

5 Malakoff Street, North Caulfield, Vic, 3161
Telephone: (61 3) 9509 9855 Facsimile: (61 3) 9509 4549
Email: ausart@diggins.com.au Website: www.diggins.com.au
ABN.19006 457 101

LAURAINÉ · DIGGINS · FINE · ART



JEAN-FRANCOIS MILLET 1814 – 1875

Les Lavandieres (The Washer Women) also known as *Woman holding laundry* c.1855

black conte, crayon, pen and ink on paper

33 x 42 cm

signed lower centre left : J F Millet

Provenance:

Jean-Francois Millet to Monsieur Atger

Atger Collection, Droet, 12 March 1874 cat. no.87

James Staats Forbes, Boston

The Alexander Young Collection, Glasgow

Stephen Mitchell, Esq, of Boquhan, Kippen, Stirlingshire

Stephen Mitchell Collection, Christie's, 22 June 1934, lot 83, sold to "Squire"

possibly The Fine Art Society, see Label verso

Hans Heysen, Adelaide, to 1970

The Hans Heysen Collection, Leonard Joel, Melbourne, 18 -19 June 1970, lot no. 131

private collection, Melbourne

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Exhibited:

Art Gallery of South Australia ,1944
Homage To France, National Gallery of Victoria,1975, then on loan until November 1982
Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, Tasmanian, on loan March 1983
to February 1985
Vive la France!: Hidden Treasures of French Art (1824-1945) from Adelaide Collections, Art
Gallery of South Australia, 10 July - 18 October 1998, cat. 72, p. 67.
Michelangelo To Matisse: Drawing the Figure, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 20
November 1999-27 February 2000, cat. no.111

Literature:

Cartwright, Julia, The Drawings of Jean-Francois Millet in the Collection of Mr. James
Staats Forbes, in *The Burlington Magazine*, 1904, vol. 5, no 13 (April 04) pp47-67
Etienne Moreau-Nélaton, *Millet raconté par lui meme*, Paris, 1921, vol II, fig. 130, illustrated
(wrongly catalogued as belonging to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)
Murphy, Alexandra, *J. F. Millet*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1984, cat no 61
Jean-Francois Millet, Hayward Gallery, London 22 January -7 March 1976 page 103
Thomas, Sarah and Trumble, Angus, *Vive la France!: Hidden Treasures of French Art (1824-
1945) from Adelaide Collections*, Art Gallery of South Australia, 1998, cat. 72, p. 67.
Maloon, Terence., *Michelangelo To Matisse: Drawing the Figure*, Art Gallery of New South
Wales, Sydney, 20 November 1999-27 February 2000, cat. no.111. p.134

This elaborate drawing inspired the painting, *The Washer Women* in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.¹ The key literary reference is to Moreau-Nelaton's seminal work of 1921 *Millet raconté par lui meme*, in which this drawing is illustrated. It had belonged to James Staats Forbes (1823 - 1904), one of the museum's patrons and the most important Millet collector of his generation. Forbes sold his collection to many of the leading collectors, including Frick, JP Morgan, and Alexander Young who, like William Burrell, was a leading industrialist and one of the leading Scottish art collectors of his day.

Millet, amongst the founders of the Barbizon school, is celebrated for his portrayals of peasants in a more realist style than previous idealised pastorals, elevating rural workers to a heroic status on large-scale canvases traditionally reserved for mythological and religious scenes, as seen in his most famous works *The Sower* (1850, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), *The Gleaners* and *The Angelus* (1857 and 1859, both at the Musée d'Orsay Paris).

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The drawing is a large size for a work on paper and depicts an important subject, as well as having a distinguished provenance. It is one of the best examples of a conte drawing by the artist, comparable in scale and ambition to his best coloured works in pastel. This drawing “with its sharply reinforced outlines leads one to believe that it served as the model for the Boston painting. In the straight stance, braced arm, and distant gaze of the woman receiving the heavy, wet linen, Millet conveyed the weight of her burden as well as resigned acceptance of a task to which her body is well accustomed. Silhouetted against the sky, lifting the laundry to her companion’s shoulders, the second woman brings a note of poised grace to their labour, in which no movements are wasted.”²

As Robert Herbert wrote of this drawing, that it is ‘the remarkable pair of figures, whose meaning not in any detail, not in any facial expression, but in the rightness of their silhouettes, into which Millet has distilled the essence of their work’.³ “Perhaps the distillation of which Herbert speaks derived from Millet’s ability to express so much with a single contour. Laundresses both in town and country were a new and modern ‘subject’, treated by such artists as Daumier, Daubigny, who often set his figures against a sunset sky, and, most famously, Degas.”⁴

The major work by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *The Bent Tree Morning*, acquired by the Felton Bequest for the National Gallery of Victoria 1907, share the same distinguished provenance being in the collection of J. S. Forbes then Alexander Young.

1. *Jean-Francois Millet*, Arts Council of Great Britain, Hayward Gallery, 22 January-7 March 1976, p. 103
2. Murphy, Alexandra R., *Jean-Francois Millet*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, p.95
3. Herbert, R., Le naturalism payan de J. F. Millet hier et aujourd’hui?, in *Jean-Francois Millet*, Paris and London 1975-6
4. Pollock, Griselda, *Millet*, Oresko Books, London, 1977, p.55