

Explore The Realistic Thought in Courbet's Works

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Abstract. In the 19th century, French artistic creation was constantly innovating, which can be described as colorful. Romanticism and neoclassicism took the lead on the historical stage. Since then, the realist movement led by Courbet has shaken the entire field of fine arts. The unique authenticity and vigorous vitality of realism faithfully reflected the social status quo, sent the working people into the art palace, and injected a new color into the history of Western painting. Through literature analysis, this paper explores the causes and characteristics of Courbet's realistic painting from the social factors, personal factors, and the painter's unique oil painting language. His works are simple and sincere, often using realistic themes, delicate compositions, and thick brushstrokes to depict society. Through the study of Courbet's creative themes, techniques, and ideas, this paper points out that it should be based on the current situation of contemporary painting, fully study and give play to the strengths of realistic painting, so as to promote the development of contemporary art.

Keywords: Courbet; Realistic painting; 19th century; France.

1. Introduction

Under the background of the increasingly severe sense of emptiness and nihilism in painting creation, it is of great reference significance to study the realistic art advocated by Courbet [1]. This study focuses on the artistic creation background of France in the 19th century, from the causes and characteristics of Courbet's realistic paintings, and uses literature analysis to search and read relevant materials and documents. The advantage of this method is that it can transcend the limitations of time and space, and better analyze the artist's artistic language and aesthetic views, which is conducive to the research. The ultimate goal of this study is to explore the role of realism in promoting contemporary art and enhancing the understanding of contemporary youth to realistic paintings. In order to achieve this goal, this study expounds on the connotation of realistic art and makes a comprehensive analysis of the works of Courbet, the representative figure of realism.

2. The Formation of Courbet's Realist Thought

Each mature artist has his own unique artistic style, and the formation of this style is influenced by many factors, such as the artist's worldview, life experience, education level, and aesthetic taste. As one of the representatives of French realistic art in the 19th century, Courbet's own artistic language has various reasons.

2.1. Social Factors

In the 19th century, as democratic revolutions convulsed Europe, France was involved in the historical trend of social change. In 1830, after Napoleon's Waterloo defeat, the "July Revolution" broke out. The French people successfully overthrew the feudal rule of the Bourbon dynasty, which greatly accelerated the process of the Industrial Revolution. Since then, the regime has constantly oscillated between republic and monarchy, and France has experienced a series of political changes such as the brief restoration of the Bourbon dynasty, the return of Napoleon's Hundred Days, the restoration of the July dynasty, and the February Revolution. The development of the economy and the replacement of the social system will inevitably bring new ideas to the field of art. The 19th-century French art schools are dizzying, neoclassicism, Romanticism and realism, Impressionism, etc. [1]. In addition, thanks to various factors such as the opening of the Louvre, the successful holding

of the Salon and other exhibitions, the successful teaching of some elite studios and academies of fine arts, and the support and rewards of the French government, French art has entered a new era [1].

In the first half of the 19th century, Romanticism was popular in France. This painting school got rid of the fetters of the academy and classicism at that time, opposed neoclassicism, and advocated the expression of the artist's personality and true emotions in a bold and dramatic way. In addition, romantic artists often chose subjects from real life and medieval literary stories to depict legendary historical events and heroic figures. For example, in Delacroix's "The Death of Sardanapalus", brilliant colors, passionate brushstrokes, and fantastic artistic images give the picture an exciting visual impact, which has been loved by people. At the same time, the fantasy of Romanticism also brings some drawbacks: the description of objects is too concentrated on high-family nobles and heroic figures, the subject matter is relatively distant from People's Daily life, and the attention to the bottom and reality is lacking [2]. Faced with the illusory nature of Romanticism, Courbet held high the banner of realism, focused his creation on the real life of the people at the bottom, and advocated that things seen by the eyes should be presented to people truthfully [3]. Although the "realism" advocated by Courbet is not as full of ideal beauty as academic classicism, nor does it have the exaggerated beauty of Romanticism, it has a simple and ordinary aesthetic feeling, opening up a new glorious chapter in the history of French literature and art.

2.2. Personal Factors

Courbet was born in 1819 in the small town of Ornans, France, into a wealthy landowner's family. His hometown is a small village near the banks of the Lu River, surrounded by lush trees and bubbling springs. The quiet and pleasant scenery of his hometown not only brought him sufficient artistic nourishment but also continued to appear in his future landscape paintings and figure paintings [4]. Courbet's maternal grandfather was a veteran of the right-wing party who had participated in the French Revolution of 1793. In addition, he was a follower of Voltaire and advocated democracy and republicanism. Under the words and deeds of his grandfather, Courbet developed a brave and rebellious character that was not afraid of authority, which had a great influence on his later artistic career [2]. He first studied painting with priests in his hometown, and at the age of 18 came to study at the Royal Academy of Berthanson. Although Courbet was taught by Jacques Louis David's student Fraoulo, he did not want to be bound by the strict painting norms of classicism and "above reason" standards, and he despised the pursuit of stylization and idealization. Later, he went to Paris to study law and was eventually attracted by the strong artistic atmosphere of Cheli and devoted himself to artistic creation. In 1844, Courbet's "Self-Portrait with Black Dog" was selected for the first time in the salon, and another work, "Ornans' Nap after Dinner," won a medal, and he began to make his mark in the art world.

In 1855, Courbet's large oil paintings "The Funeral of Ornans" and "Studio" were rejected by the selection panel of the World's Fair, and he was angry at the exhibition near a shed, held the first personal exhibition, and named "realism, Courbet 40 works." At the same time, Courbet also published a manifesto to explain his artistic ideas. "Realist art is, by its very nature, democratic art," he declared. This act caused a strong reaction in society at that time and also pushed his artistic career to a climax [3].

3. The Creation Characteristics of Courbet

3.1. Realism of Subject Matter

When holding a personal exhibition, Courbet declared that "I want to faithfully express the customs and ideological outlook of The Times in which I live according to my own judgment." Different from the relatively idealized classicism and Romanticism, authenticity is the essential feature of realism. While there is a great passion for authenticity in other genres, realism is about more than just an undistorted reproduction of what have seen and heard. Its "realism" not only refers to the expression form of painting but also the essential meaning of the creation principle.

Courbet's realistic art not only respects real human life and fully reflects his concern for the people at the bottom, but also advocates an accurate, detailed, and non-overly beautification description of nature and real-life [5]. These ideas are also deeply reflected in the subject matter of his works. For example, he painted *The Stone Breakers* in the winter of 1849, as shown in Figure 1. On his way to sketch the landscape, the artist saw two ragged gravel workers working hard, which greatly inspired him. Courbet invited the workers into his studio and recreated the scene of their quarry. The painting does not focus on the facial features of the figure but rather depicts the sculptural human body from the back and sides [3]. In the picture, the patches on the workers' coarse trousers, worn wooden shoes, ragged clothes, and the young men covered with dust show their poor economic conditions and give people a shocking visual effect [6].



Fig. 1 *The Stone Breakers* (Oil on canvas 300cm×190cm 1849) Courbet [6]

In addition, another of Courbet's works, *The Return of the Market*, vividly depicts the scene of the peasants returning from the market in Fragne. As is shown in Figure 2, the earth is shrouded in a golden sunset, and several farmers return home with a lot of things on their faces. The artist's intimate depiction of nature and his ardent concern for the working people are vividly reflected in this poetic pastoral painting.



Fig. 2 *Return from the Market* (Oil on canvas 208.5cm×275cm, 1855) Courbet [7]

3.2. Artfulness of Composition

Instead of the usual triangular composition, Courbet arranged the picture in a long queue. His masterpiece, *Burial at Ornans*, for example, is shown in Figure 3. In order to achieve the artistic effect of "19th-century society in miniature", he gathered the required types of characters together, stood in several rows, and divided them into three large sections. On the left are pallbearers carrying the coffin and priests dressed in white as they prepare to lower it into the tomb. The crowd in the middle area, with the mayor and the chief judge as the core, surrounded the empty tomb. The people in this area are more colorful, with a red-robed funeral leader on one side and two war veterans on the other. The

area on the right is occupied by mourners who have come to the funeral, and the uniform black dress, the weeping women with their faces covered, and the dejected elderly people give this part of the picture a somber and subdued atmosphere [7]. In addition to the horizontal arrangement of the figures, the artist also intentionally narrowed the distance and height of the mountains on both sides of the picture, matching the vast earth and the dark sky in the distance, thus creating a strong sense of space [8]. In addition, Courbet's other work, *The Painter's Studio*, is also composed of three parts of the horizontal composition. As shown in Figure 4, the work depicts people from all levels of society and is a true microcosm of 19th-century French society. The artist cleverly placed 23 figures of different identities in one space, centering on the artist himself who is creating. The composition of the whole picture is semi-circular, divided into three parts: left, middle, and right [9]. On the left side of the picture are poor people from the bottom of society, in the middle are nude models representing the academy, and on the right are acquaintances and friends of the artist. In *The Painter's Studio*, the impoverished people at the bottom form a sharp contrast with the elites in the upper society, which fully reflects Courbet's political stance and his ideal for the future.



Fig. 3 *Burial at Ornans* (Oil on canvas 668cm × 315cm 1849) Courbet [7]



Fig. 4 *The Painter's studio* (oil on canvas 361 cm × 598 cm 1855) Courbet [3]

3.3. The Depth of the Strokes

Courbet's painting techniques not only inherited the traditional multi-layer addition but also gave full play to the role of the scraper. Through repeated strokes of the scraper and brush, he creates a thick, steady texture to the picture. Courbet made great use of this special painting technique in the creation of seascapes. Among them, the *Waves* (Figure 5), which he created in 1869 and 1870 respectively, is a good example. The large swabs of the blade and the powerful brushstrokes depict the sweeping waves, and the stack of blue and gray creates a mist-filled atmosphere and further sets off the surging waves [4]. The full power and overwhelming sense of veracity in the whole painting bring a strong visual shock to the viewer. The application of the scraper in "Waves" not only does not affect the viewer's view of natural physical properties but also brings a more real and smart sense of texture. In another seascape, *Cliff After a Thunderstorm* (Figure 6), Courbet vividly portrays the

image of the beach, the boat, and the cliff after the rain, and uses straight lines and hard blocks to create a strong cliff, making it the focus of the whole painting. Rich and changing colors and rough brush strokes make the picture simple but full of power, highlighting a bold and magnificent spiritual temperament; The artist's fluent and free brush strokes narrow the distance between the viewer and the work, making people seem to hear the angry waves. Vast, Pentium surging wonder also reflects the painter's broad mind and heroic spiritual temperament. In addition, Courbet's bold brushstrokes were admired by artists such as Monet and influenced many later painters [10].



Fig. 5 The Waves (oil on canvas 95.5cm×85.5cm 1870) Courbet [4]



Fig. 6 Cliff after a thunderstorm (oil on canvas 133cm×162cm, 1869) Courbet [10]

4. The Inspiration of Courbet's Realism to Contemporary Art

"I am convinced that painting is, in fact, concrete art, which is nothing but the representation of real and existing things." This sentence of Courbet clearly reflects his painting propositions: he neither deliberately pursues the noble grandeur and heroism of classicism, nor blindly praises the poetic and painting of Romanticism. The ordinary and suffering of the people at the bottom of real life is the main theme of his works. Courbet's realism not only expanded the scope of subject matter and ideas of artworks but also raised the social significance of painting creation to a new height. As a pioneer of realism, his painting proposal still has a lot of references for contemporary artists. Nowadays, some artists lack observation and deep thinking of life, and only rely on imagination to complete their works, resulting in thin and empty works. Although they may be familiar with the medium, material, or technique of creation, they lack a sincere, simple, and dignified artistic attitude and a deep understanding of life. Because of this, these artists are unable to express their true emotions, and their works tend to be flat and virtualized from the original real society. It can be seen that Courbet's concept of "I want to paint what I see" still has a strong inspiration for contemporary art. He highly emphasized the connection between history and empirical reality, arguing that "the artist of this world cannot reproduce the past and the future," and focused his attention on ordinary people in their lives. In addition, Courbet also integrated his own deep perception into every creation. His realism is not

just a cold copy and paste, but a profound collision of ideas. For every creator, only by rigorously treating every step in the creation, attentively perceiving the power of life and beauty, and truly reflecting the requirements of The Times, can the work have a real soul.

5. Conclusion

Based on the discussion of the origin of Courbet's realism thought and the noumenal language of his oil painting, this study summarizes the enlightening significance of realism to contemporary art and further puts forward some concrete ideas for improvement. On the basis of the present situation of contemporary realistic painting in China, the author studies realistic painting actively, and integrates this unique artistic expression form with contemporary art, learning from each other, so as to promote the development of realistic painting. This study provides a lot of valuable reference significance for the construction of the ontology language of Chinese oil painting in the future. Mainly thinking about the depth and breadth of "realism", promotes the establishment of a new vision of the creation and theory of "realism" in Chinese contemporary art, and then promotes the construction of the ontology language of Chinese oil painting. The analysis of the characteristics of Courbet's creation is limited to the subject matter, composition, and brushstrokes, which involve a narrow scope and have a one-sidedness. In order to analyze Courbet's oil painting language more comprehensively, it is necessary to expand the research field of view. Around the framework established in this paper, more in-depth work is still needed in the processing of light in the picture, the use of color, modeling language, and other aspects, and in-depth analysis is carried out in combination with specific works.

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