

*From the Modern to the Contemporary
Urban Landscapes, Urban Lives*

by Gregory Evans

Before I can discuss the birth of urban landscape art in Paris, I've got to introduce what is called our Modern art period. To do this, we've got to go back to the Impressionists and how artists like Courbet, Caillebotte and the Impressionists began to change the way they saw reality, and thus changed the way they portrayed it. Impressionism was a Parisian movement, plain and simple. Those artists of the time were mostly city dwellers. However, in the beginning, it wasn't the modern city that inspired them. From the earliest of their development, they were running off to the country to paint pretty pictures of trees and parklands, or in the worst case, they were off to the banks of the Seine painting images of calm and wondrous city dwellers with their fancy clothes and parasols protecting them from the intense sun of a non-polluted Paris of the day. It wasn't these guys who gave us urban art, but since the impressionists were indeed rebels of the status quo, they did propagate these new synthetic scenes and backdrops.

It would have been a modern Realist of the time who would have planted the seeds of change for that embrace of city life and the artist's presentation of it. It would be this artist who gave our later Impressionists permission to do things differently. Gustave Courbet was our first rebel to realize that he was indeed a rebel, and yes, he did have a cause, a purpose – he knew he needed to break away from the ways of his predecessors, heroes and idols, the soon to be dying Romanticists. It would be this solitary and groundbreaking move of the time that Gustave denied the authority of academic art that made him the father of Impressionism.

I must say its difficult to present European urban landscape art as such a limited geographic phenomenon (i.e. Paris) when art always has some kind of dynamic with other areas. Artists lived in all cities around the world, and since artists migrate just as birds and insects do, they bring their ideas with them when they move. Europe is a large continent, and, for example, while the Cubists were having their heyday in Montmartre in the early 20th century, the Futurists were having theirs

over in Italy. Cubists affected Futurists and Futurists affected Cubists – its with this that we cut a healthy slice from that specific but delicious Parisian tart called modern art, and call it Urban Landscapes – Urban Lives.

Propaganda of the Paris Salon

In Paris, all things art began with the Paris Salon and its juridic realities. In 1667, long before our modern era, a publicity and public relations mechanism most commonly called The Salon, was established to show the works of recent graduates of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts (called the Academy at the time) This school was founded by a church Cardinal and was supported by the French Monarch Louis XIV, with both parties needing to propagate what they thought were proper opinions. With both the Church and Royalty guiding the hands of art, we could expect rigid and strict control of what was acceptable and produced. Those who established and ran the Salon were those who ensured their own gain.

For nearly 200 years, the salon functioned as an outlet to share and guide the directions of what art was, or what it could do. All works were juried, and it was only those works that suited purposes of the time, i.e. historic, mythological, and Biblical themes, that were approved. Of a worthy note, nudity was accepted without a bat of an eye if kept within the Academy's construct of what they

considered fine art. The complete control of not only the art industry, but of morals and ethics, was well in place.

Approaching the mid-nineteenth century, the Salon boasted more than a million visitors every year. For all practical purposes, we can consider this exhibition of art the solitary driving force for guiding beliefs and steering public opinion in a specific direction in regards to what good, acceptable art was.

Then, along comes war, a war that finds its way into the confines of Paris. This was the war of 1870, a bitter thing between the French and Germans, and one that was settled quickly. However, the resulting social unrest and political upheaval within the city of would extend itself into the hearts of the population, and into the hearts of local artists. Amongst the political upheaval, there were the frustrated artists who were tired of the rejection of that haughty Salon that refused, even censored, their work to perpetuate the status-quo of the Romantic model of the time. These were artists that would demand recognition in any way that it came.

The Original Seed

A young French artist and political idealist named **Gustave Courbet** (1819 – 1877) learned to paint by copying the works of Romantic Period luminaries such as Rembrandt, Titian, Rubens and Caravaggio. The Academic Romantics had exclusive not only to the Salon's stage, but the arena that contained that stage, and the parking lot surrounding it all. Subjects and narrative considered suggestive were strictly unacceptable, and just plain indecent, worthy only of being ignored. This exclusivity was not to be challenged.

In light of revolution and changing times, Courbet ignored those convention by painting a familiar and real world which included real people doing real things. Gone was myth – gone was religion. Courbet strove to do something different with his work, and faced pretty severe rejection in this need for self-expression. Slowly, sporadic successes, some being rather surprising, would accumulate, and his reputation as an artist grew. He would continue pushing his vision forward, and others would soon follow in his footsteps – it would be Courbet's Realist work that stimulated the birth of early impressionism. Aside from his nudes (particularly his revealing and near pornographic *L'Origine du monde*) His tasty and provocative “*Les Demoiselles des bord de la Seine*” (Young Ladies by the Siene) shown at the Paris Salon

in 1857 may be just the painting that would feed an artists' dreams of going where they could not go before, and just the painting that showed a seeming change in the Salon's juried preferences.

By title alone, *Young Ladies by the Siene* was rebellious not so much in its detail, but in its subject. It was, of course, an image of two young ladies by the Seine, but at the time, and at the least, this image was certainly indecent in its suggestivity. Once this painting was placed on public display, an uproar ensued. Audiences were already well-trained in public opinion and could hold to those opinions as tenaciously as some do today. Yes, indeed, one of two young ladies in this painting was portrayed in her undergarments while an empty boat sat nearby at the river's edge. This empty boat would have a man's hat in it, which indicates some male companionship out of the scene – perhaps the painter himself. This was a voyeuristic journey that would allow any man to claim that hat to be their own, to claim to be that man present but not in the picture – it was bound to upset and hit a bit too close to home with those who supported proper, domestic, paried relations.

The work Gustave did was academically rebellious, and by doing such work and gaining approval amidst said controversy, he was giving permission for other artists to do the same – it was Gustave that paved the way for future artists to paint as they would, to

paint real subjects in real life situations - no longer painting gods and satyrs and what was approved by the Salon. It was Courbet's honest treatment of his subject matter that would be considered the beginning of the Realist movement – his work was the seed of that which began the Modern Art period.

The Belle Epoch

It was 1870, and a bloody 7 month war in Paris had ended with the revolution of the Paris Commune. A few months later, France would take its city back from the Communards and replace it with its Third Republic, but the need for changes were irreversible – this would be the beginning of the Belle Epoch.

Soon, there were other options for artists in the way they expressed themselves and the ways their work could be disseminated. Via artistic demand the Salon was no longer the driving force in art that it had been, though it still did exist. There were now collectors and galleries who sought out and represented artists not within the system of art as an academic product. Critics contributed to this new way, paying due attention to these new upstarts that we now call the Impressionists. The practice of non-artists writing about art was now a lively and accepted part of what was to become a new industry.

The rebellious Impressionists' work would bring about the practice of plein-air painting.

No longer being satisfied with the academic approach of going to the country and sketching what they saw only to return to the studio to create a proper painting, they took their supplies out in the field. Paint found in small tubes was now commonplace (having replaced pig-bladders and fragile glass syringes) and the product was now being enjoyed in ways that couldn't have been expected just 30 years before.

Working in the field as the Impressionists did, required one to work fast. If it were not one painting completed in a day, it would be many. With the changes in light and weather, one had to work fast. This would require the sacrifice of sophistication, and when one removes a quality of sophistication from art, one is freed to explore new ideas, new techniques and new subjects.

Discarding any need for sophistication, an artist ends up representing reality in a more candid, spontaneous, honest way, and this is what these Impressionists did. They completely broke the mold of highly detailed realism of the Romantics and took Courbet's honest approach to daily life into the the demands of a real environment, an environment that changed quickly and had to be captured quickly. The Impressionists removed the polish, the falseness, and the artificiality that only long hours in a studio can provide.

Montmartre's Patron Artist

If anyone could be considered the patron of the French Impressionists, it would be **Gustave Caillebotte**. His work itself may have been more studied than our recognized impressionists with their bright daubs of color serving as the periods trademark, but he was Impressionist nonetheless.

Its been said that the Impressionists went to country to paint when the weather was good, and resorted to remaining in the city when the weather was bad, or when the winters days were cold. It was this inclement weather that we see depicted in many of the Parisian urban landscapes at the time.

By that theory, Paris Street; Rainy Day, Caillebotte's urban landscape piece with its near life-sized figures and remarkable camera-like perspective, was one of these bad day, bad weather paintings. This huge canvas was not shown at the annual Salon, but was presented at the Third Impressionist Exhibition in 1877. Eyes were turning at this one – an artists work couldn't have been more intriguing or attractive at this time while remaining challenging. Even today this large canvas continues to seduce the modern eye. Caillebotte's use of the Paris city streets serving as landscape and backdrop for the human narrative truly epitomized the Impressionists new direction in Realism. Note

must be taken of the workman with a ladder crossing the street in the background and the servant woman in the door of a home to the right. These were subjects that were frowned upon, and example of why this type of Realism was termed such. There was nothing pretentious or staged about this one - it was honesty at its finest.

At twenty-nine years old, Caillebotte was the most active member of the Montmartre Impressionists, and he was the youngest. He was a man of family wealth and played a leading role in financing and organizing the new Impressionist Exhibitions. It was over a period of 12 years that there would be 8 group-sponsored Impressionist Exhibitions run independently of the Salon or any gallery influence. This was radical and unheard of before – it was a turning point for artists and the way art could be marketed. Its with these shows that we see the works of such artists as [Sisley](#), [Cézanne](#), [Morisot](#), Monet, Degas, Renoir, Pissarro, Gauguin and others represented – these were artists and paintings that would have a hard time being seen at the Salon. It was Caillebotte's savvy in the wealthy circles that gave this new movement some serious credibility, and his role as Patron to the Impressionists can't be understated. This young man was not only a painter, but a man of means, and a collector and supporter of the arts.

These Impressionist Exhibitions would have it

that more urban subjects would be found in galleries and collector's homes, and the commonly accepted flowers and pearls and pretty girls as subject matter would be finding new company with these new landscapes, this urban art, portraying the city's more ordinary residents and denizens, house servants and workmen.

What constituted “vulgar” work was still a hurdle to consider – the art establishment (the Salon and its stuffy adherents) deemed only farmers and country folk as acceptable subjects from the working class. These country dwellers weren't a reality in the city, and so were safe subjects to portray in honest circumstances. However, it was the presence of the working-class city dwellers that hit too close to home and the realities of class-distinction – it was this truth that stained the fragile fantasy of an upper-class art connoisseur's beautiful world.

Caillebotte took the dangerous “realism” of Courbet one step further. In his day, he was not only the spokesperson of urban lives in urban landscapes – he created urban art and portrayed the city's true realities.

A Father to the Boys

If Caillebotte was the patron artist of the Montmartre impressionists, **Camille Pissaro** would play father to this group of risk-takers. The younger rebels especially looked up to

him as a wise elder. With Caillebotte as the youngest of the group and Pissaro was the most senior (in 1890, he was 60), the two served as formidable bookends to this group of upstarts and rebel artists. They were the glue that held a fiery combination of creative types together.

As new needs forced themselves on this group of artists, Pissaro quickly became a primary developer of the techniques being used in the new impressionists way. He offered much to the new theory. He also became a natural mediator and grounding force for our younger artists, keeping them on track. A few of the group could be known to be quite difficult at times, such as Cezanne, Gauguin and Degas – Camille, in his maturity, managed to remain deeply friendly and respectful with them. He displayed works at all 8 of the new Exhibitions.

More than just flowers and pearls

In 1890, **Oscar Claude Monet** was just another artist of the times dissatisfied with what academic art had to offer him. He much preferred to be out in nature painting out of the new tubes and in the new fast, furious and wet ways, finishing at least one painting in a day, if not more, so he could capture the changing light with each changing hour. Other than a couple of hangings at the Salon, Monet, like all his rebellious friends, wanted less constraint than the Beaux-arts, Salon crowd

could offer, and spent the next decade putting the thumb to the Salon by exhibiting works with the Impressionists Exhibitions.

Remembered mostly for his typical impressionists' love of nature, we can't overlook his love of architecture. Painting crowded streets, heaving, steamy train stations, imposing city monuments and honest blue-collar workers toiled-up in filthy clothes, Monet's contribution to the cityscape art arena can't be overlooked. The man was prolific in everything he did, including his work of urban environs and its residents.

Days and Nights at the Moulin Rouge

Another man to step up to portray city life in a brutally honest and close-up perspective of our growing, changing and lively Paris was **Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec**. A child of the inbreeding of his Noble parents, some today would say his genetics would result in the stunting of the growth of his legs, while others look to accidents breaking each of his legs to explain such (neither matter much in the context of art). While his torso grew to adult stature, his legs remained those of a pre-teen. It would, however, be his physical limitations that would have him embrace the urban reality as his sole subject since trips to the rugged country swamps were deemed quite uncomfortable.

Toulouse-Lautrec was enraptured by his city. He saw it as only he could, uninfluenced by the beauty of nature and countryside. His world was gritty – he had a way of portraying urbanites in a dynamic and brutally honest way. Like many artists, he took no shame in his addictions - his Absinthe-drenched lifestyle, nor did he take any shame in those he hung out with. Where Henri was different was that it was his friends that were his subject matter. He hired no models nor seek out subjects to paint. His subjects were a part of his world, and he a part of theirs. Lautrec painted those he hung out with, and in this way, he was a chronicler of the times, as well as being the local portrait painter to the stars – in this case, the stars of the Moulin Rouge and other cafes around Montmartre. With Lautrec, we took another step forward into honesty in art.

Henri was not one to shy away from a party, and could be found nearly 24/7 every day of the month in Paris' cabarets, clubs and cafés. The Parisian nocturnal, its creatures of the night caused Toulouse no discomfort – he thrived on life with them. He dined with them. He lived with them. He painted them.

From dancers and prostitutes to aristocrats and intellectuals, they all trusted him and loved him, allowed him to paint them, though sometimes he would go unnoticed in their true-to-life urban debaucherie. How many would strike a proud smile when seeing

themselves as a centerpiece on the new posters seen about town, and how many might deny such resemblance while out on a stroll with his wife!

Transcending time

Marc Chagall is one who can give us some perspective on the passage of time. We can think of the impressionist era as being something of history, but Marc makes it a tangible thing, something that happened only yesterday. Chagall would be the artist to carry urban art into the contemporary art era, having outlived all his Impressionist predecessors and peers and seeing changes in art that the rest could never have imagined.

Chagall's contribution spanned decades with his fun and whimsical images executed with a Matisse-like flair for color. In the 50s, Picasso commented that Chagall would "be the only painter left who understands what colour really is". If one could see Chagall with a brush in his hand in those early days in Paris, it would most likely be late at night sitting at his upper story window painting the scenes of the streets of Montmartre below. While others would place themselves in those seething pits of nightly music, humanity and alcohol, Chagall kept himself on the strait and the narrow, perhaps making him the most devout of all observers to the ways of the city. It was the city that intoxicated him, not its diversions! It was the pulsing life that filled every corner of

existence – the weekly street-markets, the fresh smell of baguette, the cafés with their nonstop rotation of clientele, and the tower, ohh... the Eiffel Tower.

Marc's words, thoughts and stories were painted: simple, carefree, unashamed and humorous – he knew his work came from within even while observing what was without. His was a spiritual, a divine, experience that displayed more than exhibition of the mundane. Chagall truly was a modern artist, in so much more than words. He mastered virtually every artistic medium during his long and productive life, profiting off every opportunity that new mediums and technologies allowed.

His test for success was such that, in his own words, if the painting stands up beside a thing man cannot make (such as a flower or rock – my words), that painting is authentic. Marc was his own judge.

Raw times, end times

Art Brut and outsider new-guard **Jean Dubuffet** was the first of his kind. With his variety of subject matter he was much like most artists, though his cause was to his style, not to his subject. Post World War 2 would have him see the world in a different way than other artists – his vision was born of a chaos and a shocked innocence. That being said, he did portray city life in a fascinating way – one

true to his art-brut regime. His were jumbles and masses of lines and colors disheveled in a free-form haberdashery of figures, emotions and backdrops. A short stint at art school would be dissatisfying for him, but would certainly contribute to his later views on art and accessibility. He found academy art to be superficial and shallow, designed to satisfy only those with “cultured” tastes, tastes he would consider safe, bland and specific.

He found the homogenized model of academic art to be isolating, mundane, and pretentious. He has said that his desire was “not the mere gratification of a handful of specialists, but rather the man in the street when he comes home from work... it is the man in the street whom I feel closest to, with whom I want to make friends and enter into confidence, and **he** is the one I want to please and enchant by means of my work.”

Dubuffet was completely fascinated by urban spaces – for him, city walls held stories, those walls told stories. The escapades he presented were not designed for entertainment, but for examination, examination of himself and the society which lived in that environment, in those streets and in those buildings. The only way for him to do this was to break down all things done prior.

Freedom hits the streets

In the 1980's, the **Figuration Libre** movement

in France took Brut one step further. This “Free Figuration” is the French equivalent of the Bad Painting and Neo-expressionist times in America and Europe, and the Transvanguardia in Italy.

Influenced by the Urban Street art found in Philadelphia, New York and Los Angeles, the French Libre artists moved freely between studio and street, changing both the landscapes of stretched canvas and city walls. Volatility, violence and angst entered the scene in a world where anything could happen and was likely to. It would be **Robert Combas** who steps up as a new freedom-fighter with his colorful displays of hue, light and shadow and births a new form of abstract figurativism and cloisannism.

In Robert's day, Paris had already lost its status of “Art Capital of the World” to New York City, but this didn't make the period, the place, or its works, his works, any less important. What was happening in Western Art everywhere was happening in Paris. Figuration Libre was a movement that was publicly accessible, which to critics reinforced the idea of it being meaningless. Figuration Libre was to art as Punk Rock was to music – it fed the children of the streets, and those who were its audience discovered that they were not only participants in the streets, but they were its its artists. They discovered they were actors on the stage, they were all performers.

This new generation of casually aggressive and uninhibited painters is distinguished from the dominant codes of conceptual and minimal art of the 1970s. Figuration Libre started off much like Impressionism, with skepticism from the critics and the masses, but proved itself none the less. It was considered whimsical, transitory and thought of lightly as it passed by on the winds of change. This may be proved to be true, until you look closely at what its become. Figuration Libre, like its international counterparts, is now entrenched in the street art cultures today, and these “Free” artists today are also taking their works back into the studios in the spirit of the 80's to make more long lasting, portable, canvassed and sculptural art.

Today's Urban Landscape

Today, it's rare that an artist portrays cityscapes from the past. They portray the city as a present model, or they deviate from that model and move things into the future in prophetic sorts of ways. It is, after all, artists who design the cities of the future, but what the future holds for the urban landscape, you nobody knows. But, in this moment, you can bet there is some appointed team of city

planners discussing some architectural project with a different team of hired architects who know city skylines are organic in a way with forever changing and growing outlines. These team projects alter neighborhoods and change lives for both better and worse, and aesthetic decisions are made based upon some what has already been shown us by other artists. It will always be an artist who changes, or contributes to, the future of a city's profile.

Art in the urban environment offers an infinite variety of scenes and subjects, which in turn inspire our designers and artists imaginations to unfathomable depths and far-reaching vistas never before attained. These new creations offer further inspiration, and artists extend themselves beyond again, and the spiral turns, and turns and turns. The future is always upon us, playful and disturbing, and all this potential is shared and reshared by an infinite number of artists enrapture by the urban environment. The variety of ways our cities can be displayed is endless, and many artists find the city and its landscape the sole source of their inspiration and their only subject, and it is, from an artist's viewpoint, really just subject, prop and backdrop for narrative, but it is essential, and alive.

In the past, urban influenced art was something that was confined to the artistic movement of the day, but today, we see it displayed in ALL ways and in all mediums, from modern day cubists to expressionists to realists and surrealists. Urban art is everywhere, in every shape and size.

The city and its residents with their varieties of lifestyle and culture and deviant sub-culture realities give us stories so much more sublime than our unchanging natural world. Nature moves ever so slowly in the span of a human life, but the city, well, that's a different beast altogether. In a city, the speed at which inspiration and change bursts upon a scene can be missed too easily, for it moves so fast with change upon change arising in our collective urban consciousness as Attention Deficit Disorder does in child.

I left the city of Los Angeles, having been raised in a beach-side neighborhood called the “ghetto by the sea,” and its environs well around 30 years ago and have never gone back. However, to paint city environs, as is the nature of what I paint, I don't need to see the city for reference. The city itself as a playground has been imprinted upon me, but there's something more than that, the city is actually embedded within me. As an example, I know what a big toe looks like without having to see it. The city has left its mark on me as do all things important, and it still finds its way into my work. My images come to me from memory, both long ago and just yesterday. My paintings are pulled out of me like pulling teeth, and though not quite as painful a process, these paintings are extracted from me; they're driven to be born, to be pulled and shown.

I'm compelled, and act with purpose that's not my own – it's the image that has purpose and I'm just its servant or its midwife. Scenes from the past become real again, scenes from my urban life become something tangible via this dance with my exigent imagination. They can be as real as they really were, or as real as they want to be, and not necessarily real as we would have ourselves believe.

You can take the artist out of the city, but you can't take the city out of the artist.

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