COURBET *(1819–1877)*

If ever an artist fit the mad-genius stereotype, it was Gustave Courbet. He was an immensely talented and volatile character who was also a vocal social activist, and he rarely shied away from provoking either his supporters or detractors. As can be seen in his self-portrait *The Desperate Man*, Courbet suffered vacillating temperments, but his steadfastness in his art and ability to stand up to conformity won the respect of his contemporaries and secured his place in art history.

Courbet was considered the first official realist because he believed that beauty was achieved through the representation of real subject matter, without artifice or affectation. Emerging in mid-19th-century France, when Romantic and Neo-classical art still held sway, Courbet arrived on the scene with his aggressive palette-knife technique, theatrical aesthetics, and little to no patience for pretentious subject matter. It is well acknowledged that the strides he made in revolutionizing the painting of his day paved the way for the upcoming Impressionists.

One of the few artists in history to achieve infamy in his own time, Courbet was critically and commercially successful through his annual Paris Salon entries. His 1855 *Painter's Studio*—which oddly was rejected from the Salon—is considered one of the great accomplishments of 19th-century art. After viewing it, Delacroix wrote, "I stand there alone for nearly an hour and discover that the picture of his which they refused is a masterpiece. I simply could not tear myself away from the sight of it."

Courbet never married and insisted on independence from all forms of institution and confinement. "I must lead the life of a savage. I must break free from its very governments," he wrote. "Therefore I have just embarked on the great wandering and independent life of a bohemian." He would lead that life until 1877, when he died an exiled but revered artist at the relatively young age of 58. —*A.M.*

The Desperate Man
1843–1845, oil, 17¾ x 21⅝. Private collection.