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Gustave Caillebotte, La Machine de Marly, co. 1875

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Gustave Caillebotte

French (1848-1894)

La Machine de Marly, ca. 1875

Oil on panel

10 ½ x 13 ½ in.

Museum Purchase, The Mary B. Finnigan Art Endowment Fund

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claimed as a 17th Century wonder of the world, La Machine de Marly provided subject matter hundreds of years later for several Impressionist artists including Sisley, Pissarro, Monet, and Caillebotte. Gustave Caillebotte's oil painting, *La Machine de Marly* completed in 1875, is a relatively small, approximately 10"x13" landscape which captures the tranquil beauty of the Seine River with row boats docked along the shore while at the same time, acknowledging the force of La Machine, the most impressive engineering and technological marvel of its time. La Machine was designed and constructed during the 1680s to lift and propel water from the river to supply the ponds and garden fountains of Versailles. Consisting of fourteen 36 foot paddlewheels and over 200 pumps, La Machine was capable of moving a million gallons of river water in 24 hours.

In Caillebotte's representation, the diagonal placement of the river and the horizontal line of buildings to its left lead the eye to La Machine in the upper right quadrant. Caillebotte calls further attention to the structure, which likely housed the operating mechanisms, by placing a tree along the right hand side of the painting with its branches almost gesturing toward it and by situating in the foreground a solitary, slightly bent over figure who appears to be moving toward it. The viewer may surmise that the artist made a choice to capture a human element in a composition of water, vegetation, and buildings or more simply, to pay homage to the common man.

Using a somewhat limited palette of blues and greens, Caillebotte achieves an interesting series of contrasts through his brushwork. While the subtle reflections of the buildings on the water's surface, the dense background foliage, and the only figure in the painting are indicated with a minimum of broad strokes, the branches and sparse leaves of the tree which partially frames the view are detailed with fine lines and great delicacy.

I believe that the contrasts of this painting are of greatest appeal to me: The immensity of La Machine's function contrasted with the intimacy of the small landscape, the broad brush strokes contrasted with the exquisite lines of the tree, and the isolated figure contrasted with the reality of hundreds of workers who constructed the machine and toiled to keep it operational. In addition, Caillebotte's artful representation of a magnificent structure in a small, exquisite painting draws me into a world I have never known.

Although I have focused on the Caillebotte painting, which is a most significant component of the Haggerty collection, I would be remiss if I did not mention a personal attribute of the artist which set him apart from others of his time. His willingness to support fellow, less fortunate artists resulted in the acquisition and ultimate bequest of 65 pieces of their work to the French state. The museum is fortunate to have this important painting not only because of its quality, but because it serves as a reminder of a truly remarkable man.

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