

History of Art
Realism

Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) and Jean-François Millet (1814-75) were the catalysts to the explosion of Realism. They were in favour of the working classes and the portrayal of the 'real' everyday life. They wanted to shock the bourgeois by their direct style and outrage respectable artists. They were both political anarchists, nobody ever painted the poor people working in the fields; Courbet and Millet glorified the figure and the subject matter in the style of classical history paintings of the Academy. They used in paint in a colourful way trying to emphasise the natural outdoor light of the countryside. Their pictures were strongly modelled to show strong form and shadows.

According to the classification of art historians, Courbet is the first great Realist among the painters of the 19th century. Courbet was born in Ornans and was in Paris by 1839, working under a minor painter in the Louvre. He copied Dutch, Spanish and Flemish works as well as pieces by Delacroix and Géricault. Courbet showed an 'ugliness' in his paintings which the public were shocked by, none of whom realised that this was what Courbet actually called reality. Courbet's realism is a totally independent of the exact illustration of details, he defies the proletariat in the style of history paintings of Regal figures.

In "A Burial at Ornans" (1859) the compact black mass of mourners has the tranquillity of a still life, almost to the same extent as the barrier of rocks in the background. The picture captures a moment of real life, a record of a burial at his hometown of Ornans with a solemn group of mourners including the social strata of the community – priest, mayor, farmers and labourers. The painting is large; Courbet has used a limited range of colours and strong chiaroscuro to add to the frieze like composition.

"The Stone Breakers" (1849) is a direct image of two labourers, one young and one old, with tools working at the different tasks of the stonemason. Strong chiaroscuro shows the form of the figures and the solid textures of the stones and general landscape.

Jean-François Millet (1814-75) was a French realist, the peasants he depicted belonged to the class which still accounted for more than half the French population yet had benefited least from the growing mid-century prosperity. He was trained under a local painter at Cherbourg and then in Paris in 1837 under Delaroche. In 1849 he moved to Barbizon and remained there for the rest of his life, living in the most gruelling poverty, painting scenes of the peasants and their labourers as well as ordinary landscapes and marines.

"The Man with the Hoe" (1852 - 62) is a narration of a workingman in a field, even his body posture is revealing, the man is a tired labourer completing an unremitting task. The reality of this painting is the everyday life of the workingman; a low life expectancy is consequential of their hard working life. The man is brutalized by toil, stopping for a moment in his task of hacking the stubborn soil, personifies a more fatalistic and pessimistic view in an image of eternal human labour and poverty. Millet gives a very unsentimental appeal despite the soft, beautiful colours of the background. The eye level is in the middle of the painting, therefore we look up to the man, this is similar to historical paintings of kings and queens where this effect gives the portrait a more ostentatious character. With "The Gleaners" he depicted with an uncompromising realism that seemed shocking to many contemporaries soon came to

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be veiled in a nostalgia which gave the countless reproductions of them an irresistible sentimental appeal to city-dwellers.

“The Gleaners” (1857) presents the everyday occurrences of working women, the process of harvesting was part of the ritual life. There is a traditional composition, foreground, middle ground and back ground which is realistic and adds to the ‘realism’ of the paintings. Traditional chiaroscuro can be seen, The three gleaners are not elegant or romantic but solid in form and outline, they are modelled firmly against the bright sunlight.

In conclusion, Courbet’s scenes from everyday life range from the depiction of abject poverty as seen in “The Stone Breakers”, social comment which is seen in “The Young Women of the Village” to the representation of a peasant funeral with more than fifty life size figures in “The Burial at Ornans”. The main figures in Courbet’s paintings were members of the rural bourgeoisie, to which his own family belonged, however, Millet specialised in depicting the rural proletariat, the people who had no possessions.