

## Henri Harpignies in Marlotte: “painter of children”

Harpignies, the “Michelangelo” of trees, was also the “painter of children”, at the time he frequented Marlotte, alongside Henry Murger



The painter Henri Harpignies, who lived almost a hundred years, is considered one of the greatest painters of nature. Born in Valenciennes in 1819, he was the painter of Saint-Privé, a village in the Yonne department, where he settled in 1860 and where he died in 1916. Through his travels and encounters, he became interested in different landscapes, such as those of the Bourbonnais countryside. He also painted numerous sites around Plagny and Nevers, which he particularly appreciated. However, he also had a small period in Marlotte, at the very beginning of his artist career, when the hamlet was inhabited by Henry Murger! (opposite, portrait of Harpignies by Carjat, circa 1866).

### Late start to his career (1846-1853)

While his parents intended for him to work in the family business, this well-rounded artist, passionate about painting and music, was able to convince his father, after ten years of good and loyal service, that his path was to become an artist! Henri wanted to be a painter. Thanks to his determination, in 1846 he entered the Parisian studio of painter Jean Achard (1807-1884). His early vocation was therefore only delayed and, conversely, family affluence was a very favorable support for his plans. In 1848, Harpignies left for Italy and, returning to France in 1850, he began to paint landscapes. Three years later, he was received at the Parisian Salon for the first time, with the ***Chemin creux*** and ***View of Capri***. The following year, like many landscape painters, he discovered the Fontainebleau forest, following the footsteps of Corot whom he met around 1851 and whom he admired.



**Les Trembleaux, Marlotte**, watercolor, 1856 (Vente 2020 – P.Karbstein, Düsseldorf)

### Discovery of the Fontainebleau forest (1854)

In *Mes Relations d'artistes* (1898), Amédée Besnus dedicates the chapter devoted to Murger (his stay in Marlotte) to Henri Harpignies, whom he then describes "wearing a large red cap with a blue tassel, which gave him the appearance of a sectarian of Mohammed." Between 1854 and 1856, Harpignies regularly frequented the hamlet where he went for exploration stays in the Fontainebleau forest, sometimes in the company of the "herald of Boheme", Henry Murger, whom he had met in Paris. In Marlotte, he settled in a small, thatched house, in the back of a courtyard, a few steps away from the Antony inn. He then drew and painted numerous forest landscapes with a predilection for the local *Trembleaux* site.



**L'école buissonnière**, 1855 (Galerie Jungi, Zurich-Archives)

### “Painter of the children” (1853-1859)

Harpignies' debut in Marlotte coincides with a particular period of his pictorial work, less known and ultimately quite short. Around 1853, Harpignies *was overcome by an unexpected desire. He was stung by the tarantula of human representations, however in the context of a landscape.*<sup>1</sup> He seems to have started this phase with a canvas representing a group of children leaving school, lined up in front of a wall, which they were copiously watering: ***Small streams make big rivers***. For F.Henriet, in *Le Paysagiste aux champs*, the origin of Harpignies' passion for children would have originated from an encounter near Nevers, in Plagny, with small inconvenient spectators... In any case, for almost six years, he exhibited paintings in which kids played the leading roles, such as in ***L'école buissonnière***, presented at the Salon of 1855. For his friend Amédée Besnus, Harpignies was only the painter of children. In 1857, we found these children skipping school in a new painting (Museum of Valenciennes), ***Un sauve qui peut***, fleeing from the local police, probably located near the village of Famars (department of Nord).



***Un sauve qui peut***, oil on canvas, 1857 (Museum of Valenciennes)

This taste for the representation of children in the landscape will last until the end of his life, even if Harpignies will henceforth favor landscapes largely planted with trees and much less animated by characters. From the 1870s, he returned to “pure and simple landscape” and we know him today as the “Michelangelo of trees”, a nickname that the novelist Anatole France bestowed on him around 1892. Harpignies exhibited at the Paris Salon until 1912 and won numerous medals before obtaining the Legion of Honor, of which he would be a grand officer in 1911.

1 - L.Bénédite, Gazette des Beaux-Arts, 1917.