Event Paper 1 – Painting

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On February 14, 2015 I attended the Dallas Museum of Art in Dallas Texas. The museums houses works from all across the world during a wide range of time periods. The “Ancient Mediterranean and European Art” captured my attention as soon as I looked at the map. These paintings jumped right off the wall, into the real world with all their drama and realism. *Gustave Courbet, in his Fox in the Snow, demonstrates the beauty and ferocity of the wild.* Courbet’s subject matter, color choice and lines all contribute to the total meaning of the painting.

The French artist uses natural elements to fuse isolation and thrill of the hunt. He chooses to paint this fox on an icy plateau overlooking a frozen plain. The bleakness of the cold tundra gets amplified with the use of an overcast sky. The frigid wasteland in the background contains no life. Additionally, Courbet creates a slightly raised pillar in the foreground of the scene. He covers the platform in snow and ice with a large rock wall behind everything. On the plateau in front of the stone wall, a fox devours its prey. The carnivore’s bushy tail sways back and forth as a vermin’s fragile body hangs out its mouth. The rodent’s entrails lay in a pile as they freeze on the ground. This image captures the cycle of life in the wilderness.

Ranging from steel blue to brown and orange, this painting uses color to accentuate nature’s emptiness as well as its beauty. The contrast between the warm brown and cold greys generates a distinct barrier from the background to the foreground. Courbet uses a handful of blue and grey to depict an icy void in the background. To transition from the dark grey, the foreground contains a neutral white powdery snow. Additionally, the tall rock on the far side of the plateau contains very dark shades of brown. The rock strongly solidifies the space behind the fox. Finally, the fox has a lighter brown tail, just barely distinguishable over the dark brown rock. The tails fades into a fur coat of warm dark brown and then red and orange towards the edge of the fox’s body. The reds and oranges near the edge of the coat change in saturation quite a bit as well. Finally, the pink pile of guts compliments the red hues of the fox’s coat, yet stands out on the light snow.

Several line types and patterns contribute to Courbet’s vision. Firstly, open lines add to the overcast and give the sky a foggy look. The clouds appear blurry around the edges. Conversely, closed lines grouped in intricate patterns give the ice a crisp look. Courbet appears to use his paint knife to achieve these sharp, defined lines. Finally, the fox holds a mix of both types. The body and coat use a lot of open lines. Thus, the coat looks soft to the touch. However, the ears have such sharply drawn closed lines that they almost resemble knifes. Courbet’s attention to detail adds to the overall message of this work.

The isolation of this frozen, desolate land creates a space of clarity to understand this work. Courbet set this painting in the middle of a frozen valley to show the contrast between life and death in the wild. A lone fox symbolizes independence while the dead prey makes a statement of ferocity. The remoteness of this land, and well as the height of the plateau balances the fox’s atomicity with soothing calmness.

Courbet uses color in the fox’s coat and eyes to communicate the mood of this painting. The coat contains a variety of oranges and reds, two very vibrant colors. This handsome coat of fur symbolizes life and passion. Although the eyes are dark, compared to the red and orange, they hold a twinkle of light reflected in each of them. The reflection in the Fox’s eyes shows enjoyment. Courbet shows the cycle of life as enthusiastic and visually appealing.

The sharpness and softness of objects speak to their importance in this painting. The clouds and much of the background make use of blurry lines, this means they lack importance. On the other hand, the fox has many sharp defined lines around the ear and face. Clearly showing how important and keen the senses of this beast are. Courbet’s sharpness also includes the patterns on the ice, they are so detailed the sound of crunched ice can be heard. This symbolizes the reality of this harsh environment, to survive the fox must become strong.

The French artist uses the fox’s kill successfully to capture the brutality of animals. The gore beneath the carnivore’s feet is a small and bold statement. This tiny, pink pile of guts adds a brutal degree of intensity to the work without overwhelming the other aspects. Furthermore, the feeling of isolation is strong with the vast empty plain. Courbet demonstrates the wild well, with a hunter out in the world alone.

Courbet reveals beauty in nature through contrast of colors. Courbet uses a subtle background of grey and washed out, blue sky to set the focus in the foreground. Additionally, the red and orange of the fox’s coat are the main warm colors in this piece. They represent passion, happiness and independence.

Alternating between line types productively focuses the important aspects of the painting. The crisply detailed work of the crunched ice depicts the bitter cold environment superbly. The sound of cracking ice can almost be heard by looking at the intricate hatching. In addition, the accentuation of the fox’s ears ties into the fierceness of nature. Courbet uses soft lines for the majority of the fox’s coat. In doing this, he creates a contrast between the aesthetic and cruelty of nature. The fox’s soft coat shows how wonderful wildlife can look and the pointed ears demonstrate cunning.

Gustave Courbet, in his Fox in the Snow, shows how visually stunning and dangerous the wilderness can be. He symbolizes the beauty of nature with a fox whose coat is so beautiful, it becomes easy to forget how deadly this beast is. To remind us, he places a dead rodent at the fox’s feet and details the fox’s ears with extremely sharp lines. To contrast the warm colors of the fox’s coat, the frozen wasteland adds great balance to the energy of the painting. The cycle of life is an important process, so Courbet shows both sides in his painting; *the beauty and ferocity of nature.*