

Parallel Lines: Gustave Courbet's "Paysages de Mer" and Gustave Le Gray's Seascapes, 1856–70

Dominique de Font-Réaulx

The links between the seascapes of Gustave Le Gray and Gustave Courbet's marine paintings, or *paysages de mer*, were first underlined by Aaron Scharf in 1968. In his still unequaled *Art and Photography*, he juxtaposed a Le Gray photograph (*Méditerranée, Cette, grande lame*, 1857, fig. 1) and a Courbet painting (*Marine, Moon Effect*, 1869, ancient coll. Fischer), stressing the aesthetic similarities between the two pictures. The photographer and the painter both chose to reproduce empty seas with large, cloudy skies—subjects that were quite new when the works were created. The compositions are also comparable, for both images are cut in two by a firmly drawn horizon line (see figs. 1 and 2 [a similar Courbet seascape]).

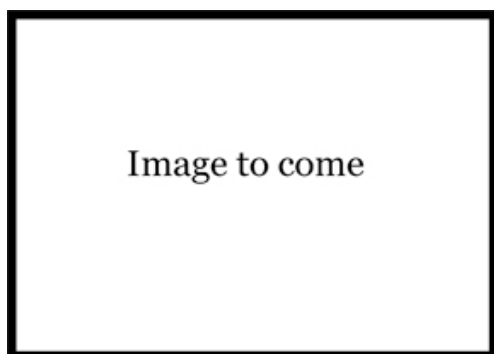


Figure 1

Gustave Le Gray (French, 1820–1884), *Méditerranée, Cette, grande lame*, 1857. Albumen print. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Département des Estampes et de la photographie.



Figure 2

Gustave Courbet (French, 1819–1877), *L'immensité*, 1869. Oil on canvas, 60 x 82.2 cm (23 5/8 x 32 3/8 in.). London, Victoria and Albert Museum. Photo: Art Resource, New York.



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The artists' styles clearly differ, however; indeed, the thick matter of Courbet's paintings could hardly be farther away from Le Gray's photographs, with their flat surfaces and clear, precise images. Nonetheless, comparisons between their works have now been drawn by many Le Gray and Courbet scholars.

As far as we know, the two men never met. They could have, as both of them were around Sète and Montpellier in the spring of 1857. Courbet was visiting his patron Alfred Bruyas for the second and last time; Le Gray had been sent there by the South Railway Company to document the Toulouse-Sète railway opening.



Figure 3

Gustave Courbet, *Seacoast at Palavas*, 1854. Oil on canvas, 27 x 46 cm (10 5/8 x 18 1/8). Montpellier, Musée Fabre. Photo: Christian Jean, Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, New York.

As a man from rocks and cliffs, Courbet wasn't familiar with the sea; he painted it for the first time in 1854, when he first visited Bruyas (fig. 3). His early seascapes related to Romanticism. In the Montpellier picture a tiny man, seen from the back, waves to a massive, calm sea. The painting has something of the bravado spirit of *The Meeting* (*"Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet"*) (1854, Musée Fabre), in which Courbet meets Bruyas on the road; there the patron appears to defer to the artist, while here the Mediterranean itself seems to greet the fierce young man. Although he painted more seascapes in 1857, one has to wait until 1865—and his many stays on the Normandy coast—to see *paysages de mer* becoming one of Courbet's favorite themes.



Figure 4

Gustave Le Gray, *Le Brick*, 1856. Albumen print from a glass negative, 34 x 42 cm (13 3/8 x 16 1/2 in.). Paris, Musée d'Orsay, PHO1985-334. Photo: B. Hatala, RMN / Art Resource, New York.

Gustave Le Gray had already created marine photographs in Normandy in 1856 (fig. 4). He showed them in December of that year in London, where they were highly praised. Courbet certainly saw Le Gray's seascapes when they were shown in France in 1857. They aroused great interest among amateurs, as *La Revue photographique* reported: "This time, Le Gray has gone beyond the limits of what could be achieved. We are not surprised at all that these mighty pictures [the French author wrote "tableaux"] have met with such great success that their author already received more than 50,000 francs from considerable orders."¹

Courbet quite often showed an interest in photography. He was one of the very first artists to order photographic reproductions of his paintings; as early as 1853, he tried to get reproductions of his two Salon pictures, *The Bathers* (Musée Fabre) and *The Wrestlers* (Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts). He collected photographs both for his work and for his pleasure—he claimed "hundreds of lost photographs" after his Ornans studio was damaged by Prussian soldiers in 1870. All his life Courbet was a close friend to many photographers; Etienne Carjat (1828–1906) and Félix Nadar (1820–1910) were among them (although his relationship with the latter was always fraught).

Unlike some academic painters, Courbet did not imitate or copy photographs. His use of photography, if I dare say so, was more interpretive. He shared the photographer's interest in the representation of reality, in the issue of Realism—which was never explored more than it was in landscape painting and photography.²



Links between Courbet's and Le Gray's works were never drawn in their time. Indeed, almost ten years separated Le Gray's early exhibitions—from 1856 to 1858—and Courbet's first show of his *paysages de mer* in 1865, which met with similar success. Le Gray was no longer in Paris at that time. He had left for, or escaped to, Cairo (he left Paris for reasons that are unclear, but gave up both his family and his business). Although conservative critics always conflated Courbet's paintings and photography in the same negative assessment, blaming both for their closeness to a “dirty and sad” reality, they never addressed a precise connection between works. As a result, Courbet's contemporary supporters—such as the critics Jules Champfleury and Jules Castagnary—always avoided any comparisons between his paintings and photography.

Both men were well known among Parisian artistic circles in 1855. Thanks to that year's impressive Pavilion of Realism, Courbet was considered one of the most important painters of his time; Le Gray, one of the founders of the Société héliographique in 1851 and of the Société française de photographie in 1854, was seen as one of the most gifted French photographers. That said, they belonged to quite different worlds. Courbet sympathized with the republican cause (and was involved in the Paris Commune years later), while Le Gray was quite close to the imperial family (in his boulevard des Capucines studio, he taught well-off apprentices such as Olympe Aguado, a Spanish banker's son who had almost been engaged to Eugénie de Montijo, who married Napoleon III).

Courbet shared with Le Gray a clear awareness of pictorial tradition. Le Gray had been trained as a painter in the studio of Paul Delaroche (1797–1856), where he met Jean-Léon Gérôme (who remained one of his closest friends, at least until 1855). Departing from the classical marines and the Romantic waves they knew well, Le Gray and Courbet designed a new subject. Writing on the painter's seascapes, Hélène Toussaint pointed this out in 1977: “His pictures introduced an actual innovation; they belong, within the history of painting, to the future rather than to the past.”³ In 1882, Castagnary wrote, “Before [Courbet], marine painters dealt with ships and vessels; they did not deal with sea, with sky strokes.”⁴ Such statements could apply to Le Gray's photographs as well. For example, it is interesting to compare Joseph Vernet's *Port de Sète*, painted in 1756–57 (fig. 5), and Le Gray's *Broken Wave*, realized exactly one



Figure 5

Joseph Vernet (French, 1714–1789), *Port de Sète*, 1756–57. Oil on canvas, 165 x 263 cm (64 7/8 in. x 8 ft. 7 1/2 in.). Paris, Musée de la Marine. Photo: Christian Jean, RMN / Art Resource, New York.



century later at the same place. Vernet's picture stresses the size and quality of military facilities, as well as the battle fleet's power. Le Gray's photograph focuses on an empty sky and the wave breaking on the embankment. Although Le Gray created his image through the photographic reproduction of reality, his Sète landscape seems more like a dream than a literal copy.

Ernest Lacan, assessing Le Gray's photographs at the second Société française de photographie show, in 1857, stated: "What's clearly new at the Exhibition, what makes it so different from all the others before, are the astonishing Le Gray seascapes, where ships with no sail keep on sailing, where a surging sea, floating clouds, and the sun itself with its glorious rays are reproduced."⁵ He added, "Mister Le Gray's marines are beyond comparison; they are completely unlike anything done before."⁶

Reproducing the sea and its endless movement was one of the first photographic goals. The length of exposure times as well as the difficulties of conveying light and tones prevented most photographers from succeeding. Louis-Cyrus Macaire and Jean-Victor Macaire-Warnod produced the first photograph of waves, in 1851 in Le Havre (fig. 6); they were supported and promoted by the marine painter Théodore Gudin. The French government then commissioned them to create thirty daguerreotypes in 1853 with "rough sea, skies, sailing vessels."⁷ In these works, the photographers achieved a technical success as well as an aesthetic one, as both sea waves and soft clouds—which move at different speeds and thus require exposures of different lengths—appear on the plate. The reproduction of waves continued to be a technical challenge for photographers until the end of the nineteenth century. As Andre Gunthert noted, the goal of capturing their movement remained elusive because the fixed image could succeed only in reproducing a single moment.



Figure 6

Louis-Cyrus Macaire (French, 1807–1871) and Jean-Victor Macaire-Warnod (French, 1812–ca. 1886), *Ship Leaving the Harbor of Le Havre*, 1851. Daguerreotype, 15 x 11 cm (5 7/8 x 4 3/8 in.). Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Département des Estampes et de la photographie.

In the scale and stillness of their images, and in the care given to their compositions, Le Gray and Courbet express a sense of the sublime that recalls the works of such artists as the German Romantic Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840). However, they broke with the fury and the outburst of the sea as it was described by Romantic painters. Unlike Paul Huet or Victor Hugo (figs. 7 and 8), whom Courbet deeply admired—he wrote to Hugo in 1864, “I shall myself go and see the spectacle of your sea”⁸—they didn’t intend to interpret our battle with the sea, the struggle against nature. Their images describe a postbattle state, with no winner—the human and the sea are face to face and equal.



Figure 7

Paul Huet (French, 1804–1869), *Breakers at Granville Point*, 1853. Oil on canvas, 68 x 103 cm (26 3/4 x 40 1/2 in.). Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo: R. G. Ojeda, RMN / Art Resource, New York.



Figure 8

Victor Hugo (French, 1802–1885), *The Vision-Ship*, drawing for *Les Travailleurs de la Mer* (*The Toilers of the Sea*), 1865–66. Pen and ink wash on vellum, 17.5 x 21.5 cm (6 7/8 x 8 1/2 in.). Paris, Bibliothèque nationale.



Both Courbet and Le Gray went beyond the picturesque. They did not show a particular place that was easy to recognize and name, for the place itself was not as important as the pictorial or photographic effects made by sea and sky. Both artists used artifice to produce these effects, freeing themselves from the mere reproduction of reality. Le Gray used two negatives for his marine prints, one for the sea, the other for the sky, in order to reach the right exposure times for the moving sea and the cloudy sky. He might sometimes have used a Normandy sky negative and a Mediterranean sea negative. In doing so, he designed an unreal place that nonetheless appears as Realist as could be (fig. 9). His images were seen as not only true to reality but also as the most accurate sea representation possible. As a critic wrote in 1857, Le Gray reversed the scientific laws: “It is a difficult matter to condemn as utterly untrue pictures to which universal praise is given for truthfulness: but still the laws of nature, as interpreted by science, are unerring.”⁹



Figure 9

Gustave Le Gray, *Ciel chargé, Méditerranée*, 1857. Albumen print from two separate glass negatives, 39.4 x 39.8 cm (15 1/2 x 15 5/8 in.). Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Département des Estampes et de la photographie.

In Courbet's seascapes, no clue is given as to the beach or the harbor he painted. When he created his first Normandy paysage de mer in Trouville, he didn't show anything of the social life there. As the critic Georges Riat wrote, "Most of the time, Courbet's marines are empty. . . . Courbet is not among those painters ["marinistes" in the original] who try to reproduce . . . the social life scenes, as did his friend Boudin [Eugène Boudin (1824–1898)]."¹⁰ When he painted his Wave series in 1869, he broke with a realistic representation of the sea, showing a rough yet still body of water. A frontal point of view gives it solid features, with an almost telluric density that comes close to the Ornans cliffs the painter was familiar with, as pointed out by Klaus Herding. Such a representation could have been inspired by photographs. Thanks to photographic prints, a sea as strong as his Franche-Comté cliffs—a very unrealistic sea, of course—could have been revealed to him (figs. 10 and 11).





Figure 10

Gustave Courbet, *The Wave*, 1870. Oil on canvas, 112 x 144 cm (43 11/16 x 56 3/16 in.). Berlin, Nationalgalerie. Photo: Jörg P. Anders, Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, New York.



Figure 11

Gustave Courbet, *Source of the Loue*, 1864. Oil on canvas, 98 x 130.5 cm (38 5/8 x 51 3/8 in.). Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle. Photo: Elke Walford, Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, New York.



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If no precise place could be recognized in either artist's seascapes, the time of the day also could not be assessed without difficulty. The "moonlight effect" of some Le Gray photographs was drawn not from the chiaroscuro of night but from the bright light of a noon sun; it's interesting to note that when Aaron Scharf compared two works by Le Gray and Courbet, he did so using a moonlit marine by Courbet and a daytime Le Gray photograph.

The commercial success of their marines often aroused suspicion among art historians; some still see them as works made merely to attract more customers. Indeed, they gave their authors the chance to appeal to a new audience. But they were not mere commercial products. Le Gray showed his seaside photographs at all major photographic exhibitions in Great Britain and in France from the end of 1856 to 1859. Courbet showed more than ten Trouville marines at his 1867 solo Alma exhibition. In 1870, he sent to the Salon *The Stormy Sea* and *The Cliffs at Étretat* (both Musée d'Orsay), thus demonstrating how important they were for him.



Figure 12

Gustave Courbet, *Low Tide at Trouville*, 1865. Oil on canvas, 59.6 x 72.6 cm (23 1/2 x 28 5/8 in.). Liverpool, The Walker Art Gallery, WAG 6111. Photo © Walker Art Gallery, National Museums Liverpool, United Kingdom, www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk.

The critic Théophile Thoré praised Courbet's paintings when they were exhibited by Alfred Cadart in 1865–66 (fig. 12): "He is fascinated by sea, he forgets Paris and Ornans. Morning after morning sea and sky are never the same. He makes every morning a study of what he sees, 'des paysages de mer,' as he says. He brought back almost forty of them, all of outstanding importance and of greatest quality."¹¹ A few years later, after Courbet's lonely death, Castagnary wrote in his foreword to the 1882 École des Beaux-Arts Courbet exhibition catalogue, "The sea gave him many triumphs. . . . His knife plays with astonishing skill in the clouds, the raining showers, the sun rays, all the changes of atmosphere."¹²



Henri Delaborde, usually a fierce Courbet opponent, wrote quite mildly in his 1870 Salon review, “We haven’t said anything . . . of Mr. Courbet’s marines. . . . Nevertheless, these works and several others could not be confused with the works that should be hushed up.”¹³ Under Delaborde’s pen it sounds almost like a compliment.

The admiration for Courbet’s seascapes, and for Le Gray’s, continues today. Several exhibitions in the past five years have reflected the interest their works inspire among art historians: *Manet and the Sea* (Philadelphia, Chicago, Amsterdam); *Autour des vagues de Gustave Courbet* (Le Havre); *Correspondence between Pierre Soulages and Gustave Le Gray* (Paris).

The poetic words of Riat still sound: “The loneliness of the ‘paysages de mer’ gives them a feeling of terror and of quietness, achieved through very simple means.”¹⁴ As Castagnary wrote, Courbet’s *paysages de mer* show “an eye of tremendous depth,”¹⁵ as do Le Gray’s marines. Both artists invented a new subject, in which careful observation of reality is made transcendent by great skill and vast knowledge of pictorial tradition. They composed convincing images of unreal landscapes, through Le Gray’s mastery of light and Courbet’s strong brushstrokes.

¹ “Cette fois-ci, les limites du possible ont été atteintes et nous ne sommes nullement surpris que ces tableaux enchantés fassent fureur, à ce point que leur bienheureux auteur aurait déjà reçu pour plus de 50 000 francs de commandes importantes.” Ernest Lacan, “Exposition de la société française, bd des Capucines, n°35,” *La Revue photographique* 16 (February 5, 1857): p. 213. (Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.)

² See Dominique de Font-Réaulx, “Reproducing Reality,” in Mary Morton and Charlotte Eyerman, eds., *Courbet and the Modern Landscape*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2006), pp. 37–53.

³ “Ces toiles constituent une innovation et appartiennent, dans l’histoire de la peinture française, plus à l’avenir qu’au passé.” Hélène Toussaint, *Gustave Courbet, 1819–1877*, exh. cat. (Paris, Grand Palais, 1977), p. 178.

⁴ “Avant lui, les peintres de marines s’occupaient surtout des vaisseaux; ils ne s’occupaient pas de la mer, des touches du ciel.” Jules-Antoine Castagnary, introduction to *Catalogue de l’Exposition Courbet à l’Ecole des Beaux-Arts* (Paris, 1882; rev. ed., 2000, ed. Bertrand Tillier), p. 47.

⁵ “Les grandes nouveautés de l’Exposition, ce qui la distingue de toutes les expositions précédentes, ce sont au premier rang les étonnantes marines de M. Le Gray, où des navires sans voiles et en marche, une mer houleuse, des nuages flottant dans l’air, le soleil lui-même avec ses longs rayons de gloire.” Lacan 1857 (see note 1).

⁶ “Prix hors ligne à M. Le Gray pour ses marines, qui ne ressemblent à rien de ce qui a été fait jusqu’ici.” Lacan 1857 (see note 1), p. 214.

⁷ “Mer agitée, de ciels, de navires en marche.” Paris, Archives nationales, F 21 “Beaux-arts,” F21 112 “Commande et acquisition d’œuvres d’art,” “Dossier d’acquisitions de daguerréotypes de marines à Macaire et Warnod, février 1853–janvier 1856.” Two of these works are now kept at the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

⁸ “J’irai devant votre retraite sympathique contempler le spectacle de votre mer.” Letter to Victor Hugo, November 28, 1864, in Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, ed., *Correspondance de Courbet* (Paris, 1996), p. 223.

⁹ “London exhibition,” *The Liverpool and Manchester Photographic Journal*, March 1857.



¹⁰ “La plupart du temps, ces marines sont désertes, à peine meublées, parfois, par une barque échouée sur la grève ou indiquée dans le lointain. Courbet n’est point, en effet, de ces marinistes qui montrent l’homme aux prises avec les éléments, dans les drames terribles de la tempête, comme le faisait Joseph Vernet, ni de ceux qui s’ingénient à représenter les scènes de la vie élégante et mondaine sur la plage, ainsi que l’essayait son ami Boudin.” Georges Riat, *Gustave Courbet, peintre* (Paris, 1906), p. 268.

¹¹ “La mer le fascine, il oublie Paris et Ornans. Et chaque matin, les effets de la grande eau et du grand ciel changent toujours; il fait chaque matin une étude de ce qu’il voit, ‘des paysages de mer’ comme il dit. Il en a rapporté quarante peintures, d’une importance extraordinaire et de la plus grande qualité.” Théophile Thoré, “Salon de 1866,” in *Salons de W. Bürger, 1861–1868*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1870), vol. 2, p. 281.

¹² “La mer fut aussi l’occasion de nombreux triomphes. . . . Dans ces brumes, ces pluies, ces rayons, tous ces mouvements de l’atmosphère, son couteau à palette se joue avec une agilité surprenante.” Castagnary 1882, rev. ed., 2000 (see note 4), p. 49.

¹³ “Nous n’avons rien dit non plus . . . des marines de M. Courbet. . . . Et pourtant, ces ouvrages et plusieurs autres ne sauraient être confondus avec les oeuvres qu’il est équitable de passer sous silence.” Henri Delaborde, “Salon de 1870,” *Revue des Deux Mondes*, June 1, 1870: p. 710.

¹⁴ “La solitude de ces ‘paysages de mer’ leur communique une impression de terreur et de sérénité, obtenue avec une grande simplicité de moyens, et qui les rend plus admirables encore.” Riat 1906 (see note 10), pp. 268–69.

¹⁵ “Un oeil d’une profondeur immense.” Jules-Antoine Castagnary, “Le Salon de 1868,” in *Salons (1857–1870)*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1892), vol. 1, p. 263.

