

Judge's Commentary

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Interpreting Gustave Courbet's "Series for Hunters"

This article reconsiders a series of three works on animal themes that Gustave Courbet entered in the 1861 Salon, *Spring Rut (The Battle of the Stags)*, *The Stag at Bay (Hunting with Hounds)*, and *The Piqueur*. Yamamasu interprets the works in terms of the cultural context of animal imagery at the time and positions them within his oeuvre.

Courbet's works have been generally discussed as two different groups, the political and the non-political. This article, however, shines a light on the hidden political meaning in this three-part series of animal paintings, which the painter himself called part of his "neutral ground." Yamamasu approached this question in two ways. First, she considered the social history approach used by Linda Nochlin and T. J. Clark. This is the fundamental method of interpreting Courbet's arts, given that he shared the socialist philosophy of Prud'hon, and was politically active, a participant in the Paris Commune. The analytical psychology mode was her second approach. While the tendency is to consider Courbet as a realist who always depicted what he saw as-is, Yamamasu indicates that the painter projected his own image and emotions on the natural forms depicted in his paintings. For example, the numerous irregularly formed, damaged apples, and dying, bloody trout he depicted in later works can be seen as the painter projecting his own image on his subjects, wounded and weakened in body and mind by his confinement as a political prisoner. In this article, Yamamasu uses this second method to interpret the "Series for Hunters" works, finding in them Courbet's own image as he struggled, persecuted by society. She used the first method, the social history approach, to show the basis for her argument. Building upon previous research on hunting and hunting paintings, she investigates the discourse of contemporary intellectuals known as *animalomanie*, a term coined for the intelligentsia of the day's interest in animals, and discovers the striking resemblance between Alphonse Toussenel's description of the stag in his *L'Esprit des bêtes, Vénérie française et zoologie passionnelle* (first edition 1847) and the imagery of the stag pursued by hunting dogs seen in two works in Courbet's "Series for Hunters," *The Stag at Bay (Hunting with Hounds)* and *The Piqueur*.

Toussenel equated stags with the "righteous people," "workers," and "creators" of new discoveries who were unjustly persecuted by authority. Yamamasu suggested the new concept that Courbet included himself in such categories, and, as such, Toussenel may have been one of the inspirations for the "Series for Hunters." To reinforce this new interpretation, she showed how the depiction of animals in the series work, *Spring Rut (The Battle of the Stags)* and in *Fox in the Snow*, another work entered in the same Salon, echoes Toussenel's text. As underpinning for this argument, she analyzed Courbet's human network and philosophical environment, suggesting that Courbet may have referred to Toussenel's writing, and, indeed, may have been in direct contact with that author.

While this article does not yet give us a full interpretation of the series, it provides a groundbreaking new vantage point based on the preceding massive scholarship on the subject. Yamamasu produced a solid reconstruction of the intellectual and political human network surrounding the works through a careful reading and interpretation of related texts and artworks of the same period, resulting in a superb, persuasive argument that indicates the resonance between artwork and thought (discourse).

For these reasons, we hereby award the Bijutsushi Prize to Yamamasu Aoi for her efforts and achievements in this article.