



The Sacred From the Profane

By LANCE ESPLUND | February 28, 2008

There should be a temporary exit, perhaps a waiting room or a café, just off the galleries, midway through the Gustave Courbet retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. There, momentarily free from the powers of Courbet's paintings, viewers could sit down, catch their breath, fan themselves, and gather the strength to give themselves over to the last half of the exhibition. The show, which begins with an astonishing grouping of self-portraits, is organized roughly by theme. Midway through is a gallery of Courbet's masterful nudes. I believe it was Thomas Hoving, the former director of the Met, who said (and I am paraphrasing here) that if your senses have not been so wildly stirred by your visit to the museum, that you do not become thoroughly aroused, the Met and its director are not doing their job. If, confronted with this astonishing exhibition of more than 120 of Courbet's paintings and drawings — in which forms are so substantially and profoundly felt, explored, and realized by the painter — you are not so overheated that you are practically shaking by the time you reach the gallery of Courbet's nudes, then you are just not paying close enough attention.



Metropolitan Museum of Art

Gustave Courbet, 'Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine' (1856–57).

But it is not only Courbet's nudes that are so passionate and erotic. Sensuousness is present in everything he touched — the landscapes, seascapes, hunting scenes, portraits, and still lifes. Courbet's paintings remind us that the experience of art is a bodily experience — a heightening of the senses. His paintings require the engagement of the heart, the gut, and the groin no less than the brain. Courbet is a painter for whom the weight and tactility of a form — the sheer presence of fruit, rock, flower, hair, flesh, and surf — were met with an animal appetite. It is a hunger, as Kenneth Clark pointed out, "whose own impulse to grasp, to thump, to squeeze, or to eat was so strong that it communicates itself in every stroke of his palette knife. [Courbet's] eye embraced the female body," Clark continued, "with the same enthusiasm that it stroked a deer, grasped an apple, or slapped the side of an enormous trout."

Courbet (1819–77) is an artist most often referred to as the instigator and leader of the 19th-century art movement known as Realism. He is also credited with starting the tradition, so highly regarded today, of rebellion against tradition. And yet, to see Courbet primarily through the lens of a revolutionary and a Realist — an angle that this show, organized at the Met by Gary Tinterow and Kathryn Calley Galitz, overemphasizes — is to misrepresent the artist and the nature of representational art. Courbet never warmed to the title "Realist" or to being a rebellious artist. He stated: "I have simply wished to draw from the accumulated wisdom of tradition a reasoned and independent sentiment of my own individuality. To know in order to do ... To be able to translate the habits, the ideas, the aspects of my epoch according to my understanding, to be not only a painter but a MAN, in a word, to make living art, that is my aim."

What Courbet was rebelling against was the sentimental, empty, and pretentious art of the official French Academy; and what he was embracing was, first, the tradition of painting and, second, the facts of modern life. Courbet was rebellious — artistically, socially, politically. He was a true bohème. But for Courbet, rebellion, Realism, and truthfulness in art were all one in the same. He did not wish to challenge the language of art but to further it. Courbet paved the way for Manet's scandalous slaps-in-the-public's-face, "Olympia" and "Luncheon on the Grass," but he never saw rebellion in art as a worthwhile end in itself.

Courbet explored common subjects — a common Frenchwoman (not Venus, not Bathsheba) bathing in a stream; the artist working in the studio; a meeting in the countryside between artist and patron; lesbian lovers entwined on a bed; a country burial; running deer — elevating them to the level of mythical and religious themes. He understood that if God (and gods) were dead, then man, to find meaning in matter, must dig back into the mud and reinvent himself.

Embracing a warts-and-all realism, Courbet confronted and shifted public norms. "Show me an angel and I'll paint it!" he famously challenged. But as this show repeatedly demonstrates, he never relinquished the grand and mystical themes embraced by Titian, Bellini, Poussin, and Ingres. And when this exhibition falters — and it falters embarrassingly in a couple of places, as with a ridiculous collage of photographs and paintings over a reproduction of Courbet's "The Painter's Studio" (a work, regrettably, too large to travel) — it fails because it diverges from the point, that is, from Courbet's paintings. Some of Courbet's pictures uncannily resemble the sudden and immediate capture of life in stop-action photography. The show includes a wonderful selection of 19th-century photographs, particularly landscapes and nudes, but the curators' much too heavy stress on

Courbet's presumed relationship to photography focuses our attention too much on the world surrounding the artist, rather than on the artist's world. Courbet may be a Realist; he may have used photography as a source; but he does not paint what is before him: He is a visionary who paints what he feels — what he sees.

Though not Impressionist, Courbet's pictures assault the senses in flashes, and with a directness that is immediate, intimate, frank, unabashed, and unself-conscious. Courbet, whom Delacroix referred to as a maker of mosaics, breaks the world down into fully felt pieces. He does not devour, so much as savor, the world; he is as excited to divulge the truth — the inner secret, the mysteries — of an apple as he is that of a female nude.

We can sense in Courbet his hunger for his subjects — for life — in this show, from the very first painting to the last. But we can also sense his profound respect. Courbet's paintings are meditations that feel like collages; it is as if, from a deep, ruminative state, the artist had hurriedly scrambled together feelings and impressions. Courbet is economic: He gives us only what is necessary. "Imagination in art," Courbet said, "consists in knowing how to find the most complete expression of an existing object." And in his paintings, whether he worked seemingly quickly and thickly with a palette knife or loosely with washes, or built up bark or rock or flesh into heavy impastos, he conveys complete expressions.

Courbet puts the whole world into every picture. His compositions do not flow in the traditional sense; they take you on a rollercoaster ride through the realm of the senses. To take that wild ride through one of his canvases is to be thrown viscerally and in quick succession from one association to the next. Courbet's flowers and fruit evoke naked breast, buttock, and thigh; his nudes evoke bunches of flowers and fruit; hunting scenes become crucifixions, sacrificial rites, sexual conquests, and annunciations; flowing hair resembles horses' manes, angels' wings, churning surf, and fleeing prey, and surging waves against stormy sky evoke battle scenes and the throes of passion.

In the early portrait of his blushing, adolescent sister, "Juliet Courbet" (1844), the artist folds her arms in on themselves, transforming her into a closed book and a blossoming flower. Courbet's views of "The Source of the Loue" are erotic ventures into hidden mysteries and the origin of the world. In "Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine" (1856–57), Courbet violently truncates the reclining woman, forcing her upper and lower body into an erotic collision. Her dress and petticoats are disheveled, and she clings to the ground as if she were a shipwrecked castaway crawling up the beach. Yet all is calm. She is dreamy. She glows and floats as if in post-coital bliss.

Courbet paints portraits of cows and sheep that rival Rembrandt's depictions of religious subjects; he transforms nudes into Venuses; a girl with seagulls flung over her back into an angel, and the genitals and pubic hair in his infamous crotch shot "The Origin of the World" (1866) into one of Corot's mysterious, luminous trees. Among all of the visceral facts of Courbet's world, in almost every work, somewhere within the painting, however, is a faraway pocket of space or a form or a figure that is brought forward: It feels singled out, precious, and found, as if it had unfolded from out of a nest of boxes. Held in the artist's hands, it is brought close to our gaze, presented like a religious relic or an offering amid a sea of brutality and physicality. Courbet's paintings may come from the hand of a Realist, but they are no less sacred for being so profoundly profane.

