6-29-2012

Smoke Signals: Courbet’s Man With A Pipe, and What It Tells Us

Christina Chicas

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.colgate.edu/car

Part of the Theory and Criticism Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://commons.colgate.edu/car/vol3/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at Digital Commons @ Colgate. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colgate Academic Review by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colgate. For more information, please contact skeen@colgate.edu.
Smoke Signals: Courbet’s *Man With A Pipe*, and what it tells us

Christina Chicas ‘09

In examining the critiques of this one self-portrait, *Man with a Pipe*, a multitude of interpretations arise. However, some commonalities can also be found: the idea that the painting is meant to represent the mood and inner climate of the smoker; the sense of the artist moving away from artistic conventions; and an attempt by the artist to find himself.

“My *Burial* and Self-Portrait caused such a sensation in Frankfort, to the point that they were hanging [signs] in the cafés and casinos, “No talking about M. Courbet and his paintings here,” for it led to arguments.”¹ Things have not changed much in the regard that people today continue debate the paintings of Gustave Courbet and his contemporaries. This portion of the paper will examine some of those debates concerning Courbet’s self-portrait from around 1849, *Man with a Pipe*.²

T.J. Clark examined the painting in terms of two contrasting halves: the first, the face of the smoker; the second, the mass of hair surrounding it. The face, Clark argued, is fragile with delicate, vulnerable features. While it is evenly lit, the eyes remain in shadow, and Clark drew parallels between this face and the faces of two other early self-portraits by Courbet: the *Desperate Man*³ of 1845, and the *Sculptor*⁴ of 1844. The face of the smoker, however, appeared to Clark more aggressive, deliberately unkempt, and stronger than these two as a whole.⁵ He attributed this appearance to the influence of Bohemianism, which Courbet himself addressed in relation to this painting in an 1854 letter to friend and patron Alfred Bruyas.

I was struck when I saw it: it is an awesome element in our solution.⁶ It is the portrait of a fanatic, and ascetic [or aesthetic]. It is the portrait of a man who is disillusioned by the nonsense that made up his education, seeks to like by his own principles.⁷

Clark examined “fanatic,” “ascetic” [or “aesthetic” – Courbet’s handwriting makes this distinction difficult] and “disillusion,” and believed that while Courbet unified them in the painting, they remained separate entities within it. The painting, according to Clark, suggests “their conflict as much as their coexistence.”⁸

Anthea Callen’s analysis remained within the vein of Bohemia. She examined his clothing, noting that the casual style of both his dress and demeanor draws him away from the then-popular image of the Dandy, and more towards the vagabond Bohemian.⁹ Additionally, she noticed parallels between the color of the smoker’s jacket and the colors in Millet’s paintings; the sea green appeared in various items of clothing worn by peasants in a number of his works, moving this image of Courbet further from the upper class, and more toward the working class.¹⁰ This color
particularly stands out in the Courbet work because it is surrounded by warmer flesh tones, and darker background colors.

Petra Ten-Doesschate Chu, in *Courbet in Perspective*, believed the painting to be representative of one of two categories of Courbet’s early self-portraits, those categories being physiognomical and environmental. While *Man with a Black Dog* was environmental, *Man with a Pipe* fell under physiognomical, which involves the thought that one’s outward appearance reflects personality. Chu had good reason to believe that physiognomy was involved in the creation of the painting, considering that a friend of Bruyas published a book on the subject around the time that Courbet created many of his early self-portraits. One point that Chu stressed was her belief that Courbet’s multitude of self-portraits in his early years were not “a question of finding his own appearance irresistible,” or of himself providing a free model.13

Here, Georges Boudaille picked up and stated his belief that the painting “illustrates Courbet’s need to affirm himself in his work, as he did in words every time he had an opportunity, and this need betrayed a deep-seated anguish, perhaps a diffidence coupled with pride.” Boudaille even quoted Courbet directly as having said he sought a sense of his own individuality, removed from traditional knowledge.14 The painting, to both Boudaille and Chu, was one step in an effort Courbet made to find himself within his art, both stylistically and personally.

One thing it appears that Courbet was very sure of at the time *Man with a Pipe* was created was his identification with the pipe, which is what James Henry Rubin chose to examine. Rubin identified the theme of a smoker as traditionally Dutch, which may be linked with Courbet’s visit to the Netherlands in the mid 1840s. Additionally, smoking represented moral suspension, because it was condemned by the church as a corruptor, especially of children. This condemnation may have made smoking increasingly appealing because of Courbet’s ideas of breaking from social norms. To Courbet, Rubin wrote, the pipe represented pleasure and relaxation, as well as a catalyst to dreaming. Courbet even went so far as to paint a “self-portrait” of a pipe in 1869, and titled it *Courbet without Ideal and Without Religion*.15

The pipe, as well as the open collar of the smoker’s shirt and his unruly hair, lends to the painting a sense of controlled disorder, emphasized by the potential for illicit substances in the pipe, like hash or opium. The painting is more concerned with the state of mind of the smoker than anything, Rubins believed, in agreement with Chu and Boudaille.16 Furthermore, the painting acted as the mark of a turning point in Courbet’s work “between early floundering and what he would now call a firm direction.”17

Linda Nochlin better established this turning point in her comparison of *Man with the Leather Belt* to the *Man with a Pipe*. The former acted as a nod to the past, with the latter having beckoned on the future. An example of this existed in the observation that *Man with a Pipe* did not have the traditional indications of Courbet’s profession, as the chalk in *Man with the Leather Belt* acted. Nochlin also referenced the romantic
intensification of the subject, the striking shading, especially around the eyes, and the simple composition and setting as points of growth. Additionally, a March 1847 letter from Courbet to his family showed Courbet’s own belief in his growth: “In former years when my own style was less fully developed and I still painted a little like themselves, they accepted me; but now that I have become myself, I must henceforth give up hope.”

In Chu’s most recent addition to the discussion of Courbet, she stated her belief that Man with a Pipe was the penultimate step towards an “authentic pose,” one removed from existing literary and artistic examples that influenced other works of art. In this painting, the smoker had a private moment, in which he either does not see or chooses not to acknowledge the spectator. Chu also identified what may have aided Courbet in his search for his true self. A contemporary of his, the journalist Champfleury, defined the difference between “true eccentrics” and “posers.” A true eccentric distinguished oneself from the artful Romantic pose, and, according to Champfleury, “looks down on society more than society looks down on him, and he seeks to fool it while telling himself that it is for their own good. These strange creatures... have a marvelous insight into the mechanism of civilized life.”

Chu believed the Man with a Pipe was Courbet’s way of reconciling his own self-definition with the exterior perceptions of him. It expressed the rebelliousness that others had seen as his defining characteristic and greatest strength. A contemporary of Courbet’s, Théophile Silvestre, believed it to be “truly his portrait, better even, his identity.”

Michael Fried agreed that the genre of self-portraits was a very important one to Courbet “not only because it lent itself to his efforts to represent his own embodiedness but also because a certain struggle against his identity as a beholder found there what might be called a counter-conventional home.” Fried believed that the proximity of the smoker to the surface of the painting and the viewer was so close because Courbet wished to remove all distance and difference between his presence in the painting, and his presence viewing it. This motive suits the aforementioned quote by Silvestre quite well.

Fried’s beliefs are also reflected in the fact that the eyes are open, but in shadow, which, along with eyes entirely closed, was a common occurrence in Courbet’s self-portraits. The fact that viewers cannot see the whites of the smoker’s eyes devalues the gaze, and places the emphasis of the painting not on the smoker’s appearance as observed by the viewer, but on how he is experiencing himself from within. Silvestre wrote about the painting, “He dreams of himself as he smokes the pipe.” The smoker is completely self-absorbed.

In examining the critiques of this one self-portrait, Man with a Pipe, a multitude of interpretations arise. However, some commonalities can also be found: the idea that the painting is meant to represent the mood and inner climate of the smoker; the sense of the artist moving away from artistic conventions; and an attempt by the artist to find himself.
Notes & Works Cited


2. According to Anthea Callen, Courbet tended to date his paintings with the dates of their first exhibition rather than the date of creation, which leads to some confusion in the actual dates of many of his paintings; see Anthea Callen, Courbet (London: Jupiter Books, 1980), 51. ALSO Gustave Courbet, Man with a Pipe, 1849? Montpellier, Musée Fabre


4. Gustave Courbet, Sculptor, 1844. Private collection

5. T.J. Clark, Image of the People (London: Thames & Houston Ltd, 1973), 44.


8. Clark, 45.


12. although he was called a “peasant Narcissus” (see Georges Boudaille, Gustave Courbet, painter in protest (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1970), 17.), and wrote in a letter to Champfleury that people were calling his self-portrait Christ with Pipe, a name he adopted and used frequently in subsequent letters about it. (see Gustave Courbet to Champfleury, 8 March 1855, Letters of Courbet, ed. Petra Ten-Doesschate Chu (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 136.)


16. Stepping slightly away from Chu’s analysis, Nochlin believes the painting to be more denotive of mood than of character. (Nochlin, 48)


18. Gustave Courbet, Man with the Leather Belt, 1845-46? Paris, Musée d’Orsay


21. Chu, Most Arrogant, 41.


23. Fried, 76-78.


