GUSTAVE COURBET SYNOPSIS

Gustave Courbet was central to the emergence of Realism in the mid-nineteenth century. Rejecting the classical and theatrical styles of the French Academy, his art insisted on the physical reality of the objects he observed - even if that reality was plain and blemished. A committed Republican, he also saw his Realism as a means to champion the peasants and country folk from his home town. He has long been famous for his response to the political upheavals which gripped France in his lifetime, and he would die in exile in Switzerland when he was found responsible for the cost of rebuilding of Paris' Vendome Column. More recently, however, historians have also seen his work as an important prelude to other artists of early modernism such as Edouard Manet and Claude Monet.

GUSTAVE COURBET KEY IDEAS

Courbet's Realism can be understood as part of the wider inquiry into the physical world that occupied science in the nineteenth century. But in his own realm of art, he was most inspired by his distaste for strictures of the French Academy. He rejected Classical or Romantic treatments and instead took humble scenes of country life - subjects usually considered the stuff of minor genre painting - and made them material for great history painting. For this he gained huge notoriety.

During the Paris Commune of 1871, Courbet briefly abandoned painting for a role in government. This was characteristic of his left-wing commitments. His art was not overtly political, but in the context of the time, he was not ignored as he expressed ideas of equality by heroicizing ordinary individuals, painting them at great scale and refusing to hide their imperfections.

In the process of clearing away the rhetoric of Academy painting, Courbet often settled on compositions that seemed collaged and crude to prevailing sensibilities. At times he also abandoned careful modeling in favor of applying paint thickly in broken flecks and slabs. Such stylistic innovations made him greatly admired by later modernists that promoted liberated compositions and amplified surface texture.

GUSTAVE COURBET LEGACY

Gustave Courbet's democratic eye revolutionized Western Art. His new form of Realism paved the way for other Modern movements, such as Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. Manet, Monet, Renoir, and others had direct contact with Courbet and were profoundly affected by the man and his paintings. Courbet's visceral paint application also opened a path for figure and landscape painters of the twentieth century such as Willem de Kooning, Fairfield Porter, Lucian Freud, the Bay Area Figurative Painters, and others.

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