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# The Paris Commune, by Courbet and the Camera

By Mary Blume, International Herald Tribune

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By 1871 and the brief and bloody Parisian uprising called the Commune, photography had become part of life and, as Mathew Brady's pictures of the American Civil War had shown, a deeply affecting means of showing destruction and death. The Musee d'Orsay has had the good idea of hanging a show of photographs taken in Paris during the Commune flanked by a small exhibition, "Courbet et la Commune," Gustave Courbet having been the one great painter deeply involved politically and artistically. Prison, ruin and exile were his rewards.

The 72-day uprising followed the disastrous Franco-Prussian War and the siege of Paris, during which, as everyone knows, the trees of the Champs-Elysees were felled for firewood and the animals of the zoo cooked and eaten. Napoleon III and his rusty empire had fallen and France would finally become, definitively, a republic. What the Commune meant and who its defenders were is less clear: a rabble of "hyenas and

gorillas," in the words of the poet Theophile Gautier, "the people fighting for the people," according to a journalist writing in 1871.

The period is still rooted in bloody ambiguity, while its symbols, the destroyed monuments, are clear (Napoleon's fallen column on the Place Vendome, the ruined Tuileries palace and Palais de Justice, the street barricades that reappeared in 1968). Its actors are immortalized in the names of French streets and boulevards, but mostly unknown. By the Commune's end at least 40,000 insurgents were in police files, some 10,000 sentenced by summary justice to prison, death or deportation to penal colonies, and probably 10,000 slain.

Civil wars are particularly horrible and are forever subject more to passion than to calm analysis. The Commune — as the photography show suggests — was in its violence, repression and urgent propaganda, inimical to clear thinking, or seeing. The photographers for the most part took a safe distance: They are, in the words of Quentin Bajac, the show's curator, most striking for what they don't show.

Some went to the barricades, others prudently photographed scenes — some of them staged — from the safety of their studio windows. Cumbersome equipment slowed them down, so did prudence in the face of censorship and imprisonment.

Rather than in newspapers, photographs of the Communards and the repressive government based in Versailles sold best in shops in the newly popular small carte de visite format, or in albums. One photographer, Bruno Braquehais, seemed pro-Communard with his pictures of insurgents of mixed classes and sexes joyful as at a fete populaire. Eugene Appert, who was pro-Versailles, was the only photographer allowed in their prisons: His pictures of suspects were filed by the police and used as evidence when all was lost after the bloody week of street fighting, La Semaine Sanglante, in May 1871.

Almost immediately after the Commune fell, a strange thing happened: Pain was replaced by nostalgia and the horrible events became a keepsake for both sides. Before 1871 was over, an auction of Commune photographs was held and a museum of the ruins of Paris proposed.

The grief, suggests Alisa Luxenberg in the show's catalogue, was shared by both sides and all classes. Even if public opinion remained divided and changeable, the general mood was melancholic. "The devastation, the ruins," a bourgeois said. "The loss of money isn't fatal but memories destroyed — I feel as if I were dying."

The wounds were rapidly encapsulated into the picturesque. The ruins were seen aesthetically: Their artistic interest could erase the hate that inspired their destruction, Gautier

said.

It wasn't only Paris that was fascinated by the ruins. Photographic exhibitions were seen in London and Liverpool and soon Thomas Cook was arranging special tours. One English visitor said he had no respect for the Communards but that without knowing it they had been artists in creating such picturesque ruins.

If fear and ambiguity weakened the photographs of the Commune, such emotions were unknown to the brazen and celebrated Courbet, the subject of many anti-Commune caricatures showing him tearing down the Place Vendome column single-handed, an act that he was in favor of (he thought its bronze should be melted into coins) but took no part in although he was condemned to pay for its restoration from his own purse — the sum was an impossible 325,091 francs — which led to his exile in 1873 to Switzerland, where he died four years later. The Vendome column was the only damaged monument that became a court case.

Disturbing as a painter and as a larger-than-life character, Courbet was visibly engaged in politics from 1870, serving as a delegate from the sixth arrondissement of Paris and later as a member of the Conseil de la Commune. It was irresistibly funny, Emile Zola remarked, to think of Courbet as a legislator.

He was active in attempts to reform corrupt practices in art schools and in the Salon and in the awarding of public commissions. He presided over a commission to protect national collections against revolutionary crowds as well as against imperial cronies. Unlike other members of the Conseil de la Commune he never joined the national guard or participated in the street fighting. He was arrested after the Semaine Sanglante in the house of a friend where he had spent the week.

He was sentenced to six months in prison and fined. Freed on March 2, 1872, he was banned from exhibiting in the Salon and could only show in private galleries — even then at risk of having his work seized. He must be put to artistic death, advised the historical painter Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier.

Except for a self-portrait in prison and some sketches, he painted nothing directly connected to the events he had so urgently lived through. No major painter recorded the events of the Commune (well after the fact, it became an acceptable subject) but, as Laurence des Cars writes in the catalogue, many of Courbet's works from 1871 to 1875 can only be understood through these events.

The major works were still lifes of apparent neutrality and uncanny force. Apples yes, but some are beginning to rot. And huge trout lying on the bank of a stream. They are

gasping, dying or already dead: better representations than stilted photographs of the terrible events of the Commune.

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