



2nd Grade: FEBRUARY

The Stone Breakers

Gustave Courbet

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About the Artist

The following information is provided to give classroom teachers a comprehensive understanding of the artist and artwork. Use your judgment on what to share with your students based on their level of curiosity, observation/inquiry skills, comprehension and age-appropriateness.

Gustave Courbet

Jean Desire Gustave Courbet was born on June 10, 1819, in the small village of Ornans (Doubs), France, near the Swiss border. His father was a landowner who did quite well financially with his vineyard. These early years in this rugged rural setting helped Courbet develop a deep appreciation for nature and provided outdoor themes that played a large role in his future work.

Young Courbet was known for his rebellious behavior, challenging authority every opportunity he had. When Courbet attended the seminary in Ornans, he had to appear before the clergy for routine confession. Courbet often compiled a large list of varied sins, some fabricated, to present for absolution. The clergy were so shocked at the length of sins for someone of such a tender age that no one granted him absolution.

Since Courbet's parents wanted their son to study law, he agreed to go to Paris to do so. However, as the rebel he was, it wasn't long before Courbet dropped his law studies and shifted his attention to painting. He began by copying masterpieces in the Louvre and studying in the studios of a few local artists. Courbet's independence kicked in despite their tutelage and he soon ventured out to study on his own.

Throughout the 19th century, Roman, Flemish, and Dutch artists were focused on a Romantic approach with subjects who were mythical or religious heroes, or historical figures portrayed with an unusual style. Courbet's early work was in this same genre, focusing on himself as the subject, rendering many paintings in flattering poses and romantic roles. In this time when many European countries were experiencing revolutions, the Romantic approach served as an escape from the realities of war. Courbet was also attracted to the works of Spanish, Flemish, and French painters but it was the works of Rembrandt that initiated his interest in the study of real life experiences. By the mid-19th century, Courbet and other contemporary painters became dissatisfied with the Romantic approach and redirected their attention to the common figure doing ordinary acts. Courbet's ability to offer an objective view of every day experiences was the essence of the "realism movement." He felt painting should represent visible and tangible objects versus idealized imagery. For his efforts, Courbet was credited as the founder and dominant figure in the French shift to

realism.

Courbet's long-term relationship with Virginia Binet resulted in a son. When the relationship deteriorated in the early 1850s, Binet took the son and left. Courbet fought off depression by keeping busy with his painting.

Some of Courbet's paintings, however, were not received well. Critics voiced concern that Courbet's paintings focused on the unpleasant, trivial, moments of life, rather than capturing the beautiful and the ideal. When Courbet exhibited *The Stone Breakers* in Paris in the Salon of 1850, the work was considered vulgar and offensive. Courbet was not receptive to these reviews and, in reaction to his critics, became the first artist to sponsor his own, self-financed, independent exhibition exclusive of the traditional Paris Salons. Gustave Courbet was clear that the aim of his work was to represent the customs and ideas of his own era.

Courbet was politically a socialist who spent much of his life questioning the actions of his government. When faced with a prison sentence and a fine he could not afford, he fled to Switzerland in 1873 and lived in exile for four years. His health deteriorated rapidly, plagued with rheumatism and liver problems. Courbet contracted dropsy and died December 31, 1877, at the age of fifty-eight. He was originally buried at a local cemetery in Switzerland but later moved to a cemetery near his childhood home in Ornans, France. Courbet's reputation for questioning authority of any kind had jeopardized his health. His life may have been prolonged but he refused to see a doctor.

About the Art

The Stone Breakers was painted in 1849, oil on canvas. It is 5' 5" x 7' 10" in size. The large scale painting gave viewers an almost life size view. *The Stone Breakers* was in the collection of the State Picture Gallery, Dresden, Germany, until it was destroyed during World War II.

Courbet visited his home town of Ornans frequently to enjoy the land he loved. He recalled his rural beginnings and his knowledge of the outdoors in *The Stone Breakers*. He took great care in painting this outdoor scene, capturing the textures of the stones, soil, and grasses. It's evident Courbet knew this three-dimensional material well as he successfully translated and transferred it to a two-dimensional canvas. The workers' clothing exhibits the effects of the rough work. Courbet's mastering of the impasto technique, applying thick paint with a knife, conveys a literal interpretation of the texture.

In contrast to Romantic style, *The Stone Breakers* is absent of

Discipline-Based Art Education

The following components are integral to students having a complete, well rounded art experience.

Art Aesthetics

Providing opportunities to develop perception and appreciation of visually expressed ideas and experiences.

Art Production

Providing opportunities to develop skills and techniques for creative visual expressions of emotions and ideas.

Art History

Providing opportunities to develop an understanding of the visual arts as a basic component of personal heritage.

Art Criticism

Providing an opportunity to develop an intellectual basis for analyzing and making aesthetic judgments based on an understanding of visual ideas and experiences.

ELEMENTS OF ART

- Line: A continuous mark
- Shape: Area enclosed by a line
- Color: Hue, reflection of light.
- Texture: Surface quality, real or implied
- Form: 3D shape or illusion of 3D
- Value: Graduated areas of light/dark
- Space: Illusion of depth

PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN

- Repetition: Imagery repeating pattern
- Variety: Contrast/variation
- Rhythm: Issues of eye movement
- Balance: Even visual weight
- Emphasis/Economy: Dominance/minimalism
- Proportion: Compare size relationships

COMPOSITION

- Symmetrical: Mirrored imagery
- Asymmetrical: Random placement
- Radial: Mirror image from center point
- Repetition: Repeating pattern, motif

ARTISTIC STYLES

- Realism: Realistic representation
- Abstraction: Personal interpretation
- Non-Objective: No recognizable depiction

ELEMENTS OF DESIGN IN PICTURE

BOOKS

Children's literature that relate to this lesson due to elements of art or story content are:

- *Bob the Builder: Fix That Fence* by Suzy Capozzi
- *Building a Road* by Henry Arthur Pluckrose
- *The Olden Days* by Joe Mathieu
- *The Olden Days Coat* by Margaret Laurence
- *Road Builders* by B. Hennessy

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- Masanes, Fabrice. *Gustave Courbet*. Taschen America, LLC. 2006
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idealization of subjects. Rather, Courbet's subjects are simple, ordinary workers breaking stones for roadbeds. Courbet includes one older and one younger worker to make the point that those who work as laborers do so their entire life. Courbet paints the individuals with their faces somewhat hidden from view to focus on their burdens. The image of the two workers compels pity, perhaps a social or economic commentary. The monumental scale of this painting, unusual for this time period, was an intentional decision by Courbet. It pulls the viewer into the painting as if stumbling upon the workers on the road. The viewer may be compelled to feel sorry for the workers because of the difficult and dirty task at hand. However, the workers do not ask for pity as their faces are turned away. What is asked of the viewer is an acknowledgement of their honest labor.

Directed Observation

Show students an image of *The Stone Breakers* and tell them it was painted with oil paint on canvas by Gustave Courbet in 1849. Invite students to quietly study the work. After some time for thinking, encourage students to share what they see. Welcome all comments. The following questions are provided to help students use art vocabulary to talk about the work.

1. Invite students to discuss how roads are made in their community. Ask students to consider how roads would be made without the use of trucks and machines.
2. How did people travel before the invention of cars? Even horses and buggies and pedestrians needed paths or roads. What would be an advantage to having a stone or gravel path or road instead of dirt?
3. Explain to the students that before machines were available, stones were gathered and placed by hand on the path. Gravel was made by hand. Invite students to consider how that was accomplished.
4. Introduce Gustave Courbet to your students by sharing some of his background.
5. Introduce the Romantic style of Courbet's early work which glorified physical attributes of heroic and religious figures. Examine contemporary action figures for comparison.
6. Contrast the Romantic style to Courbet's Realism. What's the difference?
7. Why is it important to convey the real world?
8. What real world events do you see that capture your attention? Consider fire-fighters or police at work. Consider the efforts of your mail carrier or your school's custodian.
9. How did the men in *The Stone Breakers*

get to work? Where do they go for lunch? How will they get home? How long will they have to work before getting the job done? How do you feel about this type of work?

10. The artist, Gustave Courbet, wanted you to feel like you were standing before these workers. How did he do this? (talk about the large size of the painting.) How would this painting feel if it were small enough to hold in your hands?
11. It's important to have a purpose for your art. If you were to make a painting about everyday workers, whom would you paint and what information would you like to "tell" in your painting?

Things to Do

1. Go for a walk in your community to view workers. Make a list of jobs you see and draw or paint a picture of one when you get back to the classroom.
2. Interview parents or invite them to talk about their jobs in the community. Choose one job to illustrate. Remember to place the worker in his/her work environment. Add appropriate details of the job site to add interest to the illustration.
3. Every worker has stories to tell about his/her occupation. Invite such workers into class to share stories.
4. Design and make a poster advertising a profession.
5. Talk about jobs such as gardening, washing a car, playing baseball, cleaning a bedroom, which are not linked to a profession. Illustrate one of these. Remember to add details.
6. Courbet painted on extremely large canvases. Why might this be difficult for Courbet? Do you prefer to look at a smaller or a very large painting? Using a large bulletin board as a background, create a community at work where all students contribute their artistic skills. Discuss your challenges in making a very large piece of artwork.
7. Read about workers in your community. Use this opportunity to make a shoe box diorama. Create a three-dimensional scene of people working by including items in the front, middle, and back of the box to create a sense of space (depth).
8. Observe workers at school. Or, use students to model physical gestures as if they were working. Use clay to sculpt a person "on the job."
9. Draw workers in your school and give them your drawing as a "thank you" for the work they do.
10. What do you want to be when you grow up? Draw a picture of you as that person.