

# SHOW ME AN ANGEL AND I WILL PAINT ONE

**A BURIAL AT ORNANS (1849–1850), GUSTAVE COURBET**



**T**he term “realism” can be used to describe any art that is highly naturalistic, but it also refers more specifically to a movement that arose in France in the middle years of the 19th century. It is chiefly associated with the artist Gustave Courbet, who was born in the French town of Ornans, and whose *A Burial at Ornans* provided his breakthrough in the Parisian art scene.

Courbet chose to paint scenes of everyday life from the world that he knew, rather than focusing on the more uplifting, imaginary, and moralizing themes of the Salon—

the French art establishment. His matter-of-fact approach to life in itself have been perfect. And controversial, except that he decided to produce a number of his pictures on a monumental scale, which was traditionally reserved for grandiose scenes of heroism, history, tragedy, and mythology. In doing so, Courbet—who possessed a rebellious spirit—considered he was striking a blow for artistic liberty. His attitude caused concern in the wake of the 1848 Revolution, which had seen the overthrow of the Orleans monarchy and the installation of the conservative

Second Republic in France. Under these ideological conditions, the establishment viewed any signs of rebellion or calls for liberty as politically inflammatory.

## **A question of size**

When *A Burial at Ornans* was shown at the Paris Salon in 1850, it was heavily criticized. Courbet's figures were not the idealized forms of the Salon, but friends, relatives, or ordinary townsfolk from Ornans, whom Courbet had painted from life, making no attempt to flatter them. Some critics even suggested that he had gone out of his way to



# IN CONTEXT

## FOCUS Realism

### BEFORE

**c.1640s** Works of the French Le Nain brothers, such as *Peasant Meal* (1642), were important precursors of Courbet's realist style.

**1848** *The Winnower* by French painter Jean-François Millet causes a stir at the Salon, with its focus on ordinary people.

### AFTER

**c.1862–64** French artist Honoré Daumier's painting *The Third-Class Carriage* chronicles modern life, following the precepts of the Realists.

**1872** Illustrations of city slums by the French artist Gustave Doré in *London, A Pilgrimage* help create an important work of social journalism.

**1885** The somber painting *The Potato Eaters*, by Vincent van Gogh, owes a debt to the Realists' peasant scenes.

make them appear ugly. Size was the issue. Courbet had depicted a simple country funeral on an epic scale: the canvas measured 260 in x 122 in (660 cm x 310 cm). Critics expected a large painting to stir the imagination or their emotions, but Courbet's subject-matter was considered banal, its participants too ordinary for the scale.

## Radical painting

Although Courbet mixed with a bohemian crowd that included anarchists, free thinkers, and republican activists, it is not clear whether he saw himself

**See also:** *Hunters in the Snow* 154–59 ■ *The Angelus* 279 ■ *Barge Haulers on the Volga* 279 ■ *The Gross Clinic* 280



## Gustave Courbet

Born in Ornans, France, in 1819, Gustave Courbet moved to Paris in 1839, where he soon

developed his own artistic style. In the 1850s he was hailed as the leader of the Realist school, and in 1855 he organized a landmark one-man show at the World's Fair, showcasing his most famous work, *The Painter's Studio*. In later years, Courbet's rebellious spirit landed him in

trouble. In 1871, he played an active role in the Commune, the short-lived revolutionary government of Paris. Reprisals followed. He was imprisoned briefly, before going into exile in Switzerland, where he remained until his death in 1877.

## Other key works

**1849** *After Dinner at Ornans*  
**1854–55** *The Painter's Studio*  
**1857** *Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine*

as a radical. Courbet maintained that his position as the "leader" of the Realist school had been thrust upon him, and that any so-called radical features—such as "ugly" depictions of poverty and manual labor—are more evident in the paintings of other Realist artists than in his own work. Indeed, *A Burial at Ornans* presents a faithful record of French funerary customs at the time: how male and female mourners were segregated; the broad-rimmed felt hats of the pall-bearers; and the pall itself, with its black crossbones and black tears.

However, some aspects of the picture are less than factual. The bare-headed figures at either side may represent Courbet's grandparents, both of whom had recently died, while the skull that is shown in the foreground is an allegorical touch, representing Everyman. The open grave is placed directly in front of the spectator and, significantly, the identity of the deceased person is not disclosed. The picture is a meditation on death—all the more moving because it is conveyed by ordinary people rather than by ancient gods or heroes. ■



## Jean-François

**Millet's** *The Gleaners* (1857) addresses the reality and social inequality of rural labor. Three women stoop low to pick the remnants of the harvest, while a horseman (far right)—thought to be the landowner's overseer—monitors their progress.

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