8.

The Mystery of Gustave Caillebotte's Bicycle

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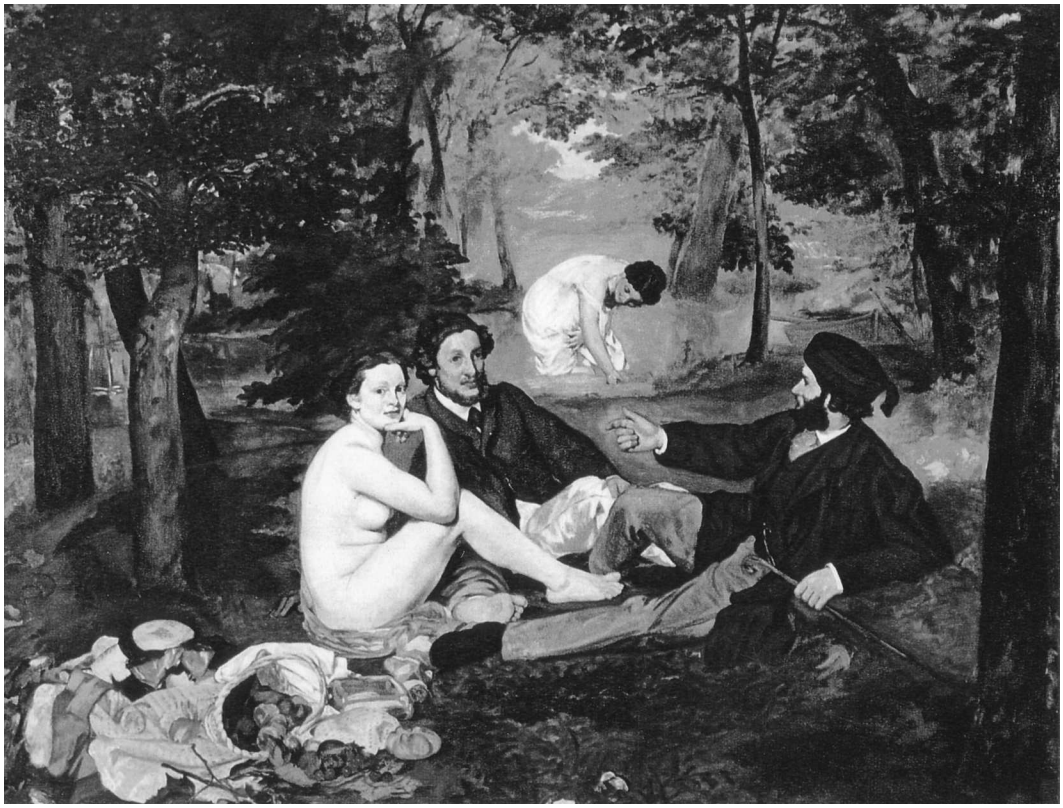
OVER recent years, my art historical studies have encompassed two principal theme: the bicycle and the visual arts of the period in which the machine was largely developed, that is the nineteenth century. I have been particularly struck by the fact that, while there is, quantitatively, a great deal of art of the cycle from the period in the form of reproduced illustrations, drawings, etc., there is little "high art," or gallery art — very few paintings, almost no sculpture, and not much derivative decorative art from the period when the pedal-activated cycle was invented and developed.

This phenomenon is particularly evident if we look more closely at the period of thirty years or so from the I860s to the 1890s when, in parallel, the most important developments were taking place in both cycles and art. On the one side, we progress from the first application of the crank and the pedal to the two-wheeled machine through to the large-scale industrial manufacture of the pneumatic-tyred bicycle, while at the same time, in the pictorial arts, we see the breakaway from classicism and formality, via the impressionist movement, to the onset of the modernism which now dominates the world of painting.

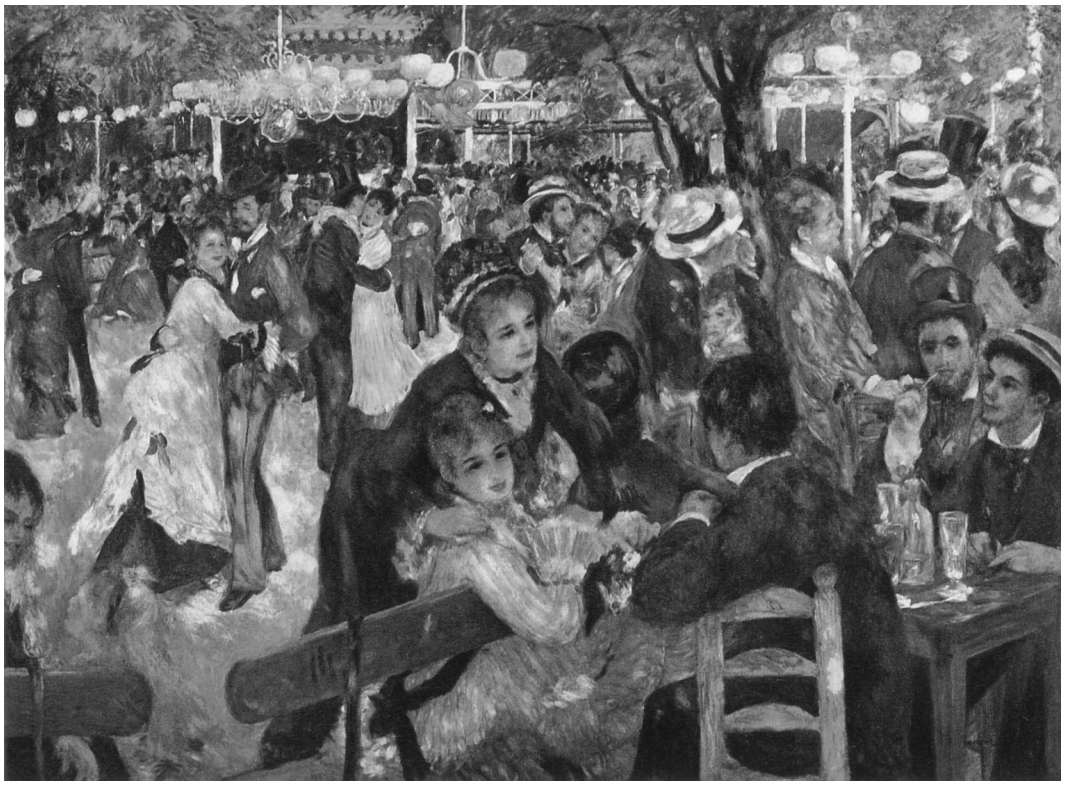
Velocipede construction commenced in Paris in the early 1860s. If we are to believe the figures introduced as evidence in the court case of Olivier v. Michaux in 1869, production of Michaux velocipedes alone had risen to 200 machines a day by 1868 — and by that time the Michaux company was by no means the only manufacturer. So there must have been some tens of thousands of velocipedes in use in the Paris region by the late 1860s. They were ridden by people ranging from princes to courtesans and from tourists to professional racers. There were a lot of machines in use.

At the same time, not more than 3 km (or 15 minutes by velocipede) from the Michaux works just off the avenue Montaigne, at the École des Beaux Arts in the rue Bonaparte, young classically trained

artists were beginning to re-examine both the subjects and the techniques of painting. For the Salon of 1863, for instance, Edouard Manet submitted a painting of startling originality. A picnic party sits under the trees. They are Edouard's brother, Gustave, and his future brother-in-law, Ferdinand Leenhoff. A pretty young woman, a professional model, Victorine Meurand having cooled off in the pool in the background, sits with the two young men (see Fig. 8.1). What the judges of the Salon did not recognize is that the



Above: Fig. 8.1. Edouard Manet: "Le dejeuner sur l'herbe," 1863.



Right: Fig. 8.2.Auguste Renoir: "Bal au Moulin de Ia Galette,' 1876.

figures are taken in their entirety from a Raphael painting, "The Judgement of Paris." Manet had simply translated the group into a modem setting, perhaps in the Bois de Boulogne or the Bois de Vincennes. What Manet is saying is that you do not have to disguise art with classicism. You do not have to go back to ancient Greece or Rome. Under the dress of blue Lyon silk and the livorno straw hat of a pretty girl from today's Paris there is a nude as beautiful as anything upon which art discretely sticks a classical fig leaf.

Above: Fig. 8.3. Gostiaux: "Le village e effrayé. La première apparition d'un vélocipède à Fouiliy-les-Oies," c.1869.

Right: Fig. 8.4. Camille Pissarro: "L'Hermitage à Pontoise," c.1 868.

This painting was rejected by the salon of 1863, together with over two thirds of the other submissions. So great was the row that ensued over the level of rejections that Emperor Napoleon III was called on to intervene. He proposed a compromise: The judgement of the Academy should stand, but there should be a parallel exhibition — *Le Salon des Refusés* — for the rejected works.

Manet's "Le dejeuner sur l'herbe" caused a huge scandal at the Salon des Refusés, and Napoleon himself described it as "indecent". In 1865, Manet submitted to the Salon another painting of Victorine Meurand, actually painted like "Le déjeuner sur l'herbe" in 1863, and taken, as far as the pose was concerned, from a "Venus of Urbino" by the Venetian painter Titian, this time a reclining nude with a black servant in attendance. But here again the message was subversive and modern. This young woman is no longer a classical Venus but actually a very different contemporary player in Parisian society. She keeps on her jewelry and, more scandalously, her slippers when she takes off her clothes. She receives the admirer's bouquet from her black servant and she is accompanied by a classic symbol of wickedness and lust, a black cat. In this picture, Manet is saying that you can see the classical Venus any time you want in the red light district of the Quartier Bréda — if you have the money and the inclination to pay for her services.

These young painters established certain guiding artistic principles. Pictorial art had to be realistic — to show the scene as it is in today's world. No classicism, no fig leaves. Their work was characterized by the exploration of the effects of light and how we see it — that even the shadows are coloured by light reflected from the objects which cast those shadows. Because of this quality of light, objects do not have sharp edges — they are not spaces to be drawn round and filled in with colour, but they are evanescent reflections of natural light out-of-doors and of dappled shade (See Fig. 8.2) and where the light is reflected from the sky and from water. The message to get out-of-doors and paint was not entirely original. Corot, Millet, and the painters of the Barbizon school had promoted out-of-doors naturalism for many years but, for the new generation of artists, it had become an imperative. Paint everyday life. Paint out of doors, examine, analyse and understand the ephemeral complexity of the light which is reflected from every object, even those in shadow.

The impressionist painters took their paints and their canvases, their easels and their models out from the studio into the open air and, more importantly, out into the countryside around Paris. The mobility and liberty afforded by the newly developed velocipede also introduced the cyclist to the same countryside as that in which the impressionist painters were active (Fig. 8.3). The new territory of the artist and of the cyclist were one and the same. For those painters whose primary interest was landscape, the countryside around Paris became their studio and their territory. Besides, country inns were cheap and convivial and the artists installed themselves to paint the sunlight and shade of those places and those roads which the velocipedists were also discovering.

Fig. 8.5. Camille Pissarro: "The Avenue, Sydenham," 1871.

Claude Monet took himself to Bréau near the Forêt de Fontainbleau. Camille Pissarro painted, as others of the impressionists did, at Pontoise (see Fig. 8.4).

Others painted at Argenteuil, to the north of the Seine, and all this area to the north and west of Paris reads like an inventory of the titles of the impressionists' landscapes.

These landscape painters operated at a time when the velocipede first came into widespread use, and they continued to portray, almost to define, the countryside of the Ile de France around Paris when the ordinary, the high bicycle, became the latest machine in the 1870s and 1880s. In all of these impressionist paintings of the contemporary scene, however, whether urban or rural, there are no cycles of any sort. In France, cycling and the indigenous cycle manufacturing industry was completely halted by the Franco-Prussian war and its aftermath in 1870–72. Both Camille Pissarro and the English impressionist Alfred Sisley spent a period of time in England but, even there, their paintings are devoid of bicycles (see Fig. 8.5).

It has been pointed out to me that, if you examine general topographical photographs from the same period, these do not include bicycles either. However, while the photograph records only what happens to be present in the frame at a moment in time, the artist has the capability to be selective in what he chooses to include in or to omit from his paintings. So the absence of bicycles from these paintings is not merely an accident of the moment, it must also be seen as a deliberate choice.

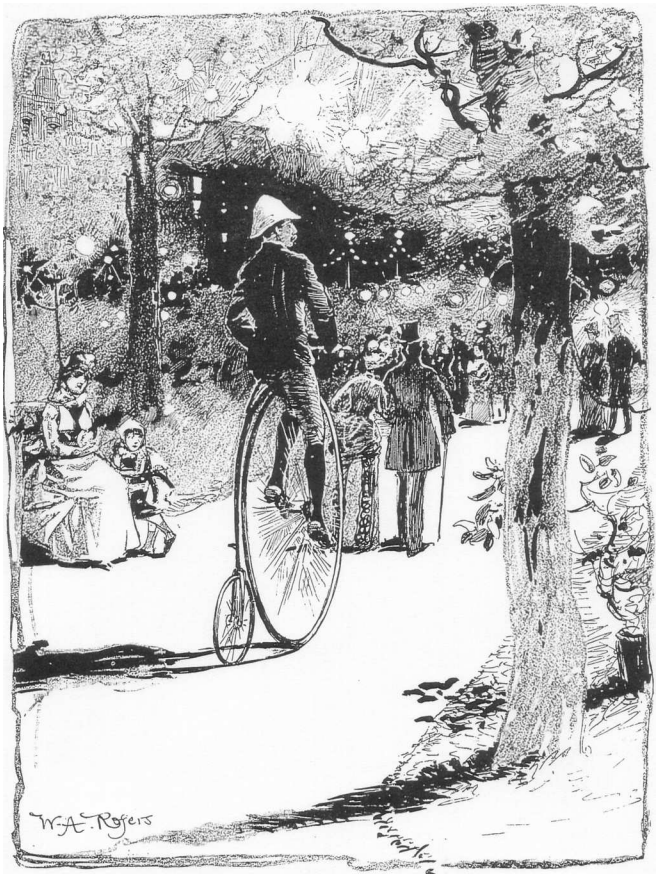
It is not that the impressionists avoided the indicators or icons of the modernity of their age. Other wheeled vehicles can be found in their works. Moreover, as they laid visual claim to the countryside around Paris, they frequently included emblems of the advance of the city into their domain. The smoking chimneys of suburban industry find their way onto the horizons of a great many impressionist works, while some of these painters found their themes of light and reflection within the city itself (see Fig. 8.6).

Throughout the impressionist period, there are no cycles to be seen in "gallery" art, even if the machines were in use and could frequently be observed on the streets, in the parks, and on the roads around Paris (see Fig. 8.7).

The easy option of art historical research is to ask the questions when? where? and who? — to which there may or may not be definitive answers. It is more difficult, and therefore more interesting, to ask the question, why? The cycle grew up at exactly the same time and in the same place as the painting of the impressionists, and yet there are no impressionist paintings of bicycles or any other sort of cycle — not a

Fig. 8.6. Alfred Sislev: "Le canal St. Martin's Park," 1870.

single one. We know, simply on a statistical basis, that there were a lot of bicycles around in the 1860–1890 period. We even know that in the 1890s, Auguste Renoir was riding a bike.



Above: Fig. 8.7. W.A. Rogers: "A Night Ride in Park," **The Wheelman**. 1885.8.

He fell off it and broke his arm and his son Jean recorded, "My father had therefore to paint with his left hand, and he was obliged to ask my mother to prepare his palette".

Why did the impressionists ignore the bicycle? I can offer some suggestions, but none of them is, of course, definitive or conclusive, since it is not possible to prove a negative proposition. Despite their revolutionary ideas, all of these artists were by training classical painters, and they remained true, by and large, to the classical subjects, the figure, the landscape, the still life and the group — but interpreted them into a modern setting. The bicycle was an obtrusive, new, alien artefact. Moreover, its first appearance also coincided with the rapid growth of the illustrated magazine. The first of these had been *The Illustrated London News* in 1842 but, by the 1860s there were numerous magazines, both in France and in England, keen to illustrate the technical and mechanical wonders of the age. So novelties like the bicycle became associated from the very beginning with the popular art of the press and the print, and they seldom became a subject for "serious" or "high" art, even at the time of the bicycle boom in the 1890s or during the first half of the twentieth century. We have lots of illustrations of the bicycle and its use, but these are the work not of the "serious" artist but of the graphic journalist, differently artistically orientated but often every bit as talented as his superior colleagues in the art world. It is the snobbery of Art — even among the impressionists!

Right: Fig. 8.8. Gustave Caillebotte: "Le pont de l'Europe," 1876.

The invention of the pedal-driven cycle also coincided with the development of photography, and cycling and photography have been closely associated from the very earliest days of both activities. The "Portrait with Bicycle" is almost by definition a photographic portrait rather than the work of the artist with brush and canvas.

As far as artistic techniques are concerned, the cycle is a visual assemblage of lines and circles. It is quintessentially a subject for the draughtsman and the engraver. Its linearity and the sparseness of its construction is not an ideal or an easy subject for the artist with brush and palette, who is looking for surface, mass, and colour.

Above: Fig. 8.9. Gustave Caillebotte: "Rue de Paris temps de pluie," 1877.

Right: Fig. 8.10. Claude Monet: "Jean Monet sur son cheval mecanique," 1872.

I would also like lightheartedly to advance a further reason why there is little high art of the bicycle by the impressionists or by any other painters. It was cited to me, not by an art historian or other theorist, but by a painter friend who is one of the most senior members of our Royal Academy of Arts in England, during a recent discussion with him. "It was," he said, "because bicycles are b… difficult to draw!"

So, to the title of my paper, *The Mystery of Gustave Gailebotte's Bicycle*. Caillebotte was an amateur painter, a wealthy man who was a member of the impressionist group in the 1870s. The work by which I am sure you will know him is "Les raboteurs de parquet" of 1875, showing workmen planing the newly laid parquet flooring in the artist's apartment. This painting can be seen in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris; but among Caillebotte's more striking works are "Le Pont de l'Europe" of 1876 (see Fig. 8.8) and "Rue de Paris, temps de pluie" of 1877 (see Fig. 8.9). These are the works in which impressionism confronts the new modernity of Paris head-on. Here, if anywhere, the bicycle, itself an icon of the new age, should have found a place; and yet, as in all the other paintings of this period, the cycle is ignored and excluded.

There is only one image in the whole œuvre of the impressionist painters to which we, as historians of the cycle, can lay claim: In 1872 Claude Monet painted an oil sketch of his son Jean on an anthropomorphic children's tricycle, "Jean Monet sur son cheval mécanique," and that is all we have (see Fig. 8.10). The bicycles of Gustave Caillebotte and of all his impressionist contemporaries remain a mystery.