

The Letters of Gustave Corbet  
from May Through December 1854  
as Original Source Material

Stephen Smith

Literature of Art  
ARH 680

Petra Chu, the translator of Courbet's personal correspondences for the University of Chicago Press, wrote a 2007 book entitled *The Most Arrogant Man in France* about the same artist. Arrogance steams from Courbet's letter as their most outstanding feature. Yet the keen creative mind of the painter is forever working toward the formation of his *oeuvre*. In his letters to various friends and business associates in the second part of 1854 Courbet gives intimate and amusing tells of his personal life, transacts some business and describes the paintings he is currently working on. The description of the *L'Atelier du Peintre* is briefly laid out in a few paragraphs in a letter to Jules-Antoine-Félix Husson or Champferury at the end of 1854. Though they were very close at the time of this correspondence, the two men would have a falling out a few years later.<sup>1</sup> In another letter to his friend and patron Alfred Bruyans he describes his *Self-Portrait with Pipe*, which had recently arrived back from an exhibition in Frankfort. This visualization of the painting explained to a close, personal friend of the artist should be the most insightful information one could acquire outside of the painting itself.

In his mid-thirties in 1854 Courbet had finished the *Self-Portrait with Pipe* four years previously to the writing of his letter to Bruyans. Courbet's explanation of the portrait in his letter can be compared to a 1988 description by Sarah Faunce and Linda Nochlin. Courbet claims *Self-Portrait with Pipe* "is the portrait of a fanatic, an ascetic. It is the portrait of a man who, disillusioned by the nonsense that made up his education, seeks to live by his own principles."<sup>2</sup> Faunce and Nochlin write that it is "cast in a Romantic spirit, but projects neither an image of suffering or distance in time and/or space, nor a vacillating and uncertain technique; rather, it asserts an unsentimental, if

---

<sup>1</sup> Petra Chu, *Letters of Gustave Courbet* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 642.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

mannered, portrait of a modern young man conscious of the advantages of his own extraordinarily handsome and sensitive features and the ostensible freedom of the Bohemian life.”<sup>3</sup> These later historians would certainly have been familiar with Courbet’s description of the painting from his 1854 letter yet they don’t mention “fanatic” or “ascetic” in their interpretation. Faunce and Nochlin downplay the artist’s cockiness as his being “conscious of his advantages.” Faunce and Nochlin’s understanding of *Self-Portrait with Pipe* seems to be more their subjective opinion rather than Courbet’s intentions.

Also known at the time as *Le Christ à la Pipe* the self-portrait is described by Klaus Herding in 1991 as “[m]usingly withdrawn...yet full of self-confidence latent vitality (collar and shoulder belie the contemplative impression), this “Christ of the people” exudes a calm that does not reappear, if with a touch of resignation, until Courbet’s final *Self-Portrait*.”<sup>4</sup> One again this is far from the artist’s description to Bruyas. Courbet is very specific about what he wants to transmit through his self-portrait. He believes his “attitude (has) gradually changed during his life”<sup>5</sup> and each painting of himself is part of the creation of a visual autobiography. Herding, as well as Faunce and Nochlin all recognize that in 1846, the date of *Self-Portrait with Pipe*, through to when the artist wrote about it to Bruyas, Courbet was at his healthiest and most confident. This certainly comes across in the handsome portrait as it does in so many of his others. But if the painter wanted to portray himself as a fanatic and disillusioned ascetic later viewers

---

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Faunce and Linda Nochlin, *Courbet Reconsidered* (New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1988), 97.

<sup>4</sup> Klaus Clayton, translated by John William, *Courbet To Venture Independence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Chu, op. cit., 122

have not found these characteristics in *Self-Portrait with Pipe*. It is possible that by calling the painting *Le Christ à la Pipe* one can see that the figure is suppose to represent an ascetic. Herding writes at length in *Courbet: To Venture Independent* about the self-anointment as a Christ figure by Courbet, whose confidence qualified as conceited.

The artist's contemporary Théophile Silvestre wrote at the time about *Self-Portrait with Pipe* that the figure "dreams of himself as he smokes."<sup>6</sup> Michael Fried will write a century and a half later "the overall impression conveyed [in the painting] is of a state somnolence that has nothing to do with fatigue and everything to the evocation of a 'primordial' or *somatic* order of activity—the automatic processes by which the body sustains itself."<sup>7</sup> Fried uses this and other examples to lead into his own theories about Courbet's art. Petra Chu wrote in 2007 that *Self-Portrait with Pipe* that "the artist seems to have distanced himself from the artistic and literary prototypes that inspired his earlier portraits to arrive at a true self-image."<sup>8</sup>

Later descriptions of *L'Atelier du Peintre* rely heavily on Courbet's 1854 letter to Champfleury. Jack Lindsay quotes the correspondence verbatim in his 1973 book, *Gustave Courbet: His Life and Art*. The letters have been translated a number of times.<sup>9</sup> Benedict Nicolson does a detailed comparison with the letter and the final painting in *Courbet: The Studio of the Painter*, also from 1973. When dealing with a complicated painting like *L'Atelier du Peintre* historians have followed the script laid out by Courbet but have chosen to be more subjective with their understanding of the self-portrait.

---

<sup>6</sup> Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago press, 1990), 76.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Petra Chu, *The Most Arrogant Man in France* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 36.

<sup>9</sup> Benedict Nicolson, *Courbet: The Studio of the Painter* (New York, The Viking Press, Inc., 1973), 84.

Though the primary source of the letters would seem to give the most concrete and justifiable explanation of the meaning of *Self-Portrait with Pipe*, historians and critics have, as Courbet predicted, had “their work cut out from them [and have had to] manage the best they can.”<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 132.

**Bibliography:**

Chu, Petra ten-Doesschate, ed. *Letters of Gustave Corbet*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Chu, Petra ten-Doesschate. *The Most Arrogant Man in France*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007.

Faunce, Sarah and Linda Nochlin. *Courbet Reconsidered*. New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1988.

Fried, Michael. *Courbet's Realism*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Herding, Klaus translated by John William. *Courbet To Venture Independence*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991.

Lindsay, Jack. *Gustave Corbet: His Life and Art*. New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973.

Nicolson, Benedict. *Courbet: The Studio of the Painter*. New York: Viking Press, 1973.