

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

Petra ten-Doesschate Chu: The Most Arrogant Man in France

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2007, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

Follow links for Class Use and other Permissions. For more information send email to: permissions@pupress.princeton.edu



INTRODUCTION

In *Les Règles de l'art*, published in 1992, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defines the artistic “field” of mid-nineteenth-century France as one in the process of formation.¹ He attributes its instability to the dramatically altered relation between artist and public, itself the result of the vast political, social, and economic changes that had taken place in France since the Revolution. Comparing the artist’s new position with that of the longtime family servant who suddenly has to compete in the labor market, Bourdieu stresses its dual effect of alienation and liberation.²

Operating in an artistic field in the process of formation, nineteenth-century artists, according to Bourdieu, were in a “double bind.” They were confronted with two equally unacceptable alternatives: one was artistic autonomy at the risk of physical and moral “degradation”—a permanent *vie de bohème* marked by “material and moral misery, sterility and resentment”; the other, equally degrading, submission to the dominant culture.³

Though it is claimed to encompass the entire artistic field, Bourdieu’s book is clearly written from a literary viewpoint. For writers, indeed, the mid-nineteenth century (roughly from 1830 to 1870) was a period of radical change—the simultaneous result of the rapid expansion of the press and of an ever-growing supply of young men (and some women) seeking to embark on writers’ careers.⁴ As for visual artists, their field had begun to change much earlier, owing to the introduction of public exhibitions in the eighteenth century and the disappearance of royal, aristocratic, and church patronage after the French Revolution. As Oskar Bätschmann and others before him have pointed out, the artistic dilemma that Bourdieu so powerfully describes had been a reality for visual artists since the end of the eighteenth century, particularly in France and England.⁵ Devoid of patronage, artists were dependent on direct sales—and this without the benefit of middlemen, as contemporary art dealers and galleries did not come into their

early nineteenth-century artists to reach out to the public was through government-sponsored exhibitions, hence Bächtmann's term for them—"exhibition artists."

The history of modern art, as Bächtmann has shown, may be written as a story of the ways in which artists have negotiated their new autonomous position in the postrevolutionary world. Within that story, Gustave Courbet played a crucial part.⁶ He may well have been the first one not merely to acknowledge but also to accept the complexity of the position of the modern artist—at once autonomous (free to create what he or she wants) and dependent on society for a living; simultaneously scornful of the public and craving *publicité*; both artistic genius, in the full Romantic sense of the term, and purveyor of commodities for the bourgeois home. To reconcile these extremes of the modern artist's position, Courbet, as I intend to show in this book, devised new ways to structure his oeuvre and developed a unique exhibition and marketing strategy. If, in the end, his tactics backfired, as the artist was forced into exile and his work plagiarized by numerous hack painters making money off his reputation, they were not the less original and forward-looking for it.

Courbet's artistic course of action was modeled on that of contemporary writers, who were busy renegotiating their own position as autonomous artists in a field that was radically transformed by the rise of the media from the 1830s onward. It was modeled as well on the media themselves, which, in their makeup and contemporary content, provided an example to Courbet for the shape and nature of his oeuvre. It was a course of action that was crucially marked by the notion of *publicité* and by a new awareness of the public as heterogeneous in its interests and tastes, but one that was informed as well by a variety of revolutionary theories about the role and the place of artist in society.

Born in Ornans, a small village in the outlying Franche-Comté region, Courbet came to Paris in 1839. For a brief time, he took the smoothly paved road to public success. He studied with the popular Charles von Steuben, who might have helped him gain access to the Salon and the coveted prizes and honors that would have guaranteed him state purchases (perhaps even official commissions) and a fashionable clientele. But he abandoned this course as he became acquainted with, and soon entrenched in, the Parisian bohemia. After several years of "material and moral misery" (to use Bourdieu's words) and facing the prospect of "sterility and resentment," Courbet began to rethink his position. Descended from a family of farmers who, through hard work, strategic marriages, and the careful buying and selling of land, had achieved the comfortable status of *rentiers*, he was raised with the notion that money is the paramount measure of success. How could he negotiate this premise with his quest for artistic autonomy? No artist had yet traced a career path that allowed complete artistic independence and finan-

rary writers who, taking advantage of the enormous expansion of the press, found in it both a means to make a living and an avenue to gain publicity for their literary undertakings. Moreover, he learned from the example of his writer friends a “rhetoric of independence.” By this I mean ways to assert an autonomous, even subversive, position in such a manner that it could not be rejected or ignored but, in its very ambiguity, elicited a maximum amount of discussion. Finally, he learned to be aware of his public, specifically the new bi-gendered public of the nineteenth century, and to diversify his production, not only by distinguishing between what Bourdieu calls a *production artistique* and *ouvrière*, but also by practicing all available genres of the nineteenth century, from history painting to still life.⁷

Chapter 1 begins with a rapid overview of the spectacular expansion of the press in nineteenth-century France, the beginning of which coincided almost exactly with Courbet’s arrival in Paris. It then turns to the effect that expansion had on writers and literary production, focusing on the phenomenon of “industrial literature,” the success of which was measured not in terms of traditional honors and laurels but of monetary revenue. Courbet’s entrance into the milieu of young, aspiring writers whose careers were to be made in the press is described in detail. His deliberate choice of the literary café rather than the academic atelier as his training ground is related to the artist’s preoccupation with *publicité*, of which it was both cause and effect. Finally, a broad parallel is drawn between Courbet’s art and the nineteenth-century press by focusing on their common goal of giving expression to the here and now.

Chapters 2 and 3 deal with two important strategies of *publicité* or self-promotion that Courbet learned through his friendships with writers for the press. One was the “pose.” It was a way to invent and create a public persona for himself—both through his art, in a series of carefully staged self-portraits, and in real life, by playing up certain physical and psychological characteristics that resonated with his journalist friends who were his vehicle to publicity. The other was what one may call a “strategy of association.” It was a way to lend dimension to his public persona by advertising the company he kept. This he did through a series of portraits of his contemporaries that became his private pantheon—a gallery of colleagues that he admired and that, in turn, defined his persona.

In chapter 4, the “rhetoric” of Courbet’s major Salon paintings is analyzed. The pronounced presence of irony, especially in his early works, is linked to the use of this same rhetorical form in the press, where it served as a weapon against censorship and as a defense mechanism in the perpetual struggle of writers against the realities of daily life. Courbet’s use of other forms of rhetoric, notably allegory, metonymy, and satire, is also discussed.

The subject of chapter 5 is Courbet’s numerous paintings of women, which are studied in the context of contemporary writers’ concern with addressing a bi-gendered audience. Several of Courbet’s paintings are shown to

de Balzac, George Sand, and Gustave Flaubert.

In the concluding chapter, Courbet's structuring and marketing of his oeuvre is linked to the structuring and marketing of the contemporary newspaper. Special attention is paid to Courbet's landscape paintings and the way in which he "packaged" and marketed nature so as to reach out to the largest possible public.

Finally, in the epilogue of the book, the tragic backfiring of Courbet's artistic course of action is described. The highly visible "bad boy" image that Courbet had worked so hard to cultivate began to work against him as soon he rendered himself vulnerable through his participation in the Commune and the dismantling of the Vendôme Column.