

Gustave Courbet

Ornans (Doubs) 1819 -
La Tour-de-Peilz (Suisse) 1870

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I. The Quest of Alfred Bruyas

Tassaert and Human Tragedy

Bruyas provided sincere support to artists by purchasing their works or inviting them to stay with him. During the long time he spent in Paris (1849-1854), he struck up friendships with painters, with the aim of achieving a great social, artistic project. Such were the beginnings of his collaboration with Tassaert (1800-1874) from whom he purchased the enigmatic *Heaven and Hell**. Their collusion is clear in the *Studio** in which the painter shows his patron to great advantage. The painter's complicity with Bruyas indicates the collector's preoccupation with social issues and pauperism prior to his meeting with Courbet. Coming from a long line of Flemish artists, Tassaert experienced misery throughout his life, managing to subsist through his work as an engraver and lithographer. He would work in turn on historic and "libertine" scenes, yet his greatest success was due to his subjects that concentrated on the sordid aspects of life, denouncing social injustice by appealing to the emotional register. Although his submission to the 1855 Universal Exposition was hailed by the critics, he gradually withdrew from the scene and no longer exhibited after the 1857 Salon. He fell into alcoholism and his health deteriorated. In 1865 he sought treatment in Montpellier, where Bruyas received him. He finally committed suicide in 1874.

1853 : A Capital Year

In his quest for the artist who would allow him to achieve his social, artistic project, Bruyas met Delacroix (1798-1863) who, in 1853, painted a *Portrait of Bruyas** (Room 32). An experienced artist with well-asserted talent, Delacroix failed to comply with Bruyas's plans. In the end, Bruyas would find a champion in Courbet. The man was involved in the political movements of his time and would bring his objective vision to serve the social cause. Bruyas discovered Courbet at the 1853 Salon, where he immediately purchased the *Spinner** and the scandalous *Bathers**. A buxom woman comes out of the water, with a piece of linen too small to hide her nudity, while her friend hastens to undress in turn. The meaning of the scene remains a mystery, but the boldness of the vision of this modern Diana irradiating the half-light of the lush undergrowth incited violent reactions. Only Bruyas would bravely proclaim "Here is free art ! This canvas is mine".

II. Gustave Courbet in Montpellier

Courbet was thirty-five when he arrived in Montpellier in May 1854. The painter found in Bruyas a patron who would free him from the demands of trade and the State which ruled over artistic creation. For Bruyas, Courbet was the artist who embodied his conception of contemporary art capable of achieving social advancement. During the four months of his stay, Courbet painted only major works in keeping with the spirit of this new pictorial trend, theorised by the art critic Champfleury under the name of "realism". While the subjects he tackled respected tradition, the approach to them was completely new. Abandoning the picturesque, he opted for a dark, austere palette and favoured carnal subjects and imposing formats that were conducive to a direct point of contact between the viewer and the life-size figures.

Portraits

Two paintings of capital importance seal the encounter between Bruyas and Courbet. The *Meeting** is a portrait, true to life, which immortalises the decisive moment when painter and patron met to accomplish their project. The clear vision, dense shadows and solid nature of the coloured paste lend a surprising sincerity to this trivial event, which is treated as a heroic scene. The Bruyas-Courbet alliance is also apparent in the *Painting Solution** in

Room
Courbet

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The Modernity
from 1850 to 1914

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which the aesthete poses with one of the books he published each year expounding his vision of art. He took the word “solution” from Charles Fourier referring to the answer to the question of social progress as sought by numerous reformers in these utopian times. In art, the solution seemed to lie in the sincerity of vision, gained through the study of reality. This would explain why Bruyas supported painters such as Tassaert, Corot (1796-1875), Troyon (1810-1865) and finally Courbet. Much later, Bruyas acquired the *Portrait of Baudelaire**. Champfleury was probably the instigator of the meeting between the painter and the writer around 1848. While their ideas would quickly differ, Baudelaire acknowledged Courbet’s “absolute, selfless love of painting”, and the painter would reuse the writer’s portrait in the *Artist’s Studio** (fig.1, detail 1) in 1855.

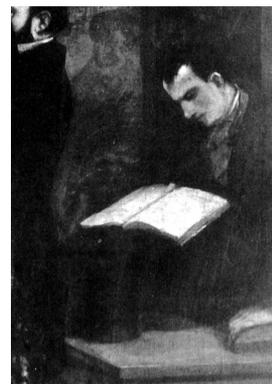


fig.1- (détail 1)- Gustave Courbet
The Artist's Studio.
Baudelaire detail
Paris, Musée d'Orsay
© RMN

Self-portraits

Courbet made his debut at the 1844 Salon with a self-portrait, a subject that he would often repeat during his youth. As he remarked to Bruyas in 1854, “I have painted many portraits of myself during my life, according to my changing states of mind : in a word, I have written my life”. The *Man with a Pipe**, still bearing traces of Romanticism, was purchased by Bruyas before Courbet’s arrival ; the painter prided himself on having refused it to the Emperor. His intentions are quite different in Self-portrait with a *Striped Collar** which records the image of a mature man, sure of himself and attired as an art patron (also to be seen in the *Meeting**), who provided him with security. As in the case of Baudelaire, Courbet takes up this portrait again at the centre of the *Artist's Studio* (fig.1), his manifesto painting which he subtitled *A Real Allegory of a Seven-Year Phase in my Artistic and Moral Life*, without forgetting either to include Bruyas (fig. 1, detail 2).

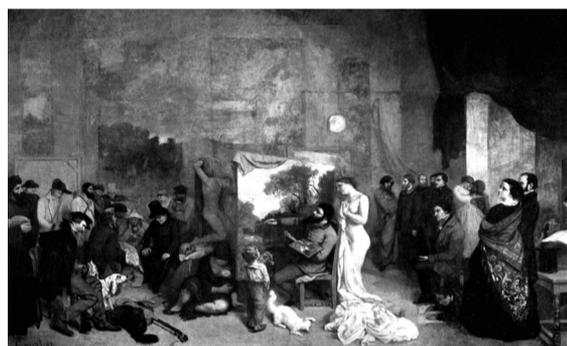


fig.1- Gustave Courbet
The Artist's Studio
Paris, Musée d'Orsay
© RMN

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fig.1- (détail 2)- Gustave Courbet
The Artist's Studio. Bruyas detail
Paris, Musée d'Orsay
© RMN

Landscapes

A nature lover, Courbet was fascinated by the extensive landscapes he found between sea and pond ten kilometres from Montpellier. This discovery of the Midi region in the South of France was already exalted in the *Meeting**. In the *Beach at Palavas**, Courbet pays tribute to this land and its light to which Bruyas’s invitation granted him access. The rugged and authentic landscapes of the region are also apparent in the *Bridge at Ambrussum**.



fig.2- Gustave Courbet
The Roe Deer's Shelter in Winter,
1866
Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts
Photograph Studio Basset

Unlike the Dutch artists he had long studied, Courbet eliminates all trace of human presence and all notion of the limpidity of light. From 1860, he devoted himself mainly to the contemplation of nature. As in *Solitude**, painted in his native region, he would remain fascinated by nature’s wildness and bounty until the very end of his life (fig.2).

Courbet’s Initiative

The year after his stay in Montpellier, the *Meeting** was selected for the Universal Exposition, but the *Artist's Studio* (fig.1) was rejected. Courbet therefore decided to organise his own exhibition in what he called the “Pavilion of Realism”. His art created a break with Academism, demanding a liberty that would lead to the dawn of Impressionism. Inspired by liberty and in the continual search for recognition, Courbet contributed to the conquest for independence undertaken by artists in the nineteenth century.

Involved in the insurrection in Paris of “La Commune”, he was forced into exile in Switzerland, where he died on 31 December 1877.