



Fig. 357 **Sir Edward Burne-Jones**, *Laus Veneris*, 1873–78. Oil on canvas, 48¾ × 73¼". Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

reverie. The theme is based on the legend of Tannhäuser, the minnesinger whose escape from the lair of Venus and subsequent repentance inspired an opera by Wagner and a poem by Swinburne and contributed to the myth of the *femme fatale*, which reached its peak in the 1890s. Here we see the goddess of Love herself, being praised in a song by a music-making retinue of maidens whom Henry James described as “pale, sickly, and wan, in the manner of all Mr. Burne-Jones’s young people.” The fully clad Venus also shares this pallor, creating an image of longing and frustration that reflects the sense of erotic repression so common to Victorian art and life. The sexuality of Venus’s domain seems a literary pipe dream, more spirit than flesh. The knights dimly visible through the tiled window frame are phantoms; and the adventures of Venus that cover the wall are distanced through the medium of tapestry, whose gorgeously ornate surfaces transform physical desire into decorative sensuousness. More and more, the refined pleasures of art and the farthest reaches of the imagination were to become hermetically sealed from the facts of modern life. Already in the 1860s, painters like Rossetti and Moreau (see fig. 259) had pointed the way to Burne-Jones’s escapist aesthetic. By the 1890s, as we shall see, many

more artists, working under the banner of Symbolism, would inhabit this twilight realm.

Nevertheless, throughout the 1870s and 1880s, the Realist impulse to record the facts of a here-and-now world continued to dominate painters working both in the most adventurous styles of Impressionism and in the more conservative modes taught by the academies. And the range of subject matter, from miserable city slums to fashionable boulevards, from the regimented activities of schools and sweatshops to the leisurely movements of cafés and wealthy drawing rooms, also expanded to match the complexities of nineteenth-century life. Artists who wished to stress the legibility of their subjects avoided the path of Whistler or Monet, who often muffled detail in blurred pictorial effects of exquisitely woven tones and textures, and chose, instead, a language of more literal descriptiveness that permitted the viewer to pay as much attention to the contemporary reality depicted as to the way in which it had been filtered through a personal aesthetic temperament.

Of the experience most central to the changing world of the 1870s—the new streets and buildings that defined the geometric networks, the rhythms, the social mixes and

segregations of the modern city—no painting offers a more monumental statement than Caillebotte's headline-titled *Paris Street: Rainy Weather* (fig. 358), shown first in 1877 at the third Impressionist exhibition. Many Impressionist masters had painted the axial streets and boulevards of modern Paris teeming with pedestrians; but typically, as in Monet's *Boulevard des Capucines* (see fig. 338), they conveyed an impression, a rapid glimpse in which details are lost in an unfocused mesh of pulsating parts. Caillebotte's view of a complex intersection of radial streets near the Gare St.-Lazare shares, in some part, the Impressionists' sense of the moment, as well as of a cropped field of vision, which may catch just half of a gentleman's back or the rear wheels of a carriage, or may miss the very top of the lamppost that slices this complex thoroughfare in half. Still more prominent is the sense of a preordained order, in which the spectacle of upper-middle-class pedestrians, shielding themselves with umbrellas as they stroll under the rain so predictable in Paris, is transformed into an almost

mechanized image of clockwork movement, dictated by the insistent parallel, perpendicular, and diagonal axes of the city plan, as further emphasized by the most rigorous perspective grid. Against the lucid cruciform pattern defined by the vertical lamppost with its watery shadow and by the high horizon line (which seems to level off every head, near and far), each component, large and small, contributes to the feeling of an all-controlling system. The Paris that was constructed under Napoleon III's prefect, Baron Haussmann, seems here a utopian blueprint for a city of the future, dominating both the residents and their environment. The paving stones that fill the lower left quadrant of the painting are marvels of hygiene and of machine-belt regularity, a far cry from the muddy streets of old Paris, and a descendant, in terms of urban tidiness and order, of Hummel's view of the Berlin pleasure gardens (see fig. 162). As for the arm-in-arm bourgeois couple at the right, who appear to be walking out of the painting into the viewer's space, they turn their heads in tandem, with the precision



Fig. 358 **Gustave Caillebotte**, *Paris Street: Rainy Weather*, 1877. Oil on canvas, 6' 11½" × 9' ¾". Art Institute of Chicago. Charles H. and Mary F. S. Worcester Collection.

of automatons, and establish a modular human form repeated throughout the swiftly diminishing spaces.

Even more than in his earlier *Floorscrapers* of 1875 (see fig. 351), Caillebotte achieves here an extraordinary fusion of opposites, in which both literal description and the most inflexibly abstract regimentation appear to be joined effortlessly. Here, the documentation is so ample that it could well provide the data for a movie-set reconstruction of an elegant Paris street scene of the 1870s, from the veil worn by the lady in the foreground to the tidy rows of chimneys on the mansarded apartment houses that funnel our gaze back to unseen streets in the microcosm of the city. And even the sense of particular weather conditions, underscored by the title, is conspicuous in the blue-gray tonality that casts a chilly pall over a scene of such pervasive wetness that streets, buildings, and umbrellas create an overall image of damp, reflective surfaces. Yet, at the same time, this painting of a photographic, split-second truth quickly reveals a commanding skeleton of such austere calculated geometries, both in the patterns of surface and depth, that we feel we are only a step away from that even more monumental and overtly artful construction of a cross-section of anonymous Parisians, Seurat's *A Sunday on the Grande-Jatte* (see fig. 399), where Caillebotte's indissoluble merger of art and reality is unbalanced in clear favor of art. And more surprisingly, Caillebotte's most imposing and important painting can be thought of as resurrecting, with modern subject matter, David's great

Neoclassic tradition, as in *Belisarius* and the *Horatii* (see figs. 15 and 16), of locking figures and architectural settings together in a taut, immutable order.

If Caillebotte's image of Paris appears to be one of ideal harmony, of a nineteenth-century optimism about social progress, his contemporaries often found in modern cities a strange, alien world that could, at times, become a hell on earth. The most dramatic vision of nineteenth-century urban misery might well be found in the work of the French painter and illustrator Gustave Doré (1832–83). A frequent traveler who often assumed the role of artist-journalist, Doré, between 1868 and 1872, made regular visits to London, where his literary illustrations were already well known in English editions. There, he and his friend the writer Blanchard Jerrold planned together a volume called *London: A Pilgrimage*, in which they would join visual and literary forces in a sweeping description of the totality of modern London life, from the racetracks to the factories, from the markets to the docks. Of Doré's many illustrations to this huge and weighty travelogue, published in 1872, few are so shattering as those which descend to the lower depths of working-class neighborhoods. Unlike Géricault, who in his heart-breaking lithographs of London life fixed on the plight of individuals (see fig. 116), Doré presents a panoramic, devil's-eye view of an infernal, yet man-made world that turns the Industrial Revolution upside down, mocking the idea of progress. In one of the most epically gloomy of these prints, *Over London—By Rail* (fig. 359), we

Fig. 359 **Gustave Doré**,
Over London—By Rail (from
Gustave Doré and
Blanchard Jerrold, *London:
A Pilgrimage*), 1872.
Engraving, 8 × 10".
British Library, London.

