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YAMAMASU, Aoi. “Series for Hunters”: Another Portrait of Gustave Courbet

The 1861 Salon has often been seen as a turning point in the career of Gustave Courbet (1819-1877). That year, this painter – whose realistic representation of ordinary people on a historical scale had ignited scandals for the preceding several years – displayed only paintings of animals and landscapes. These paintings were met with great praise. Three of those works, *Spring Rut (The Battle of the Stags)* (Paris, Musée d’Orsay), *The Stag at Bay (Hunting with Hounds)* (Marseille, Musée des Beaux-Arts), and *the Piqueur* (Munich, Neue Pinakothek), formed what the painter himself called, “a series for hunters.”

In her renowned 1967 article “Gustave Courbet’s *Meeting: A Portrait of the Artist as a Wandering Jew*,” art historian Linda Nochlin discerned a direct influence relationship between *The Stag at Bay and Deer and Deer Hounds in a Mountain Torrent* (1832, London, Tate) by the British painter Sir Edwin Landseer (1802-1873). She also noted that it would be foolish to see Courbet’s use of Landseer’s iconography as socially motivated. Nochlin’s view was widely favored, and as a result, scholars tended to emphasize the popularity or commercial strategic quality of Courbet’s hunting scenes or animal paintings.

However, recent research has shed light on the history of paintings on hunting themes and their politically symbolic function. Along with those aspects, these studies have clarified the ideological opposition to aristocratic hunting practices from the French Revolution onwards. In this historical context, Courbet, as much a hunter as a painter, dismantled the traditional hunting picture framework, and produced works that approached popular animal pictures. Around that time, phrenology was a popular trend in 19th century France and the natural sciences were developing overall. This led to a heightened interest in analogies between people and animals. The caricaturist J. J. Grandville coined the term, *animalomanie* for this phenomenon.

Here I would like to focus on *L’Esprit des bêtes, vénerie française et zoologie passionnelle* (first edition 1847), by Alphonse Toussenel (1803-1885), a disciple of Charles Fourier. Toussenel’s work was praised by notable contemporaries such as Champfleury and Charles Baudelaire, and most likely Courbet himself was one of his readers. In his writing, Toussenel expanded on “passion,” a fundamental concept for Fourier’s socialist utopia, a concept which transcends the disparity between humans and animals. He classified animals by their appropriateness for various passions, and labeled them with certain professions and social classes within human society. There is, I discern, an obvious affinity between Toussenel’s depiction of the stag and Courbet’s heroic humanization of suffering animals in his “series for hunters.” Further, Toussenel’s identification of the stag with an intellectual worker, the misunderstood creator, accords with Courbet’s self-recognition as an artist. In other words, Courbet relied on Toussenel’s *L’Esprit des bêtes*, and we can see how the painter realized his integrated, and indeed, socially permitted, self-expression.

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