

Courbet

COURBET'S work has now achieved wide acceptance, not least since its display in a national gallery in Paris. The work, and its history, are though complex.

Firstly, as has been said elsewhere, the purpose is not to shock. One purpose of art may be to shock: but displaying commentary on a work, now well-known, and executed in 1866 should not shock.

If the purpose were to provoke, then a comparison with similar 'work': cinematographic, on the Internet, or whatever could easily have been included. Not least, a comparison with the (to us) grotesque and unappealing '*dessin 20.8.71*' of PICASSO (crayon sur carton, 1971, galerie Louise Leiris, Paris).

The work was one of two commissioned by Kalil-Bey. The former Turkish ambassador to Russia had seen *Venus and Psyche* (1864) then commissioned COURBET to produce two further works.

Sleeping Women (or *Laziness and Sensuality*, 1866) now hangs in the Petit Palais. Though it is almost an academic nude of the period in that it shows no 'embarrassing' parts of either character's anatomy, it is in its theme perhaps even more explicit than the work explored here: The entwined 'sleeping women' can with not too much imagination, be seen to be in a tender and intimate moment . . . following orgasm.

The Origin of the World is the other side of the coin: explicit, but showing no hint of love-making (in any sense).

The work was lost in 1945 and only poor photographs were available for some period. Since 1995 it has been at the Musée d'Orsay. In 1994 it featured (not without incident –see display) on a book cover.⁴

3.3 Pose

The pose of the model looks simple. It is not.

⁴See page 97.

Obviously a horizontal, looking up between the legs, or vertical, 'full frontal', would have little artistic appeal. However if one tries to create a series of works such as this from the full range of angles between the extremes, then it will be found that there is a very narrow range that is aesthetically pleasing.

An attempt has been made to demonstrate this with a series of photographs of a plaster cast (see display on page 19). A more convincing demonstration is achieved with a live model and a camera—an exercise that we leave to the viewer to undertake themselves . . .

3.4 Sandblasting

COURBET's *Origine* does encapsulate the ('non-academic', at least) artist's dilemma: What to show?

The academic artist of the Nineteenth century carefully contrived to wrap limbs or to place bizarre (and often Freudian) objects to block the view (for the latter see ALMA-TADEMA's *In the Tepidarium*, considered 'respectable' when produced (1881) and its use of a solitary ostrich feather).

The other solution is to 'air brush' (painting) or 'sand blast' (sculpture) out the inconvenient. Views have though changed.

Many 'innocent' paintings which not only fail to show the female sex, but also fail to even show pubic hair, would probably now be considered as tending towards the pædophilic . . . and in some cases perhaps rightly so.

Many sculptures with there perfectly rounded, nippleless breasts, have removed the essence of the female –the ability to nurture. Nowadays there could be a strong feminist argument against such 'castration' of the female form.

But, if showing nothing is no longer acceptable, what should an artist show? (And, to ask a totally different question: If he does show it, is it acceptable?)

Famously, one of Modigliani's exhibitions (in Paris) was censored because his famous series showed 'explicit' pubic hair.⁵

⁵Even more bizarrely the first 'full frontal' female nude to be legally published in Britain *with* pubic hair was in 1967, in an Oxford University students' magazine. Prior to that nudes had either been airbrushed or shaved. As commented elsewhere, contemporary mores — perhaps equally confused and paranoid(?)— would perhaps see shaving as more outrageous (because of the paedophile undertones) than leaving pubic hair displayed . . .



One totally unexpected outcome of this study, from a perhaps to be expected diversion, was a marked reinforcement of a previous observation of most women's self-view.

The COURBET study led to a series of life-casts of female genitalia. The models were educated, articulate, worldly-wise and not shy. Their reluctance was not prudery, it was primarily based on "it's not nice" —one part of their body as a model that was not fit for view. This progressed on discussion from *the vulva's* lack of aesthetic qualities to *their vulva's* lack of aesthetic qualities. This went far beyond the usual (women's magazine hype of): 'but my breasts are too small', 'but my bum is too big', 'but my belly is not flat enough'.

Most were convinced they were not quite normal. That there were extra bits of flesh there that other women did not have: "the dangly bits", if you wish. A topic touched on in the central painting of MICAH's *The Inner Workings Series* (often confused with a drop of blood, and given other meanings . . .).

If after decades of 'liberation', decades of feminism, decades of explicit magazines in every Tabac . . . educated, articulate, non-inhibited women can still feel in such a way, then where have we come since 1866 . . . and an oil-painting that anatomically shows very little . . .



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