at his studies. Day by day, Millet’s
talent improved even to the surprise of his teacher. His teacher took Millet’s paintings and showed them to the rest of his classmates. But Millet could not afford his tuition fee and thus could no longer attend school. When his teacher found out about Millet’s situation, he said, "Do not worry about things like tuition fees, just concentrate on your studies." However, it was not just the tuition fee that needed to be dealt with. Millet was destitute.

At that time, pleasurable paintings were popular in Paris and they were sold at a very high price. Although this was not what he wanted, poverty-stricken Millet had no choice but to paint these paintings. One day, when Millet was painting one of these paintings on the street, several passersby stopped to look at his work and said, "A sham of an artist. What kind of art is that?" Those words pained Millet as if he had been hit with a hammer. Millet took his paintings and went back home to reflect upon the issue.

"It’s true. Up until now, I have lived a very cowardly life. In order to have bread, I have painted empty paintings that have no meaning for me. If I must work in order to live, I should have been a peasant just like my father and grandfather. But I have another calling. The land that supported my ancestors is ingrained in my bones. The work that I must do is to nurture that land and to capture the truth in the faces of those who work on the land. Plowing, sowing, harvesting, homely peasants, flocks of gamboling sheep, the warm light of the sun, and cozy forests — I will capture all of these elements in my work! I must leave this bustling city as soon as possible."

... Upon settling down in the country, Millet immediately began painting in the midst of picturesque fields. Holding his own amongst the earth, the sky, and the forests, Millet felt as though he had returned to the warmth of his mother’s embrace.

However, Millet’s family was even more destitute than before. As
autumn passed and the weather became colder, there was not enough firewood to heat Millet's room. At times like this, Millet would leave his room to stroll across the fields which were awash with the color of the sunset. During these walks, Millet would closely observe the people of his village. Millet wanted to capture the spirit of these hardworking peasants in his work.

One day, Millet was painting on a white sheet with audacity. It was a painting of a couple who had got up, stretched their back and were giving thanks in prayer upon hearing the evening church bell after the hard day's work. It was a painting of the silhouette of their bent heads against the sunset. The scene, cast by their shadows, entranced Millet.

This was what Millet had hoped to paint for a very long time. Millet felt an everlasting joy and love for peasants when he observed his painting. Millet later repainted this work on a larger scale. When the painting was finished, Millet's friend came to see it and was exceedingly happy. "You have painted The Angelus!" he exclaimed. For the two people standing in front of the painting, it was as though they could hear the faint echo of church bells across the fields. "It's a success! It's magnificent!" The two friends shook hands.

... Throughout the rest of Millet's modest life, he continued to paint magnificent paintings and in 1875, at the age of 61, Millet passed away. Though he has left this world, his work continues to convey a sense of truth and beauty inherent in his work. If you stand in front of "The Angelus," you too will be able to hear the faint echo of the angelus across the field.

This is the exceedingly moving story of a great painter, who was born to a poor peasant family in Gruchy, arriving in Paris only to be driven to paint pictures that he did not have the heart for by that
same poverty. Upon his returning to the countryside, he lived with the village peasants, painting real works of peasant life, thus becoming a famous painter who gained the respect of others. The story was part of the unit on 'stories of great men' in the fifth grade textbook. However, there are many discrepancies in this story. Though Millet's parents were peasants, they were prospering farmers. Scholars of Millet point out that though Millet did assist with the farming, he was quite well educated as he studied Latin with the village priest, and particularly enjoyed the ancient Roman writings of Virgil and Theocritus as well as Shakespeare, and his favorite was the lyrical prose of Robert Burns (1759-1796).

Millet went to École des Beaux Arts in Paris and studied under the tutelage of Paul Delaroche (1790-1850) as he received the scholarship of the city of Cherbourg through the help of his art instructor, Lucien-Théophile Langlois (1803-1846). Though it is true that country-bred Millet was nicknamed the 'savage of the forest,' as Sensier wrote in his biography, Delaroche was far from an ideal instructor. Millet's scholarship was cut when he had dropped out of school after two years of attendance. In the aftermath, because he was living in poverty, Millet did paint nudes to sell as this was mentioned in Sensier's biography. Yet, Millet's consequent move to Barbizon was not because of the negative remarks he heard in the street. Art historian, T. J. Clark, asserts that Millet's arrival in Barbizon was indeed a turning point in his life as an artist, but it seems unlikely that he returned solely to paint the peasants. Clark

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states that with the need to escape the riots of the June Revolution, the rampant cholera epidemic, and Millet's dire financial straits (as the standard of living in Barbizon would have been much less than it was in Paris), all played a part in Millet's decision to return to the countryside. Clark also points out that though Millet had received money in advance for a work commissioned by the government, Millet submitted a different work instead. It is because of these various reasons that Millet abruptly left for Barbizon one week before the 1849 Salon exhibition.

Millet actually began painting rural landscapes four years before he even arrived in Barbizon. His works had already been selected for the Salon and critics were not all critical of his work. Millet's poverty has also been greatly exaggerated. Though it is true that Millet was destitute in Paris, from 1860 onwards, his circumstances improved as he attracted the attention of several art dealers. Not only did he employ a maid from as early as 1851, Millet always had enough to eat on his table. Another aspect of Millet's private life that has fascinated scholars has been his reputation as a complex personality. Millet was Catholic, but did not attend church. It seems also that Millet continually suffered from headaches and that he did not get on very well with the villagers of Barbizon. While in Barbizon, Millet's family increased by nine children, yet Millet's own parents were unaware of Millet's marriage and his family. Millet's return to his home took place after the death of his mother in 1853, nine years after he had left home. Millet's formal marriage only took place in

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1874, barely a year before his death.

As the above evidence indicates, the story in the elementary school textbook is a glorified biography of sorts. From his display of superior talent as a child to having a mentor in Paris to his noble return to nature are all idealizations, hackneyed at best. The background as to how this story of Millet was selected in Korean elementary level textbooks is not all that clear. It was, however, customary during this period for the Korean Ministry of Education to edit works that had already been written to render them suitable for elementary school students. It is therefore difficult to determine who the specific author was. This idealized biography is almost identical to writings on Millet in the United States and Japan, which may be the sources for the Korean version.

3. The Introduction and Reception of Millet in East Asia

1) Japan and China

In Asia, the first nation to be introduced to Millet was Japan.9) The first person to introduce Millet in Japan was Antonio Fontanesi (1818-1882), an Italian instructor of Painting, who was invited by the Kobu Art School in 1876, the first art school to teach Western style technique in Japan. Fontanesi was primarily a landscape painter of the Barbizon style and a friend of Charles-François Daubigny (1817-1879), one of the painters of the Barbizon school. When

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Fontanesi arrived in Japan, he came prepared with Millet’s sketches, prints, and reproductions amongst his teaching materials. Japan’s first Western style painter, Takahashi Yuichi (1828-1894), copied two works by Millet, *Peasants* and *Girl Burning Leaves*, both of which were in Fontanesi’s collection.

Several Japanese scholars have brought attention to the correlation between Millet’s popularity and missionary propaganda. Uchida Iwao states that it is American missionaries who introduced Millet to the Japanese public after 1887. Takumi Hideo asserts that around this time, a Christian movement was at its zenith with many youths idolizing Christianity. Tano Yasunori likewise affirms that Protestants presented Millet’s works as an example of expression of noble and religious sentiment. These arguments, interesting as they may be, remain as speculation without presenting any concrete evidence.

There were several Japanese who had visited the Barbizon school. In 1886, Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908) who taught at Tokyo Imperial University visited Barbizon with Okakura Tenshin (1862-1913), an art historian who later became the principle of Tokyo School of Fine Arts. Kuroda Seiki (1866-1924), one of the most influential Japanese painters of Western style Painting, started to admire Millet’s work while he was studying in France. Not only did he buy a book on Millet, he visited Millet’s house in 1884. Asai Chû (1856-1907), who was a student of Fontanesi and was under Millet’s influence, also

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10 Uchida Iwao, *Millet to Corot* (Millet and Corot), Iwanami Shôten, Tokyo, 1950, p. 161

visited Millet's home in 1901 during his stay in France.

The first Japanese exhibition of Millet's works was in 1890 at the second annual Meiji art exhibition. Two works of Millet from Hayashi Tadamasa's collection, Group of People and Late Autumn, were shown with other works from the Barbizon school. Professor of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, Wada Eisaku (1874-1959) who copied Millet's works during his trip to Europe, also provided another opportunity to view his works in Japan.

In the latter half of the Meiji period, books on Millet began to be published. In 1903, the first picture book of Millet was published by Kabôsha. Three volumes of books on Millet's works were published in 1906 by Sekaisha. The literary magazine, Shirakaba, an influential journal of arts and literature, published an article on Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), and gave reference to Millet as having influenced van Gogh. Around this period, it was not just art, but literary circles and literary magazines which referred to Millet's career and his works. In 1909, an ad for a painter's box named after Millet appeared in the magazine, Hosun.

In the Taisho period, which lasted from 1912-1926, the art circle began to lose interest in Realism in favor of Post-Impressionism, and Millet's name became less frequently mentioned in art magazines. However, the popularity of Millet among the general public increased in the 1920s.

By this time, Western style buildings were changing the face of cities, although the countryside remained unchanged. Japan was already a capitalist economy with a well-developed industrial structure. Factories were producing many products and as foreign exports came in, the huge zaibatsu conglomerates were born. The majority of
factory workers were originally farm laborers. The problem of laborers and farmers was already brewing by the beginning of the 20th century and developed into a full-scale movement by 1920. The most riveting document from this period was the first edition of the Proletariat Literature Movement magazine, entitled, *The Sower*. Published in 1921, this magazine was closely connected with peasant literature and on the cover was Millet's *The Sower*. This indicates that Millet's *The sower* was being read as a socialist instigator at this period.

In the 1930s, Millet's works had become part of popular culture. Around 1933, the product called 'Millet's Paint' was advertised in an art magazine (fig. 6). The most famous use of Millet's work was in 1933. The renowned publisher, Iwanami Shōten used the image of *The Sower* as their company logo (fig. 7). President Iwanami Sigeo joked that Millet's *The Sower* symbolized the aspiration to be the first to plant the seeds of culture.\footnote{12} It became commonplace to see reproductions of Millet's *The Angelus* or *The Gleaners* in Japan.\footnote{13} In 1960, three textbooks for elementary school carried the story of Millet.


\footnote{13. Harada Heisaku, "Nihon to Millet, sono shōronteki Kosatsu (Japan and Millet, its introductory study)," *Millet ten* (Millet Exhibition), Yamanashi Prefectural Art Museum, 1985, p 29}
Fig. 6, Advertisement of 'Millet Paint' in Atelier, Japan.

Fig. 7, Logo for Publisher Iwanami Shoten

In 1970, a large-scale exhibition on Millet was held in Tokyo's Seibu department store, and in 1978, the Yamanasi Prefectural Museum was able to procure The Sower which attracted many tour groups. In 1985, the traveling exhibition of Millet and the Barbizon School, brought the Boston collection to Japan.

Although there was no research as far as I know of the extent of Millet's influence in China, it is supposed that people were well aware of Millet from 1920-40 as a great number of books were translated into Chinese on Western artists. In 1930, Lu Shun, the

14. Millet painted two version of The Sower. The first version is now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the second version is in Yamanashi Prefectural Art Museum. The second version was submitted to the salon of 1850.
writer and thinker who was key figure of the left wing artists group of Hangzhou and Shanghai, pronounced Millet’s The Gleaners as being generous, expressive and beautiful, and regarded Millet as an artist who could provoke a passionate response.\textsuperscript{15} Interest in Millet continued to take on a Communist slant. The Shanghai People’s Art Museum published a series of monographs on Western artists in 1959-64, which included Millet.\textsuperscript{16} Art historian Michael Sullivan asserts that even in the 1950s, Chinese students studied Millet and Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), another Realist painter. One to receive the influence of Millet was sculptor and painter Lao Xinshui (1901-1958), and Millet’s influence could be seen even up until 1980 in China, where realism was still much appreciated (fig. 8).

\textbf{Fig. 8, He Duoling, Spring Breezes Have Arrived, Oil on Canvas, 1980. China.}

\textsuperscript{15} Michael Sullivan, \textit{Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China}, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996, p. 82.

2) Korea

How was Millet introduced to Korea? It seems one can consider two possibilities. One source could be through American missionaries who were active in Korea between the end of the 19th century Choson Dynasty and the Japanese colonial period which lasted from 1910 to 1945. The other possibility is through Japan, which served as an intermediary for the introduction of new Western culture to Korea. Since there is little evidence to support the first supposition, it is most likely that the latter route took place.

Unlike China, Korea, where the knowledge of the West began to be introduced around 1910, made little effort to translate Western books into Korean during the colonial period. The Korean intelligentsia widely read Japanese books and magazines, and one can guess that there were many opportunities to learn about Millet, despite the lack of Korean translations.

The earliest record on Millet was a newspaper article in 1920, by Kim Yu-bang (Kim Ch'an-yong, 1912-?), the third painter who executed oil paintings, wrote under the title, 'Western Painting System and Mission.' "... any modern man knows the painter Millet. But even a genius like Millet received criticism and threats when his The Sower was exhibited, by mediocre critics who sarcastically called him the traitor of art. It was fifty years later that he received the recognition he deserved."[17] Also in 1920, sculptor Kim Pok-chin (1901-1941) who was then enrolled at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, states that he knew of Millet at least through the reproductions.[18]

[18] Kim Pok-chin, "Chogak saenghwal sansup nyōn (30 years of life as a sculptor),"
Painter Pak Su-gŭn (1914-1965) who grew up in a rather remote place like Kangwŏn Province, likewise recalls seeing a color reproduction of Millet’s *The Angelus* in 1926. He remembers praying, "Dear Lord, please let me grow up to be an artist like Millet."19) In 1940 Chŏng In-sŏp wrote, "The postcards I bought at the Louvre are much better reproductions than those which are sold in the stores of Korea, but still they do not compare to seeing the original."20) Thus, one can assume that the circulation of Millet’s reproductions was not limited solely to big cities but also known throughout the nation.

Critic An Sŏk-ju (1901-1951), who had written frequently on Millet, wrote an article in 1925 entitled, "Millet, the pastoral painter."21) He said that Millet showed what labor really means and that he was a humanitarian painter who taught peace and humanism. In 1929, he wrote, "Through *The Angelus*, you can see a new religion … very close to pacifism."22)

Most writings on Millet in Korea addressed him as a great peasant painter instead of analyzing his individual works, and in this, they were not different from the U.S. and Japan. In 1930, Shin Nak-sŏn wrote, "Too poor to eat, Master Millet — Millet’s poor family had nothing to eat but water for three days … In the end, there was no one who understood Millet."23)

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The most interesting account is a 1929 magazine titled Korean Peasants (fig. 9). On the front page is a picture of Millet’s *Man with a Hoe* (fig. 10).

![Fig. 9, Cover page for magazine Choson Nongmin (Korean Peasants), 1929.](image)

![Fig. 10, Jean-François Millet, 1860-62, *Man with a Hoe*, 1860-62, Oil on Canvas, Getty Museum, Los Angeles.](image)

This magazine was a nationalistic publication published by a group of reformists especially around Ch’ŏndogyo (The Religion of the Heavenly Way), a Korean-born religious sect who sought the enlightenment of peasants. In some ways, it seems that writers rather than painters were more interested in the values represented by Millet’s works. There is another branch of writers who also developed an

interest in peasant literature: that of the proletariat movement. This should be viewed in the light of the vigorous debates on peasant literature that was going on in several magazines of the 1930s. Also, the high interest in peasant literature relates to that of other socialist countries. In November of 1930, the Second International Congress of Proletariat Revolutionary Writers at Kharkov, Russia, recognized the importance of peasant literature in the proletariat movement.

However, there is no evidence that Millet was utilized for the promotion of socialist ideology in Korea. According to the painter Kim Chu-gyong (1902-1908), Millet, who had spent his lifetime expressing the life of the pauper, did not portray in his works a sense of purpose or struggle, and thus were examples of local art — the same as bourgeois art. Proletarian theorist Chŏng Ha-bo criticized Millet, saying that he was depicting the life of the peasants but did not offer an enlightening lesson for the peasant in his works.24) Millet was also attacked as an individualist, who covered harsh labor with the beauty of nature.

If one examines the reality of Korean peasants during this colonial period, the interest in peasant literature becomes obvious. After the annexation of Korea, Japan set up real estate actuaries to redistribute the land. All across the nation, the number of Japanese landowners increased and Korean peasants were downgraded to sharecroppers. In order to deal with the food shortage in Japan, through the Rice Production Program of 1920 and the Farming Promotion Movement of 1932, pressure was focused on increasing output. The ultimate intention behind this policy was to use Korea as Japan’s provisional

rice storehouse. Due to this exploitation, from 1925 onwards, the rural exodus increased dramatically. By 1930, many farmers had moved or emigrated to cities in Korea, Japan, and even Manchuria.\(^{25}\) In spite of this, the agricultural population still made up 80% of the national population.

During the 1930s, several important literary works based on Korean peasants were written. The two most illuminating peasant literatures were the famous writer Yi Kwang-su’s novel *Earth* (1932) and Shim Hun’s *Evergreen* (1935). Both novels were about urban intellectuals who were in search of real life, who finally returned to the countryside.\(^{26}\)

One should note that during this period, Korean modern literature was greatly influenced by Russian literature which had many examples of rural literature. From 1910, Leo Tolstoy’s literature had a great influence not only on literature but also in philosophical thought. Tolstoy commented on Millet in his *What is Art?* that Millet’s *The Angelus* and *Man with a Hoe* reflect Christian emotion and love toward God and our neighbors. Therefore it is possible that the interest in Tolstoy may have led to the humanitarianism of Millet’s works.

In comparison to the many volumes of literary works which dealt with the peasant subjects at that time, the numbers are quite limited in the fine arts fields. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the number

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25 In 1930, the number of immigrants to Japan was 420,000 and it increased into 1,470,000 in the year of 1941. Yi Ki-back, *Han’guksa shimron*, (A New History of Korea), Ilchogak, Seoul, 1990, p. 453.

26 From one perspective, there are similarities with Millet’s biography. Although both authors might have been aware of Millet, it is difficult to insist that they were guided solely by Millet’s influence.
of artists did not measure up to the number of writers or that art tended to be slower in absorbing new trends. And yet, it also indicates that fine art has been separated from reality. Rather, one finds the real peasant experience in the genre paintings of the 18th century artist, Kim Hong-do (1745-after 1816). His portrayal of peasants can be seen as satires commenting on the contrast in societal levels (fig. 11). After Kim Hong-do, it is rare to see the real experience of peasants until the Minjung (People's) art movement which surfaced as late as the 1980s.

Fig. 11, Kim Hong-do, Harvest, from the Album of Korean Genre Scenes, Ink on Paper, 18th century, National Museum of Korea, Seoul.
If we define peasant painting as one which reflects the life and experience of peasants, most Korean paintings depicting the countryside do not belong to this category. Rather they reflect purity and the innocence of the countryside, which can be categorized as scenic landscapes. In the case of Yi Sang-bŏm (1897-1972)'s works, the traditional brush painter, it is still appropriate to describe them as having the scent of the pastoral and rural landscapes from a visitor's view (fig. 12).

Painters during this colonial period, such as Kim Chung-hyon, O Chi-ho, and Yi In-sŏng have all produced rural landscape paintings with figures that cast peasants with the same sentimentalism. There is no critical view toward the reality of Korean peasants. An Sŏk-ju also points this out when he criticized Yi Yong-il's work (fig. 13) at the annual Chosŏn Art Exhibition of 1929 in comparison with Millet's *The
Angelus. He said, "Any children of Korea’s countryside cannot be like the children of peaceful Arcadia as painted by Yi Yong-il." However, when he himself produced Pray (fig. 14) in the magazine cover of 1941, which is an appropriation of Millet’s The Angelus, it was pointed out that the couple is perhaps bowing down to the Japanese emperor.

Fig. 13, Yi Yong-il, Peasant Child, Color on Silk, 1929, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Kwach’ŏn, Korea.

Fig. 14, An Sok-ju, Pray, Cover Page for Shin Saedae (New Generation), 1941.

If we were to choose a Korean artist who had most received

27. An Sok-ju, An Sok-yŏng Munson (The Selections from An Sok-yŏng’s writings), Kwandong Ch’ulp’ansa, Seoul, 1985, p. 177.
Millet’s influence, it would be Pak Su-gûn, who acknowledged this association. Pak’s images of women and mortar, or peasants and their tools, or young women doing chores, show many elements of Millet’s work (fig. 15).

What is the reason, then, that Millet did not have much influence on Korean art despite his popularity among the general public? Perhaps it is due to the fact that by the time Millet’s name was imbrued through either America and/or Japan, in Korea of the 1920s and 30s, the trends of Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Expressionism preoccupied Korean art circles. In 1941, the literary figure Yi T’ae-jun wrote, "Millet’s The Angelus is only a painting of narration whereas van Gogh’s Sunflowers can be valued as a masterpiece, despite the fact that it only shows several flowers."[28]

During the 1950-60s, Millet was the best-known popular artist. His The Angelus or The Gleaners were seen on the front wall of many

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elementary school classrooms, public buses as well as at the barbershops. His works were also used as tablecloth patterns and wall decorations. Even the famous traditional ink painter, Kim Ki-ch'ang painted his version of The Angelus in his Farmer Couple at Prayer in Fields (fig. 16) in 1955.

Fig. 16, Kim Ki-ch'ang, Farmer Couple at Prayer in Fields, Color and Ink on Silk, 1955, Sotheby, New York.

But Millet disappeared from the Korean consciousness as Korea underwent modernization after the 1960s. In 1960, the rural population constituted 50% of the entire population. As the numbers shrank to 25% in 1980, Korea had metamorphosed into an post-industrial nation. It is interesting to note that after 1973, the choice of
the 'Great Men' unit of elementary school textbooks changed to Korean heroes such as General Yi Sun-shin, who replaced Millet and other Western men.

After 1980, Minjung artist Yim Ok-sang (1950-) focused on peasants' reality in his works, although Millet's influence was irrelevant. However, while writing this paper, I happened to come upon a photograph by Min Pyŏng-hŏn (1951-), *Korea's Early Morning Journey* (fig. 17) of 1985. It was impossible not to associate the two bent over figures and one standing figure in the early morning mist, with their heads covered in wrapped towels, with Millet's *The Gleaners*. This photographer was born in 1955. I am certain that he too studied Millet in elementary school.

![Image](image.png)

**Fig. 17, Min Pyŏng-hŏn, Korea's Early Morning Journey, Photograph, 1985, Private Collection.**

4. Conclusion

As I mentioned in the beginning, this paper began as a simple
question as to why Millet was so popular in Korea. When I learned of the fabrication of the myth of Millet, I became intrigued regarding the background that produced this account. It has also occurred to me that since the Korean education system was influenced by the Japanese even as late as 1960, this account might be based on a Japanese model. Though Ono Michitaka states that the earliest record yet found of Millet’s entry into Japanese textbooks was in 1960, since earlier textbooks have disappeared, we cannot eliminate the possibility that it had entered even earlier.29

I can only surmise that the objective of including Millet’s story in textbooks was to arouse the interest in Korean rural society as more than half of the nation’s population was still peasants. Considering it is The Gleaners or The Angelus, rather than The Sower which were popular, the image of homely peasants working in nature in these works coincided with the Korean traditional concept of the submissive peasants.

The fact that the image of The Sower and Man with a Hoe were used in Korea and Japan during the Proletariat and Peasant Movements could point to the possibility that they were being used as socialist propaganda. The physical strength visible in The Sower seems to refer to potential power and vitality of the peasant, contrary to the traditional submissive image. It could also be interpreted as an ideological and political challenge to the authority, thus was considered dangerous in Japan and Korea. Maybe this is the reason why the popularity of these works is a great deal less than The Angelus or The Gleaners.

29. Ono Michitaka, "Nihon ni okeru Millet si (The Millet history in Japan)," p 199
The reason why Millet was so popular with the public is because by transcending history, his peasants in *The Angelus, The Cleaners,* and similar works were not based on the reality of modern culture. Whether in the U.S, or Asia, these peasant images reminded urbanites of their lost ethical values. The purity of the countryside also offered a respite. The popularity of Millet in America was during the industrial metamorphosis of the late 19th century. In Japan, it took place during the early 20th century and Korea quickly followed. It lasted until 1980 in China. In Asia, which used to consist of basically agrarian countries, Millet's works were perceived as rural landscapes symbolizing nostalgia, quietness and simplicity in comparison with the affluence, disorder, and decay of city life, and it is this dream of an agrarian Utopia which is an idiosyncrasy of modern life.
<Abstract>

**Millet's Peasant Image:**

The Receptive Phenomenon in Asia

*Kim, Youngna*

Jean Francois-Millet is one of the few artists blessed with high popularity. Millet's *The Sower, The Angelus, or The Gleaners* are well known, even amongst lay people. However when Millet's works were first shown in Paris around 1850, the reaction was mixed and they aroused controversy amongst the critics. It was felt that these peasant images implied a socio-political connotations.

Yet Millet's reputation changed from the mid-1860s as his peasants were read as following the laws of nature, and his works were received as nostalgic and pastoral depictions of rural life. Millet, the peasant painter, was widely recognized internationally, especially in the United States.

In Asia, the belated interest in Millet started in the first half of the 20th century. By the mid-1930s, Millet had become the most widely known Western painter in Korea, Japan and China. The reproductions of *The Angelus or The Gleaner* could be seen in homes or public places.

This paper started out as a simple question as to why Millet was so popular in Korea. The recollection of having to memorize the text of Millet's *The Angelus* in the fifth grade of elementary school in the 1960s is still fresh in my mind. The paper traces how Millet was introduced to Asia and what the Korean people saw or read in Millet's peasant images.