

## Rough Manners: Reflections on Courbet and Seventeenth-Century Painting

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In a typically elegant and wittily concise review of the great 1977–78 Courbet exhibition shown at the Grand Palais and the Royal Academy, Anita Brookner remarked that Gustave Courbet appeared less like the first of the dissidents—setting himself up at the gates of the Universal Exposition in 1855—and more like the last of the old masters.<sup>1</sup> Although these two viewpoints are not wholly mutually exclusive, it is in the old master context that I would like to consider Courbet’s paintings here.

Petra Chu summarized this theme in the opening paragraph of her book *French Realism and the Dutch Masters*, where she wrote: “There has probably been no period in the history of Western art in which painters, sculptors and architects alike were as preoccupied with the art of the past as the nineteenth century. All the major artistic currents of this period hark back to one or more historical styles, a phenomenon that is most common in architecture, but that can also be observed in painting and sculpture.”<sup>2</sup>

Without exception, every author who has written about Courbet’s life and art has pointed out his early debt to seventeenth-century painters—principally Dutch and Spanish. Courbet himself acknowledged it. In a letter to his family written in August 1846, he noted that he had to go to Holland, principally to earn money, but also to “study their old masters.” In the same letter, he described painting the portrait of a M. de Fresquet, who “has paid me the greatest compliments on the one of his son which has made quite an impression in Bordeaux. He showed me a letter in which his wife says that the Bordeaux painters maintained that it reminded them very much of Rembrandt.”<sup>3</sup>

Courbet would have had no difficulty studying seventeenth-century painting in Paris. The collection of the Louvre was famously strong in Dutch art—although it had rather fewer Spanish paintings—and the young Courbet copied old master paintings there. For Spanish art, he would have had the riches of King Louis-Philippe’s Galerie Espagnole, which was exhibited at the Louvre from January 7, 1838, to January 1, 1849.<sup>4</sup>

The Spanish connection was evidently significant for Courbet. Of his self-portrait known as the *Man with a Leather Belt* (fig. 1), exhibited at the Salon of 1846 under the title *Portrait of M. X\*\*\**, Courbet himself said, “C’est du sur-Velázquez” (It’s super-Velázquez). T. J. Clark, in his *Image of the People*, described this portrait in Spanish terms also: “What Courbet borrowed from the Spanish paintings in Louis-Philippe’s Galerie Espagnole, was not so much their formal qualities, though he sometimes copied these, as their sheer brutality, the unembarrassed emotion of the paintings and of the painters’ own legendary lives.”<sup>5</sup>





**Figure 1**

Gustave Courbet (French, 1819–1877), *Self-Portrait, Entitled "Man with a Leather Belt,"* 1845–46. Oil on canvas, 100 x 82 cm (39 3/8 x 32 1/4 in.). Paris, Musée d'Orsay. Photo: Erich Lessing, Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, New York.



**Figure 2**

Titian (Tiziano Vecelli, Italian, 1488/90–1576), *Man with a Glove*, ca. 1520. Oil on canvas, 100 x 89 cm (39 3/8 x 35 in.). Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo: Thierry Le Mage, RMN / Art Resource, New York.



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There is another fascinating old master association with this painting. Courbet exhibited it again, in 1855, under the title *Portrait of the Artist /A Study of the Venetians*, and various twentieth-century scholars have connected it compositionally with Titian's famous *Man with a Glove* in the Louvre (fig. 2). Their instincts were proved correct when, in 1973, an X-ray of the picture showed that Courbet had painted it over a copy he had made of that very Titian.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 3**  
Gustave Courbet, *The Burial at Ornans*, 1850. Oil on canvas,  
315 x 668 cm (10 ft. 4 in. x 21 ft. 11 in.). Paris, Musée d'Orsay.  
Photo: Hervé Lewandowski, RMN / Art Resource, New York.

Contemporary critics were not slow to make the Spanish connection, either. Courbet's loyal friend, the critic Jules Champfleury, mounted a passionate defense of *The Burial at Ornans* (fig. 3), shown so controversially in the 1851 Salon. He wrote, "with its composition and arrangement of groups, Courbet was already breaking with tradition. Although unacquainted with Velázquez's wonderful canvases, he was in agreement with that illustrious master, who placed figures next to one another without worrying about laws laid down by pedantic and mediocre minds. Only those who know Velázquez can understand Courbet. Had the Parisians been more familiar with the works of Velázquez, they would undoubtedly have been less angry about *The Burial at Ornans*."<sup>7</sup> Although Champfleury didn't make the additional connection, others have pointed out the painting's obvious similarity to a burial scene by an earlier Spanish artist—El Greco's *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (fig. 4).

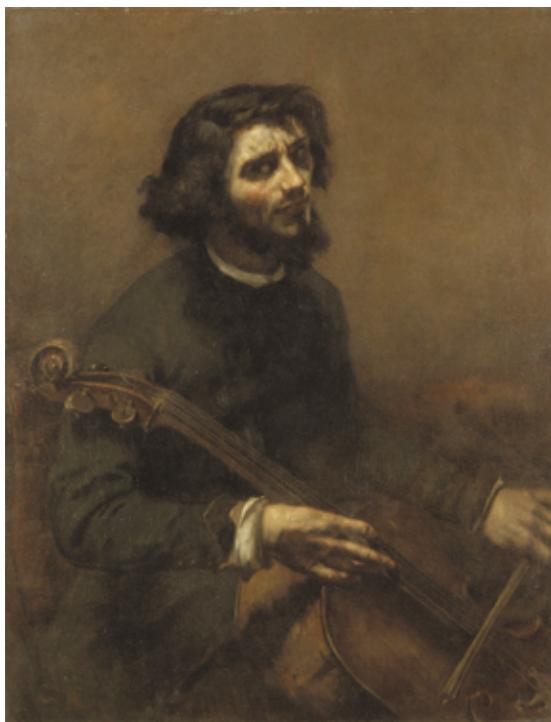
The nineteenth-century critical view of Courbet's style was grounded in drawing parallels with seventeenth-century Spanish painting. The critic Jules Castagnary wrote, "In his power and variety, I find him very like Velázquez, the great Spanish naturalist; but with this slight difference: Velázquez was a courtier of the court, Courbet is a Velázquez of the people."<sup>8</sup>





**Figure 4**

El Greco (Doménikos Theotokópoulos [Spanish, born in Greece, 1541–1614]), *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, 1568. Oil on canvas, 480 x 360 cm (15 ft. 8 in. x 11 ft. 9 in.). Toledo, Spain, Santo Tomé.



**Figure 5**

Gustave Courbet, *The Cellist: Self-Portrait*, 1847. Oil on canvas, 117 x 90 cm (46 1/8 x 35 1/2 in.). Stockholm, Nationalmuseum, 3105. Photo: © The National Museum of Fine Arts, Stockholm.



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However, the essential subjectivity of these comparisons shouldn't be underestimated. In an admiring comment on Courbet's 1848 Salon piece *The Cellist: Self-Portrait* (fig. 5), Champfleury wrote, "If you put his portrait *Man with a Cello* in the Spanish museum, it would hang there proud and calm with no fear of the Velázquezes and the Murillos."<sup>9</sup> But Champfleury's comparison of Courbet with the Spanish masters has to be set alongside the opinions of other contemporary critics, who simultaneously likened the *Cellist* to Rembrandt. In the modern era, Clark described the painting as "Rembrandt confused by the concern for elaborate posing and spatial arrangement—undecided whether to set the figure in a dissolving chiaroscuro or against a background which presses it to the canvas surface."<sup>10</sup> Linda Nochlin has proposed a specific source for the self-portrait, Rembrandt's own 1660 self-portrait in the Louvre (fig. 6), pointing out the "subtle and expressive lighting of the head, the inquietude of the expression and the general composition, including the fact, unusual for Courbet, that he has chosen to represent himself almost full length in a life-size format."<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 6**  
Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn (Dutch, 1606–1669), *Self-Portrait with Easel*, 1660. Oil on canvas, 111 x 90 cm (43 3/4 x 35 3/8 in.). Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo: Hervé Lewandowski, RMN / Art Resource, New York.



**Figure 7**  
Gustave Courbet, *Portrait of H. J. van Wisselingh*, 1846. Oil on panel, 57.2 x 46 cm (22 1/2 x 18 1/8 in.). Fort Worth, Texas, The Kimbell Art Museum. Photo: Art Resource, New York.



Courbet was an inveterate traveler and visited a number of major cities in Holland, Belgium, and Germany to work and to study old master paintings. We know of trips to Amsterdam, at the invitation of the Dutch art dealer H. J. van Wisselingh, whom Courbet depicted in a highly Rembrandtesque portrait (fig. 7). He certainly went to the Rijksmuseum to look at Rembrandt, not in the building we know today, but in the museum's previous home, the Trippenhuus. He also went to Brussels, Ghent, Antwerp, and Bruges, and to Frankfurt for almost a year in 1858–59—where his hosts provided him with a studio and introduced him to stag hunting—as well as to Munich in 1869, where he copied a self-portrait by Rembrandt and *Malle Babbe* by Frans Hals (figs. 8, 9).



**Figure 8**

Gustave Courbet, *Copy of a Self-Portrait by Rembrandt*, 1869. Oil on canvas, 87 x 73 cm (34 1/4 x 28 3/4 in.). Besançon, Musée des Beaux-Arts. Photo: RMN / Art Resource, New York.



**Figure 9**

Gustave Courbet, *Malle Babbe*, 1869. Oil on canvas, 85 x 71 cm (33 1/2 x 28 in.). Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle, 2262. Photo: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, New York.



Until quite recently, it was assumed that Courbet never went to Spain, but a search through the register of copyists at the Prado has revealed his unmistakable signature under the date of September 4, 1868.<sup>12</sup> Tantalizingly, we know no further details of his visit to Madrid—not even which paintings he copied in the Prado—but perhaps more will come to light about this mysterious journey.

We should now ask ourselves a general question about the notion of artistic influence and examine how important it was for Courbet—and, in the context of the exhibition at the Getty, for his landscape painting. How was Courbet's own art shaped by his intense scrutiny of the art of the past? The answer, naturally, is not straightforward. We can identify clearly different levels of influence by earlier masters.

At the most obvious level are direct copies of the sort that he made in Munich—but these were not particularly significant for Courbet. Perhaps they were brief acts of homage to painters he admired, or simply technical exercises in mimicking style; it is certainly interesting that they are after two of the greatest exponents of painterly brushwork in European art. Courbet dismissed the idea of simple imitation as an end in itself, emphasizing that such processes were part of a cumulative search for artistic identity. In his so-called *Manifesto of Realism*, he wrote, "I have studied the art of the Old Masters and the art of the Modern Masters. I no more want to imitate the former than copy the latter; nor have I pursued the futile goal of art for art's sake. No! I simply wanted to draw from a complete knowledge of tradition a reasoned and independent sense of my own individuality. I sought knowledge in order to acquire skill, that was my idea."<sup>13</sup>

At a more indirect level are the Rembrandt-like or Velázquez-like portraits and figure studies that we have already seen. Here the influence is of a general kind—of shape and arrangement, of mood and characterization, of chiaroscuro and theatrically lit forms set against crepuscular backgrounds. True, certain of these compositions seem to follow seventeenth-century prototypes rather closely, and there is undoubtedly some conscious or unconscious assimilation taking place. Apart from the similarities to Rembrandt and Velázquez, we might mention other examples. For instance, parallels between the still solemnity of *After Dinner at Ornans* (fig. 10) and the family groups of Louis Le Nain (fig. 11) are abundantly clear.

In all of these comparisons, we are playing the art historian's favorite game of spotting the sources—matching images to plausible and sometimes proven precursors. For Courbet, however, it is almost entirely in his figure painting that we can trace these connections. So—what can we say about the landscapes that will be of particular interest to us here?

We have very few clues. There is one intriguing reference to an early landscape that Courbet may have studied, *Paysage imaginaire imité des Flamands*, but we have no idea which painting this is.<sup>14</sup> There are no obvious seventeenth-century prototypes for Courbet's brilliant and vibrantly textured landscapes. The Rembrandt landscapes that Courbet would have seen are quite different—small, serene panels, the paint thin and transparent with the light ground shining through. We are perhaps closer to Courbet if we look at other seventeenth-century Dutch artists, such as Jacob van Ruisdael or Philips Koninck or Meindert Hobbema, but these are influences of a fairly universal kind and not specific enough to be significant.





**Figure 10**  
Gustave Courbet, *After Dinner at Ornans*, 1848/49. Oil on canvas, 195 x 257 cm (76 3/4 x 8 ft. 5 1/8 in.). Lille, Palais des Beaux-Arts. Photo: Philippe Bernard, RMN / Art Resource, New York.



**Figure 11**  
Louis Le Nain (French, 1593–1648), *Repas de paysans*, 1642. Oil on canvas, 97 x 122 cm (38 1/8 x 48 in.). Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo: Gérard Blot, RMN / Art Resource, New York.



The only type of rural scene in which we can identify a direct connection is that with prominent cattle, where the derivation from Albert Cuyp and Paulus Potter—whose works Courbet saw when he visited Holland—is very clear. The light brown cow in *The Young Ladies of the Village* (fig. 12), for example, has almost exactly the same shape and pose as Potter's monumental *Bull* (fig. 13), in the Mauritshuis.



**Figure 12**

Gustave Courbet, *The Young Ladies of the Village*, 1851. Oil on canvas, 195 x 261 cm (76 3/4 x 8 ft. 6 1/2 in.). New York, © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Harry Payne Bingham, 1940. Photo: Art Resource, New York.



**Figure 13**

Paulus Potter (Dutch, 1625–1654), *The Bull*, ca. 1647. Oil on canvas, 235.5 x 339 cm (7 ft. 3/4 in. x 11 ft 1/12 in.). The Hague, Mauritshuis, Royal Picture Gallery.



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**Figure 14**

Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, *Portrait of a Pair of Old Testament Figures, Called "The Jewish Bride,"* 1667. Oil on canvas, 121.5 x 166.5 cm (47 7/8 x 65 1/2 in.). Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, SK-C-216.

Such borrowings are reasonably clear transpositions of motif from recognizable sources. I want to suggest an altogether different type of influence, however—a fundamental of painterly representation firmly rooted in seventeenth-century art theory and practice. I refer to the emergence of the “rough manner” in Dutch painting, particularly in the works of Rembrandt, and in Spanish painting, with Velázquez.<sup>15</sup> Both were working against the prevailing norms of smooth or fine painting, and, for both, the example of late Titian was cited as authorization of their increasingly broken and irregular handling of paint. In a remarkable trajectory that echoed Titian’s, Rembrandt moved through his career from being a founding father of the Leiden *fijnschilders*, or “fine painters”—those painters who, with invisible brushstrokes and “the patience of saints and the industry of ants” (as one contemporary author described it), took the illusionistic depiction of objects to a new level—to his culmination as the undisputed extreme exponent of the rough manner. In his late works, the paint surfaces have the density of rock faces. Ernst van de Wetering of the Rembrandt Research Project has described the sleeve of the so-called *Jewish Bride* in the Rijksmuseum (fig. 14)—a picture that Courbet would have seen—as appearing to be “the outcome of some geological process rather than paint applied by a human hand . . . the paint rises from the surface in clots and flakes, reflecting the light. It is a mystery how such a surface structure was achieved, to imagine what implement was used, for it is difficult to distinguish any clear brushstrokes, nor are there any traces of the palette knife.”<sup>16</sup>

The rough manner in Dutch painting was a conscious aesthetic choice and was described in Rembrandt’s day as *lossigheydt*, “looseness”—the equivalent of the *sprezzatura* of the Italian writer Baldassare Castiglione (1478–1529), who drew parallels between the effortless nonchalance of courtly behavior and the loose, seemingly careless touches that the artist applied with his brush. The epitome of *lossigheydt* or *sprezzatura* in Rembrandt’s art is his masterpiece, the *Portrait of Jan Six* (Amsterdam, Six Collection), in which the paint seems to have massed spontaneously into the gorgeous fabric of the sitter’s clothes and



the powerful passages of his face and hands. Seventeenth-century Spanish art theory, similarly, had terminology for loose, expressive brushstrokes: they were referred to as *borrones* or *manchas*, words loaded with the same significance as “sprezzatura.”<sup>17</sup>

In his brilliant and eccentric study of Rembrandt, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, Simon Schama cogently summarized that significance. “The rough surface,” he said, “engages with, and stimulates, the activity of the eye far more powerfully than a smooth surface. Rough and smooth surfaces, in fact, presuppose quite different relationships between artist and spectator. The unequivocally completed, clear and polished work of art is an act of authority, presented to the spectator like a gift or declaration. The roughly finished painting, on the other hand, is more akin to an initiated conversation, a posed question, demanding an engaged response from the beholder. Rough artists deliberately expose the working processes of composition as a way of pulling the spectator further into the image.”<sup>18</sup>

Would Courbet have been aware of the theoretical underpinning of the seventeenth-century paintings he studied so assiduously? The answer is, almost certainly not—since scholarly debate about the rough/smooth aesthetic did not resurface until the twentieth century. But what we are talking about here is something instinctive, not the deliberate borrowing or imitation of motifs. We are talking about the almost unconscious exercise of visual memory, the storing of perceptions and sensations on the retina of some inner eye. From the textured surfaces of those seventeenth-century paintings, Courbet was absorbing a sort of mnemonic code of representation, to be rediscovered and reinvented in the extraordinary low-relief formations that were his landscape paintings.

Nor was that inner eye simply registering the superficial rough manners of Rembrandt and Velázquez; it was also taking in the dramatic effects that could be imparted by the colors underlying the paint. Rembrandt's dark brown quartz grounds, often used for his canvases, and the deep earth color of Velázquez's early Sevillian grounds, established an approach that was startlingly different from conventional methods, which involved working on light-colored preparations. Courbet's apparent preference for painting on dark underlayers echoes that of those earlier artists. It was a technique entirely without transparency or inner luminosity—the complete antithesis of the later, Impressionist technique of allowing light to reflect from a pale ground and flood through the paint layers above.

The tonal effect is curious. Colors must be applied thickly—reinforcing the textural effects we have already examined—and they are glittering and brilliant rather than soft and luminous. There is a hardness to them, unsoftened by any shimmer of transparency or play of light through translucent brushwork. They seem to hover above some dark void, colors overcoming blackness by sheer force. There is a sense of the photographic about this way of working—forms and colors emerging piece by piece from deep shadow and increasing in substance until they subdue the darkness underneath. This is tenebrist painting remade in a new and unique idiom for a new type of nineteenth-century landscape.





**Figure 15**

Gustave Courbet. *The Diligence in the Snow*, 1860. Oil on canvas, 137.2 x 199.1 cm (54 x 78 3/8 in.). London, National Gallery, and Dublin, Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art. Photo: © The National Gallery, London.

I conclude with a Courbet landscape that few people have seen in recent years. It is the huge *Diligence in the Snow* (fig. 15), owned jointly by the National Gallery in London and the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery in Dublin. Apparently it records an actual incident of a carriage and its terrified occupants foundering in the snow that Courbet witnessed in the Jura. In terms of technique, it has all the rough texture you would expect of a grand, sweeping composition loaded with so much lead white paint. Great pastose swirls of white and gray stand for rocks and snow in the foreground, flat slabs of pale color are knifed on for background and sky, and trees in the distance are slashed on with stripes of black. Underlying everything is a ground color of inky darkness, giving the whole scene a tone of oppressive cold and threatening intensity. The physical structure of this underlayer caused tremendous problems for the painting. It has a slick, greasy surface, to which the paint layers never stuck properly. The work was plagued with flaking and paint loss for most of the last century and was repaired on many occasions. Happily, it is reasonably stable these days—and, when the Hugh Lane Gallery opened again to the public in spring 2006, it was seen in public for the first time in years.

This powerful image is very much of its time. No Dutch seventeenth-century Little Ice Age snow scene would have looked like this. But it is my contention that Courbet unconsciously drew on his acute visual memory of seventeenth-century paintings every time he made one of his extraordinary landscapes.

<sup>1</sup> Anita Brookner, *Soundings* (London, 1997), pp. 110–14. Originally published as “The Last of the Old Masters,” *Times Literary Supplement*, January 27, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, *French Realism and the Dutch Masters* (Utrecht, 1974), p. 1.



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- <sup>3</sup> Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, ed., *Letters of Gustave Courbet* (Chicago, 1992), pp. 65–66.
- <sup>4</sup> See Jeannine Baticle, “The Galerie Espagnole of Louis-Philippe,” in *Manet/Velázquez: The French Taste for Spanish Painting*, exh. cat. (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003), pp. 175–89.
- <sup>5</sup> T. J. Clark, *Image of the People* (London, 1973), p. 41.
- <sup>6</sup> Valérie Bajou, *Courbet* (Paris, 2003), pp. 36–37.
- <sup>7</sup> Champfleury [Jules-François-Félix Husson], “Courbet en 1860,” in *Grandes figures d’hier et d’aujourd’hui* (Paris, 1861), cited in Geneviève and Jean Lacambre, eds., *Champfleury, Le Réalisme* (Paris, 1973), p. 182.
- <sup>8</sup> Jules-Antoine Castagnary, *Salons (1857–1870)*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1892), vol. 1, p. 149.
- <sup>9</sup> Champfleury 1861 cited in Lacambre and Lacambre 1973 (see note 7), pp. 153–54.
- <sup>10</sup> Clark 1973 (see note 5), p. 42.
- <sup>11</sup> Linda Nochlin, “Gustave Courbet: A Study in Style and Society” (PhD dissertation, New York University, 1963); published New York, 1976, p. 51.
- <sup>12</sup> See Alisa Luxenberg, “Buenos Días Señor Courbet: The Artist’s Trip to Spain,” *The Burlington Magazine* 143 (November 2001): pp. 690–93.
- <sup>13</sup> Courbet, “Le Réalisme,” preface to *Exhibition et Vente de 40 Tableaux & 4 Dessins de l’oeuvre de M. Gustave Courbet* (Paris, 1855).
- <sup>14</sup> Chu 1974 (see note 2), p. 28.
- <sup>15</sup> See, for example, Bernhard Schnackenburg, “Young Rembrandt’s Rough Manner: A Painting Style and Its Sources,” in *The Mystery of the Young Rembrandt*, exh. cat. (Staatliche Museen, Kassel, and Museum het Rembranthuis, Amsterdam, 2001), pp. 92–121; also Ernst van de Wetering, *Rembrandt: The Painter at Work* (Amsterdam, 1997), pp. 160–69; and Gridley McKim-Smith et al., *Examining Velazquez* (New Haven, 1988).
- <sup>16</sup> Van de Wetering 1997 (see note 15), p. 157.
- <sup>17</sup> McKim-Smith et al. 1988 (see note 15), pp. 15–27.
- <sup>18</sup> Simon Schama, *Rembrandt’s Eyes* (London, 1999), p. 654.

