Gustave Courbet: Letter to a Group of Students

With the help of the journalist, Castagnary, Courbet wrote and published this letter in reply to a request of some students who had withdrawn from the Ecole in protest of its methods. Though Courbet did not open a school, he did consent to give instruction and criticism to the students for about a year in a rented studio, where the model was usually a horse or bull held by a peasant.

Gentlemen and dear friends, Paris, Dec. 25, 1861

You want to open a painting studio in which you can freely continue your artistic education and you have been kind enough to offer to place it under my direction. Before I give any answer, we must be clear on the meaning of that word DIRECTION. I can not lend myself to there being a question of professor and student in our relationship.

I should explain to you what I recently said to the Congress at Anvers: I do not have, and I can not have, students.

I who believe that every artist should be his own master, can not think of making myself into a professor.

I can not teach my art, nor the art of any school, because I deny that art can be taught and because, in other terms, I maintain that art is completely individual, and the talent of each artist is only the result of his own inspiration and his own study of tradition.

In addition I say that art or talent to an artist can only be (in my opinion) the means of applying his personal faculties to the ideas and the objects of the time in which he lives.

Especially, art in painting can only consist of the representation of objects that are visible and tangible to the artist.

No age can be depicted except by its own artists. I mean to say by the artists that have lived during it. I believe that the artists of one century are completely incompetent when it comes to depicting the objects of a preceding or future century, in other words, to paint either the past or the future.

It is in this sense that I deny the term historical art as applied to the past. Historical art is, by its very essence, contemporary. Every age should have its artists, who will express it and depict it for the future. An age that has not been able to express itself through its own artists, does not have the right to be expressed by outside artists. This would be falsifying history.

The history of an age finishes with the age itself and with those of its representatives who have expressed it. It is not given to new ages to add something to the expression of past ages, to aggrandize or to embellish the past. That which has been has been. It is the duty of the human spirit to always start anew, always in the present, taking as its point of departure that which has already been accomplished. We must never start something over again, but always march from synthesis to synthesis, from conclusion to conclusion.

The true artists are those who take up their epoch at exactly the point to which it has been carried by preceding ages. To retreat is to do nothing, is to work without result, is to have neither understood nor profited from the lessons of the past. This explains why all archaic schools have always ended by reducing themselves to the most useless compilations.

I also believe that painting is an essentially CONCRETE art and can only consist of the representation of REAL AND EXISTING objects. It is a completely physical language that has as words all visible objects, and an ABSTRACT object, invisible and non-existent, is not part of
paintings' domain. Imagination in art consists in knowing how to find the most complete expression of an existing object, but never in imagining or in creating the object itself.

Beauty is in nature, and in reality is encountered under the most diverse forms. As soon as it is found, it belongs to art, or rather to the artist who is able to perceive it. As soon as beauty is real and visible, it has its own artistic expression. But artificiality has no business amplifying this expression. It can not enter into it without risking its distortion, and consequent weakening. The beauty based on nature is superior to all artistic conventions.

Here is the basis of my ideas in art. With such ideas, to think of opening a school in which conventional principles would be taught would be to return to the incomplete and banal premises which until now have everywhere directed modern art.

There can be no school, there are only painters. Schools only serve in the research on the analytical proceedings of art. No school can lead to synthesis in isolation. Painting can not, without falling into abstraction, allow one particular aspect of the art to dominate, whether it be drawing, color, composition, or any of the other multiple aspects whose total constitutes this art.

Therefore I can not pretend to open a school in which to mold students, to teach this or that partial tradition of art. I can only explain to artists, who will be my collaborators and not my students, the method according to which, in my opinion, one becomes a painter which I have myself followed from my beginnings, leaving to each one the complete direction of his own individuality, the full liberty of his personal expression in the application of this method. The founding of a common studio, bringing to mind the fruitful collaborations of the studios of the Renaissance, can certainly be useful in attaining this end and contribute to opening the phase of modern painting. To attain it, I will lend myself with eagerness to all that you wish of me.

Yours with all my heart.
GUSTAVE COURBET