

Courbet

The painter Courbet started and dominated the French movement toward realism. Art critics and the public were accustomed to pretty pictures that made life look better than it was. Courbet, against much opposition, truthfully portrayed ordinary places and people.

Gustave Courbet was born on June 10, 1819, to a prosperous farming family in Ornans, France. He went to Paris in 1841, supposedly to study law, but he soon decided to study painting and learned by copying the pictures of master artists. In 1844 his self-portrait, Courbet with a Black Dog, was accepted by the Salon, an annual public exhibition of art sponsored by the influential Royal Academy.

In 1848 a political revolution in France foreshadowed a revolution in art, as people in the arts became more open to new ideas. Courbet's early work was exhibited successfully in 1849. That same year he visited his family in the countryside and produced one of his greatest paintings, The Stone-Breakers, followed by Burial at Ornans in 1850. Both were quite unlike the romantic pictures of the day because they showed peasants in realistic settings instead of the rich in glamorized situations. In 1855 he completed a huge canvas, The Artist's Studio, and, when it was refused for an important exhibition, Courbet boldly displayed his work himself near the exhibition hall.

Courbet visited Germany in 1856, where he was welcomed by the artistic community. By 1859 he was the undisputed leader of the new generation of the French realist movement. He painted all varieties of subjects, including admirable portraits and sensuous female nudes but, most of all, scenes of nature. His series of seascapes with changing storm clouds wafting overhead begun in 1865 had a great influence on impressionist painters.

Politically a socialist, Courbet took part in some revolutionary activities for which he was imprisoned for six months in 1871. He was also fined more than he could pay, so he fled to Switzerland, where he died in the town of La Tour-de-Peilz on Dec. 31, 1877.

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