

Realism and Tradition in Art

1848—1900

SOURCES and DOCUMENTS

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GUSTAVE COURBET: 1819–1877

The Realist Manifesto

Gustave Courbet, leader and artistic embodiment of the Realist movement, had attracted scandal and controversy since exhibiting his gigantic Burial at Ornans and Stone-Breakers at the Salon of 1850–1851. Courbet's determination to paint unelevated, familiar subjects (preferably those from around his native village of Ornans in the Franche-Comté) in a broad straightforward manner, on the grand scale hitherto reserved for historical or religious painting, was immediately equated with social anarchy and political revolution by public and critics during the period of conservative reaction following the downfall of the 1848 Revolutionary Government.

When Courbet's major works, the Burial at Ornans and the newly painted Artist's Studio, were rejected by the jury of the Universal Exposition of 1855, an infuriated Courbet withdrew the eleven pictures that they had accepted and had his own exhibition building constructed on the Avenue Montaigne, where, with customary bravado, he held a one-man show in competition with the official international exhibition.

The so-called "Realist Manifesto," reminiscent of the political manifestoes of this stormy period both in its aggressive tone and in its concise setting-forth of a program, was actually the introduction to the Catalogue of Courbet's private exhibition. According to some authorities, Courbet's ideas were put into coherent form by the realist writer and critic Champfleury (see pp. 36 to 45), Courbet's staunchest supporter and initiator of the "bataille réaliste."

The title of Realist was thrust upon me just as the title of Romantic was imposed upon the men of 1830. Titles have never given a true idea of things: if it were otherwise, the works would be unnecessary.

Without expanding on the greater or lesser accuracy of a name which nobody, I should hope, can really be expected to understand, I will limit myself to a few words of elucidation in order to cut short the misunderstandings.

I have studied, outside of any system and without prejudice, the art of the ancients and the art of the moderns. I no more wanted to imitate the one than to copy the other; nor, furthermore, was it my intention to attain the trivial goal of *art for art's sake*. No! I simply wanted to draw forth from a complete acquaintance with tradition the reasoned and independent consciousness of my own individuality.

To know in order to be able to create, that was my idea. To be in a position to translate the customs, the ideas, the appearance of my epoch,

according to my own estimation; to be not only a painter, but a man as well; in short, to create living art—this is my goal.¹

Art Cannot Be Taught

When, in 1861, Courbet received a petition from a group of dissatisfied Ecole des Beaux-Arts students requesting him to open a studio and teach them the theory and practice of Realism, the artist, who had always rejected academic training himself, was at first reluctant. But he then decided to open an unorthodox, democratic atelier, where an atmosphere of mutual aid and equality would reign among the students and their teacher and where the models were to include not only the usual nudes, but an ox, a horse, and a deer (presumably stuffed) as well.

Courbet explained his position in an open letter to his students, dated December 25, 1861, which appeared in the Courrier du dimanche. His ideas about the impossibility of teaching art, his insistence on each individual's personal assimilation of tradition and unique interpretation of his own epoch, and upon the essentially concrete nature of painting itself make this letter Courbet's most important and far-reaching contribution to art theory; the artist was probably assisted in putting his thoughts into words by his friend and supporter, the critic Castagnary (see pp. 47 to 49), who was also in charge of running the studio and who later reprinted the letter under the title "Courbet: His Studio; His Theories" in Les Libres Propos, 1864.

PARIS, DECEMBER 25, 1861

GENTLEMEN AND COLLEAGUES:

You were anxious to open a studio of painting where you would be able to continue your education as artists without restraint, and you were eager to suggest that it be placed under my direction.

Before making any reply, I have to get things straight with you about that word *direction*. I can't lay myself open to making it a question of teacher and students between us.

I must explain to you what I recently had the occasion to tell the congress at Antwerp: I do not have, I cannot have, pupils.

I, who believe that every artist should be his own teacher, cannot dream of setting myself up as a professor.

I cannot teach my art, nor the art of any school whatever, since I deny that art can be taught, or, in other words, I maintain that art is completely individual, and is, for each artist, nothing but the talent issuing from his own inspiration and his own studies of tradition.

I say in addition that, in my opinion, for an artist art or talent can

¹Gustave Courbet, *Exhibition et vente de 40 tableaux et 4 dessins de l'oeuvre de M. Gustave Courbet, avenue Montaigne (7 Champs-Élysées, Paris, 1855)*, n.p.

only be a way of applying his own personal abilities to the ideas and objects of the time in which he lives.

Above all, the art of painting can only consist of the representation of objects which are visible and tangible for the artist.

An epoch can only be reproduced by its own artists, I mean by the artists who lived in it. I hold the artists of one century basically incapable of reproducing the aspect of a past or future century—in other words, of painting the past or the future.

It is in this sense that I deny the possibility of historical art applied to the past. Historical art is by nature contemporary. Each epoch must have its artists who express it and reproduce it for the future. An age which has not been capable of expressing itself through its own artists has no right to be represented by subsequent artists. This would be a falsification of history.

The history of an era is finished with that era itself and with those of its representatives who have expressed it. It is not the task of modern times to add anything to the expression of former times, to ennoble or embellish the past. What has been, has been. The human spirit must always begin work afresh in the present, starting off from acquired results. One must never start out from foregone conclusions, proceeding from synthesis to synthesis, from conclusion to conclusion.

The real artists are those who pick up their age exactly at the point to which it has been carried by preceding times. To go backward is to do nothing; it is pure loss; it means that one has neither understood nor profited by the lessons of the past. This explains why the archaic schools of all kinds are brought down to the most barren compilations.

I maintain, in addition, that painting is an essentially *concrete* art and can only consist of the representation of *real and existing* things. It is a completely physical language, the words of which consist of all visible objects; an object which is *abstract*, not visible, non-existent, is not within the realm of painting.

Imagination in art consists in knowing how to find the most complete expression of an existing thing, but never in inventing or creating that thing itself.

The beautiful exists in nature and may be encountered in the midst of reality under the most diverse aspects. As soon as it is found there, it belongs to art, or rather, to the artist who knows how to see it there. As soon as beauty is real and visible, it has its artistic expression from these very qualities. Artifice has no right to amplify this expression; by meddling with it, one only runs the risk of perverting and, consequently, of weakening it. The beauty provided by nature is superior to all the conventions of the artist.

Beauty, like truth, is a thing which is relative to the time in which one lives and to the individual capable of understanding it. The expres-

sion of the beautiful bears a precise relation to the power of perception acquired by the artist.

Here are my basic ideas about art. With such ideas, to think of the possibility of opening a school for the teaching of conventional principles would be going back to the incomplete, received notions which have everywhere directed modern art up to this point. . . .

It is not possible to have schools for painting; there are only painters. Schools have no use except for discerning the analytic procedures of art. No school is capable of pressing on to a synthesis in isolation. Painting *cannot*, without falling into abstraction, let a partial aspect of art dominate, whether it be drawing, color, composition, or any other one of the extraordinary multiplicity of means the totality of which alone constitutes this art.

I am, therefore, unable to open a school, to form pupils, to teach this or that partial tradition of art.

I can only explain to some artists, who would be my collaborators and not my pupils, the method by which, in my opinion, one becomes a painter, by which I myself have tried to become one since my earliest days, leaving to each person the complete control of his individuality, the full liberty of his own expression in the application of this method. To achieve this aim, the organization of a communal studio, recalling those extremely fruitful collaborations of the studios of the Renaissance, could certainly be useful and contribute to the opening of the era of modern painting, and I would eagerly give myself to everything you want of me in order to attain this goal.

With deepest sincerity,

GUSTAVE COURBET ²