

Part 3:
1848–1870

PAINTING

The 1848 Revolution: Some Pictorial Responses

When Delacroix, in 1830, painted the revolutionary July days as an allegory of *Liberty Leading the People* (see fig. 127), he was able to orchestrate in a convincing whole both the rhetorical, ideal symbol of liberty and a journalistic account of civilian streetfighters, dead and alive, in contemporary costume within a modern Paris environment. But by 1848, the year of revolutions not only in Paris, but throughout Europe, from Berlin to Palermo, this wedding of traditional allegory and reportorial document seemed rent apart, as if the overwhelming new facts of nineteenth-century experience had for ever banished the abstract language of timeless symbols into an anachronistic, vacuum-packed world where the air was so pure that it could no longer sustain life.

A perfect example of this rupture can be found in the responses of French painters of the same generation to the events, ranging from the uplifting to the grisly, that began in a startlingly swift three-day revolution, from February 22 to 24, 1848, and ended with Louis-Philippe's abdication. There followed a series of chaotic provisional governments that instituted welfare workshops to alleviate the drastic unemployment and then held an election in which, for the first time in European history, almost every male—if not female—adult was given the right to vote. (Some nine million Frenchmen went to the polls, whereas under the July Monarchy, suffrage was granted only to wealthy “stockholders” of the government.) But even before this election, the new Second Republic sought out a visual icon for its utopian resurrection of the First Republic's dreams of the 1790s, and on March 18, 1848, a competition was announced for a symbolic figure of the new regime. Although Daumier himself was one of the twenty finalists in the painting division, it was mainly artists of a more high-minded academic persuasion who aspired to this lofty task. Of these, Armand Cambon (1819–95), a student of

Ingres, is typical in his efforts to perpetuate the traditionally abstract language and style of allegory. With her frontal, immobilized posture, fixed beneath the perfect arch of a rainbow, his *Republic* (fig. 219) belongs to the dynasty of Ingres's *Napoleon* and *Jupiter* (see figs. 49 and 54). Her Olympian throne, whose base bears, in inscribed Roman



Fig. 219 Armand Cambon, *The Republic*, 1848. Oil on canvas, 29¼ × 21¼". Musée Ingres, Montauban.

numerals, the revolutionary dates, is as pure as a lesson in solid geometry; and her feet rest on a lion which symbolizes the power of the people (although in 1830, the symbolically flexible lion could refer, in astrological terms, to the new July Monarchy). Far above our earthly heads, she holds a flag and an oddly disembodied pair of clasping hands that stand for Fraternity. Among the other symbols, a beehive suggests, as it had under Napoleon, communal labor. This strange assortment of palpable, cleanly defined objects—nouns without verbs—has the abstruse quality of a rebus, although, for much later generations, its irrational scale, odd juxtapositions, and clear-eyed rendering of individual facts make it a precursor of Magritte's Surrealism. But however we respond to this bizarre dictionary of objects, the chill the image casts is remote and unpolluted. Her eyes averted from terrestrial events below, *The Republic* belongs to a serenely timeless realm, which in fact corresponded to the competition's premise that an icon of stability might magically affect the instabilities of the real world in 1848. When in October of that year the jury of statesmen and establishment artists finally scrutinized the submissions, it was decided to give no prize at all; for clearly, even to them, the results were hopelessly out-of-joint with the demands of history.

One of the jurors was an artist of Cambon's generation, Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier (1815–91), whose experience of 1848 could not have been more at odds with these still-born allegories. By June 1848, the makeshift improvements of the conditions of Paris workers had been so negated by governmental shifts to the right that full-scale riots broke out in the working districts, culminating in four bloody days (June 23–26), when the army, under General Cavaignac, was called in to suppress what seemed to be almost an immediate demonstration of the fratricidal class warfare Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had discussed in their *Communist Manifesto*. Published in London in January 1848, the *Manifesto* urged an international proletarian revolution, and observed how the economic conflicts between freeman and slave, lord and serf had been transformed by the mid-nineteenth century into a struggle between capitalist and worker. Before 1848, Meissonier had painted agreeable eighteenth-century genre subjects with a miniaturist precision that lent an otherworldly distance and nostalgia to a prerevolutionary past. But during the "June days" of 1848, this master of what contemporaries often referred to as a Lilliputian style was called to duty as a captain in the National Guard. Before the Hôtel de Ville, which his troops were defending, he became an eyewitness at the barricades to the spectacle of, in his own words, "defenders slain, shot down, thrown from the windows, covering the ground with their corpses, the earth not yet having drunk up all the blood." When the mayor of Paris asked the Republican Guard whether all the victims were guilty, the answer was that, to be sure, not more than a quarter were innocent.

From this traumatic revelation of the moral and physical horror that accompanies any war, and especially civil war, Meissonier created a pictorial catharsis which he first submitted to the Salon of 1849 under the title *June*, and then decided to withdraw until the Salon on 1850–51, when it appeared under the title *Memory of Civil War* (fig. 220). Even the precedent of Goya's *Disasters of War* or Daumier's *Rue Transnonain* (see fig. 181) offers inadequate preparation for the close-up scrutiny of the facts of modern military death that Meissonier insists on here. Behind the stone rubble of the barricades, abruptly cropped at the right as in a narrow-range photograph, lies what a contemporary described as an "omelette of men," a black-humored metaphor that nevertheless captures the indiscriminate scramble of a slaughter. The ignoble truths of violated flesh and blood, of grotesque foreshortenings, and of ripped clothing are presented with the chilling veracity of a modern news photo that might document anything from the corpses of the Crimean War to those of a Nazi concentration camp. All the empyrean poetry of Delacroix's scene of the glorious July days of 1830 has vanished into thin air, leaving behind nothing but the terrible earthbound facts. Of course, all good artists, like all good photographers, edit their work, and Meissonier has chosen, for one, a patriotic palette that evokes, in red blood and blue and white clothing, the tricolor. Moreover, his increasingly blurred rendering of this street, the rue de l'Hôtel de Ville, as it funnels away from us, gives it the same generalized, imprisoning gloom often found in the abbreviated city backgrounds of Daumier's and Gavarni's lithographs. Such an effect was especially appropriate to this working-class street, which, in 1832, when it was called the Rue de la Mortellerie, was a prominent site of another urban apocalypse, a cholera plague. But most of all, Meissonier has tempered the shock of reality here by the surprisingly tiny dimensions of the canvas (less than a foot high) and by the jeweler's precision of his technique, both of which evoke the unreality of the miniaturist's art. Yet even relative to Daumier's view of civil massacres, documentary truths overwhelm artistic fictions here to a degree that brutally discloses the anachronism of Cambon's *Republic*, while proclaiming the possibility that art and reality might become one.

Meissonier's painting, in fact, was not only prophetic of other mid-century efforts, such as Winslow Homer's and Manet's, to document, with seeming objectivity, the facts of wars, uprisings, and executions on both sides of the Atlantic, but also of the new use of photography to record for history the human realities of war. Although photographs had been made of the Crimean War (1853–56), it was the American Civil War that prompted the fullest expansion of what would later be called photo-journalism. The successful photographer Matthew Brady, who, with his large display of daguerreotype portraits, won the top award at London's Great Exhibition of 1851, decided a decade



Fig. 220 **Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier**, *Memory of Civil War (The Barricades)*, 1849 (Salon of 1850–51). Oil on canvas, $11\frac{1}{2} \times 8\frac{3}{4}$ ". Louvre, Paris.



Fig. 221 **Timothy O'Sullivan**, *A Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, July 1863*. Albumen silver print. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

later, at the outbreak of the Civil War, to use his profession in the manner of a historian, recording with the truthful eye of the camera the traumatic events of 1861–65. For this ambitious project, Brady hired a team of some twenty photographers to cover the expanding zones of conflict, from South Carolina to Pennsylvania, with results that range from unforgettable images of the burned-out ruins of Richmond, Virginia, to the taking of prisoners. From these eyewitness accounts, which numbered about ten thousand, Brady and his colleagues also envisioned an expanding business enterprise that could be profitably marketed to a vast public: unless they had survived the battlefields themselves, most people had never before seen the shocking realities of modern warfare. Of these records, none are more devastating than the photographs taken by an Irish immigrant, Timothy O'Sullivan (1840–82), who, like Meissonier, did not flinch at the sight of a ground littered with soldiers' bodies. In the albumen print poetically titled *A Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, July 1863* (fig. 221), we find ourselves standing in front of a field of corpses that seems to continue forever toward a distant horizon and, thanks to the cropping, to both left and right. Like Goya's *Third of May 1808* (see fig. 34) or Daumier's *Rue Transnonain* (see fig. 181), this pinpoints a moment of nineteenth-century history and transforms it into a new kind of memento mori.

In O'Sullivan's head-on confrontation with the nameless victims of modern warfare, their former allegiance to the Confederacy or to the Union could hardly matter less.

Jean-François Millet and Peasant Painters

For a whole generation of artists who were young in the revolutionary year of 1848, the social realities of the everyday, whether in city or country, whether dramatic or commonplace, loomed large, leaving them with the problem of reconciling these newly observed facts with the traditions of high art. Of the countless major and minor artists who responded to these pressures, it was Jean-François Millet (1814–75) and Gustave Courbet (1819–77) who most conspicuously defined for the Paris public the kind of painting whose newness startled spectators in the decade following 1848, although their personalities and art are so different that they stretch even further the boundaries of the once inflammatory word Realism that is still used to describe them both. Born to a prospering family on the Normandy coast near Cherbourg, Millet from the beginning was steeped in an environment where he could see, and often participate in, the tilling of the soil, the shearing of sheep, the gathering of the harvest. Yet these humble origins did

not prevent him from being profoundly well educated not only in art, but in literature; and his lifelong concern with artists as diverse as Michelangelo, Poussin, and Fragonard was equaled by his familiarity with classical authors, especially those like Theocritus and Vergil who evoked bucolic idylls, as well as with modern ones like Robert Burns, who also captured the poetry of country life.

Peasants as subject matter had become popular decades before 1848; but their physical energies and their potential social force had been minimized in order to permit more Arcadian interpretations that, to urban eyes, like those which inspected the paintings of Corot or the Barbizon School, conjured up a nostalgic world of simplicity and innocence. Millet's own early works often perpetuated this mode. After 1845, however, when he moved to Paris, his art began to register more clearly the powerful tremors that introduced the year 1848. He could even record the violent, body-wrenching labor of those miserable itinerant workers from the country who were forced to construct the new railway lines in the Paris suburbs, and by the time the



Fig. 222 **Jean-François Millet**, *The Winnowor*, Salon of 1848. Oil on canvas, 41¼ × 28½". National Gallery, London.

month of revolution came, he was ready to exhibit at the Salon (which opened only weeks later, in March) a large painting that seemed to exemplify the emergence of the rude, terrifying power of ignorant laborers. *The Winnowor* (fig. 222), which was rediscovered in 1972, dramatically singles out from the tranquil or charmingly picturesque peasants of earlier art one rugged worker who suddenly demands, so to speak, equal time. For Millet has bestowed upon this nameless peasant not only a full-scale monumental presence, but has given him an unexpectedly heroic grandeur that transforms the arduous physical marks of winnowing—the slightly squatting stance, the firmly bent wrist and grasping fingers—into titanic anatomies that would be recognized by critics as conveying “Michelangelesque energies.” Millet did not avert his eyes from coarse, peasant detail—the pathetically worn shoes, the patches on the clothing, the brutalized expression, the powdery scattering of the grain. But as in even the more modest prints of Daumier’s urban characters, a grand Western pedigree is sensed here, with broad patterns of light and shadow dramatizing this crude, almost primitive man, whose social power, after 1848, began to threaten the status quo. As usual, it was not only the question of class that could make the well-heeled Salon-goer uncomfortable before this painting, but also the question of style. Théophile Gautier, the most accurate and vivid of all nineteenth-century art critics, again pinpointed the matter when he described how Millet “trowels on top of his dishcloth of a canvas, without oil or turpentine, vast masonries of colored paint so dry that no varnish could quench its thirst.” Even the vigor and coarseness of the paint application, so different from both the lacquered smoothness of Cambon’s or the exquisitely fine detail of Meissonier’s, underlined the image of grueling physical exertion.

We know nothing directly of Millet’s own political sentiments, but he probably shared the Republican convictions of his friends and of the critics who hailed this work. Yet he was obviously happy to turn his back on the turmoil of Paris, where he had been conscripted during the “June days” of 1848. In 1849, he left for the serenity of Barbizon, where he remained until his death, in 1875. There, like other Barbizon masters, he could maintain close touch with the art network of Paris, while continuing to explore firsthand those facts of rural life that he would translate into many epic canvases for the Salon. Of these, *The Gleaners*, shown at the 1857 Salon (fig. 223), is so familiar that, as in the case of the equally famous *Angelus*, it takes considerable historical knowledge to understand exactly what is represented. Although it may first evoke a harmonious idyll of farm women gleaning the harvest as they might have in biblical times, it is also a comment on the economic hierarchies that by the 1850s were being rapidly established among the peasant classes. The three gleaners in the foreground are, in fact, separated from the rich and densely



Fig. 223 **Jean-François Millet**, *The Gleaners*, Salon of 1857. Oil on canvas, 33 × 44". Louvre, Paris.

populated farm on the distant horizon. They belong to the lowest level of peasant society, those who are given permission to pick up the scant leftovers in the fields after the wealthy have harvested the crops, the rural equivalent of urban beggars who looked for crumbs and coins on the streets of Paris. Nevertheless, Millet transforms this scene of numbing, heart-breaking poverty and labor into an image of epic nobility, bearing out the belief of his champion, the critic Jules-Antoine Castagnary, that a new art had been born in which the artists "had gained the conviction that a beggar in a ray of sunshine is seen in truer circumstances of beauty than a king on his throne." So stark and so emblematic is this trio—two of whom move toward the meager pickings in a broad postural rhyming while the third, her back still arched from this exhausting labor, begins to move upward toward the horizon, but remains below it, as if eternally rooted to the earth—that a hostile critic could refer to them as "the Three Fates of pauperdom." Yet the very fact that they could resonate with such grand associations is a tribute to Millet's genius at distilling figures,

landscape, and architecture into a serene, interlocking organism that might rival Poussin's vision of antiquity. Even the haystacks and wagon on the left horizon echo the archaic clarity of the trio's A-A-B rhythm, and the gabled farm buildings have a comparably terrestrial firmness. Millet's sense of color, too, underlined this search for almost primitive truths. In general, his palette smacked of the duller, earthier tones of stone, of fields of grain, of the coarse gray-brown weaves of peasant costume; and in *The Gleaners* the parched yellow-browns of the tilled fields dominate the whole. Yet the three women are distinguished from each other by their colored caps, aprons, and sleeves, which offer an elemental trio of primary hues—blue, red, yellow—muted to tones appropriate for their lowly, utilitarian clothing. By bestowing such pictorial dignity on the most poverty-stricken rural population of France, Millet not only revitalized, in an agrarian translation, the inherited vocabulary of classicizing art, but also implied, to nervous upper-class spectators, that this population should be taken seriously as a welling force both inside and outside the Salon.

That force was often tempered and sweetened by other Salon painters of the 1850s, who, like Millet, magnified the peasant class to epic scale. Of these, Jules Breton (1827–1906) was, so to speak, Millet's milder-mannered understudy who could present France's vast agricultural population not as an image of raw, threatening power, but as a simple society of archaic harmony dominated by the serene, recurrent rhythms of daily labor and church ritual. Like Millet, Breton had lived most of his life in a rural, provincial community and could paint from firsthand experience such disasters as a fire in a haystack. Indeed, he even preceded Millet in representing, at the 1855 Salon, the labors of the poorest gleaners. Yet his view of peasant life generally censored out of sight the harsh facts of ragged clothing, hands like clubs, and faces like those of whipped animals. In 1857, at the same Salon as Millet's *Gleaners*, Breton presented the huge *Blessing of the Wheat in the Artois* (fig. 224), one of the many venerable Christian ceremonies he had observed near his native town of Courrières. His record of ethnographic detail, in fact, is scrupulous, presenting far more precise, sharp-focus descriptions of regional costume and individual people than are usually found in Millet. But these particular truths are filtered through rose-colored lenses, so that, finally, an entire rural population becomes as pious, content, and harmless as a peasant chorus in an opera like Gounod's *Faust* (1859). Bathed in a gently sparkling light and separated from us by kneeling worshipers, a harmonious procession of picturesque, devout, and ignorant people moves across the fields in solemn step, clergy first, peasants behind, recalling, in modern rural guise, the historicizing biblical processions of the faithful in such mid-nineteenth-century church frescoes as those by Flandrin (see fig. 155). The earth, to which they are all wedded, rises high above them to form a continuous horizon line punctuated only by the sacred

canopy and, at the right, the skyward thrust of the church steeple. There is much of Millet's sense here of the naïve beauties of peasant life and even reminiscences of Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* (see fig. 228), with its friezelike display of a whole society. But Breton's leap from reportorial fact to poetic fiction (or, some would say, to whitewashing) is so smoothly contrived that we understand how more complacent spectators of the 1850s might be convinced that the increasing multitudes of troublesome peasants outside Paris would in no way disturb their status quo. Small wonder that the painting was enthusiastically endorsed by the conservative director of the Museums of the Louvre, the Count of Nieuwerkerke, and bought by the state; whereas Millet's *Gleaners* at the same Salon antagonized and frightened a right-wing audience.

The same distancing from the grubby realities of farm life, whether of men, women, or beasts, characterized much of the work of Rosa Bonheur (1822–99), the most internationally renowned woman painter of the mid-nineteenth century and one whose professional and social independence was probably nurtured by her father's association with the Saint-Simonian Socialists, who proselytized for the equality of women. Indeed, that goal was assertively realized by Bonheur, who applied for and was regularly issued legal permits to wear men's clothing in public. At the Salons of the 1840s, she made a name for herself as an animal painter, replacing, however, the Romantic zoo—tigers, jaguars, herons, gavials—of an earlier generation, that of Delacroix and Barye (see pages 219–21), with the domesticated animals—horses, rabbits, sheep, goats, cows—of prosaic country life. A member of Courbet's and Millet's Realist generation, she, too, hit her stride by 1848, receiving that year a lucrative government commission which was exhibited at the next Salon, that of 1849. *Plowing in the Nivernais: The Dressing of Vines* turned



Fig. 224 Jules Breton, *Blessing of the Wheat in the Artois*, Salon of 1857. Oil on canvas, 4' 3" × 10' 6". Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

◆ ROSA BONHEUR: PAINTING IN THE NIVERNAIS ◆

At the Salon of 1848, Rosa Bonheur won a gold medal, a Sèvres vase, and on July 3, 1848 a 3,000-franc commission for *Plowing in the Nivernais* (see fig. 225), which was shown at the Salon of 1849 in the Tuileries palace. Bonheur wrote of this period in her diary:

I'll never forget my father's [the minor landscapist and portraitist Raymond Bonheur] joy at this double triumph. He felt that my success was truly his own. Hadn't he been my only teacher? Another thing added to his legitimate pride: he loved the government honoring his daughter, and its advent had nourished his dreams. ...

Alas! I cannot help feeling a twinge of pain whenever I think of my *Plowing in the Nivernais*. Although it really made my reputation, what gloomy memories it calls back. A few days before my father died, he made another proud inspection of my work. He embraced me and said: "You're right on the heels of Vigée-Lebrun. So it's not in vain that I made her your role model." Poor Father, despite his long and even worse suffering, he had no idea that the money I got for this painting was meant to pay for his funeral expenses. ...

I was twenty-seven when my father died. Two months later *Plowing in the Nivernais* was shown at the Salon. I had a hard time finding it in the catalog, since it was listed as *Boarding*

in the Nivernais, Sinking [*L'Abordage nivernais, le sombrage*]. This made me momentarily cross, all the more because this mix-up raised lots of questions that I couldn't answer. Fortunately, people still liked it.³⁹

In 1859 Emile Cantrel compared Bonheur to the novelist George Sand:

There is a most intimate relationship between the two talents. Mlle Bonheur often reads George Sand, her favorite author, and I would not be surprised if Mme Sand felt the same way about Rosa Bonheur's landscapes. George Sand has a special genius for landscapes; and in her paintings Rosa Bonheur gives song to the trees and eloquent speech to the animals, grass, and clouds. Both can understand the mute symphonies of creation and render them in the passionate, harmonious language of art: one, through descriptions drawn by a pen equal to Ruysdaël's brush and Lorrain's palette; the other, through stories told by a palette with all the genius, the masterful style, the vigorous color that have so rightly glorified the pen.

George Sand and Rosa Bonheur are two landscape artists in Jean-Jacques's [Rousseau] school, two superior women who are the envy of Europe, two serious and confident painters who will give France the right to bask in glory—two brother geniuses.⁴⁰

Later writers invested the painting with political overtones that Bonheur herself might not initially have recognized. The painting inspired Adrien Dézamy to write a socialist poem published in 1880, "Labourage Nivernais," a reference to the popular print, *Le Labourage*, made after the painting:

Six huge Nivernais oxen, six huge
white and red oxen,
Till a slope on an autumn morning,
And drag a heavy plough that
scallops
And crawls with a clank of iron and
nails.

While his holly-wood goad flies over
their backs
To quicken their monotonous pace,
The driver intones in a falsetto voice
Some old song with a slow, sweet
refrain.

The ploughshare opens up the flanks
of the fertile earth...
To the trills of the birds fluttering
around,
The ox team replies with a long
bellow.

The sun is shining on this festive
countryside:
And facing this painting that is so
alive
I stop and hum one of old Pierre
Dupont's refrains.⁴¹

[Pierre Dupont was a socialist poet and songwriter.]

out to be a huge success (fig. 225). Its concern with depicting specific agricultural activities (the dressing of vines in tilled soil) in a particular province (the Nivernais) was typical of the period's inquisitiveness about the regional variations of French rural society and, in this case, may have been inspired by a passage in *The Devil's Pool* (1846), George Sand's novel of rustic life. To this record of local truths—and it was Bonheur's custom to travel in the provinces for documentary material—is added, as in the case of Breton, a vision of Eden. The meticulous detail of the landscape, of the breed of cattle, all studied *in situ*, attest to the artist's firsthand experience, yet the stately movement of the beasts of burden and of the men who

direct them across the soil is kept at a sufficient distance from the spectator to make sure that none of the harsh facts of country life—flies, manure, grinding poverty—offend the sense of sight, smell, or touch. The whole appears as remote and noble as the procession of oxen in ancient Egyptian reliefs, finally fulfilling the expectations of high art. Such a fusion of the real and the ideal, of modern fact and historic beauty quickly made Bonheur's reputation, not only at home, where she eventually became, in 1894, the first woman officer in the Legion of Honor, but particularly in the Anglo-American world, where patrons from Queen Victoria to Cornelius Vanderbilt lauded and bought her work.



Fig. 225 **Rosa Bonheur**, *Plowing in the Nivernais: The Dressing of Vines*, Salon of 1849. Oil on canvas, 5' 9" × 8' 8". Musée National du Château de Fontainebleau.



Fig. 226 **Jean-François Millet**, *Killing the Hog*, 1867–70. Oil on canvas, 28¾ × 36½". National Gallery of Canada/Galerie Nationale du Canada, Ottawa.

Millet's reputation, too, expanded internationally, especially after the 1850s, when his art, like that of many other Barbizon masters, tended to take on an ever more remote, nostalgic look, his rural people and landscape often viewed through a veiled, crepuscular light that glowed with a halo of Romantic reverie. Nevertheless, his art never turned into formula, and he could continue to confront, with total honesty, even the most brutal truths of farm life, ranging from the *Man with a Hoe*, with its heroic record of a single fieldworker who seems to bear centuries of mind-dulling and back-breaking labor, to the routine murder of wild birds and farm animals. Of these latter works, *Killing the Hog* of 1867–70 (fig. 226) is both alarming and matter-of-fact in its subject matter, the commonplace exertions of farmhands to drag a recalcitrant hog to a low table where it will be slaughtered with a knife. Yet, in Millet's hands, this ordinary scene of farmyard noise, agitation, and violence is converted into a grave ritual act that evokes biblical sacrifices. The archaic lucidity of the planar composition, with its parallel layers of rude cottage and barnyard walls and its trio of leafless trees, is echoed in the solemn tug-of-war between man and beast, finally stalemated by the axial clarity of the triangular grouping. Even in family terms, Millet has extracted a primal image, including a pair of children in the background who quietly watch their elders act out, in a theatrical space, an ancient, cruel ritual which brings the specter of death into their life. That Millet's art could resonate so deeply into all kinds of mythic and psychological archetypes was testimony not only to his greatness but also to his ability to transcend the confines of the historical category, Social Realism, in which he is usually placed.

Gustave Courbet

That category, suggesting an artist who is primarily concerned with conveying the facts, and often bitter ones, about contemporary social issues, is one that suits many painters who matured with the experience of the 1848 revolutions, and who came to believe that the routine events of city and country life were the only vital source of artistic truth. It was Gustave Courbet (1819–77), far more than Millet, who represented the embodiment of this viewpoint, both through the revolutionary force of his paintings of the 1850s and through his appetite for arousing and enjoying public controversy. With gargantuan conceit, he not only thought that he was the most handsome and seductive of all men, but that he was a secular incarnation of a second coming of Christ, a messiah who would lead his disciples into new paths of truth and beauty that would finally crush Paris's infidel art and social establishment. Luckily for him and posterity, his estimate of his own importance was pretty accurate.

Like many other mid-century artists responsible for replacing Greek heroes or medieval kings with workers, Courbet himself came from the rural provinces, where he was raised with those physical and social facts of country life that, in his eyes, could undermine the arty, moribund traditions of Paris with the ring of coarse, grass-roots truth. He was born to a wealthy farming family in the town of Ornans in the Franche-Comté, a region of France near Switzerland where the landscape is rugged and rocky and where the locals are known for their hard-boiled pragmatism. The strength of these origins even extended to his early artistic training as a teenager under a certain Père Baud, a provincial student of Gros whose own paintings have the stiff, naïve character of folk art, which, like the crude, flat imagery of anonymous broadsheets, could inspire Courbet to create a style that was willfully popular in its avoidance of the compositional sophistications of Parisian high art. Yet, like most artists, revolutionary or conservative, Courbet needed Paris as the stage to act out his ambitions. In 1839, he arrived in the capital to continue his training and to study firsthand the old masters. Among these, his enthusiasms turned to those painters who insisted on recording the commonplace truths of city and country life—French masters like Chardin and the Le Nain brothers (whose dignified images of seventeenth-century peasants were the object of new excitement in the 1840s and 1850s) or Spanish masters like Ribera, Zurbarán, Murillo, and Velázquez (whose earthy vision was especially prominent in the 1840s in the so-called Musée Espagnol, a gallery of Spanish painting created under Louis-Philippe). Courbet's own early work, in large part rejected by the Salon juries from 1844 on, featured overwhelmingly narcissistic self-portraits, in which he scrutinized his own handsome features in mock-Romantic poses. It also included more straightforward portraits of friends and family, landscapes, and more fanciful subjects, like a guitar player in troubadour costume, which often seem to parody the apparatus of conventional Romanticism. For him, as for Millet, 1848 was a watershed; and in the words of his early champion, the novelist and Socialist Jules Champfleury, Courbet began to "exist" only in 1849, with *After Dinner at Ornans*, a painting which, like the novels of George Sand describing rural life, offered an accurate accounting of such uneventful truths as the indoor comforts of a chilly November day when the artist, his father, and two friends enjoyed a smoke, drink, and music after a meal. This chronicle of country life, even magnified to the life-size dimensions appropriate to more heroic history painting, was agreeable enough to be warmly received at the 1849 Salon, earning Courbet not only a state purchase but a medal that guaranteed him automatic acceptance at future Salons.

Ingres, who grudgingly recognized the unfamiliar talent of this painting, also worried that its example might be



Fig. 227 **Gustave Courbet**, *The Stonebreakers*, 1849 (Salon of 1850–51). Oil on canvas, 5' 3" × 8' 6". Formerly Gemäldegalerie, Dresden (destroyed 1945).

dangerous; and indeed it was. At the next Salon, Courbet himself presented a trio of paintings about rural life which scandalized the Paris audience. To generate these works, Courbet had returned to his native Ornans for the autumn of 1849, reimmersing himself in his rural origins for fresh inspiration. The episodes he chose were a local funeral, a pair of stonebreakers, and the return of a group of wealthy peasants from a country fair. Of these, *The Stonebreakers* and *A Burial at Ornans* instantly became the kind of manifesto paintings which, like the *Oath of the Horatii* (see fig. 16) at the 1785 Salon, announced a new world.

For posterity, *The Stonebreakers* (fig. 227) is almost more of a myth than a real painting. Because the work had been in Dresden since 1904 and was then destroyed there during the Second World War, its image has been conveyed mainly through reproductions in history books. There it became the very symbol of the proletariat invading the center stage of high art, the ideal visual parallel to 1848 and the *Communist Manifesto*. Controversial from the outset, the painting still inspires theoretical writings by Marxist critics. To measure something of how shocking it was to the Salon audience in the winter of 1850–51, it is best seen in the context of Millet's *Winnower* from the 1848 Salon, which in good part inspired it (see fig. 222). By contrast, Courbet seems coolly matter-of-fact, directly recording

what he described as an encounter on the road to Maizières with two stonebreakers whom he then had pose for him in his Ornans studio. Neither monumental gloom nor Michelangelesque energy ennobles or dramatizes their physical labors, and if their faces happen to bear, like those painted by Millet, the marks of physical stress or of the blunting of intellect through countless man-hours of sweat and toil, Courbet has chosen to avert the spectator's eyes from such emotionally charged evidence. Yet he provides all the clues to a life totally lost as a human beast of burden: the pairing of a young and old worker in a suggestion of the long, imprisoning cycle of a worker's existence; the upward strain of raising a basket of stones versus the downward exertion of hammering them to pieces; the pathetic marks of poverty in the clothing, from the sagging trousers and torn stocking heel to the grindingly worn shoes. Courbet puts this all down as sheer, unbiased fact, viewed in a clear flat light that permits only the shortest shadows to be cast and that evenly defines every detail from the disarray of crushed stones in the foreground to the working-class still life behind of bread, spoon, and metal soup-pot. This removal of any lingering veil of sentiment, this inclusion of all palpable facts, were as alarming in Paris as the dimensions accorded this lowly vignette of anonymous, unskilled workers paving the new roads of

provincial France. For indeed, this canvas occupied an area more than five by eight feet, outsize countless noble subjects on the same Salon walls. And if it was impossible to get away from the sheer size of these workers, it was just as hard to get away from their material presence. Instead of being seen against a hazy background that makes them less threateningly near, they are pushed close to us against a steeply rising hill, a parched, gritty terrain that is abruptly cropped at the upper right. Abrasive, too, was the willful ingenuousness of the figural composition (or non-composition), which seemed as clumsy as the graceless movements it depicted. None of Millet's abstract rhymes generalize this pair, whose contours and surfaces bear the specific ring of ugly truth, the ragged clothing as unideal as the bodies it covers. And the paint surface, even more than Millet's, corresponds to Gautier's metaphor of troweled masonry.

Even though Courbet himself had referred to his subject as the "most complex expression of misery," his painting seems totally poker-faced. But to his close friend and compatriot from the Franche-Comté, the Socialist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *The Stonebreakers* became a heart-breaking indictment of capitalism, which he described with highly charged language in his rhetorical treatise *On the Principles of Art and Its Social Purposes*, not published until 1865. For Proudhon, the painting told as horrible a story of immoral greed and human degradation as the issue of slavery; yet the emotions and grand ideas the work generated for him seem more appropriate to the pictorial rhetoric of Biard's *Slave Trade* or Hübner's *Silesian Weavers* (see figs. 184 and 185). Finally, Courbet's art, for all its Socialist implications,

was far more tight-lipped and dry-eyed than its propagandistic potential, meeting the demands of a new kind of painting based on the equality of all material facts even more than the demands of a new kind of society based on the social and financial equality of all people.

This visual, as well as social, democratization of art was seen in still more ambitious terms in the immense *A Burial at Ornans* (fig. 228). Like *The Stonebreakers* (whose title, as listed at the Salon, also included, between parentheses, the specific region, the Doubs, where the scene took place), *A Burial* transported a huge slice of rural truth into the urban sanctuary of the Paris Salon. Courbet's loyalty to the provinces was also borne out earlier in the year when, before the opening of the 1850 Salon (delayed until December 30), he showed *A Burial* and other works in one-man exhibitions at Ornans, Besançon, and Dijon, presumably reaching those less cultivated audiences which in turn had provided the raw material of his art.

Here, the rural truth—inspired, according to one legend, by the funeral of Courbet's own grandfather—encompassed a vast spectrum of human experience, from the commonplace but inherently tragic fact of Christian burial rites for a beloved family member to the inventory of a provincial community. And individuals they were! Courbet had dozens of local people come pose for him before clustering them together on canvas, side by side and almost fifty strong, in order to honor the deceased in the coffin, which, casually held by four pallbearers at the left, will soon be placed in the newly dug grave. This crass hole hollows out the bottom center of the canvas with a dull thud, invading the space of the spectator who, in imagination, joins the



Fig. 228 **Gustave Courbet**, *A Burial at Ornans*, 1849 (Salon of 1850–51). Oil on canvas, 10' 4" × 21' 9". Musée d'Orsay, Paris.