

Sir Francis Seymour Haden's *Dusty Millers*: Rural Representation in Nineteenth Century Art
Movements
Gracie Roades
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Rural images in the art historical canon vary depending on their age, but have a certain organic character that underlies their subject matter. As the middle nineteenth century faced avant-garde artists, the artistic movements of Realism and Post Impressionism catered to this subject matter that aligned with peoples' political views and push to leave the industrialized city while allowing for fresh stylistic perspectives of these modern artists. Within the University of Cincinnati's Art Collection, some prints exist as a testament to how these characteristics are seen across many types of subject matter where the natural elements occupy the rural setting, elements that nineteenth century working-class people were looking to as they moved towards the country and away from industrialized cities. One work, as a case study, is Sir Francis Seymour Haden's *Dusty Millers* from 1877 (fig. 1). With this etching, Haden captures the thinking of the working class while embodying the new artistic movements of the nineteenth century, even though he is viewed as an amateur artist. By considering his artistic background, mentors, and political shifts or ideologies, one can start to analyze the artwork and understand Haden's, along with other artists, motives when creating images of rural subject matter. After a breakdown of these individual aspects of Haden, artistic movements, and political/economical drive, one can start to understand that Haden was paying attention to his surroundings and was not just an amateur artist, but a modern artist with a modern medium for the working class.

Haden was first a surgeon from Britain who was born in London on September 16, 1818 and died June 1, 1910.¹ Haden had a love for the arts, but did not start until later in his life due to his main profession. What sparked his beginning was a trip to Italy in 1843-44 where he sketched from nature, and upon his return, he began to study earlier artists, such as Rembrandt

¹ "Francis Seymour Haden (1818-1910), Prints and Drawings," Digital Commonwealth, 2022, <https://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/collections/commonwealth:5138jp89z>.

and Dürer.² Haden worked alongside better known artists, like his brother-in-law, James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903).³ Whistler, like Haden, studied the same masters and followed contemporary artists like Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) as part of avant-garde art movements of Realism and Post Impressionism. Whistler and Haden had very similar ideas about these movements due to their shared artistic inspirations, so in turn one can see a similar approach to Haden's work when compared to his famed brother-in-law.⁴ Haden was never a major artist, but regarded as an amateur, however, he did campaign heavily for the prints as being an art form after he began working with the medium. Due to his strong views, he founded the Royal Society of Painter Etchers and was a large part of the etching revival in England.⁵ His art follows the avant-garde trends of the 19th century due to his involvement in the etching medium and his peers in the art world.

His print, *Dusty Millers* (fig. 1), was made during the mature part of his art career in 1877. The viewer looks straight in to the field with workers, horses, and the mill in a horizontal composition. The most noticeable figure is the central one, hunched over in his labor by the bridge. Above is a horse and cart, coming out of the mill that occupies the left side of the print. Underneath the mill is a stream of water that transitions the viewer from man-made to natural aspects of the composition. The stream creates a diagonal that points from the bottom-left of the print to the top-right, where Haden created a hazy background that includes fields in the upper-central area and a forest in the top-right. The emphasis on differentiating hazy and bold forms

² "Haden (1818-1910), Digital Commonwealth."

³ "Haden (1818-1910), Digital Commonwealth."

⁴ "James McNeill Whistler," The Met Museum, 2022, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/whis/hd_whis.htm.

⁵ "Francis Seymour Haden: Biography," The Annex Galleries, 2022, <https://www.annexgalleries.com/artists/biography/916/Haden/Francis>.

throughout the piece is key to Haden's composition as it allows the viewer to have an emotional connection with both the hazy and bold areas.

Through the use of tonality, Haden distinguishes the foreground, middle ground, and background with harsh contrasts of light versus dark, which keeps the focus on the middle ground of the print where all of the figures are located. This use of value are of the main elements of the artwork. Line is used in various ways, from the bold foliage that right angles to the wispy touch of the trees in the background. His lines create organic forms, even in the architecture as where the mill does not feel boxy or squared up straight, but rather has the appearance of an older structure with wear. Haden also chose to give a thick texture to the main subjects of the etching (figures, horses, and the mill). By combining these characteristics of value, line, form, and texture, Haden creates a scene that suggests a realistic depiction of rural society with a homey quality a nineteenth-century viewer may not have felt in images of urban subject matter.

Haden's stylistic approach is related to both past and contemporary artists, but the main inspiration of his stylistic approach appears to come from his brother-in-law, James McNeill Whistler. Whistler also followed both past and contemporary artists of his time, but he himself was one of the forerunners for Post Impressionism.⁶ While his most famous artwork from his later career is *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Artist's Mother* (1871), he did many marine artworks in Post Impressionism. An example of an early artwork that could have influenced Haden is *Grey and Silver: Old Battersea Reach* (fig. 2) from 1863. This piece shows several clusters of boats along the river with the industrialized banks in the background. The viewer can also make out workers at their trade in the boats. Whistler chose to show the scene

⁶ The Met Museum, "James McNeill Whistler," Accessed 6 March 2022, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/whis/hd_whis.htm.

with fleeting strokes of paint to convey the subject matter unrealistically, but through conveyance of forms. Somber tones of a neutral color palette are used that give the artwork a calm mood, a defining aspect of Whistler's works that individualize him as one of the first to become a Post-Impressionist. Where Whistler manipulated colors and brushwork to convey emotion, he individualized Impressionism for his own liking, a factor that would not be popularized until later with other artists.

Like Whistler, Haden portrayed his subject matter in a Post Impressionist style, much like Whistler was doing with his works. When examining *Dusty Millers* (fig. 1) for the characteristics of the movement, there are several factors present. The most prominent example is the foliage in the foreground (fig. 3) as it is conveyed with a few stray lines, but is not highly detailed and realistic compared to earlier artists' stylistic approaches before Impressionism. Looking at the horse and cart the viewer can tell that Haden is portraying a horse and cart, but the forms are minimal and blend in to the darker etching of the mill structure (fig. 4). In fact, one almost misses the two other figures in the back of the cart if not looking close enough, also suggested with loose forms and lines. While the subject matter is loosely suggested, it is not to the same extent as Impressionist compositions can be. Haden's work still holds clear images for the viewer to understand while conveying a peaceful mood to the viewer that is not over exaggerated.

The movement of realism was no longer prevalent by 1877 in England, but just as Haden came late in his life to art, so did his interest in this technique. This could be due to his and Whistler's admiration for Gustave Courbet, specifically for the use of working class subject matter.⁷ Haden, being a surgeon, would have been part of a higher class in society, but he shared

⁷ The Met Museum, "Whistler."

empathy for others in the working classes on his journeys to the country as he completed studies for his etchings.⁸ The inclusion of workers in his later works show the influence of Courbet and Realism that are not present in his earlier works. To understand his main interest in his earlier career, his print *On The Test* (fig. 5) from ca. 1854-1864 is an example of a landscape. The print, like many others of his early works, is a calm scene along the banks of a creek or river with trees, fields, and architecture to fill the rolling fields. His style does not seem to change throughout his career while his subject matter slowly aligned with the Realist subjects. As noted before, his lines are carefree but vary in darkness and width, giving the print perspective and dimensionality, which is best seen along the opposite bank.

The rural landscape, like seen in *Dusty Millers*, show the tendency to relate to the Realist Movement of the nineteenth century. As outlined by The Art Story, the movement “rejected traditional forms of art, literature, and social organization as outmoded in the wake of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution.”⁹ In essence, artists were looking to the rural areas after focusing on the city and industrial areas. This was fueled by political ideas of the time surrounding the rapid advancement of technology and the so-called “perfection” of both city and society that had been emphasized in art for some time before this movement. Courbet was at the forefront of Realism with the prime example of being *The Stonebreakers*, completed in 1849 (fig. 6). Two figures, young and old, are laboring to break stone into smaller pieces. Their clothing is patched, worn, showing the realities of everyday people rather than that of high society or the glossed over fantasy of the middle and lower classes. Harris and Zucker best noted that,

⁸ “Haden (1818-1910), Digital Commonwealth.”

⁹ Art Bulletin 70, no. 1 (1988): 25–48. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3051152>. The Art Story. “Realism.” Accessed 27 February 2022. <https://www.theartstory.org/movement/realism/>.

Courbet wants to show what is ‘real,’ and so he has depicted a man that seems too old and a boy that seems still too young for such back-breaking labor. This is not meant to be heroic: it is meant to be an accurate account of the abuse and deprivation that was a common feature of mid-century French rural life.¹⁰

This kind of thinking by Courbet and others of the Realist Movement is exactly what the movement wanted to portray to the public. Realism aimed to bring awareness to everyone about the economic struggles the working classes felt.

What drove artists like Courbet and Haden to focus on subjects related to Realism in Europe? Why was it so scandalous to depict ordinary people working? For the avant-garde movements like Realism, this was a boundary that was not supposed to be crossed in the art world. The Salon in Paris and The Royal Academy in London both preferred works that related to Historicism, a group of artistic movements that looked back to earlier periods of time and typical subject matter, however, avant-garde works were rejected due to stepping outside the line that the Salon and the Royal Academy drew. The kinds of subject matter that Haden, Whistler, Courbet, and other artists of Realism would not fit into the constraints of the audiences that attended these prestige events. The upper classes attended those events and valued tradition that the Historicist movements offered over the new subjects that attacked their lifestyle and politics. Haden and Whistler additionally chose a medium that was not seen as “fine art” in the eyes of the upper class, so Haden dedicated much of his time to promoting etching to be as high of an art as any other. This medium allowed for people of all classes to afford artworks and not just a select few in high society.

What were the issues of the nineteenth century that spurred these artists to choose their subject matter and medium with care? Europe and America were going through the Industrial

¹⁰ Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, "Gustave Courbet, The Stonebreakers," in Smarthistory, August 9, 2015, accessed March 30, 2022, <https://smarthistory.org/courbet-the-stonebreakers/>.

Revolution and for some people the conditions which the working class endured was a problem. Conditions were hard and dangerous to a person's health with little compensation. As mentioned by Nardinelli, the working class in the cities had it worse than in the country as rent rose and the quality of living dropped. This allowed for Marxists to start pushing for reform for better working and living conditions.¹¹ Artists, who were often a part of the lower classes, also took this side, including artists like Courbet who painted *The Stonebreakers* one year after Marx and Engels's *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848.¹² The document laid out issues with the way the working class was treated and how society could treat each other more fairly. While it did not catch on as much originally, their work became more popular in the twentieth century. Another event within Europe was the French revolution of 1848. The French aimed to overthrow the monarchy in favor of a democratic government in hopes of raising the working class out of poverty. Many people in France were unhappy with their living conditions and politics, and this only worsened with the rapid advancement of technology.

Haden himself was not of the lower class due to his profession as a surgeon, however, he could have sympathized with artists, like his brother-in-law. By looking through his artwork one can see that he appreciated the avant-garde movements. He chose to depict a scene in the country with working class people doing their jobs in *Dusty Millers* rather than to simply represent a landscape that would have been a more traditional subject. Through Haden's approach of subject and style, he placed himself in the world of avant-garde styles through the inspiration of Whistler. Finally, using a printmaking technique made his works more affordable for a wider audience. This combated the idea that art was reserved for the upper class, and Haden argued that

¹¹Clark Nardinelli, "Industrial Revolution and the Standard of Living," Econlib, 2019, <https://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/IndustrialRevolutionandtheStandardofLiving.html>.

¹² Beth Harris and Steven Zucker, "Gustave Courbet, *The Stonebreakers*," in *Smarthistory*, August 9, 2015, accessed March 30, 2022, <https://smarthistory.org/courbet-the-stonebreakers/>.

prints were no less of an art form than oil painting or sculpture. This suggests Haden was not a typical artist of his status in society, but was into the artists' philosophies and movements of the nineteenth century.

Considering Haden's *Dusty Millers* more broadly, it is a scene of rural living and the working class that was promoted during the Industrial Revolution. This artwork was propaganda against the technological advancements, corrupt politics, and high social status of the time. Haden and other Realist artists convey the real world and real people that lived in it, not just the upper-class fantasies and subjects that were socially acceptable. Realism took a swing at these issues through rough subjects that rattled the upper class and art schools enough that it created an avant-garde artistic movement.

While Haden was not in the art world his whole life and was known as an amateur artist, he did have substance to his etchings he created that showed his knowledge of artistic movements and techniques. By considering his works, one can see his formal and stylistic development as he became more daring with his subject matter and approach. His biography suggests that he came from the very same social class that artists of the Realist movement were calling out. Careful consideration and research reveals that he was inspired by artists that followed the movement, such as Courbet, when creating artworks that depicted the working class with dignity. His other inspirations came from other avant-grade artists such as his brother-in-law, Whistler, who was well known for his stylistic approaches pushing outside of Impressionism. Considering these factors alongside Haden's use of the etching technique, there is a point that could be made, which is that Haden liked to raise up the underdog and promoted the artistic and political ideas that pushed boundaries for change.



Figure 1: Sir Francis Seymour Haden, *Dusty Millers*, 1877, etching and drypoint on paper, 7 15/16 in x 10 7/8 in.



Figure 2: James McNeil Whistler, *Grey and Silver: Old Battersea Reach*, 1863, oil on canvas, 50.8 × 68.6 cm, Art Institute of Chicago, <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/81574/grey-and-silver-old-battersea-reach>.



Figure 3: Sir Francis Seymour Haden, *Dusty Millers*, 1877, etching detail.

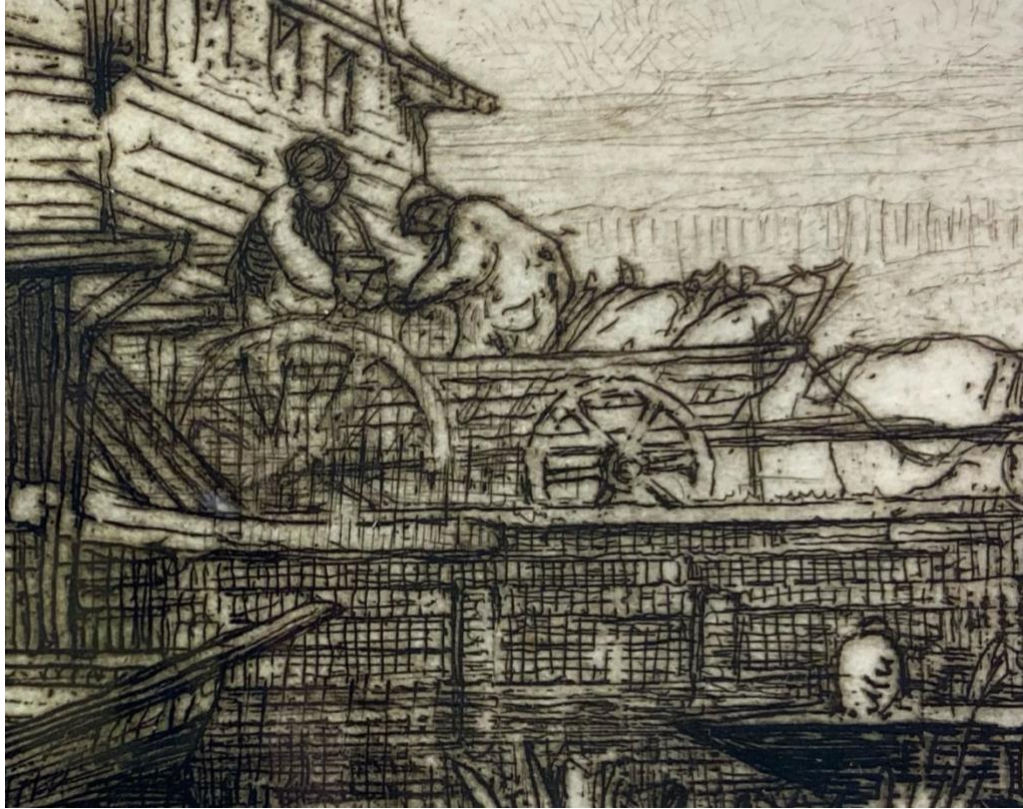


Figure 4: Sir Francis Seymour Haden, *Dusty Millers*, 1877, etching detail.



Figure 6: Sir Francis Seymour Haden, *On The Test*, ca.1854-1864, etching with drypoint on cream laid paper, 149 × 223 mm, Art Institute of Chicago.

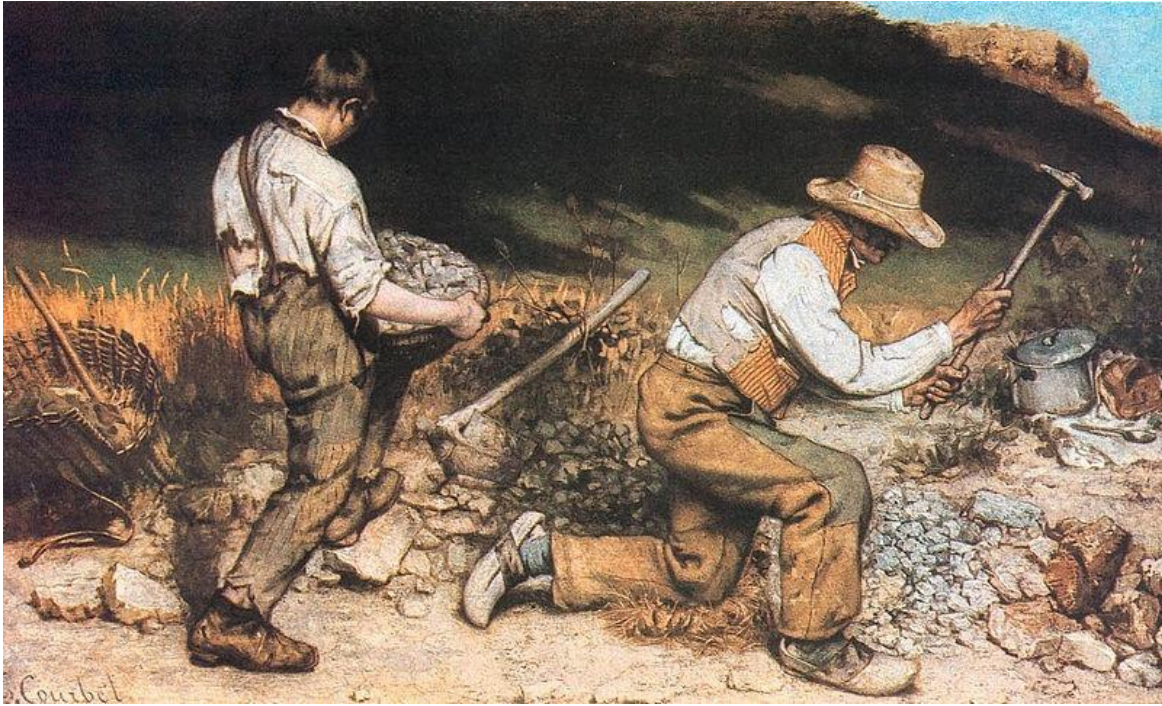


Figure 5: Gustave Courbet, *The Stonebreakers*, 1849, oil on canvas, 165 x 257 cm.

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