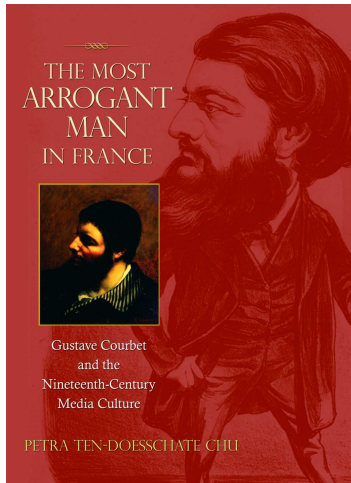


The Most Arrogant Man in France: Gustave Courbet and the Nineteenth-Century Media Culture / Petra ten-Doesschate Chu.--Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, May 2007.--248 p.: ill.--ISBN 978-0-691-12679-1 (cl., alk. paper): \$45.00.



There is no better art historian than Petra ten-Doesschate Chu to write something original about Gustave Courbet (1819-1877). She is the editor and translator of *The Letters of Gustave Courbet* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992) and a well-published authority on nineteenth-century art. The book's title is drawn from Courbet, who characterized himself as "the most arrogant man in France." The publication coincides with the 130th anniversary of the painter's death, and, along with several other publications, reflects the media appeal Courbet zealously sought.

As a painter, Courbet is familiar to many for his naturalistic, raw, unsentimental landscapes; graceless, lusty working women; and monumental works, such as *The Painter's Studio* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 1885). Chu departs from critical assessment of the painter's technique, style, and artistic themes to focus on Courbet's achieved "artistic autonomy." In the book's first chapter, Chu writes: "It is the story of an artist whose public persona, work, and marketing strategy were inextricably bound up with the press and whose originality as an artist

depended to a large extent on his astute assessment of the newspaper and popular magazine as the carriers, barometers, and shapers of the culture of his time." Chu studies Courbet's celebrity within the social, political, and economic developments of the nineteenth century that most impacted the artist and his work—industrialization; rise of the Bourgeoisie; growth in subscription publications to a wider reading public; growing demand for art, particularly for middle class homes; the Franco-Prussian War, and the dismantling of the Vendôme Column. The trajectory of Courbet's career, particularly his relationship with the media, differed from artists of previous generations, who relied upon government sponsored commissions, acceptance by juried Academy and Salon exhibitions, and upper-class clientele.

The protagonist within this historical framework, Courbet created a persona through which to publicize his art and ideas. He sought to be an artist of the people and bring his art to a broader audience. He made art in all genres that would appeal to both men and women and consciously worked to make images that would comfortably inhabit spaces in middle-class homes. He initiated connections with writers and journalists, by corresponding on art and social issues. With controversial views on both art and politics, he earned the reputation of "bête noir" and Chu illustrates the ways in which this "'bad boy" image worked for and against Courbet.

The text is scholarly, but accessible to undergraduates. Over 60 pages are devoted to endnotes, bibliography, and index. Recommended for college libraries, especially those already owning *The Letters of Gustave Courbet*.

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