



Farm to Table

Art, Food, and Identity in the Age of Impressionism

Farm to Table: Art, Food, and Identity in the Age of Impressionism explores intersections of art, gastronomy, and national identity in late nineteenth-century France. The nation's image as the world's culinary capital became increasingly important as it grappled with war, political instability, imperialism, and industrialization. In this climate, France's culinary traditions signaled notions of its refinement, fortitude, and ingenuity while also exposing fractures in French society.

Beginning with the 1870 Prussian siege of Paris (and the resultant food crisis) and continuing through the 1890s, the era covered by this exhibition spans the age of Impressionism. In nearly sixty works by artists such as Rosa Bonheur, Julien Dupré, Paul Gauguin, and

Claude Monet, *Farm to Table* contains images of sumptuous ingredients and severe privation, bountiful meals and agrarian crises. Depictions of markets and gardens, farmers, chefs, and restaurants underscored the possibilities and precariousness of France's colonial and industrial projects, evolving norms of gender and class, and the tenuous relationship between Paris and the provinces.

Farm to Table is organized into five sections. The first examines farming and husbandry from the fields of rural France and the kitchen gardens of the country's urban centers to the lands of France's colonial empire. Works such as Claude Monet's *The Haystack* (cover) draw attention to the distinctive qualities of the French *terroir*—the soil, which was believed to lend an intrinsic and ineffable “Frenchness” to the nation's gastronomy. Auguste Renoir's scene of banana trees in the French colony of Algeria offers an alternative view. No longer an evocation of European *terroir*, the work prompts the question, If Algeria was, by extension of imperial rule, a part of France, do the products of its *terroir* have a place within French cuisine?

The second section features images of French markets, shops, and food halls. Narcisse Chaillou's *A Rat Seller During the Siege of Paris in 1870* (fig. 1) illustrates the hardships that people endured during

the devastating Franco-Prussian War. Later depictions of Paris's central markets show the interaction of different classes in commercial spaces, underscoring the socioeconomic dynamics between urban and rural areas.

Food workers are the focus of the third section. Depictions of young cooks, butchers, preparers, and servers highlight the gendered divisions of labor and social hierarchies that formed the foundations of France's gastronomic culture.

In the fourth section, still lifes representing meat, fish, fruits, and vegetables contain symbolic social messages. Gustave Courbet's austere 1872 still life of roughly painted fruit, for instance, showed his solidarity with working-class people and their humble fare. Cuts of meat acted as stand-ins for the body and served as allusions to both revolutionary violence and medical research. Plates of luxurious pastries reflected not only the impact of the colonial sugar trade but also the ingenuity of French food scientists and the aesthetics of presentation.

The last section of *Farm to Table* showcases the places where French men and women consumed meals, meager or extravagant. While hunger and poverty were social realities that could not be ignored, this

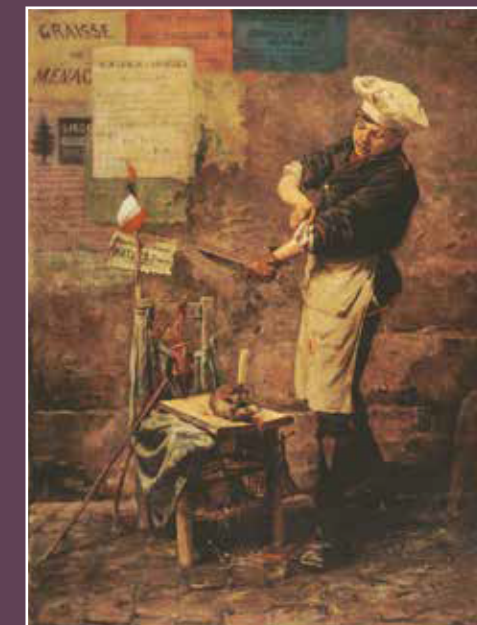


Fig. 1

was the age of the grand banquet, and the maturation of the restaurant, and an era of picnics and rural feasts. In these spaces, questions of family, community, citizenship, and spectacle come to the fore, speaking to the evolving social identities of a people who had long been told that what they ate—and how they ate it—defined who they were.

Adapted by Mark Scala, chief curator, from an essay by Andrew Eschelbacher, exhibition curator

January 31–May 4, 2025

Farm to Table: Art, Food, and Identity in the Age of Impressionism is organized by the American Federation of Arts and the Chrysler Museum of Art. The exhibition is generously supported by Martha MacMillan and Monique Schoen Warshaw. Additional support has been provided by Betsy S. Barbanell, Lee White Galvis, Allan Green, Clare E. McKeon, Betsy Pinover Schiff, the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation, the Dr. Lee MacCormick Edwards Charitable Foundation, and the Julia Child Foundation for Gastronomy and the Culinary Arts. This project is supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts.



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COVER: Claude Monet. *La Meule (The Haystack)*, 1891. Oil on canvas; 28 7/8 x 36 1/2 in. Private collection. INTERIOR: Narcisse Chaillou. *A Rat Seller During the Siege of Paris in 1870, 1871*. Oil on canvas; 25 1/4 x 18 1/2 in. Sheffield Museums