

Artist	Courbet
Title	Stonebreakers
Date	1849
Medium	Oil on Canvas
Scale	1.65 m x 2.57 m
Style	Realism
Scope	Scenes of working life



SUBJECT: France and Europe undergoing major social changes. Roads are built linking cities to rural areas- people migrate to cities for work. This painting shows two male figures breaking stones to clear the way for roads. Such work was undertaken by the lower classes and poor.

Formal features

Composition	Two figures one old one young fill the composition with tattered clothing
Colour or texture	Muted, dull colour palette represents the somber mood the workers are feeling. The browns and greys represent the only life they will know and the realities of labour whereas the blue sky in the background shows a life they will never have.
Light & tone	Natural light, shadow in background and light shines down directly onto the workers to show their importance in society even though they are often overlooked.
Space & depth or relief	The horizon line is covered by the mountain and the sky is only just visible in the background. The figures give a sense of scale which wouldn't be there without them.
Line or brushwork	The brushwork is blended and makes the scene very realistic. Courbet's application of paint was rougher and less finished than the techniques favoured by the academies and his working method would influence the Impressionists and artists of the modern era. Like the stones themselves, Courbet's brushwork is rough—more so than might be expected during the mid-nineteenth century.
Figure handling	Figures are shown as realistic and unidealised- the elder figure is aged and stopped, the younger struggles to carry a basket of stones. Unidealised realism was typical of the Realist style.

Historical context/subject of work:

Courbet was a Realist who painted individuals and events in a non-idealised, direct way. He did not sentimentalise his subjects but showed them in as accurate a manner as possible so that when we look at the painting we experience what these individuals endure. This view is supported by the Socialist writer and friend of Courbet, Pierre Proudhon, who wrote of the painting; "This modern servitude devours the generations in their youth". The tattered clothing worn by the figures mirrors in colour the rough ground beneath them, further linking them to the task they are undertaking.

The young boy struggles to lift a basket filled with stones, his youth and slight physique indicating this is an occupation for a stronger adult male. His older companion has broken these stones from the road. A pile of stones slowly rises behind them, neither figure engages with the viewer, they are absorbed in the completion of their task. Tools such as a pickaxe reinforce the struggle these characters endure. This might be a painting of unknown individuals, however Courbet does not celebrate their struggle, instead he encourages us to sympathise with them.

Cultural/social factors:

The large scale of the painting was typical of Courbet's depictions of peasants and workers. It gives a sense of importance to subjects often overlooked or ignored by the Salons at this time. Courbet treated these individuals, their lives and struggles with the same gravitas traditionally reserved for history paintings.

Artist's involvement:

If we look closely at Courbet's painting *The Stonebreakers* of 1849 (painted only one year after Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote their influential pamphlet, *The Communist Manifesto*) the artist's concern for the plight of the poor is evident.

Barbizon School of Painters...

An influence of Courbet's *Stonebreakers* could be Millet's subject matter but he rejects his way of painting a scene of labour. Unlike Millet, who, in paintings like *The Gleaners*, was known for depicting hard-working, but idealized peasants, Courbet depicts figures who wear ripped and tattered clothing. And unlike the aerial perspective Millet used in *The Gleaners* to bring our eye deep into the French countryside during the harvest, the two stone breakers in Courbet's painting are set against a low hill of the sort common in the rural French town of Ornans, where the artist had been raised and continued to spend a much of his time. The hill reaches to the top of the canvas everywhere but the upper right corner, where a tiny patch of bright blue sky appears. The effect is to isolate these labourers, and to suggest that they are physically and economically trapped. In Millet's painting, the gleaners' rounded backs echo one another, creating a composition that feels unified, where Courbet's figures seem disjointed. Millet's painting, for all its sympathy for these poor figures, could still be read as "art" by viewers at an exhibition in Paris.

Critical text quote:

The Socialist writer and friend of Courbet, commenting on the subject of this painting said; 'This modern servitude devours the generations in their youth'

Political factors:

The painting is showing the inequalities in society and the fact that the young and the old have to do these difficult jobs just because of their class. Also this shows them struggling away to make the roads for the upper classes when they won't even use them or get paid what they deserve.

How does this example fit the scope of work:

The realities of the working class and show life as it is unidealised typical of the realism style but rejecting academic art. Courbet wants to show what is "real," and so he has depicted a man that seems too old and a boy that seems still too young for such back-breaking labor. This is not meant to be heroic: it is meant to be an accurate account of the abuse and deprivation that was a common feature of mid-century French rural life.

Like the stones themselves, Courbet's brushwork is rough—more so than might be expected during the mid-nineteenth century. This suggests that the way the artist painted his canvas was in part a conscious rejection of the highly polished, refined Neoclassicist style that still dominated French art in 1848.