

ART APPRECIATION GROUP- February 2024 – Report by Tony Seward

We started 2024 in lively fashion with a talk from David Phillips on ‘the picture that shocked Paris in 1851’. The perpetrator of this subversive work was Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), and the picture his ‘Burial at Ornans’. Set in his home region of the Jura, it caused such offence because it treated a procession of mourners, made up of the local bourgeoisie and ordinary country people, with the monumentality hitherto only accorded to figures in historical or religious paintings (compare El Greco’s ‘Burial of Count Orgaz’).



Courbet: A Burial at Ornans

French Realism was a major new development sparked by the upheaval of the 1848 Revolution. Courbet, along with writers such as Zola, Balzac, and Flaubert, demanded that art should reflect the real lives of ordinary people, thus posing a direct democratic challenge to the existing social order. His ‘The Stonebreakers’ was even more controversial, showing the poorest of the poor, dressed in rags and engaged in the sort of backbreaking, dehumanising work to which they were condemned by their lowly status.



Courbet: The Stonebreakers

Courbet led the way. Others followed, with varying degrees of radicalism. They included Jean-Francois Millet, whose subject was also the rural peasantry but whose style was more traditional, following classical models and less 'in your face'. His images have a grace and nobility which were very powerful and, through prints and etchings, became immensely popular throughout the nineteenth century and beyond.



Millet: The Gleaners

More acerbic was Honoré Daumier (1808-1879), whose output ranged from hard-hitting political cartoons, through magazine illustrations, to paintings of everyday life across the social spectrum., a good example being his contrasting depictions of railway travel, 'The First-Class Carriage' and 'The Third-Class Carriage'.

The influence of Realism extended to Van Gogh in the 1880s. He especially admired Millet, and invested some of his key images, such as 'The Sower', with his own powerful sensibility. We rounded off the session with Professor Kloss's illuminating analyses of Van Gogh's 'The Harvest', which demonstrates his mastery of formal landscape composition; and of Cézanne's 'Card Players' in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, again a monumental study of ordinary folk.

Next up - Wednesday 6 March: Winslow Homer – Battling the Elements. Looking further ahead, on 3 April we will look at pioneering women artists, starting with Artemisia Gentileschi.