A Revolutionary Look at Sleep

Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) was one of the most controversial and influential artists of his century. In an era of rapidly evolving artistic conventions and an explosion of modernity, Courbet embodied the 19th-century artist; his radical approach to politics and art characterized his dramatic career. When his works were rejected from Parisian salons, he hosted his own exhibitions, where his innovative paintings reached a wider audience. He intentionally broke artistic traditions and seemed to revel in the backlash he received from incensed conservative critics. His attention to working-class life, his open opposition to dramatic history painting, and his detailed nudes were labeled as destructive and lacking merit. His revolutionary painting of two sleeping lesbians, *Le Sommeil* (1866, translated as *Sleep or The Sleepers*), was so shocking that it was not publicly shown for over a century.¹

Most infamously, Courbet participated in the short-lived Paris Commune, a revolt which sprung up in the chaos of the Franco-Prussian war. After the commune was swiftly crushed by the army, Courbet went into exile in Switzerland.² Commentators note that

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² 2352-7218/© 2023 Published by Elsevier Inc. on behalf of National Sleep Foundation.
some of his later works depict fish dying on land, thought to be an allegory for his persecution. An early death, likely exacerbated by heavy drinking, ended Courbet’s pioneering life.

Today, Courbet is most often associated with Realism, although he did not apply this label to himself. Instead, his letters articulate a vision of art focused on everyday life. The challenge for Courbet was locating the beauty in the real. Many of his works take on a dreamlike quality that defies the dreary standards assigned by his critics. His famous self-portrait, The Desperate Man (1845), with its wild eyes and brilliant lighting, succinctly shows his ability to imbue the simple and real with a mesmerizing beauty. The Courbet of this portrait seems to be roused from his sleep by a tormenting nightmare or perhaps fights the hold of a drug-induced panic. In the real, he finds those unique experiences and emotional states that seem unreal.

It is unsurprising that altered states of consciousness would be a captivating topic for artists like Courbet, given the scientific understanding of sleep at the time. Sleep medicine was grounded in methodological improvements made in the 19th century—primarily the belief that sleep was an active process worthy of rigorous study. Later, technological advances made in the 20th century, like tools to monitor brain waves and eye movements, allowed sleep medicine to fully blossom. The only accurate scholarship on sleep that would have existed in the 1850s is Jean-Jacques de Mairan and Augustin de Condolle’s early experiments in chronobiology. Courbet’s generation occupied a unique moment in which modern medicine was overtaking centuries of unrefined, traditional beliefs. This chaotic transition into modernity, seen in politics, science, and art, allows Courbet to paint sleep and intoxication as the mystical death throes of prehistory.

Turning to Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine (Summer), the sentiments articulated in The Desperate Man appear again, although, at first glance, the work simply shows two women relaxing by the river. The sleeping woman in front immediately grabs the viewer’s eye, her tranquility evident in her open hands and ruffled dress. Her one eye seems to flutter open, as if she is caught in between consciousness and unconsciousness or enjoying an exciting dream. There is an implication of erotic bliss or insobriety, as if Courbet cannot help but include some scandal in every composition. These elements stand out from the more muted background, with its careful greenery and calm water. The artist’s appreciation for detail is evident in the slight translucence of the fabric at the sleeping woman’s waist.

The piece seems to act as precursor to Édouard Manet’s Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe (1863), another outdoor park genre painting. In Manet’s work, there is a clear mingling of the real and unreal. The period clothing and seemingly relaxing subject matter are totally upended by out-of-place nudity and an inescapable feeling of confusion or interruption. This same sense of pulling the dreamlike from the solidly real is evident in Courbet’s work, as well. Sleep, then, is fitting material for his eye. It is entirely normal and common, yet also mysterious and inspiring. As much as our scientific understanding of sleep has grown, the public imagination (and art) continues to interpret dreams and nightmares. The loss of control and the vulnerability of altered mental states are explored here in Courbet’s rendering of sleep, combining the real and the dreamlike in a harmonious masterpiece.

Declaration of conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

References


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