



Gustave Courbet

By Ulf Küster

Art to Read

**HATJE
CANTZ**

Gustave Courbet



Gustave Courbet

By Ulf Küster

**HATJE
CANTZ**

Contents

7	Prologue – <i>The Hammock</i>
17	Ornans – Flagey
35	Industrialization in the Countryside – Remarks on <i>The Stonebreakers</i> and <i>The Wheat Sifters</i>
51	Eugène Delacroix Sees <i>The Painter's Studio</i>
67	With Knife and Thumb
81	Origine du monde – Origine de la peinture
99	Epilogue
107	Notes
115	Biography
122	Recommended Reading and Viewing
123	Literature
125	Acknowledgments

Prologue

The Hammock

I can remember my first encounter with a painting by Gustave Courbet quite vividly. It was in 1971 during a visit to the Oskar Reinhart Collection “Am Römerholz” in Winterthur. I was five years old; my father, as usual, took me by the hand and I know for sure that I was puzzled by the peculiar yellow socks worn by the young girl sleeping in a hammock in Courbet’s painting (ill. p. 10/11). Could they be some kind of shoe-socks? Even today, after countless visits to this magnificent museum, I am still puzzled by this odd footwear, which seems better suited to a character in a Biedermeier fairy-tale painting by Ludwig Richter. Her feet are naturally immaculate, as if this beauty never touched the ground before laying herself down to sleep.

Gustave Courbet’s *Le hamac* (*The Hammock*) from 1844 is a masterpiece, a dreamlike vision in every sense of the word. But what does the painting depict? Is it Courbet’s dream or the sleeping girl’s? One sees a forest clearing; a hammock is stretched over a path that leads in turn to another clearing in the background. A girl lies in it and sleeps, half in sunshine, half in shade. She wears a garland of flowers in her loose blond hair. The weather is apparently very warm because she has removed her blue silk shawl and opened her bodice, lined in yellow, un-

derneath which her breasts are just visible through transparent gauze. The girl's legs hang down from the hammock, feet crossed, her skirt hiked up to reveal calves clad in white stockings. She holds firmly onto the edge of the hammock with her right hand, while her left hand extends over her head in a gesture typical of sleeping persons. Her chin rests on her chest and the expression on her face has something equally lascivious and innocent about it. And in general she seems virginal and a little wicked at the same time. The dream she is presently dreaming is surely very pleasant. It is a pity that it will soon come to an end, because she is about to fall off the hammock. Her hair, which resembles a waterfall, presages her imminent plunge to the ground. She will not fall onto the path itself but rather into shallow, dark water, which will wrench her from her reverie.

This painting often reminds me of two verses from "Frühlingstraum" [Dream of Spring], a poem from Wilhelm Müller's *Winterreise* [Winter Journey] cycle published in 1823 and set to music by Franz Schubert. They concern the abrupt shift from the world of dreams to that of reality, which for Müller was a sign of the difference between the idea of freedom and the reality of suppression during the Restoration and the period leading up to the March Revolution of 1848:

Ich träumte von Lieb' um Liebe,
Von einer schönen Maid,
Von Herzen und von Küssen,
Von Wonne und Seligkeit.

Und als die Hähne krähten,
Da ward mein Herze wach;
Nun sitz' ich hier alleine
Und denke dem Traume nach.

[I dreamt of mutual love,
Of a lovely maiden,
Of embracing and kissing,
Of joy and rapture.

And when the cocks crowed
My heart awoke;
Now I sit here alone
And reflect upon my dream.]¹

Does Courbet's *Hammock* depict the transition from an idealized world to a harsh reality? Is this image of sleep shortly before it comes to an abrupt end also about the end of an era that can be designated "Romantic"? The fact that this painting might unexpectedly contain concealed messages still occupies me today. The garland the young woman wears in her hair is not an ivy wreath, as has frequently been claimed.² It is in fact



Gustave Courbet, *Le hamac* (*The Hammock*), 1844, oil on canvas, 70.5 × 97 cm,
Oskar Reinhart Collection "Am Römerholz," Winterthur

