

# The life and work of gustave courbet



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Courbet was born in Ornans, France. Ornans is a small village near the Swiss frontier. The Alpine foothills cross the area with tree filled slopes and cliffs rising above them. Streams also flow above and below ground in the region.

(Mack)

3. Note any information you were able to find on the parents of the artist.

Gustave Courbet's father, Regis Courbet, was a wealthy landowner. He owned fields and vineyards that covered much land in the area of Flagery, which was a village about eight miles from Ornans. Courbet's family had homes in both villages. Regis Courbet loved the nature around his properties, and was a gregarious and inventive man. Gustave's mother Sylvie was four years older than her husband, and was the practical one in the family. She not only managed the household, but also the farms and the vineyards.

(Mack)

4. Did the artist have any brothers or sisters?

Gustave was the only boy and the eldest of five children. His sister Zoe was born in 1824 and was a difficult girl. Zolie, born in 1828 was frail and pious and Juliette, born in 1831, was more like her brother in spirit; conceited and a spinster. Gustave was closet to Juliette and their mutual devotion was never broken. His sister Clarice was born in 1821, but died at the age of 13. He often used his sisters as models.

(Mack)

5. What were some of the significant childhood experiences in the early life of the artist?

It is significant that Courbet loved nature as a child. He knew every little path, hill, and field in the area so well that he would lead outdoor excursions.

During Courbet's time at the seminary, according to his confessor, the number and kind of sin he confessed were considerably greater than other children of the same age.

(Mack)

6. Note any information on the education of the artist.

When Courbet was young, he appeared to be a promising student. At the age of twelve, he entered and spent six years at the seminary at Ornans. Courbet refused to study or take part in religious instruction. His essays were so entertaining that the teacher would save his for last. Original composition was the exception to his poor academic record at the seminary.

Nevertheless, his father wanted Gustave prepared for a profession such as the law.

(Mack)

When Courbet was fourteen, Gros, a teacher from Ornans and former student of the Neo-Classical painter introduced him to painting.

(Museum d'Orsay, Paris)

In 1837, when Gustave was eighteen, his father sent him to a near-by college to study philosophy. Gustave complained about everything to his parents and wanted to leave, but his father wouldn't allow it. Finally, in 1840, Gustave left college without taking any of his final exams. He moved to Paris studied Spanish, Flemish and French painters on his own. Gustave's father disapproved, and tension grew between them. However, his father continued to send Gustave an allowance. From Paris, he returned regularly to Ornans to visit his family and to enjoy the landscape that inspired many of his paintings.

(Mack)

7. What was the artist's early career like? Was it as an artist or was it in another field?

Except for a short employ or internship at the studio of Steuben and Hesse in Paris, none of the sources I used mentioned Courbet doing any other work besides producing art. During his first four or five years in Paris, he produced many paintings. Courbet was conflicted as far as style and spent most of the time painting romantic and literary subjects. He complained to his parents about the high cost of producing art, but as far as making money on his own, he thought that would hinder his ability to produce art.

(Mack)

(This section is worth 20 points.)

Young Adult Life and Artistic Beginnings

1. Did the artist marry? If so, note any information on the marriage.

Courbet never married, but had a mistress with whom he had a child in 1847. The mistress left with the child in the early 1850s.

There were many women in his life, but his relations with them were mostly physical.

(Mack)

2. Did the artist have children? If so, note any information on the children.

See question 2.

3. What were the artist's early experiences as an artist?

Courbet's first works in Paris were *Odalisque* inspired from a poem by Victor Hugo, and *Lelia* from a novel by George Sands. According to Gerstle Mark, author of *Gustave Courbet*, These early works were rigid, wood like, and sometimes sentimental.

(Mack)

He painted his only commissioned altarpiece for the church of the local parish in 1847. He didn't gain much attention until he embraced realism in 1849; before that, he relied on the submission of paintings to the Salon, where few were accepted each year.

(Gowing)

4. What were the significant early works of art and what were they like?

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The first painting of Courbet's that was accepted to the Salon exhibition was Self-portrait with the Black Dog in 1844. Gustave is cloaked in black holding a pipe, with a book and walking stick nearby, and he is holding his new dog; a black spaniel. Posed on a hill or cliff, his up-close form takes up a good part of the canvas. He is young and handsome and has a prideful look on his face; it looks like he is trying to appear clever.

(Mack)

See Highlights section, question 10, for others.

(This section is worth 20 points.)

#### Historical Information

1. What major historical events took place around the world during the time the artist was alive? Give 2-3 significant historical events for each continent.

a. Europe

1) In July of 1830, there was an uprising of the middle classes against King Charles' attempt at absolutist monarchy. King Charles gave up the throne and fled.

2) Queen Victoria took the British throne in 1837 and ruled until her death in 1901.

In 1861.

3) Russian Czar Alexander II abolished serfdom in the Russian empire. This was a result of pressure by progressive groups in Russia.

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(The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

b. Asia

1) In 1839, the first Anglo-Afghan war began. The British wanted to protect their colony of India.

2) Hong Xiuquan led the Taiping Rebellion in China from 1851 through 1866. Impoverished peasants believed that he was Jesus younger brother, and sent as their savior.

c. Africa

1) In 1830, the French occupied Algeria. Abd al-Qadir, led a resistance to the French occupation until he was exiled in 1847.

2) In 1838, Sir James Alexander produced an academic study of the rock paintings and engravings found throughout southern Africa called An Expedition of Discovery into the Interior of Africa: Through the Hitherto Undescribed Countries of the Great Namaquas, Boschmans, and Hill Damaras, Performed under the Auspices of Her Majesty's Government and the Royal Geographic Society. He concludes that the works are images that reflect the life and culture of the indigenous San peoples.

d. North America

1) The United States Civil War took place between 1861 and 1865.

2) The United States Indian Removal Act of 1830 was an attempt to get Indians that lived east of the Mississippi River to give up their land and move

west. This led to the final Trail of Tears march whereby 18, 000 Cherokee were marched out of their land to Oklahoma; the conditions were so bad, that 4, 000 died on the trail.

3) In 1848, gold was discovered in the Sierra Nevada foothills, and as a result, more than 80, 000 migrants arrived in California.

(The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

e. South America

1) Spanish rule ended in Central and South America in 1824 after the defeat of the Spanish at Ayacucho, Peru.

2) In 1852, Dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas was driven from Buenos Aires. Afterwards, the Argentine Federalist constitution was established.

(The Metropolitan Museum of Art) Timeline

(This section is worth 20 points.)

Historical Information on the Style

6. What style did the artist work in?

He first painted in the Romantic and Neoclassic style of the late 1700s and early 1800s. Courbet's mature style was Realism. He coined the term, after his critics had used the word derogatively about his work. Many people thought his work was too real, and depressing.

(PBS)

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7. Describe the significant characteristics of this style.

In art, Realism is associated with works that show the artist's perception of real life, and the experiences of human beings in the here and now. Courbet's paintings are concerned with regular people in the midst of everyday circumstances. Rather than painting from memory, he was one of the first artists to complete his landscape paintings outdoors.

(Frank)

Realism focuses on modern subjects and the lives of the lower classes.

(The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

To Courbet, Realism was not perfection. Instead, he was spontaneous and rough with the application of the paint while he portrayed the irregularities in nature. Observers of his art thought he purposefully painted ugly things. He used his popularity to write essays about democratic and socialist ideas.

(Gustave Courbet; The Complete Works )

8. Name some of the other artists who worked in this style.

Our textbook points out that Rosa Bonheur and Thomas Eakins painted in the style of Realism in the 19th century. According to the [gustavecourbet.org](http://gustavecourbet.org) website, Honore Daumier and Jean-Fran ois Millet were also considered realist artists in the mid 1800s.

(Frank)

9. Where and when did this style occur?

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Because the PBS website credits Courbet for first using the term Realism, I would say the style, termed Realism, began in France. It was around the middle of the 19th century, during times of civil unrest in France, that Realism replaced Romanticism in many works of art (PBS)

The chronology Realism goes from the 1840s through the early 1900s with Impressionism and Post-Impressionism overlapping from around the 1860s to 1925.

(Gowing)

In the mid 1800s, the realist movement was known as Verismo in Tuscany and Naples, Italy.

(The Metropolitan Museum of Art) Timeline

Highlights of Artistic Career

10. What were some of the highlights of the artistic career of the artist?

After his first Salon exhibit in 1844, Courbet needed more money to produce his work. His father denied him an increase in allowance, but Gustave received a financial windfall when a Dutchman purchased some of his works and created a market for him in Holland and Belgium.

(Mack)

The work Burial at Ornans depicts the funeral of a relative in September of 1848. This was the first realist style masterpiece. Unlike historical works of this sort, he painted the people in attendance instead of hiring models or

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actors. Unique to this work was its large size of 10 by 22 feet, and its religious and ritual subject matter usually reserved for religious and royal subjects.

(Gustave Courbet; The Complete Works )

On exhibit with *Burial at Ornans* in 1850-51, was *The Stonebreakers* (1849) and *The Peasants of Flagery Returning from the Fair* (1850). *Burial* itself was startling in its size and subject matter, but the public believed that Courbet was satirizing social values with the other two paintings. Courbet had embraced socialist ideals, but what he was really trying to do was to paint reality. From this point on, he gained attention from critics, some loved his work, and others despised it. For the rest of his life he found himself in the public eye.

(Mack)

Courbet established a Federation of Artists in April of 1870 for the free and uncensored expansion of art. Members included Andre Gill, Honore Daumier, Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, Eugene Pottier, Jules Dalou, and Edouard Manet.

(Gustave Courbet; The Complete Works )

Because Courbet refused the Legion of Honor award from Napoleon III, he became popular with those that opposed the current government. In 1871, revolutionaries put Courbet in charge of saving all the works from Paris art museums from looting mobs. While doing so, he had people destroy the Vendome Column for which he was sentenced to six months in prison and to pay the costs of rebuilding the column. Courbet fled to Switzerland to avoid

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bankruptcy. He died there, at age 58, of liver disease due to heavy drinking before he could make his first payment.

(Gustave Courbet; The Complete Works )

11. List any awards, honors and/or exhibitions of her/his art work.

At the Salon of 1849, Courbet received a gold medal for After Dinner at Ornans.

In 1870, Courbet rejected an award from the Legion of Honor. He positioned himself as free from any form of government.

In the 1850s, Courbet exhibited some paintings set in his village of Ornans, France at the Salon. The paintings reflected everyday life and people in the village. This realistic style of painting upset many people because it was usually reserved for the recording of history.

(The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

After the Paris International Exhibition rejected A Burial at Ornans and The Artist's Studio in 1855, Courbet built his own pavilion and held an exhibition of his work.

(Gowing)

In 1853, Courbet decided he would paint a series of works of nude women, but the Salon rejected those Courbet submitted for indecency. Finally, the Salon accepted Woman with a Parrot in 1860.

(The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

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In 1882, the cole des Beaux-Arts held an exhibit of his works.

(Gustave Courbet; The Complete Works )

In 2008, the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibited approximately 130 of Courbet s works including the 1850s seminal manifesto paintings and those of Ornans and his friends and family. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) Prior to that, the exhibition called The Born Rebel Artist began in 2007 at the Grand Palais and Musee Fabre in France.

(Gustave Courbet; The Complete Works )

12. Briefly discuss several significant works by the artist. Name the works and tell a little about each.

Stone Breakers 1849

Stone Breakers is an example of the one paintings that established Courbet as a realist artist. The men are ordinary workers. Courbet is not making any religious, romantic, or symbolic statements. When this piece was exhibited at the Salon in Paris in 1850, many people, expecting to see beautiful artwork, were shocked at what they thought to be ugly and socialistic paintings.

(Frank)

Stone Breakers is now lost.

(The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Nude Woman Reclining 1852

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In this work, Courbet presents a painting of a nude woman asleep. She is wearing nothing but white stockings; one shoe on, and the other stocking loose on her leg. It looks like she is sleeping on purple drapery in the early evening hours. This is one of several nude paintings of women where Courbet's portrays real women including the reality of body hair. This and *The Origin of the World* were owned by a Hungarian collector in 1862, but were stolen from his bank vault during World War II. After the war, the baron tracked down *The Origin of the World*, but *Nude Woman Reclining* was lost. It had made its way to a Soviet soldier who carried it, rolled up, into Slovakia, and gave it as a gift to a doctor. Years passed and the doctor died. In 2003, the doctor's family tried to sell it at an auction house, and it was eventually recovered for a \$706,000 reward to the family. Its worth was estimated at around \$15 million.

(The Associated Press)

#### After Dinner at Ornans 1848

This is the work was the first in Courbet's series of paintings that were meant to depict real life in his home village of Ornans. Like *Stone Breakers*, it upset the public, as they relied on art to be uplifting and beautiful. This painting is of four men that have just finished dinner. The scene is low key; showing how it may have really been after a big dinner. A couple of them are playing musical instruments, which would be like having TV on in the background after dinner today. Also disturbing to people was Courbet's coarse and unrefined brushwork.

(The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

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## Woman with a Parrot 1866

Today, Courbet's *Woman with a Parrot* is located at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Unlike some of his other nudes that the Salon rejected, Courbet covers the woman's genitals by a white drape, and doesn't reveal any body hair. The woman gazes contentedly at a parrot that sits on her raised hand. Aside from some who thought her hair was too messy, the public loved the painting when they saw it at the Salon exhibition of 1866. It was slightly risqué, but similar to the Venus types of paintings people were used to seeing there. Some of his supporters however, though he had sold out. In Courbet's mind, he had pulled one over on the Salon.

(Schjeldahl)

## The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory Summing up a Seven-Year Phase of My Artistic Life 1855

This painting, along with *Burial at Ornans*, was rejected for exhibit by the jury of the Paris International Exhibition Exposition in 1855. Courbet decided to set up his own exhibition called the Pavilion of Realism where he showed *The Painter's Studio* along with around forty other paintings. The work is comprised of thirty life-size figures, and is divided into three parts. According to the Metropolitan Museum of Art website, Courbet describes the work as on the left side shows "the world of commonplace life," with a priest, a hunter, a worker, and "a Republican of 1793." On the right are "the people who serve me, support me in my ideas, and take part in my actions." And in the center, Courbet painted himself in a landscape with a nude model and a little boy on either side.

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(The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The Wounded Man 1844-1854

Many of Courbet's early works were self-portraits. In this painting, he appears wounded; as if he was in a sword fight or in battle. Either way, it looks he has likened himself to someone who stood up for something and is dying for it. The real story was, according to the Museum d Orsay website, is that painted it in 1844, and reworked it ten years later after a love affair had ended. Originally, a woman was leaning on his shoulder; he replaced her with a sword and added the blood in 1854.

(Museum d'Orsay, Paris)

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