

In scorn of official

OF AWARDS AND THE ARTIST overtures

by A.R. Nagori

"I cannot paint an angel because I have never seen one" — Courbet.

In order to broaden their base for public support, after the elections of 1869, Napoleon III and his Minister of Fine Arts, M. Maurice Richard, seized the opportunity to bestow upon Courbet the ribbon of Legion of Honour. Notwithstanding the fact that painter Courbet had a police dossier and was jailed for his republican

Its intervention is altogether demoralising, disastrous to the artist, whom it deceives concerning his own merit; disastrous to art, which it encloses within official rules, and condemns to the most sterile mediocrity; it would be wisdom for it to abstain. The day the State leaves us free, it will have done its

for producing wealth first cracked the hard foundations of old orders.

Artist Gustave Courbet was a stormy personality of his time. His revolutionary vision was a genuine expression of his environment. He was of peasant stock and of re-

putation as a social revolutionary by taking part in the events of 1848. The painting 'Stone Breakers', which was a masterpiece of social comment, portraying common people, gave new meaning to art that resulted in the birth of 'Realism' (Art movement succeeding Romanticism and Neo-Classicism). Unlike David's idealised classical approach and Delacroix's dramatic, baroque and colourist, romantic concepts and rendering,

French artist Gustave Courbet, a stormy personality of his time rebuffed Napoleon III by refusing the ribbon of Legion of Honour because "the State is incompetent in matters of art, when it undertakes a reward, it usurps the public taste

and socialist convictions, he was awarded the highest honour of France. The artist replied to the Minister of Fine Arts, by writing:—

"At the house of my friend Jules Dupre, at Isle Adam, I learned of a decree naming me chevalier of the Legion of Honour. This decree, which my well-known opinions on artistic rewards and titles of nobility should have spared me, has been issued without my consent, and you, Your Excellency, thought it your duty to take the initiative...

Such methods do you honour, Your Excellency, but allow me to say that they can change neither my attitude nor my decision.

My republican convictions make me unable to accept a distinction which belongs in essence to a monarchical order. My principles reject this decoration of the Legion of Honour, which, in my absence, you have accorded me.

At no time, under no circumstances, and for no reason would I have accepted it. Much less would I do so today, when betrayals multiply on every side, and the human conscience is saddened by so many selfish recantations. Honour does not lie in a title or a ribbon; it lies in actions and motives for actions. Respect for oneself and one's ideas is its largest portion. I honour myself by remaining faithful to my lifelong principles; if I betrayed them, I should desert honour to wear its mark.

My feelings as an artist are no less opposed to accepting a reward accorded me by the State. The State is incompetent in matters of art. When it undertakes a reward, it usurps the public

duty towards us. . . .

Permit me then, Your Excellency, to decline the honour you had thought to give me. I am fifty years old, and have always lived free, let me finish my life still free. When I am dead they will have to say of me: He never belonged to any school, to any church, to any institution, to any academy, above all not to any regime, unless it were the regime of liberty."

Stormy

The generation between 1815 to 1849, in European history, was ripe for an endemic civil war. The forces of conservatism triumphed with the restoration of the old order in 1815 and then proceeded to entrench themselves in power in most of the states of Europe. Their strength is measured by the tenacity and the partial success with which they held the forces of change at bay for another generation. But their greatest strength lay at the level of political power; and political power alone became less and less sufficient to resist the most powerful forces of change. The kind of social and economic order, to which aristocracy suited, was a static order based on landed property and agriculture, religious faith and political status-quo. The kind of socio-economic order which was coming into existence, was based on faith in science and industrial wealth.

By 1848 it became obvious that the forces of conservatism were fighting a losing battle. New forms of governments (in Europe) better adapted to the needs of the new society, were set up. New political and social ideals, fermented first in men's minds and then in movements of political and social revolt. Revolutions happened mainly because the spreading roots of a new system



revolutionary lineage. Prof. Janson of New York University quotes Karl Marx, "Can Jupiter survive the lightning rod?" According to him the French poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire was working out the same problem when he said that paintings expressed "The heroism of modern life". According to Prof. Janson, "at that time only one painter was willing to make an artistic creed of this demand; Baudelaire's friend Gustave Courbet."

Courbet had come to believe that the Romantic emphasis on feeling and imagination was merely an escape from the realities of the time. He believed that the modern artist must rely on his direct experience: "I cannot paint an angel because I have never seen one." This defines Courbet's concept of Realism, appropos to naturalism. His painting 'Stone Breakers' caused a storm in the Parisian art world. Courbet's friend, socialist Proudhon, commenting on figures depicted in that painting, said, "They are endowed with the dignity of their symbolic status, they do not turn to us for sympathy, they are a parable from the Gospels."

Catalyst

The award of a medal, his painting's admission to the Salon, and the artist's rejection of the award, set off a controversy that began a running battle between the authorities and Courbet. It lasted throughout his life. Courbet at this time won his

Courbet chose to paint ordinary peasants and workers and such other commoners in their every day life ordeals.

In contrast to this subject matter, Courbet continued to paint studio nudes such as his famous work 'Bathers' about which a critic remarked, "This creature is such that a crocodile wouldn't want to eat her." Whether these nudes were painted out of pure sensuous delight on his part or to ridicule aristocracy and their taste for academic studies of (aristocrat ladies) 'Les Grande Femmes', is not clear.

In 1855, on the occasion of the Exposition Universelle, Courbet was refused entry to the Salon, so he organised a private exhibition in its vicinity. It was for this occasion that he prepared his famous painting, 'Studio'. He called this, "a real allegory of seven years of my artistic life." In it he pictures himself, the artist in action, and through this action serving as catalyst between the common man in his manifold (and miserable) aspects and the Parisian elite.

Some of the most beautiful works, flower paintings, were produced while he was imprisoned, convicted for the part he was presumed to have played in the Commune of 1871. His protest against authoritarianism and destruction of Napoleon resulted in his solitary confinement in a cell where he fell ill after being attacked by vermin. Later he died a premature and tragic death as an exile in Switzerland.