

Realism 1; Nineteenth Century France

Corot

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796– 1875) was a French landscape and portrait painter as well as a printmaker. He is a pivotal figure in landscape painting and his vast output simultaneously references the Neo-Classical tradition and anticipates the plein-air innovations of Impressionism. He was a shy boy and a poor scholar. His mother was a milliner and his father managed the business, which was very successful. The store was a famous destination for fashionable Parisians and earned the family an excellent income.

At nineteen, Corot was a "big child, shy and awkward. He blushed when spoken to. Before the beautiful ladies who frequented his mother's salon, he was embarrassed and fled like a wild thing."

He was apprenticed to a draper, but he hated commercial life and despised what he called "business tricks". When he was 26, his father consented to his adopting the profession of art. Later Corot stated, "I told my father that business and I were simply incompatible, and that I was getting a divorce."

Between 1821 and 1822, Corot studied with Michallon, a landscape painter of Corot's age who was a protégé of the painter Jacques-Louis David and who was already a well-respected teacher. Michallon had a great influence on Corot's career. In addition to tracing lithographs and copying three-dimensional forms, Corot's drawing lessons included making landscape sketches and paintings outdoors, especially in the forests of Fontainebleau, the seaports along Normandy, and the villages west of Paris such as Ville-d'Avray (where his parents had a country house



Corot later stated, "I made my first landscape from nature...under the eye of this painter, whose only advice was to render with the greatest scrupulousness everything I saw before me. The lesson worked; since then I have always treasured precision.")

Starting in 1822 Corot began receiving a yearly allowance of 1500 francs which adequately financed his new career, studio, materials, and travel for the rest of his life.

Corot, *La Trinité-des-Monts, seen from the Villa Medici* 1825–1828

This is an Italian oil sketch which was later used for a studio painting which by adding imagined, formal elements consistent with Neoclassical principles, became his first Salon entry, *View at Narni* (1827). He took this quick, natural study of a ruin of a Roman aqueduct in dusty bright sun and transformed it into a falsely idyllic pastoral setting with giant shade trees and green lawns, a conversion meant to appeal to the Neoclassical jurors.

Corot, *The Bridge at Narni* 1826



At this time landscape painting was on the upswing and generally divided into two camps: one—historical landscape by Neoclassicists in Southern Europe representing idealized views of real and fancied sites peopled with ancient, mythological, and biblical figures; and two—realistic landscape, more common in Northern Europe, which was largely faithful to actual topography, architecture, and flora, and which often showed figures of peasants. In both approaches, landscape artists would typically begin with outdoor sketching and preliminary painting, with finishing work done indoors.

In the early 19th century highly influential upon French landscape artists was the work of

Constable and Turner, who reinforced the trend in favour of Realism and away from Neoclassicism.



He went to Italy from 1825 to 1828 to study the masters of the Italian Renaissance and to draw the crumbling monuments of Roman antiquity. This was a highly formative and productive period, during which he completed over 200 drawings and 150 paintings.

"This sun gives off a light that makes me despair. It makes me feel the utter powerlessness of my palette." He learned to master the light and to paint the stones and sky in subtle and dramatic variation.

Corot, *View from the Farnese Gardens* 1826

In the spring of 1829, Corot came to Barbizon to paint in the Forest of Fontainebleau returning in the autumn of 1830 and in the summer of 1831, where he made drawings and oil studies, from which he made a painting intended for the Salon. While there he met the members of the Barbizon school; Rousseau, Millet, and the young Daubigny.



Corot, *View of the Forest of Fontainebleau* 1830

Charles Daubigny stated, "He's a perfect Old Man Joy, this Father Corot. He is altogether a wonderful man, who mixes jokes in with his very good advice." Another student said of Corot, "the newspapers had so distorted Corot, putting Theocritus and Virgil in his hands, that I was quite surprised to find him knowing neither Greek nor Latin...His welcome is very open, very free, very amusing: he speaks or listens to you while hopping on one foot or on two; he sings snatches of opera in a very true voice", but he has a "shrewd, biting side carefully hidden behind his good nature."



He advised his students "The study of the nude, you see, is the best lesson that a landscape painter can have. If someone knows how, without any tricks, to get a figure, he is able to make a landscape; otherwise he can never do it."

Corot, *Repose* c1865-70

Recognition and acceptance by the establishment came slowly, but by 1845 Baudelaire pronounced Corot the leader in the "modern school of landscape painting". While some critics found Corot's colours "pale" and his work having "naive awkwardness", Baudelaire astutely responded, "M. Corot is more a harmonist than a colorist, and his compositions, which are always entirely free of pedantry, are seductive just because of their simplicity of colour."



Corot, *Ville d'Avray* ca.1867



Corot, *Young Girl Reading* 1868

In spite of his strong attraction to women, he wrote of his commitment to painting: "I have only one goal in life that I want to pursue faithfully: to make landscapes. This firm resolution keeps me from a serious attachment. That is to say, in marriage...but my independent nature and my great need for serious study make me take the matter lightly."

In 1847, Delacroix noted in his journal, "Corot is a true artist. One has to see a painter in his own place to get an idea of his worth...Corot delves deeply into a subject: ideas come to him and he adds while working; it's the right approach."

It was not only Italian architecture and light which captured Corot's attention. The late-blooming Corot was entranced with Italian females as well: "They still have the most beautiful women in the world that I have met...their eyes, their shoulders, their hands are spectacular. In that, they surpass our women, but on the other hand, they are not their equals in grace and kindness...Myself, as a painter I prefer the Italian woman, but I lean toward the French woman when it comes to emotion."



Corot, *Woman with a Pearl* 1868-70



Corot, *Diana Bathing* 1873-1874

Having forsaken any long-term relationships with women, Corot remained very close to his parents even in his fifties. A contemporary said of him, "Corot is a man of principle, unconsciously Christian; he surrenders all his freedom to his mother...he has to beg her repeatedly to get permission to go out...for dinner every other Friday."

With his success secured, Corot gave generously of his money and time. He became an elder of the artists' community and would use his influence to gain commissions for other artists. In 1871 he gave £2000 for the poor of Paris, under siege by the Prussians. In 1872 he bought a house in Auvers as a gift for Honoré Daumier, who by then was blind, without resources, and homeless. In 1875, he donated 10,000 francs to the widow of Millet in support of her children. His charity was near proverbial.

By the mid-1850s, Corot's increasingly impressionistic style began to get the recognition that fixed his place in French art. "M. Corot excels...in reproducing vegetation in its fresh beginnings; he marvelously renders the firstlings of the new world." From the 1850s on, Corot painted many landscape *souvenirs* and *paysages*, dreamy imagined paintings of remembered locations from earlier visits painted with lightly and loosely dabbed strokes.

In the 1860s, Corot was still mixing peasant figures with mythological ones, mixing Neoclassicism with Realism, causing one critic to lament, "If M. Corot would kill, once and for all, the nymphs of his woods and replace them with peasants, I should like him beyond measure."



Corot, *A Woman Reading* 1869-1870

He also financially supported the upkeep of a day center for children in Paris. In later life, he remained a humble and modest man, apolitical and happy with his luck in life, and held close to the belief that "men should not puff themselves up with pride, whether they are emperors adding this or that province to their empires or painter who gain a reputation."

It has been said that..."Corot painted three thousand canvases, ten thousand of which have been sold in America".



Daumier, *The chess players* 1863

Honoré-Victorin Daumier (1808 – 1879) was a French printmaker, caricaturist, painter, and sculptor, whose many works offer commentary on social and political life in France in the 19th century.

He produced more than 500 paintings, 4000 lithographs, 1000 wood engravings, 1000 drawings and 100 sculptures. A prolific draughtsman, he was perhaps best known for his caricatures of political figures and satires on the behaviour of his countrymen, although posthumously the value of his painting has also been recognized.

Courbet

Jean Désiré Gustave Courbet (1819 – 1877) is considered the leader of the Realism movement in 19th-century French painting. He committed to painting only what he could see, he rejected academic convention and the Romanticism of the previous generation of visual artists. His independence set an example that was important to later artists, such as the Impressionists and the Cubists. Courbet occupies an important place in 19th-century French painting as an innovator and as an artist willing to make bold social statements through his work.



Courbet, *Self-portrait, Man with a pipe* 1848–49

Courbet painted figurative compositions, landscapes, seascapes, and still lifes. He courted controversy by addressing social issues in his work, and by painting subjects that were considered vulgar, such as the rural bourgeoisie, peasants, and working conditions of the poor.



Courbet's paintings of the late 1840s and early 1850s brought him his first recognition. They challenged convention by depicting unidealized peasants and workers, often on a grand scale traditionally reserved for paintings of religious or historical subjects. A committed socialist, he was active in the political developments of France. He was imprisoned for six months in 1871 for his involvement with the Paris Commune.

Courbet, *After Dinner at Ornans* 1849

Trips to the Netherlands and Belgium in 1846–47 strengthened Courbet's belief that painters should portray the life around them, as Rembrandt, Hals and other Dutch masters had.

Courbet achieved his first Salon success in 1849 with his painting *After Dinner at Ornans*. The work, earned Courbet a gold medal and was purchased by the state. The gold medal meant that his

works would no longer require jury approval for exhibition at the Salon.

In 1849-50, Courbet painted *Stone-Breakers* (destroyed in the Allied Bombing of Dresden in 1945), it has been called 'an icon of peasant life' and 'the first of his great works'. The painting was inspired by a scene Courbet witnessed on the roadside. He later explained: "It is not often that one encounters so complete an expression of poverty and so, right then and there I got the idea for a painting. I told them to come to my studio the next morning."



Courbet, *Stone-Breakers* 1849

He maintained that the only possible source for living art is the artist's own experience.

For Courbet realism dealt not with the perfection of line and form, but entailed spontaneous and rough handling of paint, suggesting direct observation by the artist while portraying the irregularities in nature. He depicted the harshness in life, and in so doing challenged contemporary academic ideas of art.



Courbet, *A Burial at Ornans* 1849-50

One of the major turning points of 19th-century French art, the painting records the funeral in September 1848 of his great-uncle in the painter's birthplace, the small town of Ornans. It treats an ordinary provincial funeral with unflattering realism, and on the giant scale traditionally reserved for the heroic or religious scenes of history painting. Its exhibition at the 1850-51 Paris Salon created an "explosive reaction" and brought Courbet instant fame.

People who had attended the funeral were used as models for the painting. Previously, models had been used as actors in historical narratives; here Courbet said that he "painted the very people who had been present at the interment, all the townspeople". The result is a realistic presentation of them, and of life, in Ornans.

The painting, which drew both praise and fierce denunciations from critics and the public, is an enormous work, measuring 10 by 22 feet (3.1 by 6.6 meters) According to art historian Sarah Faunce, "In Paris the *Burial* was judged as a work that had thrust itself into the grand tradition of history painting, like an upstart in dirty boots crashing a genteel party, and in terms of that tradition it was of course found wanting." The painting lacks the sentimental rhetoric that was expected in a genre work: Courbet's mourners make no theatrical gestures of grief, and their faces seem more

caricatured than ennobled. The critics accused Courbet of a deliberate pursuit of ugliness. Eventually, the public grew more interested in the new Realist approach, and the lavish, decadent fantasy of Romanticism lost popularity. Courbet said: "The Burial at Ornans was in reality the burial of Romanticism."

In 1873, when Courbet's political views had changed, he repudiated the work saying that it was "worth nothing"

Courbet became a celebrity, and was spoken of as a genius, a "terrible socialist" and a "savage". He actively encouraged the public's perception of him as an unschooled peasant, while his ambition, his bold pronouncements to journalists, and his insistence on depicting his own life in his art gave him a reputation for unbridled vanity.

In 1850, Courbet wrote to a friend: '...in our so very civilized society it is necessary for me to live the life of a savage. I must be free even of governments. The people have my sympathies, I must address myself to them directly.'



The painting is traditionally interpreted as Courbet greeted by his patron Alfred Bruyas (who later donated it to the museum in Montpellier) his servant Calas, and his dog while traveling to Montpellier. The composition is based on the theme of the Wandering Jew. *The Meeting* was exhibited in Paris at the 1855 Exhibition Universelle, where critics ridiculed it as "Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet". Courbet portrays himself in a self confident, swaggering stance, while Bruyas doffs his hat and the servant bows his head in deference to this unexpected meeting with the great artist returning home in the evening after his day's work.

Courbet, *The Meeting or Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet* 1854



Courbet, *The Painter's Studio: A real allegory summing up seven years of my artistic and moral life* 1855

In 1855, Courbet submitted fourteen paintings for exhibition at the *Exposition Universelle*. Three were rejected for lack of space, including *A Burial at Ornans* and his other monumental canvas *The Artist's Studio*. Refusing to be denied, Courbet took matters into his own hands. He displayed forty

of his paintings, including *The Artist's Studio*, in his own gallery called *The Pavilion of Realism* (Pavillon du Réalisme) which was a temporary structure that he erected next door to the official Salon-like *Exposition Universelle*.

The work is an allegory of Courbet's life as a painter, seen as an heroic venture, in which he is flanked by friends and admirers on the right, and challenges and opposition to the left. Friends on the right include the art critics Champfleury, and Charles Baudelaire, and art collector Alfred Bruyas. On the left are figures from life with whom he sympathised: the poor and the exploited classes (prostitute and grave digger) and those he disapproved of (priest, merchant and others) who represent what Courbet described in a letter to Champfleury as "the other world of trivial life, the people, misery, poverty, wealth, the exploited and the exploiters, the people who live off death."

In the foreground of the left-hand side is a man with dogs: he is an allegory of the then current French Emperor, Napoleon III, identified by his famous hunting dogs and iconic twirled mustache. By placing him on the left, Courbet publicly shows his disdain for the emperor and depicts him as a criminal, suggesting that his "ownership" of France is an illegal one.



Courbet, *The Pont Ambroix Languedoc* 1857



Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine, painted in 1856, provoked a scandal. Art critics accustomed to conventional, "timeless" nude women in landscapes were shocked by Courbet's depiction of modern women casually displaying their undergarments.

Courbet, *Young Ladies Beside the Seine (Summer)* 1856

How much more scandalous would they have found the, *Woman With White Stockings*, which was probably never publicly exhibited in Courbet's lifetime?



Courbet, *Woman with White Stockings* 1864



Sleep (1866), featuring two women in bed, became the subject of a police report when it was exhibited by a picture dealer in 1872.

Courbet, *Sleep* 1866

Courbet and the Paris Commune

On 4 September 1870, during the Franco-Prussian War, Courbet made a proposal that later came back to haunt him. He wrote a letter to the Government of National Defense, proposing that the

column in the Place Vendôme, erected by the Napoleon I to honour the victories of the French Army, be taken down. He wrote:

In as much as the Vendôme Column is a monument devoid of all artistic value, tending to perpetuate by its expression the ideas of war and conquest of the past imperial dynasty, which are reproved by a republican nation's sentiment, citizen Courbet expresses the wish that the National Defence government will authorize him to disassemble this column."

1871 in the aftermath of the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, a revolutionary government called the Paris Commune briefly took power in the city. Courbet was a leading activist, and organized a Federation of Art. At its first meeting on 5 April in the Grand Amphitheater of the School of Medicine, some three hundred to four hundred painters, sculptors, architects, and decorators attended.

During the Paris Commune the Vendôme column was pulled down following a suggestion of Courbet. In this photograph Commune officials pose with the wreckage. After the fall of the Commune, Courbet was imprisoned and ordered to pay the cost of putting the column back up.



Destruction of the Vendôme column 1870



A satirical sketch of Gustave Courbet taking down a "Rambuteau column" (a urinal), caricature published by a popular Commune newspaper, the *Père Duchêne illustrée*.

Courbet, caricature 1870

Courbet finished his prison sentence on 2 March 1872, but his problems caused by the destruction of the Vendôme Column were still not over. In 1873, the newly elected president of the Republic, Patrice Mac-Mahon, announced plans to rebuild the column, with the cost to be paid by Courbet. Unable to pay, Courbet went into a self-imposed exile in Switzerland to avoid bankruptcy, and never returned to France. In the following years, he participated in Swiss regional and national exhibitions.



Courbet, *Still Life* 1871



Important works from this period include several paintings of trout, "hooked and bleeding from the gills", that have been interpreted as allegorical self-portraits of the exiled artist.

Courbet, *The Trout* 1871

He declared 'I am fifty years old and I have always lived in freedom; let me end my life free; when I am dead let this be said of me: "He belonged to no school, to no church, to no institution, to no academy, least of all to any régime except the régime of liberty."



Courbet, *Cliffs at Etretat, After the Storm* 1870



He lived in exile in Switzerland from 1873 until his death.

On 4 May 1877, Courbet was told the estimated cost of reconstructing the Vendôme Column; 323,091 francs and 68 centimes. He was given the option of paying the fine in yearly installments of 10,000 francs for the next 33 years, until his 91st birthday. On 31 December 1877, a day before the first installment was due, Courbet died, aged 58, in La Tour-de-Peiliz, Switzerland of a liver disease aggravated by heavy drinking.

Courbet, *The Castle of Chillon* 1874

Legacy

Claude Monet included a portrait of Courbet in his own version of *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe* from 1865–1866 (Musée d'Orsay, Paris). Courbet's particular kind of realism influenced many artists to follow.

Courbet's importance was announced by Guillaume Apollinaire, poet-spokesperson for the Cubists, declared, in 1913 "Courbet is the father of the new painters."

Art John Berger said: "No painter before Courbet was ever able to emphasize so uncompromisingly the density and weight of what he was painting."