



A Burial At Ornans (1849–50) by Gustave Courbet

Courbet's

A Burial at Ornans

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How the painting of a peasant funeral helped to
define the birth of Modern Art

In 1848 in France, political turmoil and civic unrest saw King Louis Philippe overthrown and workers take to the streets in protest at their living conditions, in what became known as the June Days Uprising (*Les Journées de Juin*).

Against this backdrop, a new group of artists was developing a radical new style of painting that rejected the lavish ideals of Romanticism which had dominated art during the previous half a century and, instead, paid tribute to working men and women and the lives they led.

Known as Realism, this new style of French painting challenged the

conventions of academic art - by placing the lives of ordinary working men and women as equal to traditional highbrow subjects such as classical mythology, heroic historical events, formal portraiture and picturesque or dramatic scenery.

Realist painter Gustave Courbet's painting of a funeral, *A Burial At Ornans* (1849–50), is considered one of the major turning points in 19th-century French art, paving the way for artists like Monet's Impressionists and Van Gogh's Post Impressionists to flourish.

The painting, which is currently displayed at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, is an enormous work - measuring 3.1 metres

by 6.6 metres. It depicts the funeral of Courbet's great-uncle, which took place in September 1848 in the family's birthplace of Ornans, a small town near Besancon in north-eastern France. Rather than use professional models, which was normal practice, Courbet said that he, "painted the very people who had been present at the interment, all the town's people," emphasising the 'truthful' character of the Realism movement.

The use of such a large canvas for such an ordinary or mundane scene was considered shocking. In painting an ordinary provincial funeral, on the giant scale traditionally reserved for the heroic or religious scenes of history painting, it



At the Funeral (1883) by Frants Henningsen



A Child's Burial in the Country (1872) by Konstantin Yegorovich Makovsky



A Peasant Coffin (1895)
by Aleksander Gieryski



The Funeral (1867) by Edouard Manet

created an explosive reaction - garnering praise and criticism in equal measure - and brought Courbet instant fame.

According to art historian Sarah Faunce: "In Paris, the Burial was judged as a work that had thrust itself into the grand tradition of history painting, like an upstart in dirty boots crashing a genteel party and, in terms of that tradition, it was, of course, found wanting."

Eventually, the public grew more interested in Realism, leading them to reject the decadent fantasy of Romanticism. Courbet himself noted: "The Burial at Ornans was in reality the burial of Romanticism."

Courbet's boldness also helped to pave the way for other Realist painters - and the depiction of the funerals of the poor proved a popular theme.

Edouard Manet, the French artist who bridged the evolution from Realism to Impressionism, painted *The Funeral* in 1867, which is now on display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It shows a small funeral cortège at the foot of the Butte Mouffetard, in southwest Paris. Revered Russian artist Konstantin Yegorovich Makovsky, who started out as a Romanticist, developed an interest in Realism which led him to paint *A Child's Burial in the Country* in 1872.

Norwegian artist, Frants Henningsen, painted numerous works on the subject of bereavement and loss and his painting, *At the Funeral* (1883), shows a mother and her two young children follow their father's coffin as it is carried to his burial in a churchyard for the poor in Copenhagen. And Polish artist Aleksander Gieryski's painting of *A Peasant Coffin* (1895), which is now in the National Museum in Warsaw, depicts peasant parents waiting to bury their child.

Courbet relished his role as a rebel, creating an 'art of the people'. "When I stop being controversial, I'll stop being important," Gustave Courbet wrote to his parents in 1852.