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**In Jean-François Millet's THE ANGELUS, the prayerful
humility of the peasants seems wholly genuine,
reflecting their response to the grandeur of God's
work in nature.**

*Jean-François Millet (1814-1875), THE ANGELUS (1857-1859). Oil on canvas, 21.8" x 26".
Paris, Musée d'Orsay. Photo: © The Bridgeman Art Library International. Used by permission.*

A Call to Prayer

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The subject of a bidding war in 1889 between the Louvre and an American consortium, Jean-François Millet's *The Angelus* sold for an unprecedented sum of 580,650 francs. During a subsequent tour around the United States, it was publicized as the most famous painting in the world.¹

The work shows a peasant couple bowing their heads in prayer as the evening Angelus bell tolls. In this thrice-daily devotion – morning, noon, and evening – the church bell calls followers to a prayer of gratitude for the goodness of God expressed through the Incarnation. Millet, who was raised in a peasant family in Normandy, recalls that “his grandmother, hearing the church bell ringing while we were working in the fields, always made us stop work to say the Angelus prayer for the poor departed.”²

Millet nostalgically evokes a lost golden age. His classical composition is saturated with Realist detail.³ Pastel colors (which anticipate the Impressionist style) relate the landscape to the earth-toned clothing of the peasants. Though he is often described as part of the Barbizon school of French painters inspired by the landscape realism of John Constable (1776-1837), he was also influenced by themes from Scripture and paintings by the Old Masters.

After the 1848 Revolution in France, a peasant revolt that spread fear in Europe, Millet's paintings were negatively reinterpreted as fostering a too grandiose view of the common people. So, by 1909 *The Angelus* had dropped out of favor and was ridiculed for having a rigid gender differentiation.⁴

Though our estimate of a work of art will always be influenced by our attitude toward its cultural, political, and religious context, perhaps the time has come for us to appreciate *The Angelus* as an honest depiction of a prayerful response to God's presence. Certainly Millet admired the simple lifestyle of the peasants whom he preferred to paint, and was sympathetic with their political plight. Yet in this image the prayerful couple's humility seems wholly genuine, reflecting their response to the grandeur of God's work in nature between them and the church shown in the distance.

NOTES

1 Heather McPherson, “Millet, Jean-François,” in *Grove Art Online*. *Oxford Art Online*, www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T058295 (accessed May 30, 2009).

2 “Jean-François Millet, *The Angelus*,” Musée d'Orsay Works in Focus, www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire/commentaire_id/the-angelus-3048.html?no_cache=1&Hash=64e2246289 (accessed June 16, 2009).

3 McPherson, “Millet, Jean-François.”

4 Ibid.