

Wall texts

Museum Folkwang

Introduction

Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) is a central figure in 19th-century European painting. The cultural and political upheavals of his day are visible in his life and works. He turned against the idealized art of Classicism and Romanticism and instead placed everyday life and people from his immediate surroundings in the centre of his work. He repeatedly championed social issues and political renewal. His reinterpretation of traditional pictorial genres made Courbet one of the most important representatives of Realism. With his painterly technique, thanks to which the paint remains visible and tangible, he became a role model for subsequent generations of artists.

Born in 1819 in the rural region of Franche-Comté, Courbet headed for Paris in 1839. Instead of training at the art academy he taught himself and attended private academies. From 1844 onwards, he regularly exhibited at the Salon, the most important state-organized exhibition in France. There, his paintings repeatedly caused a great stir. Courbet opposed academic conventions and was attacked by conservative art critics. At the same time, he arranged his own exhibitions and both inside and outside France found new opportunities for displaying and selling his works.

After 1870 he became politically active and assumed political offices but after the Paris Commune fell into disfavour with the new government. He was sentenced and after spending time in jail went into exile in Switzerland, where he died in 1877. The exhibition presents Courbet's drive to overcome the academic painting of his day and establish art as an independent voice in the bourgeois public sphere. He made use of various artistic strategies, including scandals, to draw attention to his painting and garner recognition for it, even staging himself in changing public roles. In the exhibition, this is especially clear in his self-portraits and in the sheer variety of pictorial themes with their references to photography and to images in popular culture.

The exhibition has arisen in cooperation with Leopold Museum, Vienna, and was curated by Hans-Peter Wipplinger and Niklaus Manuel Güdel; Anna Brohm, Hans-Jürgen Lechtreck, and Sonja Pizonka have adapted it for the Museum Folkwang show.

Under the High Patronage of Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Emmanuel Macron, President of the French Republic and the Honorary Patronage of Alexander Van der Bellen, Federal President of the Republic of Austria.

A digital exhibition guide, the Courbetorial, is available by scanning this QR code

Self-portraits

A remarkably large number of self-portraits by Courbet have survived. The majority of these works were produced between 1840 and 1855 and document his development from a young, largely unknown artist to a key figure in the French art world. Courbet experimented as early as the 1840s with the European traditions of portrait painting and in the process steadily refined his painting technique: For someone who was a newcomer to painting, his own face was an obvious model to choose as it was cost-effective. At the same time, he used these images to stage himself as an artist in changing roles and in this way attract attention – as a pipe-smoking rebel, as a lone wolf plagued by fear, as a man wounded by the suffering of the world, as a melancholic dreamer, or as a sensitive musician.

Until well into the early 1850s, Courbet regularly submitted self-portraits to the official exhibitions at the academy, and the public thus swiftly associated his facial traits and appearance with his artistic development and agenda. The self-portraits served him not only as a terrain in which to practice and a space for experimentation, but also as an instrument for marketing and positioning himself in the art world. By around 1855, after some of his pieces had gone on show in his own “Pavillon du Réalisme”, Courbet had found his feet and sufficiently established himself as an artist, so he henceforth painted very few self-portraits. He subsequently increasingly relied on the medium of photography to polish his public image and sought the assistance of professional photographers to this end.

Ornans

Courbet produced about a third of his entire œuvre in his home region of Franche-Comté, in particular around his native Ornans. Even after he had shifted the main focus of his life to Paris, almost every year he returned to his hometown for several months and regularly went out exploring the region, always taking his painting utensils with him.

Be it solitary brooks or waterfalls, greened high plateaus or valleys, dense forests or rock formations: For Courbet, representing nature and his own, purportedly undistorted view was a strategy for depicting reality and approaching an authentic truth with painterly means. With this approach, Courbet parted company with the popular idealizing and carefully composed landscape painting such as was taught at the academies and promoted by the Paris Salon.

Courbet regularly emphasized how obvious and indeed compelling it was for him to repeatedly paint this familiar countryside. He succeeded in reproducing complex natural structures by using a painting technique that hinged on applying thick paint for the surfaces of rocks and water as well as trees and bushes and then truly moulding them with his palette knife.

Rock Formations

Courbet's painting *The Roche Pourrie, Geological Study* was a piece commissioned by reputed geologist Jules Marcou, who, like Courbet, came from the Jura region. The latter's special interest was in the Roche pourrie rock formation not far from Salins-les-Bains, which featured a strikingly unusual combination of ironstone and limestone. He had Courbet capture the wild, almost chaotic structure of the stone in a painting, and the work thus unites scientific curiosity with artistic aspirations.

Courbet remained true here to his own concept of landscape painting: He underscores the direct, sensory experience of nature and avoids placing the subject matter in some larger landscape context. In the process, he relied carefully on the effect of space: Although the rock formation dominates a large part of the picture, by representing a bridge and a small figure in the background, Courbet generates a feeling of proportion and depth.

Courbet's work was an important point of reference for Paul Cézanne. Both artists shared a similar relationship to their respective home countryside, which they were forever exploring anew, and both had an enduring fascination for the mineral as the constant force in nature. Cézanne's painting *The Quarry at Bibémus*, which depicts a quarry outside Aix-en-Provence, and which arose about three decades later, takes up Courbet's stylistic strategies. A direct comparison clearly shows how modern Courbet's approach was.

Social Realities

For Courbet, art and politics were inextricably linked. Between 1848 and 1855, he produced his trailblazing works that were critical of society, bringing him fame as a political painter and strongly influencing the concept of realism.

Courbet firmly rejected the academic convention of idealized representations typical at the time, focussing his attention instead on common people and everyday scenes. In a phase in history characterized by profound social and political upheaval, he sympathized with the February Revolution of 1848 in France and joined the protagonists' calls for better political and social conditions, in particular for the working population. Courbet himself, the scion of a prosperous landowning family, liked to depict himself as an artisan of art.

He regarded his realism as a form of resistance – as an artistic means for visualizing social reality and triggering change. The public, accustomed to idealization and romanticization with smooth surfaces, careful compositions coupled with historical and mythological themes, was initially unsettled by his representations of things that were ostensibly trivial and his blunt gaze at social realities. Courbet self-confidently pursued his new, provocative style and used the scandal to make his own works known. He refused, however, to be pigeonholed in terms of a specific painterly technique or pictorial theme, although he has nevertheless gone down in the annals of art history as one of the most important proponents of realism.

Academy and Salon

L'Académie des beaux-arts, the state academy of fine arts in Paris, had been a central institution in French culture since the 17th century. It regulated training in art and established binding norms covering a hierarchy of genres, with history painting at the top. The academy's Salon, first organized in 1725, was a major exhibition that took place in the Louvre until the end of the 1840s, and thereafter in other ostentatious Parisian buildings, and encompassed only those works selected by a jury made up of academy members. The jury also awarded medals and was in charge of acquisitions on behalf of the state.

Courbet, who had both trained in private academies and taught himself, had a fruitful, albeit often conflict driven relationship to both institutions. From 1844 onwards, he regularly exhibited at the Salon and received minor awards. Above all, though, he used it as a stage for artistic confrontation, with many of his contributions provoking fierce responses on the part of conservative critics owing to the large-scale representation of everyday themes, his unconventional brushwork, and his novel form of composition.

When some of Courbet's key works were excluded from the exhibition at the Paris World's Fair in 1855, he decided to display them in the "Pavillon du Réalisme" he himself instigated and which served to present and sell his output. It was an act of artistic self-empowerment levelled against the official, ostensibly non-commercial exhibition practices. Courbet also intensively sought out exhibition opportunities both outside Paris and abroad.

The Hunt

Courbet was an enthusiastic hunter and was able to draw on his own experiences for the 100-plus images of the hunt he produced. Hunting interested him not just as a new element of bourgeois life; indeed, the painter felt the figure of the hunter also embodied something of his own view of himself as a daring artist with a close bond to nature. Even after moving to Paris, each year Courbet spent several weeks in his native region of Franche-Comté, where he visited his family and friends from his youth, painted in his studio in Ornans or “en plein air” (under an open sky), and went hunting in the nearby forests.

In the images in this group of works, Courbet knowledgeably shows the different phases of a hunt. He also made use of stuffed animals, butchers’ wares, and photographs as models for his depictions of animal bodies, and it is striking how his artistic approach often differed: Courbet presents the fugitive stag moving dramatically against a wide landscape. Meanwhile, the animal that has been killed is similar to traditional still lifes, depicted as a trophy, while the hunter and dogs rest in the dark interior of the forest.

From 1857 onwards, Courbet repeatedly submitted hunting pictures to the Paris Salon. They were very well received by the public and collectors alike, and this prompted the artist to likewise include deer or other wild animals in some of his landscape paintings in order to enhance their effect.

Seascapes

Courbet first experienced the sea in 1841 in Normandy. He was emphatically impressed by the ocean’s expanse and the power of the waves, and he later repeatedly spent time on the coast of Normandy, for example in Le Havre, Étretat, Trouville, Deauville, and Honfleur. Moreover, while visiting his most important patron Alfred Bruyas outside Montpellier, he painted several seascapes on the Mediterranean coast.

Courbet preferred the term “seascapes” (paysages de mer) to the usual designation at the time, namely “marine pictures”, which he felt was overly narrow and commercial. His paintings show the sea in all manner of moods, from stormy with dark, high waves and waterspouts through to calm, bright scenes that are almost Impressionist in their impact. Only rarely did he add figures, and usually to indicate how small humans were compared to the power of nature.

In his representations of waves and coasts, the paint itself becomes an important pictorial theme. Courbet often worked with a palette knife and applied the paint in several layers, which resulted in an especially sculptural effect. He knew just how virtuoso his technique was and how popular his seascapes, which is why he repeated and varied individual motifs on several occasions.

Jo, the Beautiful Irish Girl

Joanna Hiffernan came from a lower middle-class Irish family that moved to London in the early 1840s from an Ireland that was in the grips of poverty. There, she made connections with the Bohemians and artists’ circles, and in 1860 she met painter James McNeill Whistler, becoming his partner and favourite model and thus a central point of reference. In the winter of 1861, the couple travelled together to Paris where, prior to moving to London in 1859, Whistler had spent four years training as a painter and had come into contact with Gustave Courbet and his circle. In Paris, Whistler began painting *The White Girl* (later: *Symphony in White*), the first of several portraits of Joanna that were to bring him and his partner international fame.

In the autumn of 1865, Whistler, Hiffernan, and Gustave Courbet met in Trouville for a working sojourn. Impressed by Hiffernan’s personality and appearance, Courbet painted a portrait of the

“belle Irlandaise”. He never parted with the picture and shortly before his death he wistfully reminisced about the time. Since he repeated the composition in several versions, it is not possible to say exactly which painting arose directly from the first encounter with Hiffernan.

Nudes and Portraits of Women

Courbet depicts women in a way that flew in the face of the conventions of the academic painting of his time. Instead of idealized beauty, he focussed on real corporeality, a technique that emphasized materiality and the real presence of the figures. This can be seen, for example, in how he presents the open tresses of the hair of Jo, the Beautiful Irishwoman or in the close-to-real-life representation of the *Young Bather*. At the same time, Courbet repeatedly reverts to pictorial conventions if only to develop them further. For example, his painting *Female Nude with Dog* is firmly in the lineage of depictions of Venus, the Goddess of Love, while removing it from its mythological context. Courbet's depictions of the nude are central to his œuvre due to their immediacy and realism. In *The Origin of the World* Courbet succeeded in radically advancing the directness of the nude. The close cropping of the image means we see neither a face nor limbs, and the eye is directed exclusively to the female torso with her genitals placed full centre. Courbet's realism is concerned less with anatomical accuracy than with the sensual presence of the subject.

Springs

The pictures of grottos and springs have a special place in Courbet's œuvre. They depict scenery from the French Massif du Jura, an environment defined by karst rock in Franche-Comté and characterized by deep ravines, waterfalls, and cave systems. Courbet had known the countryside since childhood, and during his stays in Ornans he repeatedly revisited it in order to paint it in the changing light of day and in the different seasons. He does not reproduce the springs as part of some rural idyll, but as stark and at times almost inaccessible places where the water bursts powerfully forth from the cliffs.

Courbet's interest in phenomena relating to geological history is manifest in the painterly representation of layers, erosion, and flow movements. His impasto application of the paint presents the viewer with rocks that are rough, almost tangible surfaces, while the water seems to be a flowing element moved by light and shadow. In these paintings, Courbet takes a decisive step toward a new understanding of landscape painting that seeks less to depict a distanced overview and more to kindle a direct sensory experience.

The images of grottos and springs are to this day accorded a symbolic dimension, too, and can be read as cyphers of the original, the hidden, or the unconscious mind. Such interpretations are also highly productive when applied to other works and workgroups by Courbet, for example his painting *The Origin of the World* or *The Young Bather*.

Courbet and Photography

Courbet is one of the very first artists whose œuvre can be linked to photography. The technical process of Daguerreotyping developed by painter and inventor Louis Daguerre was first presented to the public in 1839 in Paris, and photographers Étienne Carjat and Félix Nadar were for many years among Courbet's friends. He was very interested in photographs and the potential technical reproduction offered.

As of about 1855, he started using photography increasingly for self-presentations and to spread his “mask”, as Courbet termed the image of himself disseminated in the media. He also had photographic reproductions made of some of his paintings, which he then sent to members of his

family and friends or offered for sale to visitors to his exhibitions. They were thus part of his self-marketing efforts and helped to spread his image as an artist.

Courbet recognized the benefit of photographic templates for painting and possessed his own collection of photographs, including nudes and pornographic images. Contemporary critics cited photography, which they viewed with disdain, when accusing the artist of producing paintings that, comparable to photographic images, did not go beyond the mere reproduction of reality. They claimed the works lacked inventiveness, compositional creativity, and substantive meaning.

The correspondence between certain formal features in Courbet's works with those of 19th-century photography, such as the choice and staging of the themes, the cropping, or the use of light, all point less to his direct adoption of photographic images and more to an intense artistic exploration of the aesthetic potential of the new medium.

Exile and the Final Years

After France's defeat during the Franco-German War and the arrest of Napoleon III, the Republic was declared in Paris on 4 September 1870. Two days later, Courbet assumed the chair of the Republican Art Commission. While Paris was under siege, he had endeavoured to ensure art was protected and also became involved in cultural politics.

On 18 March 1871, the Commune de Paris was founded as an uprising against the capitulation and the government, with one of its most symbolic acts being the demolition on 16 May 1871 of the Vendôme Column, a Napoleonic monument. Although Courbet did not join the Commune until after the corresponding resolution had been taken, he was made responsible for the demolition, leading to his arrest on 7 June 1871 and subsequent sentencing on 2 September to six months in jail and a fine. He was initially taken to Paris's Sainte-Pélagie prison and later moved to a clinic in Neuilly. After his release in March 1872, he was forbidden from participating in official exhibitions and was therefore only able to present his works to a very limited extent. Politically stigmatized and isolated, he initially retreated to Ornans.

When the lawsuit on the Vendôme Column was re-opened and the threat of claims for heavy damages was in the air, Courbet decided to emigrate. On 23 July 1873, he went into exile in Switzerland and settled in La Tour-de-Peilz on the shoreline of Lake Geneva.

The works Courbet created there before his death on 31 December 1877 are replete with memories and melancholy. For commercial reasons, he also repeated certain themes, such as views of Château de Chillon and of Lake Geneva, and these paintings simultaneously attest to his isolation and his yearning for his homeland. In his late works, he remembers landscapes he painted in France, and in the final years of his life he increasingly dedicated himself to the exact reproduction of light and its reflection on surfaces of water or in the sky.

Drawings

Neglected for many years by art critics, Gustave Courbet's drawings form a little-known part of his œuvre. Until recently, there were assumed to be less than one hundred of them, a comparatively small number, but recent research has revealed there to be as many as 140. This very fact explains why the painter was usually described as being indifferent to the printed arts, even though he regularly drew using a variety of techniques, and even exhibited charcoal drawings at the Salon.

Among the drawings, a special place must be accorded to his drawn reproductions: Some of the sheets are "ricordi" (memories) of his own paintings, namely subsequent drawings Courbet made in order to commit a composition to memory or to document it. *The Sculptor* or *The Lovers in the*

Country are striking examples of this: The drawing bears a reciprocal relationship to the painting, oscillating between memory and independent status.

Courbet exhibits an astonishing virtuosity in his large, standalone drawings that are almost exclusively made using charcoal. Starting from a blackened grounding, which he brightened using an eraser, he has shapes emerge from the darkness. The hitherto unpublished *Portrait of Jean-Antoine Beuque* displayed here for the first time is an especially impressive example.