

Gustave Courbet: Representing Women

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Gustave Courbet, a key figure in 19th-century French realism, is celebrated for his pioneering contributions to genre painting and his evocative landscapes of the Franche-Comté region, where he was born. Recent scholarship has also highlighted the diversity and complexity of his depictions of women. Among the most notable examples of Courbet's portrayal of women are *The Bathers* (1853), in which the artist presents nudes in an unidealized, candid manner, *The Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine (Summer)* (1856), which caused a scandal owing to its frank depiction of prostitutes, and *Woman with a Parrot* (1866), a work that garnered significant praise at the Salon art exhibition. These pieces collectively illustrate Courbet's evolving approach to the female form and offer insight into how he navigated social and artistic conventions.

By contrast, Courbet produced several highly erotic works commissioned by private clients. These sensual depictions would have a lasting impact on his legacy, influencing how later generations perceived his representations of women. Courbet became known for some of his more provocative works, such as *The Origin of the World* (1866). In addition to his broader impact, feminist art historians have long analyzed Courbet's portrayals of women, highlighting the complex interplay between his art and his personal beliefs. His close association with the philosopher Proudhon, known for his misogynistic views, further complicated perceptions of Courbet's own attitudes toward women.

Art history research has encountered difficulties in addressing the juxtaposition between the significance of female representation in his oeuvre and sensual depictions that objectify women. Thus, it is necessary to move beyond the early methods of analysis that relied on the personal history of the artist's tastes and private romantic feelings, as well as critical feminist art analysis, to systematically and empirically analyze and clarify Courbet's representations of women in connection with his artistic conceptions. This book thoroughly re-examines Courbet's artistic practice through a detailed study of his representations of women. The book seeks to elucidate the function of female figures in his artistic oeuvre and examine how they evolved over his artistic career. It also discusses Réalisme's formation process and the correlation between art and politics. Specifically, I divide Courbet's painting practice into three periods—the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s—and select a characteristic representation of women in each period for analysis. By examining the works submitted to the Salon that represent each period in detail, we can elucidate how Courbet altered his approach to female representation in accordance with the maturation of his artistic style.

The initial period, encompassing the 1840s, was characterized by the prevailing artistic currents of the era. As an emerging artist, Courbet closely examined the artistic developments in Paris, drawing substantial inspiration from them, and engaged in persistent experimentation to establish his distinctive artistic identity. To represent the first period, this study focuses on *The Hammock (Dream)* (1844), a work that integrates numerous elements from the Romantic and Ingres schools. While this piece initially appears stylistically distinct from Courbet's later realist approach, a closer examination of its visual composition reveals nascent elements of *Réalisme*. In his early Salon exhibits, the artist endeavored to portray contemporary women along with their customs and social manners, aiming to forge a unique style by synthesizing diverse schools of thought and artistic theories.

The second period, the 1850s, marks a phase in which Courbet showcased a series of widely publicized works at the Salon and formally articulated his artistic philosophy through the declaration of his "Realist Manifesto" (1855). Courbet's portrayal of women became a focal point of public scrutiny during the Salon of 1853, when his *Baigneuses* drew substantial criticism. To represent the second period, this study focuses on *The Sleeping Spinner* (1853), a work that has been largely overlooked compared with its more prominent counterparts in Courbet's oeuvre. In this seemingly tranquil piece, I identify elements that subtly reflect the fluid class dynamics that emerged as a significant social issue in France at the time. Moreover, by conducting a thorough analysis of the Salon of 1853, I aim to explore the motivations behind Courbet's *Realist Manifesto*. Subsequently, *The Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine (Summer)* (1856) is discussed as a representative example of how Courbet operationalized his stated objectives. Through a close examination of the works presented at the two Salons intersecting in 1855—a pivotal year in Courbet's career—this study elucidates the artist's endeavor to portray the socio-political realities of his era through the depiction of women.

In the third period, the 1860s, Courbet gained significant recognition not only within the French art world but also across neighboring countries, marking the maturation of his artistic career. Although his style during this period exhibited a more academic approach, his correspondence revealed an enduring defiance toward the Salon and the Academy. Within this context, Courbet submitted a nude to the Salon for the first time in nearly a decade, a decision likely influenced by both his competitive spirit toward younger painters, such as Édouard Manet, and the prevailing taste for idealized nudes promoted by the academy at the Salon of the 1860s. However, his eagerly anticipated *Venus and Psyche* (1864) was deemed immoral and subsequently rejected. Just two years later, he achieved critical success with *Woman with a Parrot* (1866), which was highly praised at the Salon. By

examining the contrasting evaluations of these two works through the artist's correspondence and contemporary critiques, this study illuminates Courbet's complex engagement with the academic world. It reveals his use of the nude form as a vehicle for his artistic principles, his critique of the Salon and academy's hypocrisies, and his ultimate ambition to guide the evolution of French art.

Accordingly, this book aims to elucidate how Courbet addressed the representation of women in the Salon, where he emphasized his artistic and political convictions, and to examine the roles he assigned to these depictions. Through a chronological analysis of Courbet's approach to female representation, this study clarifies the purpose and significance of these depictions in his art, ultimately providing a renewed perspective on the role of women in Courbet's works and contributing to broader discussions on gender representation in Western art history.