

Appreciation for the urban worker

In 1875 the jury of the Salon, the official exhibition of the French Academy of Fine Arts, rejected a painting they considered to be 'vulgar' and 'unheroic' and Émile Zola described the same painting as 'anti-artistic'. That painting is now regarded as one of Gustave Caillebotte's best modern works - '*Les Raboteurs de Parquet*' or 'The Floor Planers'.

Born into a very respectable, upper-class Parisian family, Caillebotte initially trained as a lawyer. He began painting in earnest at the age of 27, when he met and befriended a group of artists (the Impressionists), including Edgar Degas, who had broken away from the academic painters displayed in the yearly Salons.

Completed in 1875 and currently hanging in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, Caillebotte's 'The Floor Planers' focuses on the urban working-class at work. Three semi-nude floor-planers scrape a parquet floor, their heads tilted as if in conversation, and an opened bottle of wine sits on the floor to the right. Daylight streams in from a window on the far wall, softly illuminating the musculature of the three men's backs as they work on their hands and knees. The diagonal alignments of the floorboards, accentuated by the bold perspective, is cleverly offset by the rectangular panelling of the far wall and the wood shavings scattered across the floor.

Aside from the perspective, it is the focus that makes this painting particularly unusual. Consider other works of 19th century realism, such as Jean-François Millet's '*The Gleaners*' or Gustave Courbet's '*The Stone Breakers*'. Both of these works depict the toil of rural workers, drawing the viewers' attention to the mundane and pitiful everyday lives of the lower classes, as was the trend in 19th century realism. In a time when the establishment considered the only acceptable subjects of social realism were the rural working class, Caillebotte represented the urban proletariat.

Caillebotte had an advantage in his affluent background. He did not have to sell his paintings to get by, and he was quite unbothered when his painting was rejected by the 1875 Paris Salon. In fact, it was this that prompted him to align himself with the Impressionists and showcase the painting at the second Impressionist Exhibition in 1876.

There has been some debate surrounding suggested 'deeper meanings' of the piece. Does the work have underlying homoerotic elements? The high viewpoint certainly could suggest an objectification of the half-clothed men, but there is no evidence of Caillebotte being a homosexual and the argument has never been comprehensively laid out. It has also been considered whether 'The Floor Planers' is a metaphor for Caillebotte's subversion of the traditions of 'old art', influenced by his contact with the Impressionists. These traditions were dark and artificial - they were covered with varnish - whereas the new style (Impressionism) was more natural and light.

However despite these debates, the painting is not intentionally charged with a political nor a moralising message. Caillebotte is not making some grand call to arms, nor is he commenting on the oppression of the urban working-class. Rather, the painting seems more an appreciation of the workers and the audience is invited to join Caillebotte in watching over their work. This is very much in line with Caillebotte's desire to forgo the theatrics of earlier artistic movements in favour of depicting things as they existed and as he saw them. The three floor-planers are depicted with a subtle dignity that honours their craft.

The painting puts the actions of the urban workers and their tools at the centre of the image whilst showcasing Caillebotte's artistic skill.