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Traduction : MultiLingual Traductions SARL, Mélanie Lefebvre

# Boudin in Le Havre

Monographies citadines



## “NO COTTON, NO PAINTINGS”

“Although born in Honfleur to a sailor father, I would (sic) not be so ungrateful as to forget that it is the town of Le Havre, where I was raised, which encouraged me and provided for me for three years.” A fair comment by Boudin in recognition of the town which educated him and, above all, which was the first to acknowledge him as a painter.

Let us briefly recall the facts. At about the age of ten years, the young Boudin was sent to live with the Brothers of the Christian Schools in Le Havre, and, a year later, became an apprentice to the printer Joseph Morlent, where he learned the trade. In 1844, at the age of twenty, he joined forces with Jean Acher to create a shop selling stationery goods and continued to work on his drawing. His taste for art led him to exhibit the works of passing artists in the window of his shop, such as Troyon, Couture, Millet and Isabey, who also gave him advice. Therefore, Boudin was entirely self-taught and, in the same way as his talents as a painter are surprising, so are the quality and ease of his writing for a man who never completed any studies.

Unfortunately, in 1846, he was conscripted and, in order to avoid spending seven years on one of the ships of the French fleet, he was

«IT TAKES MANY YEARS TO  
PREPARE ONE’S CAREER AND  
YOU SHOULD NOT BE IN TOO  
MUCH OF A HURRY OR TOO  
QUICK TO ASPIRE TO FAME.»

LETTER TO LOUIS, 21 FEBRUARY 1853.



forced to pay a man 2,500 Francs to replace him. This sum meant that he had to break his association with Acher, who probably did not behave very correctly since Boudin did not hesitate to refer to him as vile.

It marked the start of a period of great poverty. A stay in Paris, enrolment in classes by the Municipal School of Drawing in Le Havre, the protection of Baron Taylor, who offered him the chance to travel to northern France and Belgium, and, in 1850, a meeting with the trader Martin, who exhibited some of his works, were just some of the events of these difficult years.

Over the previous five years, the port town, which was more focused on trade than on intellectual matters, had boasted a museum directed by Adolphe Couvely, whose influence on the young Boudin was probably much greater than has been acknowledged in history books. But the key event was the foundation of the Société des Amis des Arts by a group of art enthusiasts in Le Havre, who had been organising exhibitions since 1839. This society, mainly comprising traders, was of great importance to the development of arts in Le Havre, which Boudin described with this phrase: “No cotton, no paintings.”

In 1850, Boudin decided to present some of his works at the Exhibition of the Amis des Arts of Le Havre. It proved to be a wise

decision since not only did the Society buy two studies from him for the lottery, but it also informed the Town Hall about this promising self-taught artist with a view to obtaining help for him to gain the required training: "His easy composition, his brilliant and convincing choice of colours offer great hope and we believe that we are not wrong in saying that Boudin is one of those privileged beings who should make a name for himself in the history of art. Boudin's exceptional abilities, despite the inevitable shortcomings in his education, have produced incredible results which have amazed us and, spontaneously, the idea has come to us that it would be regrettable if Mr Boudin was not placed, as soon as possible, in an environment which would allow him to undertake serious study, without which even the very best talents fade without producing all of their fruit. What Mr Boudin needs is to be able to spend time with masters and study works of art. Unfortunately, these conditions are not available in Le Havre, and Mr Boudin's particular situation does not allow him to go to Paris to find them. We believe that, under these circumstances, it is our duty to inform you of our concerns and wishes, convinced that your intelligent sensitivities, less sterile than our own, might be translated into facts. Therefore, please allow us to express the wish that the Municipality of Le Havre sends Mr Boudin to study painting in Paris for three years by offering him a grant of 1,200 Francs from municipal funds.

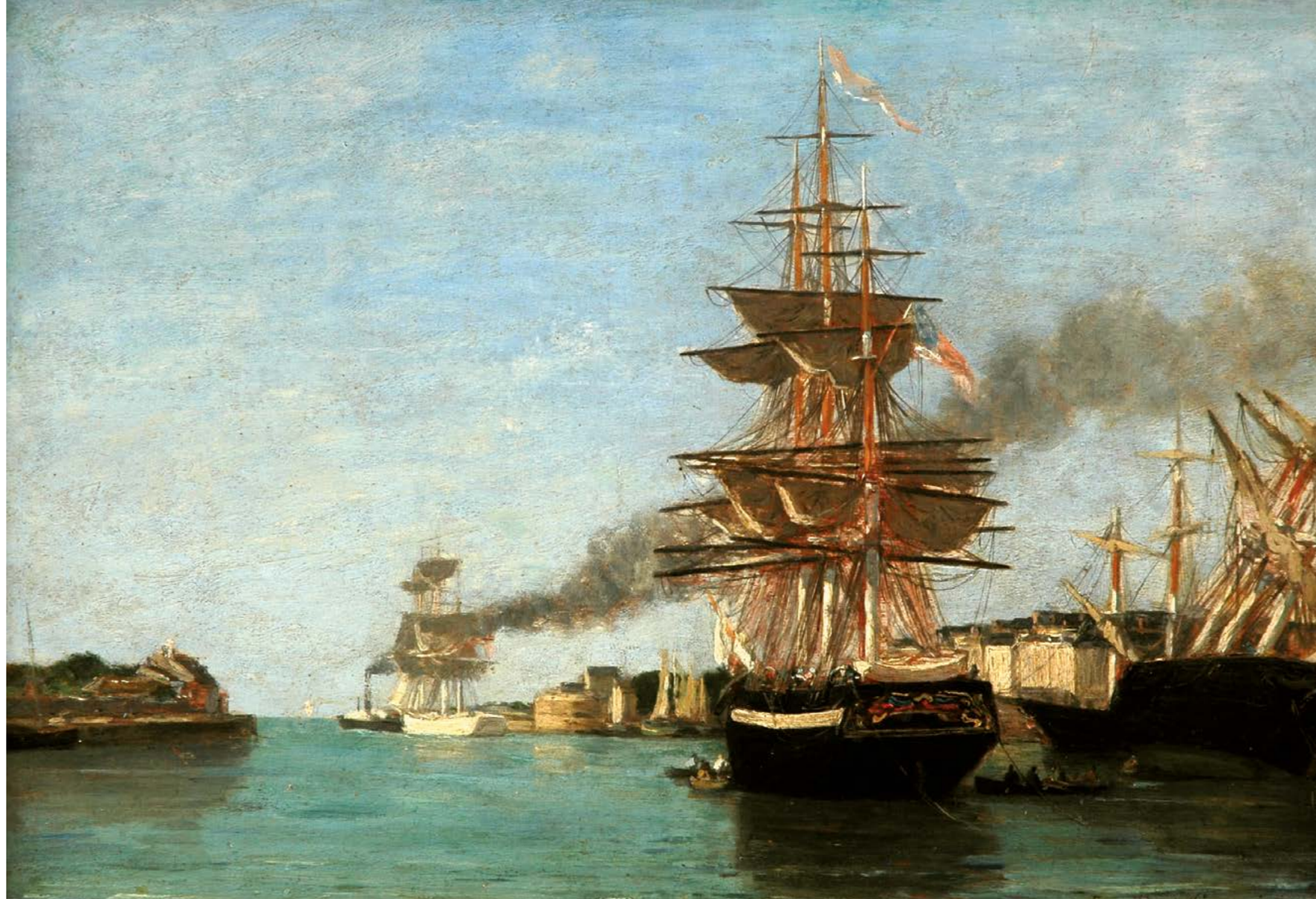
ON THE RIGHT  
**La Tour François I<sup>er</sup>**  
**au Havre, 1852**  
*painting on canvas*  
16 x 49,2 cm  
MuMa Le Havre © 2005  
MuMa Le Havre / Florian  
Kleinefenn



This wise action would pay tribute to your enlightened administration; it would help to eradicate the barbaric reputation which some ill-informed strangers no doubt enjoy associating with the town of Le Havre; it would offer hope that yet another name would be added to the long list of art, alongside the examples of which the town of Le Havre is rightfully so proud to see shine in the field of letters.”

The extraordinary thing is that, on 6 February 1851, the municipality accepted this request and the terms proposed by these enlightened amateurs. Equally extraordinary was the wise decision to carefully avoid comparing the flourishing and self-taught talents of Boudin with the more mature skills of Lhullier, who, too, was applying for this grant, refusing the proposal of Ochard (Lhullier’s teacher), who suggested that, in order to decide between the two competing artists, they should be asked to draw an antique statue and a live model and that these drawings should be judged by the members of the Parisian jury in order to avoid local influences. The council members, on the strength of the recommendations of Thomas Couture and Constant Troyon, as well as Alphonse Karr and Couveley, the museum’s director, chose Boudin without submitting him to any real test. And Boudin, who was asked to donate a work to Le Havre museum every year, was able to leave for Paris, with

ON THE RIGHT  
Port du Havre, ciel bleu  
painting on canvas  
© Collection du musée de  
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« IN THE NAME OF GOD,  
BOUDIN, YOU ARE A SE-  
RAPH, ONLY YOU KNOW  
THE SKY.» COURBET



ON THE LEFT  
**Le Moulin du Perrey**  
drawing  
© Art auction, Paris

the guarantee of a quarterly grant of 300 Francs for the next three years, where he enrolled at the Louvre as a student-copyist. Wisely, the town councillors of Le Havre stipulated that the contract would be suspended if it was seen that the titleholder “does not show the zeal and persistence in his work which we are entitled to expect of him”. Furthermore, if we are to believe Couveley, Boudin was warned that “these gentlemen will go to the Louvre to see you working for their first excursion to Paris.”

The grant was renewed for the three years, but this did not prevent them from being disappointed when they received the three paintings donated by Boudin to fulfil his contract because, naively, they expected to find an already successful artist. Instead, the grant holder sent two copies: *Prairie* by Paul Potter and *Ruisseau* by Ruysdael, as well as a still life of his own which, after being refused by the municipality, led to a dispute because it had been agreed in the contract that Boudin should provide three paintings. With the last painting still not having been delivered in 1858, the Mayor initially refused him the right to exhibit at the Le Havre painting exhibition. Boudin must have settled this dispute because, eventually, he was able to present eleven paintings at the event.

Despite Berthoud writing to him on 8 June: “I am pleased to see that your copy has been of satisfaction”, Boudin was well aware that he had not met the expectations of his patrons: “It was believed

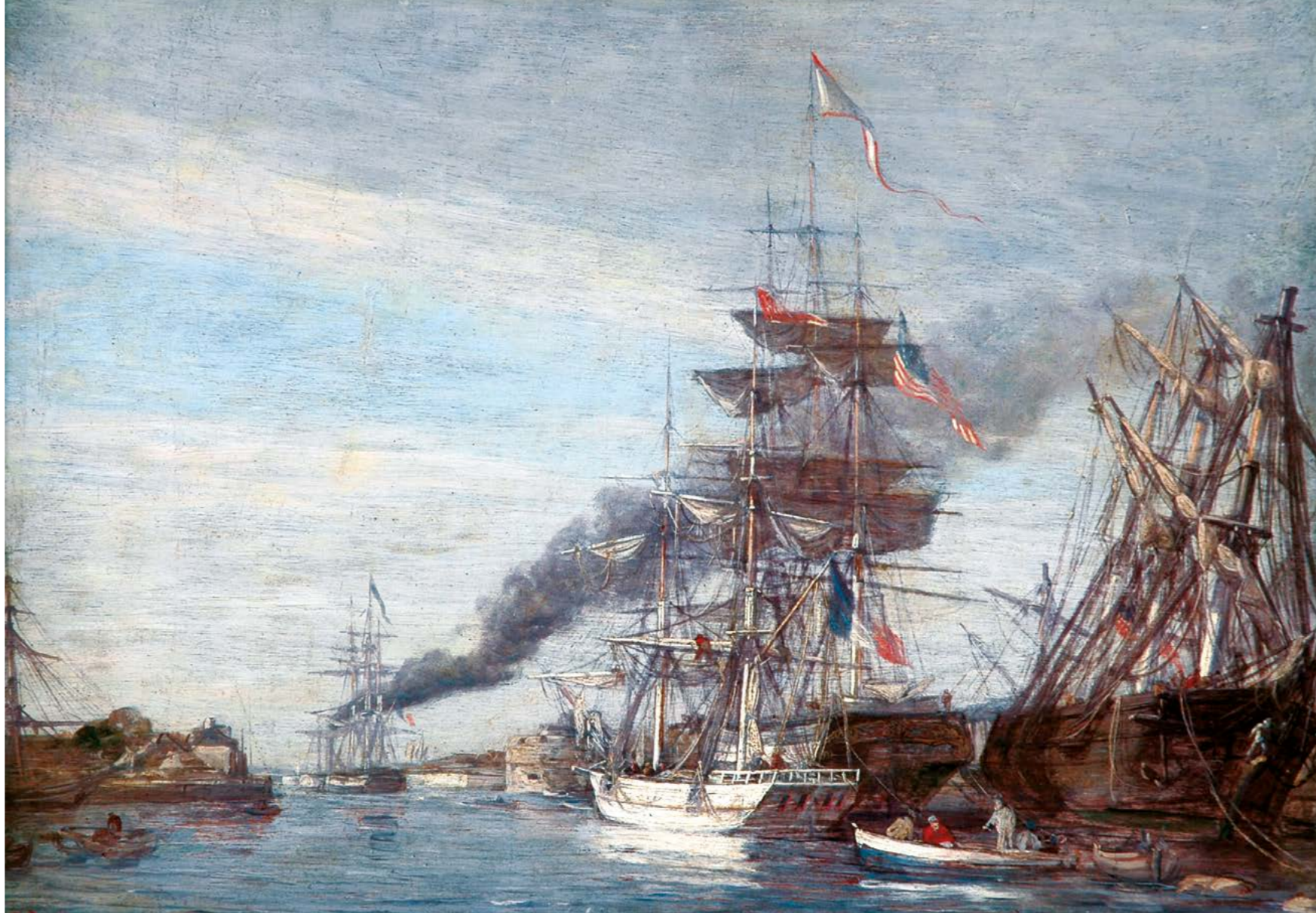
that, after three years, I was going to return as a phoenix of art. I returned more confused than ever, fascinated by the famous names of the time, from Rousseau, who charmed us, to Corot, who was starting to show us a different path.”

This should not surprise us, with the great conflict between those representing the institution and those representing the modern movement offering plenty to confuse a young self-taught painter from the provinces. Boudin did not realise that the way he used what he called “grey painting” did not have a chance in Paris. Proof of this was Corot, the master of this genre, who had great difficulty making a name for himself. Therefore, he returned to Le Havre in the hope of better days. But these were long in coming and the painter grew depressed seeing nothing emerge from this “mud of colours”. He wrote to his brother on 20 December 1865: “I saw Courbet and others who dare to produce large canvases, the lucky things. The young Monet has a twenty foot one to cover. I would like something less ambitious, to be able to undertake something larger than my small offerings, but I have to think about this wretched sustenance, so many never-ending tiny expenses.” And dream about rendering the delicacy of light which surrounds us.

In 1858, he met the young Oscar Monet in Le Havre, who was a

ON THE RIGHT  
**Port du Havre, ciel gris**  
*painting on canvas*  
© Collection du musée de Boulogne-  
sur-Mer - Philippe Beurtheret

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**Bassin au Havre**  
*painting on canvas*  
© Galerie Glogner, Luzern, Suisse



caricaturist at the time. He convinced him to take up painting, something to which Monet did not aspire at all. The following year, he met Baudelaire and Courbet. The latter had seen some of Boudin's small canvases in a shop window in Le Havre and wanted to know who had produced them. That year, in 1859, Boudin sent his first painting to the Paris Salon, *Le Pardon de Sainte-Anne la Palud*, a painting which he criticised for containing many defects of youth. In 1861, on request by the sculptor Jules Bonnafé, who considered Le Havre to be inhabited solely by idiots, and by Monet, who wrote to him that marine painters are completely lacking because the only one there is happens to be completely mad (he was referring to Jongkind whom he met in Trouville the following year). Boudin returned to Paris. He was right to do so. Remaining in Le Havre would have been equivalent to burying himself, especially with the town suffering the full blast of the cotton shortage between 1865 and 1867 as a result of the American Civil War. He started a new way of life, with a few winter months in the capital and the summer season at the coast, mainly on the coast of Normandy where he was born and where he found his favourite subjects: the harbours and beaches of which he became such a great specialist. His famous beach scenes brought to life by women in crinolines, whom he referred to as his "little dolls", helped him to achieve fame, even though, in about 1868, he became disgusted with these groups of

