"Show Me An Angel, and I'll Paint You a Lie," Gustave Courbet, The Man and His Myths Behind The Revolution

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“Show me an angel, and I’ll paint you a lie,”
Gustave Courbet, The Man and His Myths
Behind the Revolution

by Shanna Goodwin
Gustave Courbet was an artist, a revolutionary, and above all a realist. His avant-garde style shocked the Salon and set in motion one of the most important movements in art history. Throughout his artistic career Courbet developed and molded his philosophies of art. He believed that art could not be taught, that one should only paint what one has seen or experienced, and he is credited with portraying women as simply nudes without clothing them in allegory. The most significant of these are his ideas on realistic depictions. How did Courbet achieve this realism? What set him apart from his contemporaries and did he truly exhibit sympathy for the lower classes? Was he a hero for the proletariat or an opportunist who knew what subject matter would spark controversy? This presentation will look into his works and examine if he really did try to understand the working-class. It will go beyond the name and into the heart of the man behind the revolution.

Gustave Courbet was born to a wealthy family in the town of Ornans. The town was a landscape artist’s dreams with its lush vegetation and ever-flowing streams. Many of its inhabitants included vine-growers. Courbet’s father was a well off landowner, which provided Courbet with the freedom to lazily enjoy the marvelous landscape. It also gave him opportunity for higher education. He came from a strong family unit, which was destroyed by the devastating death of his sister in 1834. After this Courbet became increasingly independent and separated himself from others. He revolted against religious instruction and other forms of education. He finally found solace in the world of painting.
The actions of Emile de Girardin in 1863 would become Courbet’s opportunity for success. During this year Girardin cut subscription prices in half allowing the lower classes access to the press for the first time. Three years later Courbet would seize the opportunity to get his name out to the people. He was different from other artists who fled to Europe’s art capital in that he sought the friendship of writers instead of fellow artists. He befriended well-known writers such as Baudelaire, Castagnary, and Champfleury who were avant-garde in their own right. Courbet believed it was better to have an article written in the paper than to be exhibited at the Salon. This idea was unique and gave him an excellent opportunity for recognition. However, Courbet did enter some of his works into the Salon. They mainly consisted of self-portraits, which assured not only his name, but also his face would be recognizable to all.

The stage was set to promote a self-image that in turn propelled him into becoming one of the most controversial artists of that time.

“Show me an angel and I’ll paint you an angel.” These words famously spoken by Courbet reflect his desire for real and tangible subject matter. He thought one should only paint what one has seen or experienced. He may have seen the working class but did he truly understand their plight? The Stonebreakers is a work that shocked critics and set conversations in uproar. Courbet went against convention and painted the working class in a whole new way. He discovered these men while taking a carriage to the castle of St. Denis. This scene captivated him as the epitome of poverty. In a letter to Francis Wey, Courbet describes the men in his painting by
the poor physical conditions they suffer. He describes these men as “two pitiable figures: one an old man, an old machine grown stiff with service and age. The other a young man of 15 who suffers from scurvy and on his feet he has his father’s old shoes.” In this letter he seems empathetic towards the working class. However, a second letter to Wey would change the tones of his intensions. He wrote, “Even in our civilized society, I must lead the life of a savage. I must break free from its very governments. The people have my sympathy. I must turn to them directly, I must get my knowledge from them, and they must provide me with a living...” In this letter Courbet reveals his plan to champion the people and in return gain fame and profit as a revolutionary artist. His decision, whether unconscious or intentional, to simply paint the proletariat and not seek to capture their true state of suffering would ultimately weaken his work. Examples of this can be seen in this painting.

It is avant-garde with its large size that was typically reserved for grand history painting. The background is dark and barely defined, which pushes the figures towards the picture plane. Sunlight shines upon the two men highlighting them and bringing further focus. The viewer notices there are one young man and one old, performing manual labor. There is no doubt that this is a difficult profession in which the younger will have to continue in the elder man’s place. Their attire consists of worn and tattered clothing. Shirts and vests are ripped which exposes their bare skin below. Large patches have been sewn multiple times to preserve the pants as long as possible. Their shoes are old and worn down with holes exposing their aged socks and dirt becomes a heavy layer that weighs down upon their skin. Their pans and utensils are separated from the ground by only a thin dirty white
sheet. The younger uses most of his strength to lift the heavy rocks allowing the viewer to realize how much hard labor this job requires. Their faces are turned which was intended to give them a universal appeal that much of the working class could relate to, but something seems too distant and cold in this depiction. All of these components reveal the physical plight and the poor conditions that the working classes endured. The physical representations are powerful in their own sense but the emotional aspect seems to have been misplaced. In his letters he makes mention of their physical appearance but does not express anything about their name, personality, or experiences. Who were these men? What were their beliefs or their desires? Courbet did not seek to know these men but was instead satisfied with the physical plight they represented. The fact that he did not understand them is revealed by his broad and unemotional depictions of the Stonebreakers.

Ilya Repin was also a realist. He was born in the southern province of the Ukraine, but would claim himself as a Russian. Repin came from rural and humble origins. He inherited his social status of military settler from his father. As a result of the social hierarchy and isolation of the rural districts, Repin had little opportunity for education. His childhood experiences provided him with the knowledge and understanding of the people. Like Courbet, Repin had a very close family. His sister would also die in 1857. Unlike Courbet, he became closer to his family after this tragedy, particularly to his mother. Later in life he applied those social skills to romantic and platonic relationships. His painting, The Volga Barge Haulers, illustrates the personal attention he gave to the men who posed for this
work. A quote about Repin from Elizabeth Valkenier states, “These men were not mere beasts of burden, but highly original and interesting personalities whom he came to admire as personifications of wisdom and fortitude. He compared the haulers, strapped to their riggings, to Greek philosophers sold on the slave markets to some barbarian conquerors.” He respected these men and it shows in his depictions.

Repin spent two summers studying these men along the shores. During this time he carefully studied the haulers. He learned their mannerisms, their expressions, and their identity. In writings about his models he does something Courbet does not, he refers to them by name. “And Kanin, with a rag on his head, with clothing patched together by his own hand and worn through again, was a man who inspired much respect: he was like a saint undergoing an ordeal.” He sought to not only depict them physically but also reach into their psyche. His emotional insight gives him a great advantage over Courbet because it reaches beyond the physical and holds powerful emotional impact with every facial feature. The Haulers have hardship engraved on every line of their faces. We see the role of the young boy who will eventually take the place of an older man. In this depiction he is more emotionally driven as he is struggling to put on his harness with a tired and sun burnt face of frustration. He expresses exhaustion that one wouldn’t expect to see in such a young child. The man in the front line gives a disdainful glare towards the viewer. His expression curses and pleads with the viewer to understand the life he lives. Their limp stature reveals the strain this work puts upon the human body.
The man wiping his brow reminds the viewer how difficult it is to walk in sand let alone to pull a large ship to shore.

The expressions upon these faces tear into the heart of the viewer. They no longer become universal as the expressions add depth to how much physical and emotional strain weigh down upon these men. Repin makes the viewer feel the humiliation that is brought on by being reduced to animals that are only useful for the hard labor they provide.

In Courbet’s A Burial At Ornans, he seems to be a little more emotionally driven, possibly because this is his hometown. The main subject matter is a burial in a typical town. The title refers to a burial but the placement of the casket on the far left of the picture plane leads one to believe that the people are the main subject matter. This is reinforced in the same way he used the background in Stonebreakers. The landscape is flat and dark which pushes the figures forward. This painting also gives a unique position for the viewer. Courbet places them right in the grave. Many citizens of Ornans are at this site to witness the burial. The people in the painting range from priests to mournful women. Courbet shows a part of the sadness that is always accompanied by a funeral but doesn’t seem to quite tap into the extremes of human emotions. The majority of expressions are hidden behind handkerchiefs, cast shadows from hats and cloaks, and are not fully represented because of the side view that most of the figures take. The dark values of black clothing surround the figures hide their facial expressions. This is the traditional color for a funeral but Courbet makes subtle attempts to highlight their
grieving faces. The few who are shown with a full view of their face seem posed and vacant. Courbet seems to be striving for quantity over quality by depicting so many figures for shock value.

A comparison to this work can be made with another of Ilya Repin’s s, the Kursk Procession. Here we see Repin’s intensive composition studies of various personalities. There is a much larger array of figures but the quality of each expression is retained. The procession consists of two diagonal lines moving to the foreground. They walk along a dry and dusty road with a hill that has been stripped of its forest. This is a desolate sight like in Courbet’s Burial but here the sunlight shines upon the faces, which illuminates their unique features. This scene was also in Ilya Repin’s hometown. This painting represents the people of his town but reveals so much more about his judgment on the conditions of this country society. He shows the ever-present divide between the social classes and the separation of people from nature. In these close-ups we see the oppressive police force that have stern and unforgiving expressions. One officer is depicted with a whip in mid air about to strike down upon some people in the crowd. Examples of status and upbringing can be seen here as well. One boy is a crippled beggar who uses much effort to keep up with the crowd. While two boys who are not walking too far away, seem to have come from a good family. Their clothes and books represent money and education, which the other boy may never have. The adults also show social status. Some are portrayed with lavish and bright clothing. Others have the same tattered clothing seen in the Volga Barge Haulers. This separation is pushed further by the expression upon each face. The wealthier classes walk around with smug
looks upon their faces. Some, like this man here, seem to be strutting down the road while the lower classes are hunched and covered from the sun. Their clothes and skin are layered with dirt. A heavyhearted expression takes shape on almost all of the lower class. They bear the resemblance of someone who has worked hard every day of their life with little reward.

Courbet was an amazing painter and his intentions were on the right track but his adolescent isolation may have deprived him of the ability to emotionally open to others. His physical representations are important but they lack the essential humanity that Repin presents in abundance. Repin’s characters are unique and he executes the portrayal of their psychology very well. Courbet was going for the shock factor but Repin sought to make others think after the initial shock had ended. Courbet attempted to champion the lower classes, which he succeeded in a very broad manner. Although his works were revolutionary, he unfortunately remained satisfied with his choice to exclude emotions. Courbet started what Repin perfected. Repin sought knowledge of the people and his outrage at their suffering is seen in every face he painted. Courbet used the working class as a tool for success, while appearing to be their hero.
Works Cited


Images Cited

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