

borrow from Arjun Appadurai.²⁷ For example, an account of socioeconomic class would consider the audience for a work of art, or a discussion of gender and sexuality would encompass the purchaser as well as the space of display.

3) What is the future of the social history of art?

There is great promise in thinking about a global social history of Impressionism—in charting a geography of Impressionism. Any understanding of the “global” nature of this practice should attend to the historical specificity of this term. One notable recent example was the exhibition “Impressionism and the Caribbean: Francisco Oller and his Transatlantic World” at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 2015, an examination of the hybrid aesthetic pioneered by the artist when he returned to his native Puerto Rico after twenty years in Paris.²⁸ When scholars today call for a “global” consideration of a topic, they usually seek to re-assess the European framework that has governed most studies of the field and dislocate it from the center. To return to the example of Hugh Lane, the global reach of his practices depended upon the centering, or the perceived centering, of London, and it relied upon the framework provided by the British Empire. Impressionism could cut across imperialism, but it could also be co-opted by it and embedded within it. A global social history of Impressionism would be attentive to celebration and emulation as well as appropriation and mimicry.

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“‘A millionaire who paints in his spare time’. The social history of art and the multiple rediscoveries of Gustave Caillebotte”

Nineteenth-century critics were rather split about Gustave Caillebotte (1848-1894). Some, like Gaston Vassy, saw him as “un millionnaire qui fait de la peinture à ses moments perdus.”²⁹ Others identified his draughtsmanship and attention to detail as recompense (albeit scant) for a cohort otherwise beset by intransigence; a painter “n’est impressionniste que de nom” who would be well advised to “quitter prochainement les impressionnistes, s’il ne veut être quitté par eux.”³⁰ For many Caillebotte’s “précision inouïe,” “force de coloris remarquable,” and “personnages [...] bien campés” were cause for unabashed celebration (and perhaps even a “médaille d’honneur”).³¹

²⁷ Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

²⁸ For more information on this exhibition, see https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/francisco_oller (accessed 15 August 2017).

²⁹ [A millionaire who painted in his spare time]. [Gaston Vassy], “La Journée à Paris : L’Exposition des impressionnistes,” *L’Événement* (6 April 1877), 2.

³⁰ [Impressionist only in name]. *La Petite République française*, “Exposition des impressionnistes : 6, rue Le Peletier,” *La Petite République française* (10 April 1877), 2; and [leave the impressionists quickly, if he doesn’t want to be left by them]. Bernadille [Victor Fournel], “Chronique parisienne : L’Exposition des impressionnistes,” *Le Français* (13 April 1877), 2.

³¹ In order: [incredible precision] E. Lepelletier, “Les Impressionnistes,” *Le Radical* (8 April 1877), 2-3; [remarkable force of colour] L.G., “Le Salon des ‘impressionnistes,’” *La Presse* (6 April 1877), 2; [firmly

For John Rewald, however, critique and praise were equally damning: Caillebotte was dismissed as little more than an “engineer [... who] also painted in his spare time”.³² It followed logically that Caillebotte, “timid in his own works,” fared better with the capricious critics of his day than did artists whose style was genuinely transformational.³³ There was thus no place for Caillebotte’s paintings—the experimental force of which resides in their combination of exacting visual detail, careful manipulations of perspective, and deep wells of narrative and psychological ambiguity—in the formalist metanarrative constituted in Rewald’s wake. Clement Greenberg’s rehabilitation of Monet’s late work, which for him “offered the mere texture of color as adequate form in painting,” set a standard of Impressionism which Caillebotte—with his preference for a sombre and figurative realism, as opposed to abstraction and flatness—could not but fail to meet.³⁴

Caillebotte’s ambivalent complexities—provoking, as Kirk Varnedoe puts it, questions of context and category *vis-à-vis* normative Impressionism—challenge a linear trajectory of modernism and are largely unanswerable within a formalist paradigm.³⁵ It was thus no accident that the resurgence of Caillebotte scholarship in the 1970s coincided with the germination of the social history of art, the horizons of which were chiefly defined by T. J. Clark’s work in that decade and the one following.³⁶ The critical apparatus of the social history of art—being inflected by Marxism inherently attuned to contradictions, ruptures, and antagonisms—was well-equipped to identify the ideology that governed the Third Republic’s socio-political structures reflected and refracted in Caillebotte’s psychologically challenging portraits, spatially bizarre cityscapes, and ambivalent scenes of labour and leisure (Fig. 3).

However, in the case of Caillebotte, the social history of art proved to be just as obfuscatory as it was revealing. Its privileging of “art” as a distinct historical and historiographical category—the axiom of “immanent aesthetic value”, as Keith Moxey diagnosed it—induced a problematic asymmetry.³⁷ While Caillebotte invested his time, energy, and identity in a diverse and decentred slate of activities that ranged from philately to horticulture, yachting to art collecting, art historians have insistently conceived of him exclusively as a painter in relation to other painters. Although the social history of art offers the critical tools to comprehend Caillebotte’s

established figures] Jacques, “Menu propos : Exposition impressionniste,” *L’Homme libre* (12 April 1877), 1-2; and [medal of honour] L.G., “Le Salon des 'impressionnistes,’” *La Presse* (6 April 1877), 2.

³² John Rewald, *The History of Impressionism* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1980), 346.

³³ Rewald, *The History of Impressionism*, 388.

³⁴ Clement Greenberg, “Art,” *The Nation* (5 May 1945), 526.

³⁵ Kirk Varnedoe, “Odd Man In. A Brief Historiography of Caillebotte’s Changing Roles in the History of Art,” in Anne Distel, et al., *Gustave Caillebotte. Urban Impressionist* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1995), 14.

³⁶ The two titans of early Caillebotte scholarship are incontrovertibly Marie Berhaut and Kirk Varnedoe. See Marie Berhaut *Gustave Caillebotte (1848-1894)* (Paris: Wildenstein, 1951); *Caillebotte, l'impressionniste* (Lausanne: International Art Book, 1968); *Caillebotte, sa vie et son œuvre. Catalogue raisonné des peintures et pastels* (Paris: La Bibliothèque des Arts, Fondation Wildenstein, 1978, updated 1994). See also Kirk Varnedoe and Thomas P. Lee, *Gustave Caillebotte. A Retrospective Exhibition* (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1976); and Kirk Varnedoe, *Gustave Caillebotte* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

³⁷ Keith P. F. Moxey, “Semiotics and the Social History of Art,” *New Literary History* 22 (1991), 985.

activities in relation to historicized structures of labour, leisure, and class, its delimitation of art from wider culture has engendered a hermeneutic privileging of painting that finds no correlate in Caillebotte's actual practice.



Fig. 3: Gustave Caillebotte, *Portraits in the Countryside*, c. 1876.
Oil on canvas, 95 x 111 cm (Musée Baron Gérard, Bayeux, France).

I would propose that the solution to this problem—as a microcosmic case-study for Impressionism generally—is to be found in the critiques of the (social) history of art newly emerging from the fields of visual and material cultural studies, which seek not only to deprive and recontextualize art objects, but also to historicize aesthetic value and thus decentre the discipline of art history itself. Stripped of its reliance on the primacy of “art,” oriented towards everyday visual practices and an expanded media archive, and conscious of the omnidirectionality of vision’s (and art’s) relation to society, the social history of art (and indeed Marxist criticism more generally) still has something to say about Impressionism’s “odd man in.” While Sophie Pietri recognized the possibility that “[le] portrait de Caillebotte amateur, donne peut-être une clé pour comprendre sa peinture” as early as 1994, it will only be possible to fully realize the potential of this idea, to rediscover Caillebotte once again, via an

interdisciplinary approach that deconstructs our understanding of art and reconfigures its relation to the social.³⁸

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“Social Art History, A Thing of the Past?”

The term “social science,” writes Bruno Latour, “would be excellent except for two drawbacks, namely the word ‘social’ and the word ‘science.’”³⁹ According to Latour, a French philosopher and historian of science best known for his interdisciplinary attention to fundamental concepts, the word “social” implies an autonomous domain, one realm among others. “Science” suggests an insurmountable gap between observer and observed, a division of the world into scientists and informants, “the scientists [doing] ‘reflexively’ what the informants are doing ‘unwittingly.’”⁴⁰

Latour exemplifies a recent turn in social science to fundamentally reconceive “the social,” and his criticisms of social science writ large apply as well to social art history.⁴¹ We art historians also tend to treat “the social” as a separate domain, as though what we needed to do were to break through something asocial (the painting on the wall, here-and-now) to its social substratum (market ideology, urbanization, etc.).

Certain speech patterns recur: artworks “reflect,” “express,” or “embody” social phenomena. But none of these gives us what we need. Consider T.J. Clark: “I am not interested in the notion of works of art ‘reflecting’ ideologies, social relations, or history.”⁴² Instead, Clark says the social art historian seeks to understand “the general nature of the structures that [the artist] encounters willy-nilly,” structures visible only from the outside.⁴³ This approach thereby secures a methodological distance between past and present, the artists and ourselves. But what if the past was not so naive?

The questionnaire asks, “How has social art history shaped our discourse on Impressionism?” It seems to ask how a twentieth-century methodology shaped twenty-first century

³⁸ [The portrait of Caillebotte the amateur perhaps gives us a key to understanding his painting]. Sophie Pietri, “Introduction”, in *Gustave Caillebotte : catalogue raisonné des peintures et pastels*, by Marie Berhaut (Paris: Wildenstein Institute, La Bibliothèque des Arts, 1994), viii.

³⁹ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.

⁴⁰ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 33.

⁴¹ The best introduction to this turn is Patrick Joyce, ed., *The Social in Question: New Bearings*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2012); other key works include Patrick Joyce, “What Is the Social in Social History?” *Past & Present* 206, no. 1 (February 1, 2010): 213–48; Michael E. Brown, *The Concept of the Social in Uniting the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015); and Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd, (University of Chicago Press, 2014). On the relation between this turn and art history, see Eduardo de la Fuente, “The ‘New Sociology of Art’: Putting Art Back into Social Science Approaches to the Arts,” *Cultural Sociology* 1, no. 3 (November 1, 2007): 409–25.

⁴² Clark, *Image of the People*, 10.

⁴³ Clark, *Image of the People*, 13.