

# Backfill

## The Fine Art of Floor Planing

**F**ishermen hauling nets get a lot of attention from painters. So do farmers and cowboys. Residential builders and remodelers? Not so much. But there's one noteworthy exception: a large canvas by French Impressionist Gustave Caillebotte called "Les Raboteurs de Parquet" ("the floor planers"), depicting three tradesmen hard at work on a hot day, long before the appearance of drum sanders, power planes, and electric fans.

The floorboards have cupped, and the worker on the right in the painting (below) is using a *rabot* — a heavy scraper plane — to knock down the raised edges, while the central figure uses a *racloir*, or metal hand scraper, to flatten them, leaving an expanse of smooth, raw wood. The third worker, on the left, is reaching for a file to freshen up the hooked edge of his own scraper, which he holds loosely in his left hand. A bottle of red wine stands in the right foreground, from which the hardworking

raboteurs evidently refresh themselves as necessary. Piles of curled shavings on the floor echo the ornamental iron grillwork in the window that lets in the light.

Caillebotte's portrayal of ordinary workers was widely criticized as vulgar and overly realistic when the painting was first exhibited in 1876. Even the workers themselves came in for some abuse. "The arms of the planers are too thin, and their chests too narrow," one observer complained. (Art historian Parme Giuntini notes the subjects' shirtlessness was the painter's way of "heroicizing" them; in reality, Parisian tradesmen of the time would never have stripped down while at work.)

But quality work shines through in the end. "Les Raboteurs de Parquet" is now recognized as a minor masterpiece — and so, in its way, is the flooring job it framed. They may have had skinny arms, but those guys knew what they were doing. — *Jon Vara*

