

WHAT, IN YOUR VIEW, IS REALISTIC IN THE  
PAINTINGS BY THE REALIST ARTISTS? IN YOUR  
ANSWER, REFER TO AT LEAST THREE DIFFERENT  
PAINTINGS.

The Realist movement would have to be dated back to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. During which time, painters such as Gustav Courbet and Jean Francois Millet would have been painting the pieces that would change human conception of 'seeing'. Indeed, even today, the paintings of the Realist movement have had an influence on the human way of life, for this is the representation of the time that the western world became much more independent. It is, perhaps, the keystone to learning to develop, as the artists brought about a way of learning to think and see for ourselves. Painters influenced by the realist movement sought to represent the harsh realities of contemporary life with uncompromising frankness.

Gustav Courbet is an important artist to look at when studying Realism. Many may see him as the 'father of Realism', which is understandable seeing as how he held the first one-man exhibition titled "Le Realism", exhibiting works in a context that people were not able to relate to. A classic example of one of his paintings would have to be *Burial at Ornans*. In this painting, inspired by the death of his grandfather, he expresses realism as a form of not only painting the truth, but, to an extent, as a means of escaping, at the time, the modern characteristics needed from art. The painting shows a crowd of people attending a funeral. However, we do not know whose funeral this is. The colours are bland. We can relate to this dullness created by the impact of the greys. What I mean is that the painting shows to the onlookers that it is portraying a normal funeral. It is showing the reality of a funeral, a reality of life. The colours show a certain element of depression in the painting. Before this painting, the only pieces of art showing burials were strictly religious, praising through colour and composition. There is no element of praise in this painting. The crowd are dressed in black, as a normal European funeral would ask. Indeed, what also insulted people about this painting was that it showed no reference whatsoever to there being an afterlife. There is a message coming through, 'who knows what happens'? There is no proof that we go to a better or worse place. And indeed, this must have been exactly what Courbet wanted out of his realist paintings; to get people to start thinking, both about reality and about what has been taught.

A classic example of another artist greatly inspired by the realist movement would have to be Jean Francois Millet. Millet was strongly left-wing, so his works portrayed people mainly in the context of working. In *The Sower*, Millet shows a picture of a working class man doing the normal, working class, man doing the normal task of scattering the seeds after the harvest. Indeed, as well as hosting a radically different attitude to the choice of the subject matter in the painting, the painting is showing a portrait of a working class man. Previously, portraits were only done for religion or for the praise of a higher class individual. In this sense, Millet seems to be praising the figure in his painting, the working class man. By portraying him as a heroic figure, he creates a similar impact to the work of Courbet by forcing the people to look at what is there, but not noticed, forcing people to look at reality. This painting shows an emphasis on class distinctions present in Europe at the time and the physical labour put in by the working class. This, similarly, would not have

made the onlookers, of mainly middle and upper class people, very happy at all. However, it was the reality of the world at the time, and that was what the realist painters set about portraying through their works.

The Marxist theory settled as being very interesting to the realist painters. Although not wholly evident in the example given by Courbet, there is a strong presence of socialist ideas in Millet's work. However, a painting of Courbet's, more in line with these views of socialism and very similar to the works of Millet would have to be '*The Stonebreakers*'. This painting shows two working class men. One is hacking the stone into pieces and the other is carrying the broken pieces of stone. Both would be very laborious tasks. It is not at all that different from the work of '*The Gleaners*', done by Millet, showing working class people doing the laborious task of gleaning the field after the harvest. Both pieces portray the hard, physical labour of the poor, essentially set by higher classes. What perhaps is also important is that in both pieces, the faces of the workers are not visible, they are hidden. By doing this, both artists provide an emphasis on the work put in by the working class people. The effort put into the back-breaking effort of breaking up and carrying the stones as well as the constant bending of the gleaners. The emphasis is placed on the bodies of the workers, showing both the exertion this work needed and the damage it caused. Indeed, a certain element of guilt was placed into the paintings, as people could relate to them. People could relate to them because they depicted reality.

In conclusion, the paintings by realist painters were called so because of the fact that they did depict a whole new subject matter; the reality. Indeed, this reality was displayed by emphasis being placed on the parts of life people tended to ignore. By studying both the works of Gustav Courbet and Jean Francois Millet, two of the greatest realist painters, what has been noticed is that the subject matter in their paintings depicts the scene as you would actually see it. There is no idealistic view of how the selected scene would look, Courbet believed in painting what you saw, this is, indeed, what he portrayed. In result, the picture is able to portray a strong sense of truth. Realism is the attribute of accepting the facts of life and favouring practicality and literal truth. This is indeed what was evident through the paintings of the realists.