

Gustave Courbet

Funeral at Ornans, 1849



Fig. 1 Gustave Courbet, *Funeral at Ornans*, 1849. Oil on canvas, 315x668 cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

The large canvas describes a burial ceremony in the cemetery at Ornans, the town where Courbet's family lived and where he was born. The painting was displayed at the Paris Salon in 1850-1851. Later it was refused, along with the picture titled *Artist's Studio*, for the 1855 Universal Exposition. Courbet's response to this refusal was to have a special structure, known as the **Pavillon of Realism**, built not far from the official exhibition hall; here *Funeral at Ornans* found a temporary exhibition space alongside some tens of other canvases.

At first glance the painting seems to have a rather simple quality but a closer examination shows how, in reality, **it breaks with pictorial tradition** in almost every way.

A New Conception of History Painting

In order to describe a funeral in the provinces, Courbet uses **a vary large canvas** of the kind that was usually reserved for history paintings; the artist's intention to make a connection to that specific genre can be seen in the work's subtitle: *Picture of Human Figures, Historic*. Courbet declared that "*Historic art is contemporary by definition*" meaning that the **history painting must bear witness to the present time's customs and ideas** in order to fully achieve the viewer's understanding.

So *Funeral at Ornans* should be seen in the light of this desire to reform historical painting. The key figures are not ancient heroes, generals or kings but rather **common people** and the event narrated is merely **a commonplace fact** without any overwhelming significance.

As the artist himself asserted, the people represented on canvas were all existing inhabitants of Ornans. In fact **each person is individually described** by his dress, his expression and gestures in a likeness that seems truthful; this kind of description was inspired by the traditional genre of Flemish group portraits. However, in contrast to tradition, Courbet refuses to idealise the forms or confer nobility to the scene. Rather he depicts the religious moment of burial as a simple fact that unites a rural community through the people's shared grief.

The Compositional Layout

The composition is laid out **in horizontal bands**: above the sky has tones of yellow and light blue while below hills and cliffs strongly divide the upper band from the central alignment of the crowd. The lowest band is the earth which is rendered with some of the tones seen in the sky.

The **figures are arranged in a frieze-like way** but without any ordering connection among themselves. Rather the crowd's arrangement follows an undulating line cadenced by **verticals** that divide the surface into five longitudinal sections of almost equal width. The two strongest vertical lines run through the cross, left of centre, as well as the man dressed in a light-coloured suit, right of centre. Taken together these two sections form a square whose base corresponds to the hole of the grave. The vertical axes also serve to define the order of the figures which is not decided by hierarchy but rather by groupings. To the left the officiants, at the centre the townsmen, with the townswomen on the right.

The effect of a direct 'filming' is given by **the photographic cut to the scene** which allows the viewer to imagine that the funeral procession extends beyond the canvas. The effect is reinforced by the recently-dug grave which is only half visible.

The Colours

From the point of view of chromatic usage the painting presents some **non-conventional** aspects. The **few colours** employed are treated with **a wide variety of tonalities interrupted by vivacious spots of colour**. This combination helps both to capture the forms and define the figures' position in space and to add a dramatic element to the scene. Further emphasis is achieved via the combined use of the paintbrush (for faces and hands) and the palette knife (for the background and earth) which serves to confer density and weight on the figures as well as on the elements of nature. Dark tones predominate in the horizontal band devoted to the crowd and these are offset by aggressive notes of white and bright touches of amber yellow, vermilion and olive green.