

Paris sous la Pluie

The first thing that strikes me is the size of the work. About seven feet tall and nine feet wide, this painting dominates its gallery and overwhelms the viewer. The couple in the foreground of the painting is nearly life size, and with the man poised to take another step it seems he might climb right over the frame and walk right into the gallery. The bold perspective thrusts the scene outward, and with details such as the sharply receding roofline of the main building and the acute tilt of the street, geometric and visual effects are created which push and pull the viewer and instill the painting with action. This work is more complex and detailed than one might first imagine, and with such a rich surface and vast array of minutiae it truly requires an “in person” viewing for full comprehension.

Painted in 1877 by the wealthy painter/impressionist connoisseur Gustave Caillebotte, *Paris, A Rainy Day* is a depiction of a familiar five-way intersection in a wealthy area of Paris near the artist’s home on a rainy and overcast day. A host of characters are dispersed throughout the canvas, strolling about and engaging in usual daily activities. The expansive street and uniform architecture, common in Paris after Haussmann’s renovations, are accentuated, and in many ways the work is a verisimilitudinous snapshot of modern everyday life.

In the foreground a well-to-do couple with interlocked arms and a shared umbrella walks towards the viewer. By noting the angle of reflections from the lamppost and other figures it seems as if the painter is taking his view from directly in front of these persons, and being the most prominent figures they certainly warrant a more detailed discussion. The man gazes to his right. His eyes are a soft grayish hue and he walks assertively. The

gaze on his face is difficult to read; perhaps he is longing or being contemplative, in any event he seems detached. It seems reasonable to label him the protagonist. The woman tilts her head as well, and is most likely observing the same object or event as her companion. Observed close up she appears to have an emergent smile on her comely face. The dots on her veil, a dazzlingly white earring (likely a diamond) and an azure blue tuft of cloth noticeable at her neckline are particularly striking, and provide vibrancy to her otherwise monotone yet certainly fashionable garb. Cropped in the right corner is a man walking towards the aforementioned couple on the same sidewalk. He tilts his umbrella to the right so as to avoid collision with the couple who neither pay him attention nor show any signs of tilting their umbrella in deference. A green (a color which stands out) gas lamp separates these three from the rest of the painting, and also divides the canvas in half. A little further back a lone man is crossing the street, looking down in a manner which suggests inward thinking but also illustrates the reality of the wet and mucky road on which one must watch their step. The rest of the figures receive less influence, but a few of them are certainly worth noting. Directly to the left of the protagonist's head two women walk away from the viewer. Their symmetry is visually enticing. Also, above the wagon wheel on the left side of the painting a man is crossing the street. He piqued my attention because of the odd position of his body and feet – it looks as if he is almost doing a jig. Lastly, one might note how the front couple's umbrella pole occludes a woman's head in the background; she in turn holds an umbrella that obscures the head of a workman with ladder behind her; a curious compositional detail to say the least.

The surface of the painting is characterized mostly by relatively broad painterly brushstrokes which in that singularly impressionistic manner allow the “stuff” of paint to

really show. Even though the picture appears much more finished and Salonesque than most impressionist works, one still feels the transience and modern quality of the work through its style. The water and muck on the street feel nearly tangible. Interesting atmospheric results are achieved through this style of painting. For instance, the wagon wheel has whitish paint covering up its spokes, an indication of the general haziness of that day. Also, in the distance the names of shops are illegible (except for the pharmacy at the base of the previously mentioned building), and the people in the distance turn into tiny blobs of purplish paint. A creamy white is used by Caillebotte throughout the work to highlight figures and objects, a technique which is especially obvious on the repetitive and pervasive umbrellas. The asymmetrical composition should be noted, and on a final visual remark, one should observe that the figures appear to all be separated by roughly the same physical distance.

After absorbing the aesthetic aspects of Caillebotte's masterpiece, it is only logical that one should then ask, "Okay, so what does this mean?" Well, the fact that the painting was chosen to represent a rainy day is the first clue given to decipher a 'theme.' The artist deliberately portrayed these weather conditions so the street would not be crowded, ergo creating a composition in which figures are distant from one another and human interactions are few and far between. The melancholic atmosphere and overall despondent nature of the figures suggests a sense of alienation and anomie in the wide and spacious Haussmannized sections of Paris which for many inhabitants and presumably Caillebotte alike rendered the city illegible and overwhelming. The umbrellas, which are particularly conspicuous, separate the people metaphorically into self contained entities which are cut off from one other. No one looks at each other or the

viewer, and bathed in a dismal and dreary ambience, the overarching mood is drab and somber. The highly ordered composition actually works to emphasize the fragileness of late 1870's life on the Parisian street, as the people and buildings in this painting seem as artificial as the human relationships. In this way Caillebotte's painting is in no way a rosy or idealized cityscape of the airy, bustling, and decidedly modern boulevards constructed by Haussman, but rather a bleak commentary on the level of disconnection and isolation felt by many despite the growing population and avant-garde civic environment.

Paris, A Rainy Day exemplifies and touches on many issues related to the impressionist movement and its historical context therein. The painting was after all produced by one of the most important financiers of the impressionists, and was displayed in 1877 impressionist exhibit which was sponsored by Caillebotte himself. The changing nature of the city and its inhabitants, the trope of the flaneur, contemporaneous fashions and ideas of modernity are all juggled in this piece and combine to make painting from which much art historical information and insight can be siphoned.

As discussed earlier, the setting is an intersection that epitomizes the spaces of Paris defined by the Prefect of Seine Baron Haussmann's sweeping mid-century restructuring. The new spaces allowed for increased traffic flow and more sanitary conditions, eventually leading to the phenomenon of the boulevard which entailed masses of people shopping and seeking stimulation in an increasingly fast paced society. With the advent of these new spaces and development of such entities as the department store and wide spread rail systems (the place of Caillebotte's painting is very near the Gare-St. Lazare) life also seemed to become more superficial and complicated. Consequently, one

felt lonelier than ever despite the masses of people. *Paris, a Rainy Day* touches directly on this occurrence.

Perhaps no single avatar is discussed more thoroughly in the context of 19th century Paris than that of the flaneur. Generally characterized as an idle male stroller who assumes an air of detachment and mingles with the public, always observant yet never distracted, the flaneur ruled his urban environment. Caillebotte's painting is a visualization of the decline of the flaneur, who fell victim to the same city which had made him once so great; for the protagonist is accompanied by a woman and the man crossing the street looks only at the ground, disqualifying both these men from the title of flaneur. In the expression on their faces it almost seems as if there is some yearning for prior times.

Because this painting is a modern cityscape it is ipso facto a painting of modernity (one thinks of Baudelaire) and a record of the fashions of 1877. By recording the actual events of his own time, Caillebotte was part of a somewhat radical new type of painting. His figures are shown accurately in contemporary dress, and he has essentially taken a mundane and fleeting moment and captured it eternally on a monumental scale. Celebrating modernity, while simultaneously casting a critical eye, is one of the signature hallmarks of impressionism and inchoate modern art.

Paris, A Rainy Day is a complex work of both technical virtuosity and implied thematic elements which synthesize to engross the viewer visually and entice them mentally to think about urban life and feelings of alienation. The painting conflates multiple issues which surround and form the foundation of the art historical study of the

Impressionists' Paris, and remains in its grandeur as a historical visual document, a commentary on urban life, and a testament to modernity.