



GALLERY
NOTES®

from

JOHN MITCHELL
FINE PAINTINGS

EST 1931

ANTOINE GUILLEMET

*Normandy's Impressionist
(1841–1918)*

CENTENARY EXHIBITION

1 – 21 NOVEMBER 2018

For nearly fifty years, John Mitchell Fine Paintings has dealt in paintings by the French landscape painter, **Antoine Guillemet**. This is the firm's third exhibition devoted to his work: the first major loan exhibition was held in our gallery at 8 New Bond Street in 1981 where over thirty pictures were on display. This was followed by a second exhibition at 160 New Bond Street in 1998 organized to launch Peter Mitchell's second book on the painter. It seems, therefore, more than appropriate to mark the centenary of Guillemet's death with a further presentation of works by him; a mixture of loans and pictures for sale.

During his lifetime, Antoine Guillemet was awarded almost every medal, honour and distinction available to artists of his time. His obituary in *Le Figaro* (28 May 1918, p. 3) observed '*..By his primary training, he belonged to the school of 1830, and remained faithful to it, although he evolved towards a more emancipated light: he was a sensitive painter of atmosphere, pleased by effects of calm harmony...*'

The same could be said of many talented artists working in nineteenth-century France, their ranks further swollen by foreign artists arriving to try and make their mark. Nonetheless, this extraordinarily fertile period in the history of art is now known principally for the rise of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, to the exclusion of many gifted painters like Guillemet.



Fig 1. *L'île de Tatihou, St. Vaast-la-Hougue*
oil on canvas, 38 x 55 cm.



Fig 2. *L'île de Tatihou, St. Vaast-la-Hougue*
oil on canvas, 54 x 73.5 cm. Private collection.

Yet, aside from appearing in Edouard Manet's famous painting from 1869, *Le Balcon* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris), as the debonair smoker flanked by two seated ladies, the painter Bethe Morisot and Fanny Claus, a violinist, who was Guillemet? In 1888 the French journalist, Félicien Champasur, was commissioned to write an article about Guillemet who had responded to the writer's request for some biographical detail in a whimsical (his words) 'telegram style' manner:

Son of an old family of ship owners at Rouen. Taste for the marine (the real, not in oils). The family opposed. A bit of law which leads to everything, as the bourgeois say. Then began painting marines in oil - compensation for the real thing. Presented to Corot. Seized at once by the goodness and genius of the master - and so met the whole galaxy, Daumier, Barye, Daubigny, Courbet-boat trips with Daubigny, father and son. Then wrapped up in the eccentric -got to know, at Café Guerbois, Manet, etc. etc. in short the Batignolles School - Duranty, an intimate, then Zola; Cézanne, les terribles. Start of painting with a pistol. What's that? Load a pistol with a tube of colour and fire at the canvas. The less it looks like something, the nearer one approaches genius - refused at the Salon - Homeric struggle. Got older, greys in the painting -knew Vollon.



Fig 3. *La Baie de Morsalines*
oil on canvas, 53 x 74 cm.

Serious debut at the Salon in 1872: Mer basse à Villerville, today in the Grenoble Museum - 1874: Bercy en décembre - got a second-class medal - today in the Luxembourg. Later on, Quai d'Orsay, Le Chaos de Villers - in 1880: Le Vieux Bercy - decorated - and then came Le Hameau de Landemer now in the Bordeaux Museum; Marée basse, Saint-Vaast-la-Hougue, near Cherbourg; other pictures, still more, always more - and there we are! Forgot the Salon Jury, on it since 1880, but that's not something to boast about. Always liked literature as much as painting. Go out a lot in Winter, and hide away in Summer in uninhabited spots. (Please note I have a daughter I adore.) Now that's very important or so it seems to me. Say that I like Paris and its sights, and I don't know really why I paint anything else.'

That Manet, Zola and Cézanne - all mentioned in one sentence- became lifelong friends is perhaps the strongest clue to Guillemet's association with the chief protagonists in that exhilarating circus of emerging performers in the arts. Although he did not participate in the 'Salon des Refusés' in 1863, he was refused at the Salon with the group three years later and again the following year. It is not difficult therefore to imagine the young Guillemet being swept along by the swirling currents as he mingled with, and

befriended, the likes of Alfred Stevens, Gustave Courbet and Camille Pissarro (he was godfather to the latter's daughter). Indeed, in 1866 Guillemet went to Aix-en-Provence for three months to paint with Cézanne and, crucially, whilst there, managed to persuade Cézanne's father to increase his son's allowance. It paid off: when Guillemet was a juror at the 1882 Salon, he exercised his position to introduce Cézanne to the Salon which would be his one and only appearance there, albeit listed as a 'pupil of Guillemet'.

In the absence of those pictures 'refused' by the Salon, and any dated work from the 1860s, one cannot know the style and manner of Guillemet's early paintings and how close to the early Impressionists he became. Contemporary critics, and the painter himself, implied that he had to become more meticulous and detailed in his work to achieve acceptance. What is certain is that Guillemet considered the success of *Mer basse à Villerville* at the Salon of 1872 a turning point. Guillemet's subjects became the timeless ones - the sky, the sea, the wind, the sweep of the horizon, and thus drew comparisons from the critics with the approach to nature taken by John Constable. Looking at Guillemet's oil sketches, it is clear that he was naturally inclined to a free and vigorous handling and they reveal him as a painter's painter; one who enjoyed nothing more than the physical act of painting; the strict and direct observation of reality.



Fig 4. *The beach at Vierville-sur-Mer*
oil on canvas, 38 x 55 cm.

In 1874, two years after the critical success of *Villerville*, Guillemet declined to exhibit with the Impressionists in their first exhibition but produced a major surprise for the Salon, its visitors and critics alike: a two-and-a-half metre view of Paris entitled *Bercy en décembre*. It was the first of a remarkable series of views of the city. However, when not turning his attention to Paris, the Seine and the capital's surrounding countryside, the majority of his paintings were devoted to the remote Channel coastline. He must have felt a deep affinity with his native Normandy, in particular the Cotentin peninsula, and frequently painted the same viewpoint at, for example, the bay of Morsalines and Vierville (figs. 4 & 5) under different atmospheric conditions. The two contrasting days in summer, illustrated in the views of the Vauban fort at Saint-Vaast-la-Hougue (figs. 1 & 2): one under a hot and limpid sky and the other in breezy, bright sunshine, provide an accurate example of this practice.

It is worth noting that throughout his life, fortunately, Guillemet was spared the financial struggles that beset many of his contemporaries, none more so than Claude Monet, and thus his paintings never became trite. Although he seemed happiest painting big, cerulean blue skies with 'cotton wool' clouds and, where possible, including a few



Fig 6. *Sea study*
oil on canvas, 38 x 55 cm. Private collection.

oyster gatherers in their white bonnets moving through the sands at low tide, Guillemet's style is most individual and characterized by a strong, painterly touch.

Of all Guillemet's accolades and beyond the context of the fascinating time that he lived through, perhaps the most appealing aspect of his paintings is the satisfaction that they have brought to our clients and friends over the generations. Although Guillemet's work sold well in his lifetime, it sells today more through its artistic merit than from any commercial ploy to make him a 'name'. My father, Peter, who should be credited with re-discovering Antoine Guillemet's life and work in the 1970s, was often quick to advocate this approach in picture collecting and we are delighted to continue our involvement with his paintings.

WILLIAM MITCHELL

October 2018



Fig 5. *Morsalines Bay*
oil on canvas, 38 x 55 cm. Private collection.

GALLERY NOTES®

is published to acquaint readers with the paintings offered for sale at John Mitchell Fine Paintings. We hope that in receiving them you will share the interest and enjoyment which they have brought to collectors throughout the world for over sixty years.

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