

Unconventionally Conventional

To revolt and represent was the ideology behind the Realism movement: a revolution characterized by the depiction of the working class amidst the chaotic industrial transformation and political tumult. Artists sought to depict nature truthfully, by avoiding superficial elements. At the forefront of this movement stood Gustav Courbet, a French realist painter, who confronted societal issues through an impartial portrayal of the rural, working-class bourgeoisie, and peasants. Naturally, his realistic, unsentimental illustrations that explored the unjust treatment of the working class invited defenders and critics to uncover the merit of his paintings. Supporters of Courbet's work included art critics Champfleury and Charles Baudelaire. Champfleury publicly expressed his admiration for Gustav Courbet's *A Burial At Ornans*, a piece that remarkably defied the establishment. Charles Baudelaire complemented the beliefs of Courbet; Baudelaire believed that by indulging in the troubles of today rather than treasuring the traditions of yesterday will permit art to manifest its era. *A Burial At Ornans* exemplifies the propositions that Gustav Courbet endorses, while Champfleury and Baudelaire guide the Realism movement in France by recognizing the fundamental principles to portray contemporary life truthfully.

Charles Baudelaire examined artists' conservative approach to idealize the past and disregard the bourgeoisie. Baudelaire's letter "To the Bourgeoisie" reveals criticism Baudelaire held for the arbitrators of truth in art. In his letter, he states, "the aristocrats of thought, the distributors of praise and blame, the monopolists of the things of the mind, have told you that you have no right to feel and to enjoy – they are Pharisees." (Baudelaire, 301) This enforces the phenomenon that those establishing the ideals neglect the significance of the majority. Like the Pharisees' strict adherence to the law, the middle-class is bound by the "aristocrats of thought"

and the liberation is dependent upon the “the forbidden fruit of knowledge” (Baudelaire, 301) that is art. Baudelaire firmly believes that the ideas of the bourgeoisie ought to be revealed, for their immense contribution is merely rewarded with the thoughts of the privileged. By advocating for the right to recognition and to relish and reason, Baudelaire identifies the central force behind the Realism movement.

To illustrate this, one must understand the underlying characteristics of Courbet’s manifesto *A Burial At Ornans*. The painting is presented on a 22-foot wide canvas, a size that was only utilized to glorify noble figures. However, to intrinsically showcase ordinary subject matter, the genre painting defies the conventions established by the authorities. Likewise, rejection of the establishment is the core of Baudelaire’s argument. Courbet’s retaliation – to recognize the contemporary, average individual alongside the historical figures – highlights the emergence of a new equilibrium. Baudelaire claims, that “society will be satisfied, happy and well-disposed when it has found its own general and absolute equilibrium,” (Baudelaire, 302) implying that to find the state of balance of forces, provocation and representation are vital.

Courbet’s defiance of the convention is further noticeable with his unprecedented composition that portrays those from the different strata of society engaging in the religious tradition. *A Burial At Ornans* is a horizontal frieze, as opposed to a vertical work typically showcasing the figure transcending into heaven. Specifically, the horizontal structure consists of the upper section, wherein the light blue sky and the subdued yellow complement the mournful occasion, the middle and foreground consists of figures placed in a disorderly manner, and the ground underneath mimics the tones of the sky. Only the crucifix extends into the sky, however,

suggesting that all individuals are equal before God. Conversely, the central foreground exhibits the cemetery worker kneeling by the grave, immediately capturing the viewer's attention. To highlight a grave-digger amongst the heroic and historical figures exemplifies Courbet's remarkable feat.

Champfleury defends Courbet's truthful depiction of the bourgeoisie by challenging the critics' perception of the "ugly." He questions, "Is it the painter's fault that material interests, small-town life, sordid egoism, and provincial pettiness have marked the faces with their claws, have made the eyes dim, have wrinkled the foreheads and stupefied the mouths? Many bourgeoisie are like that; Mr. Courbet has painted bourgeois." (Champfleury, 369) Champfleury refers to the visible consequences of the financial struggle for the poor in the quest for "material interests," as many undertake a fraudulent approach and concern over trivial matters. He claims the deterioration of facial features is a harsh reality of their lives and Courbet merely portrays the bourgeoisie in an honest manner. This urges critics to reconsider their classification of the subject matter as "ugly," as Champfleury acknowledges that, "Mr. Courbet can boldly state that three women's heads, the children, the grave-digger, and several other figures, are characteristic of modern beauty." Instead of utilizing models that are commonly objectified and sensualized in historical works, Courbet relies upon the ordinary villagers – sorrowful women with wrinkled, rough skin appear to weep with handkerchiefs around the grave. Along with that, the dresses of the women are nearly pitch black; the viewer is unable to discern their bodies and is drawn towards their mournful faces. This defies the former understanding of beauty; the modern beauty is characterized by truthfulness. Presumably, the critics were accustomed to the romanticization of subject matter. Champfleury's attributes Courbet's masterpiece to the creation of an

unflattering scene that challenges classicism. The unidealized representation of reality was a fundamental principle of Realism. In *A Burial At Ornans*, the viewer is not presented with the ideal funeral, instead, they are met with the chaos and distractions. The villagers deal with the mental burden of loss and each character holds a unique posture. This sense of individuality, as the ordinary person including the vergers, clergy, town officials, children, women, and businessmen is recognized on the large-scale, is truly unprecedented.

Moreover, *A Burial At Ornans* reveals an unconventional chromatic usage, for Courbet utilizes the limited colors in varying tones. Specifically, moss, dark green presides over the hills and ground. The hints of the dusty, dark strokes are also witnessed in the lighter areas of the individuals' clothing. The nuances of color develop their form and features, providing a sense of weight and thickness. The dusky tones are offset by the vibrant sections of white and red. The viewer is met with unpleasant colors that develop the gloomy atmosphere, with occasional bright colors. Champflury succinctly captures this experience, "the simplicity of the black costumes is akin to the grandeur of parliaments in red robes by Largilliere. It is the modern bourgeoisie, full-length, in all its ridiculousness, its ugliness, and its beauty." (Champflury, 369) Champflury believes that this representation characterizes the modern bourgeoisie; to place the black costumes with the red robes was not mere defiance of the conventional color usage, but one that eliminated the social barrier, as they unite to mourn one's loss. Courbet's relied upon truthful observation while portraying the bourgeoisie and the characters accepted death as a part of life.

The impact of the Realism movement soon spread throughout the world. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in England, too expressed their support for the working class, though

remained less politically engaged; their movement engaged with the social issues of modern society. Stylistically, they had highly detailed works with intense colors and intricate compositions. Nonetheless, the influence of artists like Courbet was essential to the development of the Realism movement, while art critics examined and uncovered the principles that motivated these works.



Figure 1: Gustave Courbet, A Burial at Ornans, 1849-50, oil on canvas, 315 x 668 cm (Musée d'Orsay).