

The harvesters by charles angrand essay

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The Harvesters, Charles Angrand, 1892, oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas

Exhibited today in the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston Texas, Charles Angrand's *The Harvesters*, dates from 1892. Its medium is oil on canvas and it measures 123 x 79 cm. The artist was born in France where he lived and worked in the later decades of the 19th century and his paintings are part of the artistic environment of his days.

The painting is a two-dimensional work of art and seems to consist of a series of small differently colored dots placed one next to the other in order to create the different forms of the picture. The technique is called pointillism and was developed in France in the later part of the 19th century. *The Harvesters* is primarily characterized by a horizontality that goes deep in the almost endless background of fields. Only a few haystacks, trees, bushes and the figures of the men and women at work disrupt this with their vertical forms. The work is very close to abstraction. Although the subject and forms are recognizable, the faces of the figures –and even of the horses– are eliminated and the artist chose to depict only what was absolutely necessary in order for the viewer to be able to recognize what he/she sees. The painting is at the same time characterized by a regularity and strictness. Everything seems to be organized and still while the circles on the ground that denote the places that have been harvested offer an optical balance. Color is of primary importance in the painting. Different shades of green dominate under a pale blue sky and the artist chose mainly cool colors with the exception of the human figures and the cart on which they load their harvest something that seems to be binding them to the earth they work.

The illuminating light of the sun fills the picture and places the scene firmly in a sunny summer day.

The theme of the painting seems to be derived from the agricultural life of rural France, where Angrand was born, raised and returned after a time in the French capital, Paris. As the title denotes, the picture represents a group of harvesters working in the field and engaged in a tiring and painful yet essential job. Harvesting, then as now, is important not only for the rural areas but also for the towns, as the agricultural production is essential for the feeding and survival of the whole population. There are several choices of the painter that make the viewer sense his motives when creating this work. His choice not to depict the faces of his figures makes them a symbol of agricultural workers universally and the fact that he represents a rural scene in a large scale painting is typical of the times in which he created his work. Post-Impressionists, like the Impressionists and even the Realists before them, were interested not in the historical and mythological subjects that so fascinated generations of painters since the Renaissance. Instead, they focused on the world they lived in and experienced in their everyday reality whether this was in the town or in the country. As a child of the countryside, Angrand was most probably very much familiar with such scenes and chose to depict them in his art. In this respect, he chose to give a prominent place to the lower classes, those men and women who worked hard all of their lives. He represented them at work during a beautiful sunny day, immortalizing their undoubted importance along with the beauty of the French countryside and agricultural life.

The stillness of the scene gives a sense of calmness but also of perpetuity.

This is a scene that was repeated every year essentially unaltered. At the same time, the viewer gets a feeling of optimism. The radiating light of the sun that fills the picture, the almost cloudless blue sky and the green of the fields create an idyllic environment in which the people work. And although the viewer understands from the bending positions of the figures (all appear in different postures representing thus all the phases of their job) that their labor is tiresome, long and painful, the beautiful landscape and the vivid colors create a pleasant, almost happy picture. This is perhaps the message the artist wanted to convey. Agricultural labor that is so connected with earth and nature is a positive experience.

The painting looks at the same time very modern and contemporary. The techniques the artist used –and most notably pointillism– and the fact that the overall result flirts with abstraction give the work a 20th and even 21st century allure.

In all these respects, Charles Angrand's *The Harvesters* is an impressive work of art, creating a positive artistic experience for the viewer and prompting him/ her to further research the artist and the period in which he lived and work.