

GUSTAVE COURBET

(Ornans, Franche Comté 1819 - La Tour de Peliz, Near Vevey 1877)

Les Gorges de Saillon

signed and dated '75/G. Courbet' (lower left)
oil on canvas
42 x 33 cm (16½ x 13 in)

AT FIRST HAND, LES GORGES DE SAILLON RECALLS other cascade scenes by Gustave Courbet, such as *Le Gour de Conche* (fig. 1), and *Cascade dans le Jura* (1875, Musée Courbet, Ornans), in both subject matter and palette the deep, mysterious cavern theme is repeated. However, here Courbet takes the landscape one step further, challenging the viewer and pushing our expectations. Courbet removes the skyline as reference point, immersing the viewer into the picture. In this exciting approach to landscape painting, Courbet cleverly creates impact despite the relatively small size of the canvas; the zig-zag of ladders draws our eyes down to the profile of a face in the contours of the rock. The emphasis of the face, already naturally apparent in the rock formation (fig. 2.), reinforces Courbet's idea of his native land as being a living, breathing entity, it is also a reference to an artistic past and artists such as Giuseppe Arcimboldo. Sarah Faunce compares the present work to *Paysage Fantastique aux Roches Anthropomorphes* (exhib. cat. Courbet, Paris, Grand Palais, 1977-78, no. 81), which similarly contains ladders set against the rock-face and an almost identical human facial profile created out of a boulder.

The present work is included by Jean-Jacques Fernier in his forthcoming supplement to the *catalogue raisonné* on the artist as 'Courbet et collaboration', on the basis that, in his opinion, Cherubino Pata (1827-99) may have assisted the artist in its creation.



Gustave Courbet,
Le Gour de Conche, 1864,
Musée des Beaux-Arts
et d'Archéologie, Besançon
(Figure 1)

Courbet was considered an artistic revolutionary of his time, rejecting the conformities of his contemporaries, his deep belief was to portray a true and frank social reality. Along with Honoré Daumier and Jean Millet, he started the movement called 'Realism'. Courbet was born in 1819, in Ornans, France and brought up in a farming family. He left for Paris around 1840 and was largely self-taught, using the great masterpieces hanging in the Louvre by artists such as Caravaggio and Frans Hals as his guide. Turning away from the idealised conventions of the Academy, Courbet refused to hide behind the cosiness of Romanticism. He re-wrote his own agenda for art using what he had learned,

but above all drew on his own experience and feelings whilst putting aside artistic theories to concentrate on portraying the truth. He turned to social realism, painting peasant life as it was- a real and hard life - to become one of the most powerful painters of the nineteenth century.

The Realist movement in France flourished from about 1840 until the late nineteenth century and Courbet was one of the key characters of the movement. Realism emerged following the 1848 Revolutions that overturned the monarchy of Louis-Philippe. The Realists responded to French society's fight for democratic reform by depicting the lives of the working class. The representation of the gritty humble existence of human life was paralleled in the literature of Émile Zola, Honoré de Balzac and Gustave Flaubert.

In 1850 Courbet exhibited his vast and bold *Burial at Ornans* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris) on a scale that was formerly reserved for history painting, and is now one of his most well known works. He shocked the Salon and at the same time defined his style. For Courbet, *The Burial at Ornans* was in reality the burial of Romanticism, he believed that 'painting is an essentially concrete art and can only consist in the representation of real and existing things'.

His landscape paintings are equally imbued with the same strong and physical emotion as his figurative works. Courbet fills the canvas with great expression, often using a dark and moody palette. Not afraid to depict nature in all its aspects, he freed landscape painting from the ideals of Neoclassicism and Romanticism.



A photograph of Grotte des
Géants de Saillon, Valais,
by Claudy Raymond, 2007
(Figure 2)

To add to the required effect, Courbet would use a range of methods to create texture in his paintings; fingers, a sponge, or palette knife. Under the 1871 Commune of Paris, Courbet was put in charge of all Parisian art museums. However, following the fall of the Commune, he was accused of aiding the destruction of the Vendome Column and imprisoned at Sainte-Pélagie in June 1871 for ten months. A year later in 1873, Courbet was ordered to pay for the reconstruction of the column, his paintings were refused entry at the Salon and his property was confiscated. He fled to Switzerland where he continued to paint until his death in 1877.

