

Paul Guigou, *La plaine de la Crau, effet de crépuscule (Provence) (The Plain of La Crau, Twilight Effect (Provence))*

Villars 1834 – 1871 Paris

Oil on canvas

25 by 39 inches (65 by 100 cm)

Signed and dated at the lower right: 'Paul Guigou 70'

Provenance: Private Collection, France

Exhibited: Paris, Salon of 1870, no. 1289;
Hommage à Guigou, Galerie Garibaldi, Marseilles, 1951, no. 1

Literature: Émile Bellier de la Chavignerie and Louis Auvray, *Dictionnaire Général des Artistes de l'École Française*, Paris, 1882 (Garland reprint, New York, 1979, vol. 2, p. 722).
Pierre Miquel, *Le Paysage français au XIXe siècle 1840-1900: L'École de la nature*, Maurs-La-Jolie, 1985, vol. IV, p. 288.
Sylvie Lamort de Gail, *Paul Guigou: Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. I, Montrouge, 1989, pp. 35 and 153.
Claude-Jeanne Bonnici, *Paul Guigou: 1834-1871*, Aix-en-Provence, 1989, p. 197, no. 277.

Note: Paul Guigou (fig. 1) was one of the principle painters of the landscape of his native region of Provence, in the south of France. Although his family wished him to become a priest or a lawyer, he studied art with painters in Marseilles and had his first exhibition with the Société des Arts there in 1854. In 1859 he went to Paris where he was influenced by the works of Courbet, which gave him a sense of how to articulate space in a broad, ordered manner. During 1862 Guigou painted the countryside of Provence with a fellow local artist, Adolphe Monticelli, and in that same year, granted a small allowance by his parents, he settled in Paris on the rue de l'Abbaye in Montmartre. The following year he had his first success when three of his landscapes were accepted for the annual Salon, where he would continue to exhibit for the remainder of his career. In 1865 he also began showing his etchings with the Société des Aquafortistes. In 1866 Guigou made a brief trip with some other artists to Algeria, but this seems to have had little impact on his development.

Since he returned often to his country home in *le Midi*, Guigou typically painted luminous horizontal landscapes of Provençal settings, capturing the crisp light of the region with its strong, jewel-like colors. He was aware of the developments of the Impressionists, whom he would have met in Paris at the café Guerbois aux Batignolles, but he chose to pursue his own individual path. He painted in and around Marseilles in the 1860s (figs. 2a-b) and throughout Provence, especially along the banks of his favorite subject, the River Durance, which served for his 1864 Salon submission (fig. 3). He also spent time at Mount Sainte-Victoire near Aix-en-Provence (fig. 4), a location that later another fellow Provençal painter, Paul Cézanne, would immortalize.

The mild-mannered Guigou was a true independent devoted to his personal vision. His work appealed to the leading promoter of the Impressionists, the critic Théodore Duret, who first met Guigou in 1868. Following the Salon of 1870, which included the present painting, Duret wrote a highly favorable review of the painter. Later that same year Guigou was mobilized for the Franco-Prussian War but he saw no action. He returned from a military camp in Provence to Paris in 1871, and because of the instability of the art market took a position as drawing master for the children of baronne Nathaniel de Rothschild. But he sadly died shortly afterwards in Paris of a cerebral hemorrhage, aged only thirty-seven.

At the Salon of 1870 Guigou exhibited two characteristic paintings of Provençal landscapes – the present work and *Les bords de la Durance, le matin*. Like many of Guigou's landscapes, this one has no human presence to disturb the solitude of the calm scene, and it reveals his interest, evident from the titles of a number of his works, in capturing the light effects of different times of day (figs. 5-9).¹ It has a purity and an integrity, a faithfulness to the harmony of nature and the beauty of his native region that holds the viewer transfixed. The vast plain of La Crau in south-western Provence, sometimes referred to as “the Sahara of Marseilles,”² was described by Guigou's first biographer, André Gouirand, as “a monotonous landscape...an ocean of stones stretching to the horizon with only some rare isolated poplars.”³ But the barren, rocky open space with just a few clusters of trees (figs. 10a-d) served to inspire several brilliant paintings by Guigou in his last years (figs. 11-15),⁴ of which this is the grandest.

Clearly taken with this sunset vista he witnessed at La Crau in 1869, Guigou made two small versions of it. The first (fig. 16),⁵ an oil on canvas dated 1869, is 8 ½ by 18 1/8 inches (22 by 47 cm); and then in 1870 he painted another (fig. 17)⁶ of nearly the same size (22.5 by 46 cm). One can assume that the first of these small studies was made on the spot directly from nature, and then later in the studio he painted this large version to exhibit at the Salon. For it he added greater definition in the clouds, and the bigger size gives it more grandeur and breadth. The painting shows a marshy pool in the foreground, which serves to lead the eye into the background where a grove of massed trees on the right is offset by the hills at the left. The immense, glowing sky with clouds tinged pink by the setting sun and with a flight of birds dominates the composition. The sunset is reflected in the water, and the whole is infused with a silent, uplifting freshness of vision. Evident of his devotion to this subject, Guigou also made an etching of the painting (fig. 18), which was likewise exhibited at the 1870 Salon but he did not publish it.⁷

Duret's article on Guigou following the Salon of 1870 remains one of the best analysis of the painter's style:

Paul Guigou...has succeeded in painting landscapes in which the sincerity of tones and the accenting of colors has now blended into a harmonious effect. At this year's Salon...he excels at extending a perspective and at arranging the middle grounds against a well composed distant background. Painting by preference the Provençal landscape, nude and desolate, he knows how to compensate for the aridity of the sites by his manner of using direct accents to render the coloring of the water, rocks, mountains and by the bright, lively light that he projects on to the countryside. Most of our northern French landscape painters depict woods and groups of trees under which we can feel the coolness of the shade. Guigou, because in Provence, there are few trees and limited amounts of foliage, paints space and distance, and creates on his canvas deep horizons.⁸

Guigou's work with its dedication to Provence is the painterly counterpoint to the poetic evocations of the region by the famed Nobel-Prize winning writer Frédéric Mistral, who may earlier in his life have met Guigou and observed in 1908:

I consider Paul Guigou the greatest painter of Provence. No one could paint better than he the luminosity of our beautiful land, the rugged poetry of its rocky and powdery soil. With great sincerity of vision, he made a truthful and faithful portrait of his little nation. He does not yet have the place in the world of art which he deserves, but that will come.⁹

And he has indeed been rediscovered! Of his nearly 450 paintings, there are now examples by him in the museums of Boston, Cleveland, Seattle, and Chicago (fig. 3), as well as the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., the Hood Museum, and three at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena.

¹See Lamort de Gail, 1989, nos. 95 and 147; and Miquel, 1985, p.288.

²See Claude-Jeanne Bonnici, "Le Désert de La Crau: L'Orient de Paul Guigou," in the exhib. cat. *Paul Guigou, 1834-1871*, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Marseilles, 2004, p. 120.

³André Gouirand, *Les Peintres Provençaux*, Paris, 1901, p. 145.

⁴See Bonnici, 1989, nos. 271-77; and Lamort de Gail, no. 183.

⁵See William Beadelston Inc, New York and Columbus Museum of Art, *Paul Guigou 1834-1871*, 1987, no. 21; and Lamort de Gail, 1989, no. 140; Bonnici, 1989, no. 239.

⁶See the exhib. cat. *Mon cher Guigou*, Galerie Daber, Paris, 1970, no. 61; and Lamort de Gail, 1989, no.182; Bonnici, 1989, no. 275.

⁷This was no. 5208 in the Salon of 1870. See Janine Bailly-Herzberg, *L'Eau-Forte de Peintre au Dix-Neuvième Siècle*, Paris, 1972, vol. 2, p. 105; and Idem, *L'Art du Paysage en France au XIXe Siècle: De l'atelier au plein air*, Paris, 2000, p. 170; also in Bonnici, 1989, p. 234, no. 421.

⁸T. Duret, "Salon de 1870," *L'Electeur libre*, May 12, 1870, p. 61; Duret's review was reprinted in Théodore Duret, *Critique d'Avant-Garde*, Paris, 1885, pp. 3-7; and he also quoted from his own review in a later article "Un grand peintre de la Provence, Paul Guigou," *L'Art et les Artistes*, XV, April-September, 1912, pp. 97-99.

⁹Published in *L'Art et les Artistes* in 1908, the text is quoted in A. Alauzen, *La Peinture en Provence*, Marseilles, 1987, p. 234.