

DUKE STREET GALLERY
INFORMATION SHEET



EUGENE BOUDIN (1824-1898)
BASSIN DU COMMERLE AU HAVRE

Materials
Oil on panel, signed,
10.5" x 13.5"

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Eugene Boudin (1824 – 1898)

Born into a seafaring family, it follows that Eugene Boudin's favourite subjects are those that he knew and grew up with. Ships, seascapes, harbours, beach scenes at Deauville and Trouville; and above all the luminous skies of Normandy and Brittany. These are things that he loved and painted with pride and patriotism, using the French flag as a splash of colour whenever possible.

Boudin began his career quite late at the age of twenty-five. In 1847, he won a scholarship to study art in Paris, whilst that fabulous city was not yet in the grip of Impressionism (1st Salon de Refusées did not happen for another thirty five years), it was still filled with excitement and inspirational ideas for a young aspiring artist from the provinces. Wandering through the endless museums, Boudin became enchanted by the landscapes, seascapes and skies rendered by the 17th century Dutch Masters. Also, albeit in its infancy, the Barbizon School was beginning to divert attention from the Paris Salon with its die-hard traditionalists; direct descendants of Fragonard and Boucher and still locked into their ideas. Boudin met Claude Monet in 1858 and their mutual admiration provided a catalyst to both. Boudin's enthusiasm for working directly from nature was just an enthusiastically embraced by Monet. "It was as if a veil was torn from my eyes and I saw and understood what painting should be." Later Monet was to dub Boudin "the King of Skies", an accolade which was, and still is, utterly apt.

Corot and Courbet provides the doorway through which Boudin found his natural palette. Whereas both those painters worked in the studio, the heavy stillness of their paintings was one of the reasons why Boudin went outdoors to paint direct from nature – "Their pictures drove me out into the fresh air and daylight". Boudin revelled in that particular silvery quality of light found along the north coast of France. All the colours of mother-of-pearl were set in Boudin's palette and they have become synonymous with his best works. Tall masts reach up against the clouds and are reflected in the still waters of the harbours where Boudin preferred to work. Rarely did he venture out to sea – the light did not appeal and I suspect he was not a great sailor for all his family background.

Market scenes, fisherfolk and inland village scenes all were delicately worked by Boudin, but it was the harbour scenes that were his first and lasting love. The one exception was when he would turn to the beach scenes in Trouville and Deauville, when the season took over and the beaches were literally covered with hooped skirts, crinolines and fluttering bonnets. The atmosphere of society taking a formal day by the sea was brilliantly distilled by Boudin's delicate brush; his eye noting the carefully arranged poses balanced on absurd little chairs, parasols carefully keeping any uncovered skin out of the sun, and the escorts stiffly at attention with morning suits correctly buttoned and top hats at the proper angle. Colour is used sparingly – black was the fashion, but occasionally a brightly dressed child stands out and, of course, the ever-present French flag.

Boudin rarely left the north of France, but there were two notable periods when he did travel. The first was a six-month stay in Venice (during which period he produced over eighty paintings); the second and final sojourn was to the south of France in the last six years of life. Ill health required that he should leave the damp climate of the English Channel and his beloved Normandy and Brittany for the warmth and sunlight of the south. He painted but missed the luminous light of the north and was never able to recreate the Mediterranean skies as he wished.

The artist suffered many disappointments during his life; not least being the lack of recognition given to him by the public. Boudin began to exhibit at the Paris Salon in 1859 and continued to do so annually. In 1881 he received a bronze medal and in 1892 he was given the Legion d'Honneur. Scant recognition for one who virtually directed the birth of Impressionism by example. More to the point is the huge esteem that Boudin was held in by Corot, Courbet, Sisley, Manet, Monet and Jongkind. Today Boudin's pictures give timeless pleasure to literally hundreds of fortunate collectors; at last he is seen for the genius he undoubtedly was.