
Francis Davis Millet: An Appreciation of the Man

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FRANCIS DAVIS MILLET

A BAS-RELIEF BY AUGUSTUS SAINT GAUDENS

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

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FRANCIS DAVIS MILLET*

AN APPRECIATION OF THE MAN

BY SYLVESTER BAXTER

"Well for him who leaves behind him a treasure of love, esteem, honor and admiration in the memory of men. Such enrichment is his gain in death; thereby he acquires the condensed consciousness of the whole earthly estimate concerning him, grasping in full measure the bushel of which in life he could count but a few kernels. This belongs to the treasure which we are to lay up in heaven."—Fechner (The Little Book of Life After Death.)

FRANCIS DAVIS MILLET—Frank D. Millet, as his friends always spoke of him—was typical of the flower of American manhood at its finest. Born in Mattapoisett, he came of the best of New England stock—Pilgrim and Old Colony, State of Maine.

Millet is a Catalonian name; the English Millets are traced to France, and probably the French Millets came from the ancient Spanish province. So perhaps the exotic quality that many of Frank Millet's friends noted in him may have filtered down through the many generations from the Mediterranean shore. On his father's side some of his ancestors went to Maine from the Plymouth country towns where his mother's people had always dwelt; some went from Sandwich on Cape Cod, on the other side of Buzzards Bay across from

the town where he was born on November 3, 1846. As a boy at Mattapoisett he was a friend of Henry H. Rogers in Fairhaven, the next town. In later years he was a beloved intimate of the Standard Oil Magnate, who enjoyed nothing better than to secure Millet's company in his steam yacht Kanawha. His mother, a Byram, numbered John Alden and Priscilla among several Pilgrim ancestors. She had brilliant qualities from her Washburn maternity and she gave her eldest son her Washburn eyes, black and sparkling, instantly taking in many things at once.

Frank Millet was companionable, lovable, quick-witted and congenial, scholarly, uncommonly talented, capable of doing extraordinarily well almost anything he chose to put his hands to; industrious and resourceful, democratic, on

*In substance this article appeared in the Boston Herald of April 20, 1912. It is here given in considerably amplified form. THE EDITOR.

an equal footing with the humble and standing without self-assumption on a parity with the best in the land. He was of remarkable executive capacity; had he cared for it he might have made a success of almost any business he undertook; he had method without routine, the ability to plan and to carry out what he planned.

So it was that in his open and above-board way he gained the confidence of many men standing high in the world, and was enabled to do many things of the sort best worth doing. His friends often wondered how it was that he was able to do so much and yet seem to have plenty of time on his hands to do it in. It was largely because he knew how to organize his activities and to make the best of every moment. He knew not what idleness was. In that way he enjoyed life at its best and made the best of it, taking keen zest in pleasure as well as in work. Such a man was of course much sought socially. He cared nothing for society as such and his democratic nature despised the shams of social convention. But he loved the companionship of the world's best, and the world's best sought his company. For many of his friends he seemed to be all over town at the same time, and all over the world, for that matter—now in London, now in New York, now in Rome, now in Washington—and at home everywhere. Indeed, one of his nearest of kin, when asked where his home was, could not make assured reply as to whether it was in England, or New York, or Washington or Rome. His work was pleasure and his play was work; he made it a business to get the best out of everything. He enjoyed himself with heart and soul and gave himself to his work in the same way, attending to everything thoroughly and leaving no loose ends behind him.

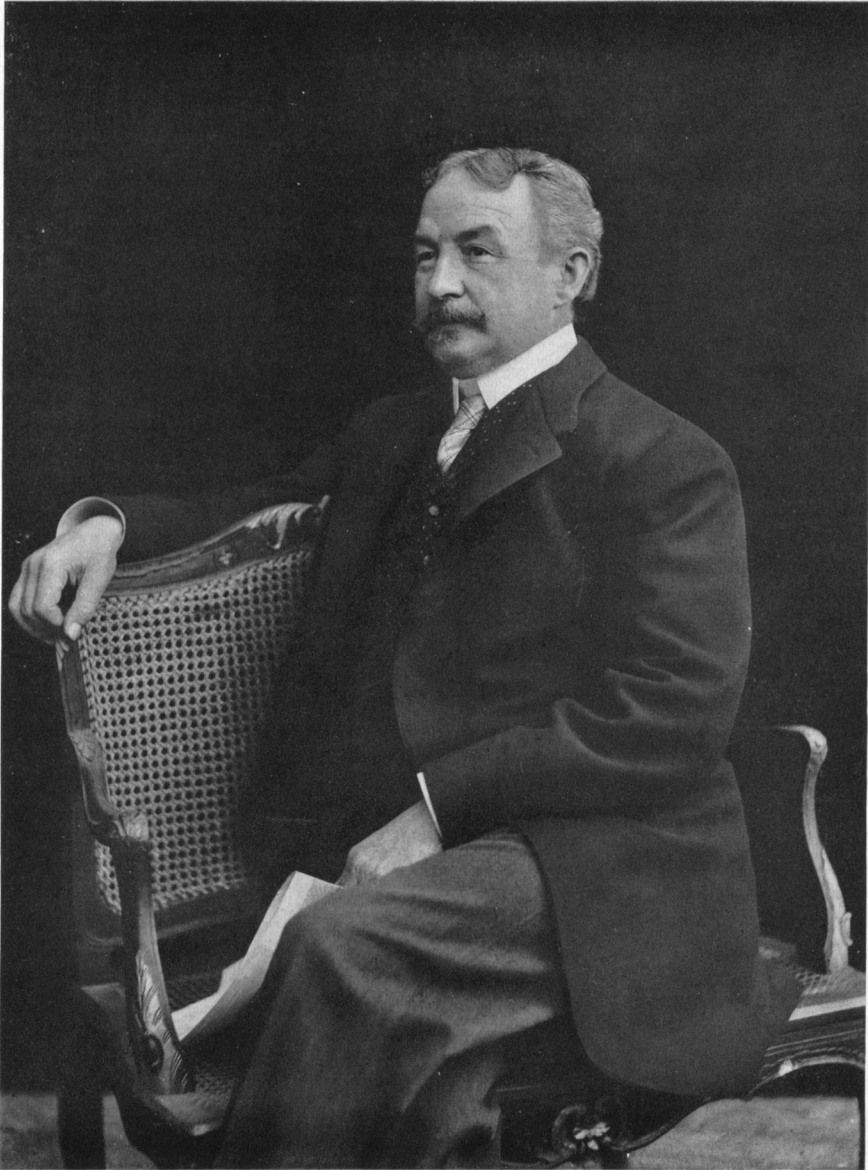
A nature like that is informed with the essence of perpetual youth. A veteran of the Civil War must be well along in life when the year 1912 comes around. But Frank Millet was one who could never grow really old; however advancing time had moulded his figure, what-

ever lines it had graven upon his face, in bodily movement and play of feature he was ever active, replete with energy, responsive to wholesome fun and keen with mental stimulation. Youth ever sought his company and accepted him as one with themselves; and his contemporaries in age, as did his elders, always esteemed him a young fellow. In this regard one classes him with two of his old friends, "Jack" Low and "Ned" Morse—the late John G. Low of beloved memory and Professor Edward S. Morse—dear old boys in the truest sense—the latter with us, as long may he be!

Frank Millet's life was rich with achievement from the first: At Harvard he was high in his class, brilliant with the promise that he never afterwards belied. He was a Phi Beta Kappa man; in the Society's rooms at Cambridge hangs one of the earliest examples of his work in art: a decorative poster for some theatrical event. A handsome youth, he played girls' parts to perfection at college.

He was trained in newspaper work with his college friend, Royal Whitman Merrill, on the *Boston Daily Advertiser* and became one of the traditions of an office that in those days was a school of good workmanship. There he laid the foundations of the literary technique in which he came to rank high, and for the skill in news gathering which made him one of the foremost war correspondents of recent times: in 1877 in the Russo-Turkish war—decorated several times by the Czar for bravery on the battlefield—and near the century's end in the Philippines.

His impulse to painting had been irresistible. While still doing newspaper work in spare hours he worked at lithography in the Forbes establishment—a road to painting followed by not a few eminent men. J. Foxcraft Cole and Mark Fisher were both graduates of that establishment. On the walls at the *Advertiser* office hung for a long time two examples of Millet's skill in drawing. One was a portrait of George Bryant Woods, of the *Advertiser* staff, a remarkable Shakespearean scholar and



FRANCIS DAVIS MILLET
FROM A RECENT PHOTOGRAPH

dramatic critic of high quality, who died in early manhood. The other was a lithographic head of Signora Morlacchi, a celebrated danseuse of that day.

When Millet went to Antwerp to study painting at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts he at once became a great favorite with his professors. His roommates in Antwerp were George Maynard, from

Washington, and Elijah Baxter, of Providence. Other particular friends there were Alfred Copeland, Edward Champney, and George Weatherby, of Boston—the latter in London ever since the early seventies. Millet twice gained the highest honors for good work at the Academy. When crowned with laurel for excellence in painting the students organized a pro-

cession and marched with a band of their own to serenade him. Baxter, now at Newport, still treasures a leaf from that laurel wreath. One of Millet's intimates at Antwerp was a young German, Otto Grundmann, whom Millet secured in 1876 as the first director of the School of Painting at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

At Vienna in 1872 Millet had his first World's Fair experience. He was still at Antwerp when he was appointed secretary of the Massachusetts Commission. The younger Charles Francis Adams was chairman. They at once became close friends for life.

Millet's literary talent was so high that Howells, editor of the *Atlantic* when his first contribution came to the magazine in the middle seventies, urged him to give up painting and make literature his vocation—assuring him a high name in it should he do so. Millet's short story that brought him this compliment, the story of a little dog that in weird ways kept turning up on the trail of the writer, brought into the tale the element of mystery and romance in masterly fashion. It had the direct simplicity blended with subtle imagination, that stands for the best of art. It was called "The Fourth Waits." Millet's other short stories were of like quality. They are collected in a volume called "A Capillary Crime and Other Stories." His other books are "From the Black Forest to the Black Sea," a delightful account of a canoe trip down the Danube; "The Expedition to the Philippines;" and a translation of Tolstoi's "Sebastapol."

Millet was married in Paris in 1879 to Elizabeth Greeley Merrill, of Boston, a sister of his college friend. A younger brother of Mrs. Millet's is William Bradford Merrill, formerly managing editor of the *Philadelphia Press*, of the *New York World* and now of the *New York American*. Augustus Saint Gaudens was in Paris at that time; his low relief of Millet, a replica of which is now in the Metropolitan Museum of New York, was made in March, 1879, probably as a wedding present.

Millet was one of the first to discover

the rare charm of the old English village, Broadway in Worcestershire. A few years after his marriage he rented a place there and later bought "Russell House"; not long after he added to the property an ancient Priory next door. He took the same keen delight in faithfully restoring it that some years before he devoted to reproducing for a studio an old-time Plymouth Colony interior at his father's place in East Bridgewater. A studio, also, the more imposing Priory, furnished the setting for some of his most celebrated pictures. In the charming garden at Broadway Mrs. Millet took unceasing delight and there she developed extraordinary skill in horticulture. This garden was the scene of some of John S. Sargent's famous paintings, among them "Rose Lily, Lily Rose." Russell House was the nucleus of one of England's most famous artist colonies.

After much distinction as a painter in England, in company with artists like Sargent, Abbey, Alma Tadema and Alfred Parsons, Millet's association with the expositions at Vienna and Paris led to a call to a responsible share in organizing the epochal Columbian World's Fair at Chicago. As superintendent of decoration and master of festivities during the fair he originated the tonal scheme that made it the "White City"—the name conferred by the late H. C. Bunner, the beloved editor of *Puck* in its best days. The mural decorations by Millet himself—the lunettes in the loggia of the Liberal Arts building and for the ceiling of the grand reception hall of the New York State building—were pronounced by architect McKim the highest achievements in that line at the exposition. McKim declared that there could be no doubt about it, Millet's mural work marked him as America's foremost man in that field. This opportunity happily brought prominently into play the talents first exercised in 1876 when, as chief assistant to John La Farge in executing the earliest important mural work in this country at Trinity Church in Boston, he was responsible for some of the best qualities in the decoration. Millet had likewise a high talent in stained glass



THE BLACK SHEEP

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FRANCIS DAVIS MILLET

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design and is the author of an important window at the Harvard Memorial Hall, executed at about the same period.

The late Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of the Columbian World's Fair at Chicago—still the greatest and best of expositions, though since surpassed in mere magnitude—was enthusiastic about Millet's invaluable services there. Unfortunately a pictorial history of the Chicago Fair, to which Millet devoted exceeding pains and many precious months, never reached publication. The enterprise was wrecked by mercantile dishonesty. It would have been a historic record of the occasion that gave to American art its greatest impetus.

The St. Louis Exposition would have been more of a credit artistically had its directors not perversely disregarded Millet's advice. The management called him in for consultation; he took infinite trouble on their account, and was shabbily dealt with. Less equable men would have loudly protested, but he bore his

treatment with characteristic philosophy.

Millet's initiative at Chicago established mural decoration in America as a distinct field of art. Mural painting as a calling by itself was unheard of in this country until he organized the work at Chicago and brought together a remarkable group of artists. For some years he did not reap for himself any of the fruits of the movement, being occupied at that period with activities in Europe which kept him abroad most of the time. He might have had an opportunity at the Boston Public Library; a considerable sum had been raised to decorate a room as a memorial to his friend Harry Codman, Mr. Olmsted's young partner and associate at the Chicago World's Fair. But Millet unselfishly represented that it would be better to use the money as a fund for establishing a Codman Library of Landscape Architecture at the Public Library. His advice was followed.

When some years later he took up

mural painting himself on an extensive scale his work splendidly justified the enthusiasm of McKim. Fine as his easel pictures are it is as a great mural painter that his fame will last. His masterpiece is his monumental work for the Baltimore custom house—a consummate development of a unique departure from the conventional traditions and one of the greatest achievements in decorative art on this continent.

These Baltimore decorations depict the evolution of navigation: "Something different from the customary representations, such as a group of young women in their nighties presenting a pianola to the city of New York," as Millet remarked with characteristic native humor. A series in a similar vein intended for the New Bedford Public Library—depicting the history of the whale fishery—is lost to the world. Millet had given much thought to the scheme and with the happiest anticipations had looked forward to doing it. It seems as if the seed that was germinating in his mind with such beautiful promise must surely fructify in some way.

Ever ready to serve the public and sacrifice his personal interests for much gratuitous work of that sort, Millet organized the American Federation of Arts for the National Academy of Art three or four years ago. He had been its secretary from the beginning.

When Charles F. McKim founded the American Academy of Art at Rome Millet was selected as one of the incorporators and served as secretary up to a few months ago. Then, much against his inclination, at the earnest solicitation of J. Pierpont Morgan—who, as fellow-trustee with Millet at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, had conceived a high opinion of his executive capacity—he consented to become the Director of the Academy, together with the American School for Classical Studies at Rome, with the idea of reorganizing the work, affiliating or merging the two institutions and housing them and their students in a way to place American prestige at the front among the several national academies of other countries in the Eter-

nal City. He gave himself to this work with all his best energy and enthusiasm and in the highest degree would undoubtedly have achieved the ends aimed at had his life been spared. It will be difficult to fill his place. But if the plans for the Academy should materialize the institution will be a lasting monument to his memory as well as to that of McKim, his friend and the founder.

Millet once said that if he could choose his manner of death it would be to live his life in fullness to the end and then be shot in battle. In substance, he had his wish; his was a hero's death.

Looking back upon the life lived with such rich measure of fair and good things wrought, one recalls the prophetic implication of the ceiling at Baltimore: The entrancing beauty of that vision of the most beautiful things that move upon the world of waters—ships under full sail, entering port amidst the perfect calm of an ideal summer sunrise, the blissful air informed with life and joy and peace in ultimate fulfilment. How goodly this world is—clothed as with a garment by the soft warmth of the early morning!

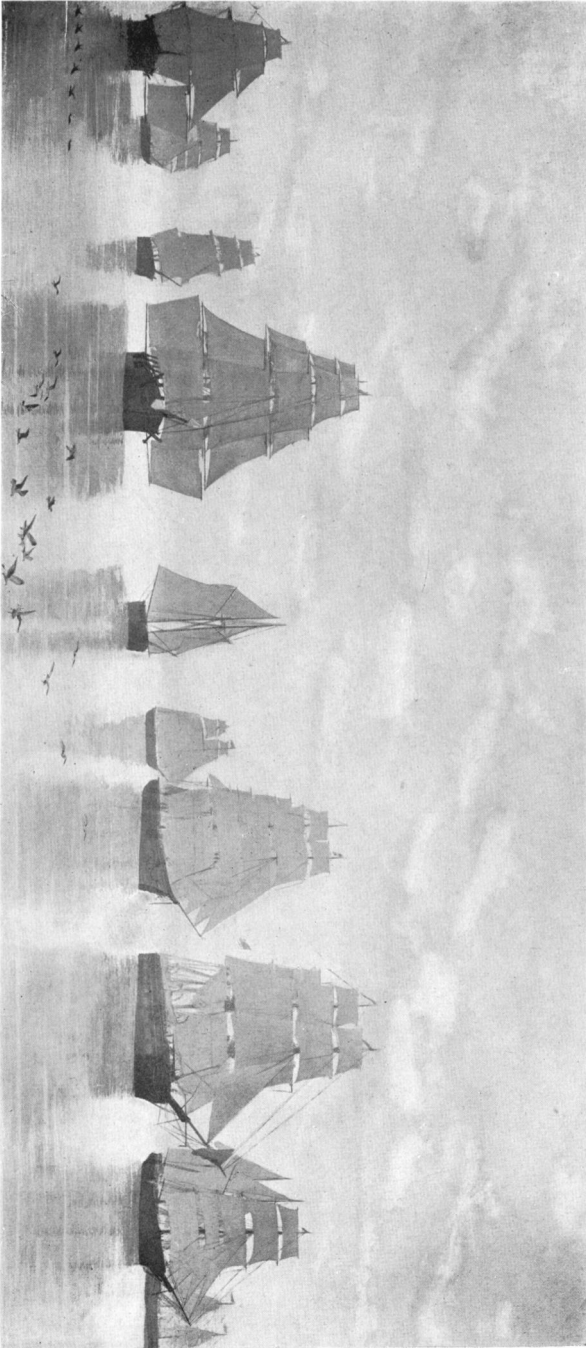
For antithesis another picture: The calm of chilling waters when earthly life went out in mid-Atlantic under the starlit sky. After all, only the moment's pang among the pallid icebergs. Then a white-souled company floats serenely home.

Upon the long pennant of a noble ship in that home-coming fleet at Baltimore, modestly inconspicuous, is inscribed the name "F. D. Millet."

EPILOG.

Dear Frank:—Over there in the Great Beyond, in the After Life, whatever it may be, we feel that somehow, in some way, you are yet with us, that your work here will go on to greater consummations—yourself a part of it; and that our loving thoughts of you will draw you consciously to us; to the hearts that hold your affection, ever one with us in soul and spirit through all the transmutations of life everlasting.

Sylvester Baxter.



ENTERING HARBOR

CEILING PANEL IN THE GALLERY ROOM, UNITED STATES CUSTOM HOUSE, BALTIMORE

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WANDERING THOUGHTS

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