

# Nineteenth-Century French Studies

A scholarly journal devoted to the study of French literature and related fields

For articles: ncsfarticles@gmail.com

For reviews: ncsfreviews@gmail.com

www.ncfs-journal.org

Howe, Jeffery W., ed. *Courbet: Mapping Realism. Paintings from the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium and American Collections*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. Pp. 140. ISBN: 9781892850218

Lauren S. Weingarden, Florida State University

*Courbet: Mapping Realism* issues from the exhibition held at McMullen Museum of Art at Boston College, in collaboration with The Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, September 1–December 8, 2013. The McMullen exhibition was an expansion of the Royal Museums' exhibition, *Gustave Courbet and Belgium: Realism of the 'living art' to the 'free art'*, May 8, 2013–November 11, 2013, devoted to Courbet's reception in the country during the years 1850, 1860, and 1870, and the Belgian Realists he inspired. *Courbet: Mapping Realism* examined Courbet's reception in America and supplemented the Belgian collection of six Courbet paintings with the artist's works from American collections and paintings by Courbet's American contemporaries. This Belgian-American collaboration is reflected in the catalogue essays, authored by curators Jeffery Howe, Professor of Art History, Boston College, and Dominique Marechal, curator of nineteenth-century art at the Royal Museum, Jean-Philippe Huys, Centre international pour l'Étude du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle (Brussels), and Boston College professors Katherine Nahur and Claude Cernuschi.

In reviewing *Courbet: Mapping Realism*, two issues concerning exhibition catalogues demand immediate attention: first, the relation between the prefatory scholarly essays and the exhibited works; second, the less than exemplary works shown in the exhibition and illustrated in the catalogue. These issues are particularly relevant because Courbet, the leader of the realist movement, has been canonized as “one of France's greatest artists” (60) based on his masterpieces, mostly held in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris and the Musée Courbet in Ornans. The works exhibited in Boston lack the masterpieces' art historical stature and artistic achievement.

This disconnect between what we know and what we see is inadvertently embedded in the catalogue's art historical essays. Howe and Nahur use the exhibited works as supportive evidence for arguments centered on the masterpieces, while Cernuschi explicates Courbet's self-portraits, none of which appeared in the exhibition, and thereby evades the disconnect altogether. Nevertheless, that these minor works are today in museum and private collections is testament to Courbet's exceptionally prolific career, his mastery of self-promotion, and his peripatetic tendencies. It is in light of the exhibition's substantive lack on the one hand, and its catchall collection on the other, that the curators have excelled. *Courbet: Mapping Realism* develops the theme of “mapping” the many facets of Courbet's career and persona. For the most part, each essay maps the artist's travels, his connections with foreign artists, critics, and collectors, and his Salon and independent exhibits, thereby unifying and contextualizing the otherwise random selection of works from museum and private collections.

Jeffery Howe's introductory essay “Courbet: Mapping Realism” sets the course for his collaborators' mappings. In this essay, Howe presents Courbet's self-assumed role as a “missionary” of Realism. Beginning with the artist's self-portrait as an outsider-qua-wander (*The Meeting*, 1854) and his 1855 “Realist Manifesto,” Howe traces Courbet's strategies for insisting “on authenticity in art and life” and “his uncompromising commitment to material truth” (10) despite public ridicule. This trajectory is a familiar one (and is repeated elsewhere in the catalogue), wherein Courbet offended bourgeois and academic decorum with his buxom, non-idealized females (*The Bathers*, 1855) and enigmatic subjects (*The Studio*, 1855). What is less familiar is Courbet's frequent travel to Belgium to promote his art to private

collectors and portrait painting clients, and to present at exhibition venues. Marechal's and Huys's essays elaborate on these Belgian routes, the artist's warm reception in that country, and the social and artistic conditions of that reception. Howe traces the exhibition and collection of Courbet's work in America, during the 1850s and 1870s, and his influence on American artists during his lifetime and after. Most noteworthy, *The Quarry* (1856-57) was the first major work by Courbet to be acquired by a public museum in America (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1918), thanks to frequent exhibitions of the work in Boston, which began in a New York gallery in 1866.

*The Quarry* is the topic of Nahur's essay, which together with Cernuschi's and Howe's second essay ("Inside Out: Courbet and the Challenge of Realist Landscape") turn to mapping Courbet's personae. As does all scholarship on Courbet, these authors draw extensively on Courbet's voluminous written correspondence and critics' reviews of his work, resulting in a conflation of the artist's personality and physicality with the subject matter and materiality of his painted works. Cernuschi's essay ("The Self-portraits of Gustave Courbet") functions as a stand-alone monograph in both its page count and content. Not only is there a disconnect with the catalogued works, but it deploys social psychology, rather than mapping, as its theoretical framework. However, the imaginative reader may make the metaphorical leap to navigate the complex psychic territory that Cernuschi has mapped.