

## Preface

On March 18, 2006, the Department of Paintings at the J. Paul Getty Museum invited a group of international scholars to convene in Los Angeles for a day of discussions related to the loan exhibition *Courbet and the Modern Landscape* (J. Paul Getty Museum, February 21–May 14, 2006; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, June 18–September 10, 2006; The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, October 15, 2006–January 7, 2007). The intent was to bring together art historians from the academic and museum professions who had carefully considered the work of the Realist master Gustave Courbet, expose them to the exhibition, and provide a forum in which to exchange ideas about a relatively neglected topic in the historiography of nineteenth-century French painting: Courbet's landscapes. The group included several senior scholars who have focused on the life and work of Courbet across their careers, a PhD candidate writing his dissertation on the very subject at hand, two art historians trained as paintings conservators, and two curators in the process of organizing the upcoming monographic exhibition devoted to Courbet, opening at the Grand Palais in Paris in October 2007.

*Courbet and the Modern Landscape* was the first opportunity to look intently at Courbet since the 1988 Brooklyn Museum exhibition *Courbet Reconsidered*, and the first chance (since 1882) to look at so many landscape paintings by Courbet in one place. The organizing criterion for the installation was Courbet's responsiveness to distinct landscape types, and the exhibition curators, Mary Morton and Charlotte Eyerman, both viewed his achievement in landscape painting through the prism of late-nineteenth-century French and mid-twentieth-century American avant-garde painting. With a formalist bent aimed at extricating Courbet's work from the sociohistorical and psychoanalytical context that has dominated Courbet scholarship for the last thirty years, the exhibition and catalogue emphasized the visual complexity, variety, and richness of his landscape oeuvre, with the intent of provoking new responses from experts in the field.

Indeed, the range of viewing experiences to be had in the exhibition galleries was dramatic. There were pictures that were peacefully pleasing (the Norton Simon *Marine*) as well as darkly disturbing (the Metropolitan *Source of the Loue*); there were baffling paintings, powerful but rather bizarre (the Houston *Gust of Wind* and Salander O'Reilly *Valley of the Loue*); paintings of an acute freshness (the Brooklyn *Wave* and private collection *Rocks at Chauveroché*); and larger, carefully finished works held within a firm, almost classical geometric structure (the Musée Courbet *Chateau de Chillon*.)

Installation highlights included a wall of five paintings of the same motif spanning fifteen years of Courbet's career. Viewers could compare the Montreal *Puits Noir* (fig. 1), a spontaneous transcription of the site just outside Ornans, with the more labored Salon production of the Orsay *Shaded Stream* (fig. 2)—larger, more organized, ennobled—and then with the profoundly penetrating, formal meditation of the Baltimore *Shaded Stream at the Puits Noir* (fig. 3), a work that so clearly illustrates Courbet as the artist with whom Cézanne begins. The remarkable presence of the *Grotto of Sarrazine* (fig. 4), a little-known painting acquired by the Getty in 2004, was consistently impressive in its combination of intense empiricism and painterly experimentation, the curling wavelike structure of the rock face elicited with a variety of studio tools used to scrape, brush, blot, and marble the canvas surface. The final gallery's long



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**Figure 1**

Gustave Courbet (French, 1819–1877), *Stream of the Puits Noir* (*Le Ruisseau de Puits Noir*), ca. 1855. Oil on canvas, 64.8 x 81.3 cm (25 1/2 x 32 in.). Montréal, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Purchase, John W. Tempest Fund.



**Figure 2**

Gustave Courbet, *The Shaded Stream* (*Le Ruisseau couvert*), 1865. Oil on canvas, 94 x 135 cm (37 x 53 3/16 in.). Paris, Musée d'Orsay. Photo: Hervé Lewandowski, Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, New York.



**Figure 3**

Gustave Courbet, *The Shaded Stream at the Puits Noir* (*Le Puits Noir*), ca. 1860–65. Oil on canvas, 64.2 x 79.1 cm (25 1/4 x 31 1/8 in.). The Baltimore Museum of Art, The Cone Collection, formed by Dr. Claribel Cone and Miss Etta Cone of Baltimore, Maryland, BMA 1950.202.



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**Figure 4**

Gustave Courbet, *The Grotto of Sarrazine near Nans-sous-Sainte-Anne*, ca. 1864. Oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm (19 11/16 x 23 5/8 in.). Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2004.47.

wall of tonal studies that Courbet produced in the mid- to late 1860s on the Normandy coast foregrounded both the serial nature of this particular campaign, and the range of expressive effects achieved with the minimal motif of sky, sea, and sand. Finally, the profoundly haunting Hamburg *Winter Landscape* (fig. 5), painted on a black ground, attested to Courbet's continued (if intermittent) artistic achievements during the difficult last years of his life.



**Figure 5**

Gustave Courbet, *Winter Landscape with the "Dents du Midi,"* 1876. Oil on canvas, 73.5 x 101 cm (28 15/16 x 39 3/4 in.). Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle. Photo: Elke Walford, Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, New York.

Moderated by myself, Charlotte Eyerman, and Richard Brettell, each of us specialists in nineteenth-century French painting and bringing to the discussion our own preoccupations, the symposium offered nine brief formulations on the nature of Courbet's landscape oeuvre. Michael Clarke opened the day by sketching the context for Courbet's landscapes in terms of the art market and of contemporary practice in the genre, suggesting ways in which the Realist painter both conformed to and diverged from his artistic



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environment. Courbet's work did not fit comfortably in his time, and so Clarke raises the question, explored in Charlotte Eyerman's catalogue essay, whether Courbet speaks more to a mid-twentieth-century painterly world or, as James Rubin suggested in his recent monograph, whether Courbet's legacy has more to do with the principles underlying his art than with the influence of the objects themselves.

The issue of Courbet's legacy to Modernist painting, explored in the catalogue though not in the exhibition itself, was a central theme of papers by Sarah Faunce, Klaus Herding, and Paul Galvez, as well as for symposium keynote speaker and moderator Brettell. The public lecture Brettell presented on March 19 addressed, in particular, the debt that Gauguin's landscapes owed to Courbet's work, notably those in a vertical format. Brettell underscored the enormous impact of Courbet's death, in 1877, for the generation of young painters we think of as Impressionists. Courbet's example, both as a painter and as a self-made, self-promoting artist, inspired generations of vanguard artists.

Faunce focused on Courbet's method of paint construction, which she described as profoundly informed by the extraordinary topography of the artist's native Jura. Courbet's layering and scumbling of paint with his palette knife, and the variety of mark making, served as a kind of visual analogue to the rocky outcroppings and rich foliage of the area surrounding Ornans, his hometown. Herding debunked the category of Realism for Courbet, emphasizing the emotional expression, ambiguity, and abstract tendencies of his landscapes. Courbet's complex oeuvre served as a "gold mine" for the Modernist generation that followed, for painters like Cézanne, Seurat, Gauguin, and Van Gogh.

Adding to the "never-ending discussion" of precisely what constitutes "modern" in painting, and when it begins, Galvez suggested an alternative to the tried-and-true Baudelaire-Manet-Impressionist story, in which Modernism is about acceleration and urban spectacle. In his intense meditation on the experience of looking at Courbet's landscapes, Galvez marveled at the careful skill and masterful sophistication of Courbet's paint application, which resulted in images of powerful sensual appeal that demand a decelerated viewing, and that ultimately have more to do with darkness than with "Impressionist light."

Returning Courbet to his sociocultural context, Petra Chu argued for a market imperative guiding not only the subject matter but also the tactile sensuality of Courbet's landscape imagery. She placed Courbet's practice firmly within the burgeoning trade for images of tourist sites in the 1850s and 1860s. Dominique de Font-Réaulx connected Courbet's landscape work to developments in midcentury landscape photography, particularly as it was practiced by such artists as Gustave Le Gray, several of whose marine photographs were included in the exhibition, offering a fascinating comparison with Courbet's seascapes lined up in the adjacent gallery.

Seizing the opportunity to break for a moment from the "desperately looking forward from Courbet" context of the exhibition, David Bomford explored Courbet's roots in seventeenth-century painterly practice, specifically the "rough manner," or textural painting, of Velázquez, Titian, and above all Rembrandt. Also looking at seventeenth-century precedents, Laurence des Cars focused on Courbet's submissions to the Salon of 1870, *The Stormy Sea* and *The Cliffs at Étretat*, suggesting the continuity—within both their compositional structure and their emotional impact—of the heroic landscape tradition established by Poussin and Claude Lorrain. Marking one of the many links between Courbet and Cézanne, she described a Neoclassical principle of organization in the modern painterly practice of both men.



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Each one of the presentations engaged in some way with the issue of Courbet's highly unusual paint surfaces, as they appeared in all their rich variety in the exhibition galleries. In her presentation, Anthea Callen investigated the actual (as opposed to presumed or mythological) tools of Courbet's working method in an attempt to excavate his surfaces. Clearly, Courbet directed an enormous amount of his voluble energy into the live process of painting, employing brushes of all sizes and textures, all aspects of the palette knife (tip, edge, and flat side), the range of dry to wet and thick to thin paint consistencies, sponges, rags, and fingers. He was and continues to be very much a painter's painter, and his experimentation with his materials resulted in a group of pictures that, while potentially thrilling, are wildly uneven, inconsistent, and sometimes mysterious in their construction.

From the moment *The Grotto of Sarrazine* arrived at the Getty Museum through the de-installation at the close of the exhibition, Getty paintings conservators and curators studied Courbet's surfaces in an attempt to get a sense of the artist's consistency (or inconsistency) of technique. Focusing on paintings in very good condition, we did develop a sense of familiarity with particular marks, some of them highly unusual. But at the same time, the sheer variety of paint handling and Courbet's experimental drive confounded attempts to get a clear sense of stylistic evolution or even an entirely consistent "hand." Building on what we have learned from *Courbet and the Modern Landscape*, and capitalizing on the imminent monographic exhibition at the Grand Palais/Musée d'Orsay, Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Musée Fabre, much remains to be done in Courbet technical studies, and the interpretive field remains rich for future scholarship.

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