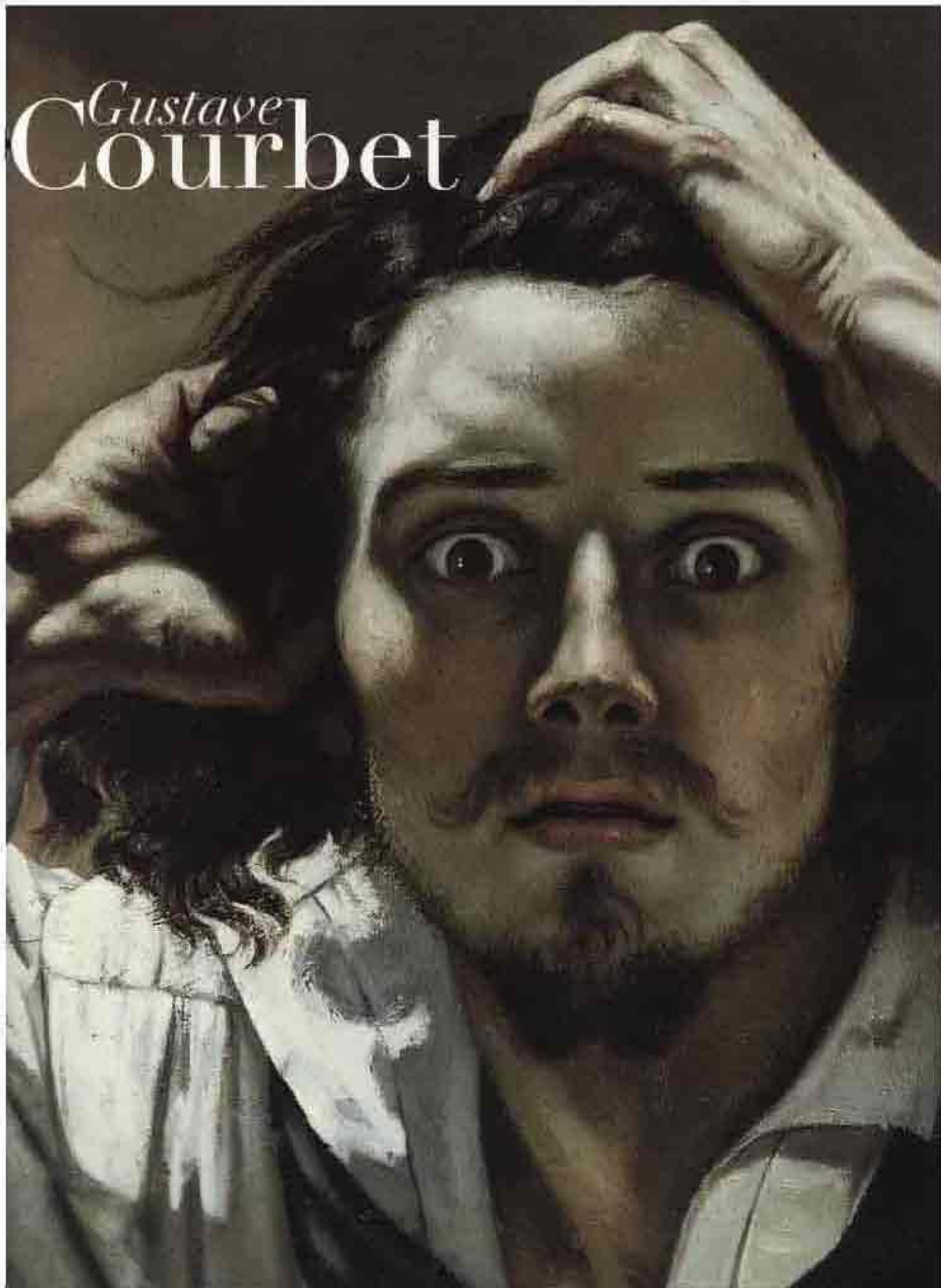


Gustave
Courbet



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Gustave Courbet
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The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York;
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Reclining Nude

1862
Oil on canvas
29 1/2 x 37 1/2 in. (75 x 95 cm)
Signed and dated bottom right:
Gustave Courbet 1862
Private collection, with the assistance of
Daniella Luxembourg Art, London
F335; C 321

PROVENANCE: until 1878, Étienne Baudry, Saintes; Maurice Lippmann, Paris; Paris, Hôtel Drouot, April 22, 1899, no. 8 under the title *Lassitude*; Prince de Wagram, Paris; baron Mor Lipot Herzog, Budapest; Marcell von Nemes, Budapest; Bruno Casarier, Berlin; Baron Ferenc Hatvany, Budapest; 1945, stolen; 1945–2000, privately held in Bratislava; 2005, restored to the Hatvany estate via the Commission for Art Recovery.

EXHIBITIONS: Paris 1878, no. 25; Düsseldorf 1912, no. 86; Budapest 1919, no. IV-40; Paris 1929, no. 38; Amsterdam 1938, no. 66; Belgrade 1939, no. 23; Budapest 1940, no. 34.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Meier-Graefe 1905, pp. 179, 181, 187; Meier-Graefe 1921, pl. 61; Fontainas, Vauxcelles 1922, p. 87, repr.; Fontainas 1927, pl. 27; Gronkowski, *Gazette des beaux-arts* 2 (July 1929), pp. 19–37; Gronkowski, *Figaro artistique* 240 (July 4, 1929), pp. 666–69, repr.; Courthion 1929, p. 90, pl. 32; Léger 1929, p. 90, pl. 32; Courthion 1931, pl. ix; Naef 1947, pl. 34; Kaschnitz 1949, pl. 9; Mac Orian 1951, pl. 30; Fermigier 1971, p. 103; Bonniot 1973, pp. 88–89, pl. 15; Lindsay 1973, fig. 73; Reff 1980, p. 100; Sheon 1981, p. 121, fig. 14; Courthion 1985, no. 321, repr.; Kosinski, *Artibus et historiae* 18 (1988), pp. 187–99, repr.; Rosenblum 1990, repr., p. 40; L. Mrávik, *Dijon*, 1995, pp. 63–67, ill. p. 63; Chu 1996, 62–64, pp. 188–89; Metken 1997; Rubin 2003, p. 187.

The rediscovery of this remarkable picture, thought to have been lost during World War II, was a major event. Well known and well documented, it had belonged to Baron Ferenc Hatvany (1881–1958), who had built up a substantial collection that also included *The Origin of the World* (cat. no. 187). In an old photograph we see the painting prominently displayed in the baron's townhouse at 96 Hunyadi János Utea, on the Buda hill (fig. 1). During the war the collection was stored in the strongroom of the Hungarian Commercial Bank in Pest, and part of it was seized by



Fig. 1 Anonymous photograph. Sitting room of Baron Ferenc Hatvany before World War II.

the Russian army in 1945. This picture was subsequently traded by a member of the Soviet army to a doctor in Bratislava, where it remained until the restitution procedure allowed the Hatvany heirs to reclaim it in 2005.

It was painted during Courbet's year in Saintonge, from May 1862 to May 1863, and can be more precisely dated to the first half of that period, in May–September 1862, when the artist was staying with Étienne Baudry, the work's first owner, in the Château de Rochemont, near Saintes. A politically progressive art lover, Baudry was a friend of Castagnary, who introduced the two men. A solid friendship developed and in 1868 the artist illustrated Baudry's *Le Camp des bourgeois*, published by Ernest Dentu. The collector showed unwavering loyalty during the dark years of Courbet's exile and in 1875 purchased *Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine* (cat. no. 150). Often regarded as an interval of peace and happiness for the painter, the Saintonge sojourn saw him explore new approaches to landscape, give vent to his anticlericalism with *Return from the Conference*, venture into the still life for the first time, and return to the nude in a sensual, intimate vein. As he wrote to his friend Jules Troubat in June 1862, "I am here slaying away . . . I am painting nude women and landscapes in the prettiest countryside you have ever seen, and in a magnificent castle where I live alone except for a man and his mistress."¹

This genre, the noblest and most equivocal of the traditional hierarchy of painting, was an inspiration from the outset in the 1850s. However it was only during the following decade that Courbet divulged the full extent of his interest, with the deliberately provocative presentation of *The Bathers* at the Salon of 1853 (cat. no. 161), and by accorded a revelatory central place to the nude in *The Painter's Studio* (cat. no. 74); the latter, a veritable manifesto, was shown in the Pavillon du Réalisme, whose construction was organized by the artist himself just outside the Exposition Universelle of 1855. His *Reclining Nude* was an extension of these initial declarations, which reflected an allegiance to nature that would brook no compromise; at the same time it added to his approach the ambition of a provocative new reading of tradition. In the wake of the mildly risqué eroticism of *Woman with a Dog* (cat. no. 172) and *Woman in White Stockings* (p. 385, fig. 2), *Reclining Nude* is the first of the dazzling series of nudes to be the focal point for the ambition, daring, and lyricism that mark Courbet's art in the 1860s.

Here the artist undertakes a fresh interpretation of the classical theme of the



Fig. 2 Titian, *Venus of Urbino* (1538). Chiosso, Galleria degli Uffizi

reclining female nude as established in the Renaissance, and very few of his pictures make so much of their filiation. Courbet's vast visual culture—to make the point yet again—allowed him to muse on such great examples of the genre as Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (fig. 2), Jean Cocteau's *Eva Prima Pandora* (Paris, Musée du Louvre), Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* (Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister) and Nicolas Poussin's *Venus Spied on by the Shepherdess* (Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister). Referring to this group of works, Theodore Reff has rightly emphasized the past: "Titian's *Jupiter and Antiope*, also known as *Partho Venus* (fig. 3), could have played in the genesis of Courbet's picture, and notably of the sleeping figure of the model." Reff, however, also mentions the continuity of this tradition, and its most recent variants: Goya's *Naked Maya* (1801, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado), Delacroix's *Reclining Woman* (1830, Paris, Musée du Louvre) and of course Ingres, with the fine series comprising *Sleeping Nude* (a study for *La Dormeuse de Valpurga*, ca. 1820, London, Victoria and Albert Museum), *Odalisque with a Slave* (1825, Cambridge, Fogg Art Museum) and *Jupiter and Antiope* (1851, Paris, Musée d'Orsay). Ingres had in turn worked through the theme by setting it in their own time and personal world. In this process of modernization accompanying increased personalization, Chassériau had, some dozen years before Courbet, charged the pastoral nude with Realism in a hymn to the curves of his mistress, Alice Ozy (fig. 4). With this reclining nude Courbet threw himself into a similar venture, and we note the



Fig. 3 Titian, *Jupiter and Antiope*, known as *Partho Venus* (Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Peintures)



gestural kinship between the two works, in each of which an arm encircling the head accentuates the model's bosom while revealing the hair of her underarms, a provocative detail hitherto excluded by the demands of ideal beauty. Despite this kinship, however, Courbet is deliberately cultivating a more transgressive relationship with tradition. In choosing an indoor setting he opts for getting as close as he can to the multiple variations on *Venus and Cupid*, but the notion of a polite meditation on the Venetian models, or their Flemish versions, is upset by the erotic frankness of the approach. While the handsome draperies and the window opening onto the landscape—perhaps a direct evocation of the Rochemont studio—give the scene a classical structure, the languorous abandon of this goddess-made-model, casually sporting a pair of stockings and a single slipper, imposes the primacy of an intimate order between secrecy and provocation. Here the sleep of a woman, so important a theme for Courbet, finds one of its most spellbinding

expressions. The treatment of a body offered to the viewer's eye stresses, in the caressing grace of its brushwork, the pearly glow of the flesh that permeates the entire painting. And around this central motif, in the hangings, Courbet scatters fragments of a rougher, thicker manner, with contrasts that vivify the surface of his canvas.

In his mastery of these intentional disparities, just as in the fetishistic focus on nakedness via adjuncts like stockings, an earring, and a slipper, Courbet is establishing a formal, sensual grammar that Manet would bring to bear more elliptically a year later in *Olympia* (Paris, Musée d'Orsay). For in addition to the feat of plasticity she represents, the *Reclining Nude* occupies a prominent place in the dialogue that sprang up between the works of Courbet and Manet and which was such a potent force in French painting in the 1860s, especially in respect to the female nude. This canvas is among those in which Courbet generates a new relationship with tradition, finding a truly modern balance between homage and

iconoclasm, perpetuating the art of the masters of the past, and paving the way for the thematic and visual innovations of a new generation of painters.

L. C.

1 Chu, "Gustave Courbet Illustrator," *Drawing 2*, no. 4 (Nov.–Dec. 1980), p. 82.

2 Chu 1996, p. 189 [letter 64-4]; English from Chu 1992, p. 210.

3 Theodore Reff, "Courbet and Manet," *Arts Magazine* 54, no. 7 (Mar. 1980), p. 100.



Fig. 4 Théodore Chassériau, *Bather Sleeping near a Spring*, 1850, Avignon, Musée Calvet.