



Les Guides Bleus, *Bourgogne, Franche-Comté, Jura, Lyonnais* (Paris, 1931)
National Gallery of Art Library, Washington



Rugged Landscapes in Auvergne and Franche-Comté

This section includes the work of only two artists: Théodore Rousseau, who is most closely associated with Fontainebleau (see section 2) but who painted early landscape studies in Auvergne; and Gustave Courbet, whose deep physical connection to his home territory in Franche-Comté finds expression in his direct and tactile painting style.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the best French artists aspired to work in Italy—if possible by winning the Prix de Rome (see p. 41). Awarded by the Academy in several categories, it provided a state-sponsored tour of study. Schooled in the Roman Campagna, the “native” landscape of these young artists was less French than it was Italian.

The very lucidity of Mediterranean light suited the classically realized compositions of academic tradition. Before the 1820s the panoramic countryside of France was largely ignored, and when artists did begin to paint in France, they looked initially to settings that offered “bones” similar to the Italian models. Among the first of these places was Auvergne. Its landscape of gorges and cascading river rocks offered a visual structure similar to that seen in Italy. Moreover, its Roman, and Romanesque, history tapped deep into France’s past, and its volcanic geology resonated with romantic sensibilities.

Auvergne was described in the first volume of an early guide to France, Baron Isidore Taylor’s lavishly illustrated, seventeen-volume *Voyages pittoresques dans l’ancienne France*. These voyages were meant to be enjoyed in the comfort of an armchair, but by the 1830s real guidebooks, with practical information and portability, were also beginning to appear. Some of the earliest described Fontainebleau (see section 2), but another region that attracted the more adventuresome traveler was Franche-Comté. Its rugged terrain was of keen interest to naturalists and geologists—and artists. In addition to native-born Courbet, Rousseau and Corot also painted there.



Baron Isidore Taylor, *Voyages pittoresques dans l’ancienne France* (Paris, 1820), frontispiece

National Gallery of Art Library, Washington
Victoria and Roger Sant Fund

Background: Auvergne

- The Auvergne lies in the southern Massif Central, the relatively arid plateau that comprises about one-sixth of the total area of France.
- Within Auvergne are approximately 80 ancient volcanic peaks, called *puys*; the highest is Puy de Sancy at 1885 m (6,188 ft.)
- Today, mineral water from volcanic springs (at Volvic and Vichy, for example) are among Auvergne's most recognizable products.
- In Auvergne in 52 BC, Julius Caesar defeated Vercingétorix, king of the Averni tribes—and the last bastion of Gallic resistance to Roman rule.
- It was also here, in 507, that Clovis (first of the Merovingian kings) expelled Alaric and the Visigoths in his quest to unite French territory.
- The Auvergne finally became a permanent part of France when it was confiscated from the dukes of Bourbon by François I in 1527.
- Today, the capital city Clermont-Ferrand is an important industrial center, home of Michelin tires; but the region is still strongly agricultural.
- The region's history and volcanic parks contribute substantial tourist revenues.
- In 2004 the population of Auvergne numbered about 1.3 million.

Explore volcanoes in France:
www.vulcania.com

Learn how fine knives are made:
www.laguirole-elite.com
www.sabatier.com

Background: Franche-Comté

- Franche-Comté is dominated by the Jura Mountains, which straddle France's eastern border with Switzerland.
- The fossil-bearing limestone formations date from—and give their name to—the Jurassic Period, about 208 to 144 million years ago.
- Franche-Comté (“free county”) acquired its name in the 12th century, when the local count wrested freedom from certain imperial levies of the Holy Roman emperor; a reputation for independence endures.
- Territorial rule passed among Burgundy, France, and the Holy Roman Empire before Franche-Comté was ultimately conquered for France in 1674.
- Today, the upland economy remains largely centered on animal husbandry and production of milk and cheese; in lower elevations, wine grapes and fruit trees are cultivated.
- Most of the population (about 1.1 million in 2004) lives in the region's industrial center between the cities of Besançon and Belfort.
- Watch- and clock-making, automotive, textile, chemical, and forest products are important industries.
- The Jura's rugged terrain and natural beauty contribute important revenue from outdoor tourism.
- The Loue, which runs through Courbet's hometown, is one of France's most picturesque rivers; a favorite with canoers and kayakers, it is also well known for fly-fishing.
- In recent years Franche-Comté has become a center for cross-country skiing and *vélo tout terrain*, or mountain biking.

Discover les Grandes Traversées: ski, mountain bike, and hiking trails in Jura:
www.gtj.asso.fr

Gastronomie: Franche-Comté

Franche-Comté produces a number of cheeses, including Emmental, and smoked meats. Local cuisine also makes use of abundant trout and other fish, eel, game, and forest products like mushrooms and morels. Vin jaune (yellow wine), called for in the recipe below, is a local specialty, aged six years, three months in small oak casks that are only partially filled.

Poulet aux Morilles (Chicken with Morels)

- 1 young chicken
- 1 onion
- 1 or 2 carrots
- 1 stalk celery
- bouquet garni of herbs for seasoning
- 5–6 tbs. butter
- 1 bottle (620 ml) vin jaune*
- 1 ½ cups cream
- 6 oz. dried morels
- salt, pepper

Soak the morels in water overnight. Reserve the water and filter it. Remove the breasts and legs from the chicken and set aside. Make a stock with the rest of the carcass, the chopped onion, carrot, celery, and the bouquet garni. Simmer about an hour.

In the meantime, sauté the breasts and legs in 2 tbs. of the butter over high heat until golden. Cover and cook gently for 10 minutes more. Salt and pepper to taste.

Deglaze the pan with the wine and cook 5 minutes. Add 1 ½ cups of the stock, 1 cup of the water used to soak the morels, and 1 cup of the cream. Cook 5 minutes over lively heat to reduce. Add the morels. Salt and pepper to taste.

Strain the sauce, then finish it by whisking in the remaining cream and butter. Pour it over the morels and chicken.

*Vin jaune is produced in fairly small quantities and its availability in the United States is limited. Try substituting a light sherry, which is produced in a similar fashion and has a similar nutty flavor. Note that a bottle of vin jaune is only 620 ml (not the standard 750 ml).

Gastronomie: Auvergne

Auvergne is noted for cheeses and tender green lentils—but perhaps its most prominent place in French kitchens is the utensil drawer. Centered around the town of Thiers, where our Rousseau painting was made, are the best knife manufacturers in France, including Sabatier and Laguiole.

Lentilles à l’Auvergnate (Lentils Auvergnate)

- ¼ lb. bacon, cut into small pieces
- 1 medium onion, finely chopped
- 1 carrot, finely chopped
- 1 leek, white and pale green parts only, finely chopped
- 1 ½ cups small green lentils
- 2 ¼ cups veal stock or water
- bouquet garni of thyme, bay leaf, and parsley
- salt, pepper

Soak the lentils overnight. Rinse and drain. Fry bacon, but do not brown. Add the vegetables and cook about 3 minutes, stirring occasionally. Do not let brown. Stir in the lentils. Add stock and bouquet garni. Bring to boil, then let simmer 30 minutes or until lentils are tender. Remove bouquet garni. Salt and pepper to taste. Serve with grilled sausages.

Vocabulaire

- anguille (f): eel
- cascade (f): waterfall
- casque (m): helmet
- chute (f): rapids
- couteau (m): knife
- morille (m): morel
- pêche à la mouche (f): fly fishing
- pneu (m): tire
- puy (m): volcanic peak
- ruisseau (m): stream
- vélo tout terrain (m): mountain bike

The Works

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Théodore Rousseau
French, 1812–1867

Mountain Stream in the Auvergne, 1830
Oil on paper on canvas, 12 3/16 x 14 1/16 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Chester Dale Fund 1997.24.1



Théodore Rousseau was eighteen years old when he set out in June 1830 to paint in Auvergne, leaving Paris only a month before the outbreak of the July Revolution that replaced the Bourbon monarch with Louis-Philippe, the Citizen King. His destination was the rugged mountains of Cantal in southern Auvergne. Views of Auvergne appeared regularly at the Salon—the two academic landscape painters who had been Rousseau’s teachers had painted studies there. It was described by a friend of Rousseau’s as a place with “a half-savage population,” and “a turbulent nature that was much as it had been at the beginning of the world.”¹

Rousseau traveled by stagecoach; the first French railroad did not open until

1832, and it was ten more years before government initiatives began to make rail transport an important means of travel, well behind England and some other European countries. The coach line went via the small town of Thiers in the modern department of Puy-de-Dôme. Built on the steep slopes of a river gorge, the town’s bridges, mills, and rushing water offered attractive opportunities for painters. Rousseau made several studies there, including this one.

The direct roughness of his studies shocked Rousseau’s teachers (one of whom was reported to have called them works of *délire*, madness). Other artists had returned with Auvergne sketches, but they were not so individual—either in their romantic

cast or energetic execution. We can see the motion of Rousseau’s brush in bold strokes that carve out boulders and ruffle the surface of water with cursive movements.

The next year, Rousseau would enter an Auvergne landscape as his first submission to the Salon, a work painted in his Paris studio from sketches like this one that he had made in the open air.

Consider this

What techniques did Rousseau use to create the illusion of depth?

- *overlapping forms*
- *contrast of large foreground and smaller middle-ground objects*
- *warm colors in front and increasingly cool colors toward the back*

Where was the artist when he painted this view? How does the vantage point affect our experience of the scene?

- *diminished sense of immediacy when not standing in the midst of the stream*

Rousseau loved the primitive wilderness of Auvergne, and yet his painting contains many signs of human civilization. What does the painting tell you about the relationship of human beings to the natural world?

How would the visual and emotional effect of the painting change if all human elements were removed?



Rousseau's scene is similar to this one from an 1834 guidebook published in England. The author notes about this engraving:

The view of Thiers from the point where the artist made his selection, can scarcely, we think, fail to remind the reader of the pleasing and romantic appearance, presented under deeper shadowings, of the wild and rural Tivoli [outside Rome]... Like the Italian, it is situated on high and broken acclivities; and as that looks far out over the Campagna, towards the 'Eternal City,' so the abrupt eminences of Thiers command a fine view over the rich plains, and level country towards Clermont.

Similarity to the Italian countryside attracted artists and travelers to Auvergne.

At Thiers

Engraving after J. D. Harding in Thomas Roscoe, *The Tourist in France* (London, 1834), pl. 7

National Gallery of Art Library, Washington

Consider this

In what ways does Courbet's *Stream* (opposite) break the rules of classical landscape composition? In what ways (whether by chance or design) does it adhere to those rules?

- as in classical landscape painting, a stream leads the eye into the distance
- unlike classical landscapes, Courbet's composition lacks clarity in the organization of spatial planes

Consider the distribution of warm and cool colors. What effect does their placement have?

- large patches of warm brown in the foreground and cool blue in the background help create the illusion of spatial projection and recession, but dotting these colors throughout the canvas envelops the scene in a unifying atmosphere

Locate passages in which Courbet might have relied on a palette knife, rather than a brush, to produce texture, thereby enhancing the tactile realism of his painting.

If you were to add a figure to this painting, who would it be and what would he or she be doing? How would the addition alter the effect of the painting?

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Gustave Courbet
French, 1819–1877

*The Stream (Le Ruisseau du
Puits-Noir; vallée de la Loue)*, 1855
Oil on canvas, 41 x 54 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. P. H. B. Frelinghuysen
in memory of her father and mother,
Mr. and Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer 1943.15.2



An early catalogue claimed that Courbet thought this picture, “entirely painted from nature,” to be his best landscape. It is unlikely, however, that the 54-inch canvas was actually made outdoors; a smaller study was probably the basis for it. It is the first of many finished paintings that depict a well-known spot near his hometown of Ornans, where a small stream (the Brême) flows through a steep gorge called the Puits Noir (Black Wells). Secret, even mysterious, this dark corner seems untouched by human presence. In a letter to a friend, Courbet described the place as “a superb landscape of profound solitude, in the depths of the valley of my country.”²

He does not focus on a single topographical feature but seems instead to paint the deep quiet of the place. As viewers, we feel ourselves not so much looking at but immersed in it. Courbet once boasted that he made no effort to select his motifs but planted his easel randomly and painted whatever was before him. His unconcern with producing dramatic compositions distinguishes him from near contemporaries among the Barbizon painters.

To reproduce the sunlit faces of rock, Courbet applied thick buff-toned paint with a palette knife. He felt his technique was parallel to the processes of nature, that he was drawing out the highlighted areas in the same way light itself acted on the rock.

His understanding of these rocks was informed by new geological study of the Jurassic formations. “Try a brush to do rocks like that,” he said, “rocks that have been eroded by the weather and the rain, which have formed long seams from top to bottom.”³ Courbet captures not only the solid, tangible qualities of the place, his palette knife and brush also conjure light on the moving surface of the water and the moist green atmosphere of the forest.

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Gustave Courbet
French, 1819–1877

La Grotte de la Loue, 1864
Oil on canvas, 38 ¾ x 51 ¾ in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Gift of Charles L. Lindemann 1957.6.1

The river Loue emerges from the underground course of this cave about 14 km (less than 9 mi.) southeast of Courbet's home at Ornans. Within the grotto the water's mirrorlike stillness reflects light onto the rock above. Outside, a frothy cascade breaks past a low wooden sluice. In both areas Courbet used a palette knife, running smooth horizontal streaks in the quiet water and piling up thick paint on the mossy rock. Except for the small figure who stands spearfishing (and providing a sense of scale), the scene is reduced to the essential matter of water and rock.



As this modern photograph illustrates, Courbet concentrated his landscape, showing us only the part his eye witnessed in one direct look—a close-up view of the grotto opening rather than the whole towering expanse of the rock face.

Source of the Loue, Doubs, France
Photograph © Yves Lafon

The Artists

Courbet on realism

Courbet was upset when what he regarded as his most important works were rejected for the official art exhibition at the *Exposition universelle* in 1855. In response, he arranged an independent showing opposite the fair's entrance. The title over the door proclaimed it as the pavilion of *Le Réalisme*. Five years later, having always rejected academic training, Courbet reluctantly acceded to students' requests to open an unorthodox and democratic studio. Unfettered by formal instruction, pupils could sketch a nude model, or an ox, horse, or deer. Courbet's clearest statement of his own ideas about *Le Réalisme* appeared in an open letter to students:

The human spirit must always begin work afresh in the present... The real artists are those who pick up their age exactly at the point to which it has been carried by preceding times. To go backward is to do nothing...

I maintain, in addition, that painting is an essentially concrete art and can only consist of the representation of real and existing things. It is a completely physical language, the words of which consist of all visible objects; an object which is abstract, not visible, non-existent, is not within the realm of painting...

Imagination in art consists in knowing how to find the most complete expression of an existing thing, but never in inventing or creating that thing itself...

The beautiful exists in nature and may be encountered in the midst of reality under the most diverse aspects. As soon as it is found there, it belongs to art, or rather, to the artist who knows how to see it there.⁴

Gustave Courbet

French, 1819–1877



Gustave Courbet

Self-Portrait, 1850–1853 | Oil on canvas, 9 x 11 in.

Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek/Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

Gustave Courbet was born close to the Swiss border in the Jura Mountains, noted for their rugged landscape and independent population. Although the artist would later assume the persona of peasant—and Parisian bohemian—his farmer/winegrower father was part of the relatively prosperous middle class in their provincial hometown of Ornans. By all accounts young Courbet spent hours in the woods and mountains. He hunted, fished, and, it was said, had a special knack for catching butterflies. As an adult he remained proud of his physical strength and retained a deep emotional attachment to the land of his childhood, returning often throughout his life.

In 1839 Courbet was sent by his parents to Paris. They hoped he would study law, but he had already determined to become a painter. He entered the studio of a successful academic artist but did not stay long (or, as he later claimed, learn much). Instead he enrolled at the Académie Suisse, where he

could paint on his own from a live model. He also studied old master paintings in the Louvre. From them he adopted a technique of painting from dark to light. Even as contemporaries would shift to lighter grounds, Courbet continued to build up light pigments over a darkly primed surface.

His method emphasized the solid, material presence of things—and his own physical connection to them. He painted the concrete, he said, giving matter physical dimension, its own tactile reality on the canvas. Often he used a palette knife to trowel on heavy layers of pigment that become, in a sense, congruent with the thing being painted. Such a materialist understanding of the world lay at the heart of nineteenth-century French realism in both the literary and visual arts. Among painters, Courbet was its greatest exponent.

There were other aspects to his realism: in addition to this rough technique he also reveled in raw subjects, rejecting the mythological, biblical, and historical narratives of the academic tradition. For Courbet the only authentic source of art was experienced in the immediate present, by an individual artist. His early submissions to the Salon offended conventional taste: like contemporary realist novels, they treated ordinary people and everyday subjects—a funeral in his hometown of Ornans, for example, or stonebreakers at work. And he presented these scenes of common people on a heroic scale, creating paintings that seemed to dignify the ordinary and the ugly. Courbet came to embody the challenge of the avant-garde, to assert bold styles and modern subjects. His influence for the younger generation of painters was enormous.

Théodore Rousseau
biography, p. 49