Temptations of the Flesh: A Discussion of Gustave Courbet’s *Origin of the World*
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With its cropped torso and prominent display of genitals, Gustave Courbet’s *Origin of the World* (1866) remains one of the nineteenth century’s most provocative paintings. Running from breast to thigh, the image presents a radically abbreviated yet supremely intimate portrait of a woman. Despite the absence of limbs and head, the painting can hardly be faulted for its omissions: what is lacking in anatomy is recuperated in sumptuous detail and rich colour. Her torso is swathed in bright white linen, a dark mass of pubic hair covers her genitals, and her flesh is brilliantly rendered: rosy and so delicately modeled, it is almost palpable.

As befitting a painting of such scandalous subject matter, the work has had a mysterious and complicated history. Never exhibited at the Salon and revealed only to a limited selection of initiates, the image remained largely in private and protective hands, occasionally disappearing from record. Particularly interesting are the conventions of display typically associated with the work: it was often kept concealed behind a curtain or screen, thereby enhancing the drama of its revelation. The painting’s original owner, Turkish diplomat and chronic gambler Khalil Bey, kept the work in a back room behind a curtain, displaying it for the delectation of choice dinner guests. The painting’s second famous owner, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, hung it in his country home behind a specially commissioned screen. Using a remote control, he would dramatically slide the screen aside, revealing the ‘true’ work of art underneath. Now hanging (uncovered) in the Musée D’Orsay, the Origin continues to fuel scholarly debate and maintains its enduring grasp on the viewer’s imagination. Flirting with pornography, it straddles traditional art historical categories and ultimately eludes them.
Courbet’s contemporaries and current scholars alike have often referred to the painting as a portrait, frequently speculating who the model may have been. And yet the *Origin* presents a radically abbreviated body whose domination of the picture plane does not allow for any traditional markers of identity: the woman’s face and clothes are absent, the conditions of the room are obscured, and, unlike some of the artist’s most well-known work, there are no overt indications of class or livelihood. Needless to say, this is not a portrait in any conventional sense; nevertheless, questions of identity persist. Rather than argue for the painting’s inclusion in the genre of portraiture, or attempt to reconstruct the figure’s identity, I would like to propose that the image participates in the construction of identity in a rather unconventional manner: by virtue of its virtuosic rendering of flesh and the inclusion of body hair. Using a variety of art historical and medical sources, I will argue that these aspects had specific implications for nineteenth-century viewers, and, whether consciously or not, enabled them to draw certain conclusions about the body, or person, portrayed.

I begin with an account of the painting by Courbet’s contemporary, journalist Maxime du Camp. Embedded in du Camp’s rightwing attack on the Paris Commune, *Les Convulsions de Paris* (1878-1879), is a slightly hysterical passage chastising Courbet for an image so lascivious that it debases the very art of painting. The author states:

“All that one may ask of a man…is to respect the art he professes. He can be lacking in intelligence, in learning, in wit, in politeness, in urbanity, and still remain honorable if he maintains the practice of his art aloft and intact. Now this elementary duty, which constitutes professional probity, Courbet ignored. Courbet, this same man whose avowed intention was to renew French painting, painted a portrait of a woman which is difficult to describe…One sees a small picture hidden under a green veil. When one draws aside the veil, one remains stupefied to perceive a woman, life-size, seen from the front, moved and convulsed, remarkably executed…providing the last word in realism…This man
who, for a few coins, could degrade his craft to the point of abjection, is capable of anything."2

Particularly striking here is du Camp’s hostility, along with his description of the woman as “moved and convulsed,” generally interpreted as sexual arousal. And yet the critic does not explain what it was about the image, which includes neither lover nor narrative element, that led him to perceive arousal and desire. Although he was a known opponent of Realism, I would suggest that du Camp’s disgust stems not from an aesthetic allegiance, but rather from the painstaking rendition of flesh. This element allowed him to draw his conclusions, and experience the work in a particularly visceral way. Keyed to aesthetic and medical discourses that were themselves informed by prevailing hierarchies and social constructs, painted flesh participated in, and in this case subverted, normative social and sexual behaviour. In other words, Courbet’s painted flesh encoded signs of morality, gender, and class identity.

Many of Courbet’s contemporaries, particularly Émile Zola, extolled the virtues of his rendition of flesh. Even those who disapproved of the artist commended him on these grounds: the irate du Camp called the Origin “remarkably executed,”3 and Edmond de Goncourt, who frequently condemned Courbet as indecent, declared himself obligated to make amends to the artist on the basis of his flesh. Associating the Origin with the achievements of the Old Masters, he claimed: “this stomach is as beautiful as the flesh of a Correggio.”4

The reference to Correggio indicates more than the enduring importance of the Old Masters: it reflects the discursive tradition of painted flesh that existed in artistic practice. According to Diderot, the depiction of the body’s surface was a crucial and demanding task, its mastery essential for an artist’s success. Implying far more than
skillful reproduction, a compelling rendition of flesh was necessary to imbue a figure with life and a sense of animation. The belief that skin contained the spark of life was born in the Enlightenment, when its conception evolved to comprise a sensitive, communicative membrane, mediating between internal and external worlds. In constant contact with the psychic interior of the body, flesh was the medium through which movements of the soul were manifest on the exterior. According to Claudia Benthien’s excellent cultural history Skin, “the epidermis [developed] into a surface that could bear semantic meaning and on which individuality could reveal itself.” In artistic practice, flesh took on a symbolic resonance beyond its formal role of demarcating the body’s limits: it signified life, both carnal and spiritual, and designated the artist as bestower of that life.

Assimilating the implications, both physical and philosophical, of current anatomical advances, artists treated dermal tissue as essential for capturing the shape and essence of a figure. A successful rendition of flesh reflected both aesthetic guidelines, found in manuals such as Charles Blanc’s essential Grammaire des Arts du Dessin, as well as perceptions established in medical treatises. As scientific breakthroughs were absorbed into art academies, artistic notions of ideal beauty began to colour medical convention, creating a shared discursive field. Artists provided images for medical texts shared by students of sculpture and surgery alike, while écorchés and medical models were used as pedagogical tools in both art academies and anatomy labs. Lectures on anatomy were integrated into the curriculum at the École des Beaux Arts, and articles on physiological processes, such as menstruation, began appearing in the journal L’Artist.
Yet despite claims to empiricism and the observation of nature, these mutually reinforcing discourses were informed by contemporary social structures and gendered hierarchies. Perpetuating the physical and aesthetic ideal made famous by Winckelmann—classical (male) proportions and smooth, white flesh—they assigned moral and cultural values to ideal form. Their development transformed the nineteenth-century body into a physical embodiment of social and sexual mores, and flesh was the screen on which these concepts were projected.

According to Robert Nye, whose work provides considerable insight on the evolving construction of masculinity, the codification of bourgeois norms in the nineteenth century led to gendered public and private spheres and biomedical models of the body defined by gender. Each sex was seen as ‘naturally’ suited to particular social roles, and these sexed bodies were conceived as both opposite and complementary. The ideal, virile man was dark, hairy, dry, hot, and impetuous; the ideal woman was delicate, moist, smooth, white, timid, and modest. Because female bodies were considered primarily for child bearing, wife and mother became the normative and healthy roles for nineteenth-century women; meanwhile, the masculine norm was redefined as rougher and more robust than the effete Ancien Régime ideal that preceded it.

Semen, the essence of masculinity, was symbolized by and embodied in a deep voice, large muscles, a full beard, and a ruddy complexion. Female attributes, which consisted of opposing qualities, were believed to be caused by a lack of semen. The amount of semen one possessed, however, was not random, and could be manipulated: prostitutes, who were thought to absorb more semen than proper women, could thus become manly, and exhibit male body traits such as body hair or flushed skin. Similarly,
the loss of semen due to excessive copulation resulted in emasculated men, and manifest as a pale, smooth complexion.

These beliefs, imbuing anatomical attributes with social and moral significance, were echoed in art and medical texts. According to Charles Blanc, an ample moustache reflected a manly temperament, investing hair, like flesh, with gendered implications. Different flesh tones were used to represent different genders, with female flesh defined by an idealized whiteness and sensitivity. Red or flushed flesh implied an exposed and excited physicality, which was considered improper: it represented a sexuality unrelated to fertility and inheritance and born instead of desire, free from the marital bed. Echoing these sentiments is an institutional description of the female body from a textbook intended for both art and anatomy students, published in 1823:

“Their exterior forms are always rounder, the muscles smaller, less bulgy and less prominent than in men. The laminate tissue is softer, looser, more abundant, particularly in the abdomen... The skin is fine, soft, unified... (body) hair is rarer, and absent from the areas where it exists in man.”

Note how these statements set up a dichotomy between the male and female body, stating as medical fact the gendered and idealized attributes cited above.

According to the *Histoire Naturelle de la Femme* (1803), flesh in particular was the site of gender difference, providing the most alluring part of the feminine: “Some of the most seductive characteristics of women, their charms, are presented to us in the form of the softness, smoothness, polish and sensitivity of their flesh.” Descriptions such as these underscore the fact that women were often painted to invite touch and possession. By providing women with an idealized surface that at once displayed their sensuality yet circumscribed their social role, artists and anatomists fetishized the female form and sought to contain the menace of female sexuality. Thus the artist, by manipulating the
way in which skin was perceived by the beholder, determined the virtue of his sitter, and managed the reception of his work. As such, flesh was an instrument of control: through it the artist imbued his painting with life and assured the physical availability of the depicted woman.

The rejection of another painting by the viewing public, John Singer Sargent’s *Madame X*, provides a useful case study of these propositions. Sargent’s portrait of Mme Pierre Gautreau, a society woman with aggressive social ambitions, presents the subject dramatically clad in a black gown and displaying whitish-blue, uniform flesh. Eschewing the perfectly modeled and rosy flesh of the ideal, the idiosyncratic Mme Gautreau tirelessly covered herself with bluish powder—an act that was both a fashionable statement and a measure sometimes taken to disguise symptoms of venereal disease. It was also an act of control: by refusing Sargent the ability to represent her flesh, she asserted ownership of her body. According to Susan Sidlauskas, when Sargent reproduced Gautreau’s violet-tinted makeup, he forfeited her sensuality and painted what critics perceived as a corpse, complete with rotting flesh.¹² For the nineteenth-century viewer, Madame X’s painted flesh registered visually as the sign of an immoral woman, impure and possibly diseased.

The ability to determine a person’s character by examining his or her external appearance formed the basis of eighteenth-century theories of physiognomy and phrenology. In the nineteenth century, these theories became increasingly popular; the question of determining the physical characteristics of deviance and criminality was pursued with mounting urgency as fin-de-siècle anxieties about degeneration and weakened national stock infiltrated the public imagination. According to Anthea Callen,
class and gender biases underlay these notions of degeneration and physiognomy. Moral and sexual deviance, symbolized by dirt and disease, were associated with the lower classes, and particularly with prostitutes; objects of both desire and fear, they provided pleasure yet threatened contamination. These fears and biases coloured the perspective of the nineteenth-century bourgeois male viewer, for whose delectation the *Origin* was certainly produced. This fact did not go unnoticed by Freud, who visited Paris in 1885. Writing to his fiancée, he remarked on the rigid separation of marital sex, denoting normative sexuality and healthy bloodlines, and desire, which was relegated to the realm of prostitution, inciting fears of dirt and disease. The French, he claimed were obsessed with nudity, and suffered from “the cynical separation of sex from conjugal life.”

With this in mind, it is possible to see why du Camp read the *Origin* as menacing, and also as a woman aroused. With its sensual flesh, flushed against the white sheets and marked by the inclusion of pubic hair, the *Origin* clearly departed from the current moral and sexual ideal. Instead, it presented an image as frightening to the bourgeois male viewer as Manet’s *Olympia*. In Courbet’s painting, the symbols of a virile, healthy, family man were projected onto and transformed into the genitals of a prostitute, hirsute in their rampant sexuality.

De Goncourt’s writing also shows evidence of these associations. About Courbet’s painting *Sleep*, the critic wrote: “Here are…two dirty, muddy bodies tied up in the most disgraceful movements of female sensuality and pleasure in bed…” The image presents two sumptuously painted nude women intertwined suggestively on a messy bed, surrounded by delicate luxuries: fresh flowers, jewels, and soft linens. Rather than denoting actual mud (there is none to be found in the image), the critic’s use of the term
here refers to filth of a different sort, and articulates the fear inspired by the supposed insatiable desire of lower class women and courtesans.

A final word about flesh: I believe it was this element, particularly the visceral experience of flesh, that provided Courbet with the means with which to fulfill, to quote du Camp, “his avowed intention of renewing French painting.” In the *Origin*, du Camp claimed that Courbet had provided “the last word in realism,” referring most likely to the amount of physiological detail. Courbet had rejected the ideal alluded to in aesthetic and medical treatises, and instead provided a skilled portrait of flesh as flesh, material and tactile. This evocation of the sensuality of flesh was Courbet’s strength (recall Goncourt’s comparison of Courbet with Correggio). According to critic Edmond About, “No one excels more than he at rendering the diverse surfaces of things. His painting, as supple as it is solid, bends to all the requirements for the most complicated executions; color becomes sand or rock, the bark of a tree or the skin of a woman; only the masters can cling so closely to nature.” Again Courbet is linked to the Old Masters, his success based on a compelling rendition of the body’s surface.

The comparison with Correggio is apt, since both artists are renowned for the sensuality and tactility of their flesh. According to Sydney Freedberg, “…Correggio’s handling of surface … inspires in flesh a quasi-erotic magnetism, appealing to the visually experienced quality of touch.” It is exactly this “visually experienced quality of touch,” I believe, that Courbet strove to achieve, in order to provide an embodied viewing experience, and thereby amplify the sensual experience of the beholder. An embodied perception of the world, according to Merleau-Ponty, is focused on materiality and tactility, and was apprehended by the projection of an observer’s body into the
objects he perceives. Thus, there is a certain reciprocity between the perceiver and the perceived, making embodied consciousness one of lived experience, and not idealized reason. Courbet’s focus on flesh and texture, and his rejection of the aesthetic ideal, produces just such an embodied experience. The viewer’s eyes act as hands and grasp the flesh of *The Origin* viscerally, as he might grasp his own. Whether understood as a projection of the artist’s body into that which he depicts, or as the viewer’s sensation of the object as his own flesh, this type of beholding clearly had an erotic component.

This view is supported by Michael Fried in his seminal book on the artist. In *Courbet’s Realism*, Fried describes the ways in which Courbet’s paintings register both the artist’s body and the physical act of painting. In an attempt to suspend his own spectatorhood and defeat theatricality, a condition Fried sees as central to French painting from the time of Diderot onward, Courbet attempted an almost physical merger with the canvas. Examples of this attempted merger include the frequent inclusion of figures in the centre or foreground facing backward, mimicking the actions of the painter, and the inclusion of objects that symbolize palette and paintbrush. Although the *Origin* lacks these types of figures, Fried maintains that it provides an equally fruitful metaphor for corporeal merger: that of sexual possession. In this way, the painting bridges the distance between viewer and image with a suggestion of the erotic. And it was exactly this type of erotic experience that Courbet’s work, as a painting, could afford.

Nineteenth century erotica—regardless of medium—was transformed by the development of photography. Different figurations of the sexual body appeared, followed by new norms of representation. Hyper-illusionist and focused on the genitals, these prints and photographs upped the erotic ante by providing images with more explicit
content. It is well known that Courbet himself used erotic photographs, prints and even medical images as source material for the *Origin*. By presenting an otherwise unachievable view of the object of desire, framed and frozen for eternity, these images played to the strength of the photographic medium.

Viewed in this context, Courbet’s image appears to assimilate the strengths of both painting and photography, providing a hyperrealist yet sensual image that facilitates an erotically-charged, embodied experience. As photography began to destabilize the world of painting, Courbet’s focus on tactility served to distinguish his work, presenting an image that was at once universal and exceptionally personal. His desire, whether deliberate or not, to occupy this position between photography and painting, is part of what affords the image its elusive quality.

As for the artist himself, one telling anecdote remains. Found in Ludovic Halévy’s memoirs, the author describes Courbet exhibiting his painting to a group of men:

“*L’origine du monde.* A nude woman, without feet and without a head. After dinner, there we were, looking…admiring…We finally ran out of enthusiastic comments…This lasted for ten minutes. Courbet, he never had enough of it…”

Based on this description, we can tentatively ascribe one more layer of identity to this complex image: that of the Courbet himself. As the work’s original viewer and creator, the artist’s gaze is evoked in all subsequent viewings, his touch manifest in the accomplished depiction of flesh. According to Freud, the voyeuristic gaze, so central here, is self-reflexive: viewing the body of another is essentially auto-erotic, the seeking of one’s own body. As such, perhaps the identity of this quasi-portrait is that of Courbet himself, seeking the origin of his creativity within his desire.
1 Most believe the sitter was Joanna Hiffernan, a favourite of the painter and lover of artist James McNeil Whistler.
2 Du Camps, quoted in Hertz, p.34.
3 Zola, p.58.
4 Goncourt, p.64.
5 Quoted in Castagnary’s “Salon 1878” in Salons 1857-1879 (Tome Second). Paris: Edition Fasquelle, 1892, p.1098. (“This smooth whiteness, even, without being or pale or matte; this mixture of red and blue that blends imperceptibly; blood, life, this is the colourist’s despair. He who achieves the experience of flesh has had a great success; the rest is nothing in comparison. A thousand painters have died without achieving flesh; a thousand others will die without having achieved it.”)
6 Fend, p.312, 316-19.
7 Garb, p.33.
8 Fend, p.317, 329.
9 Garb, p.126-7.
10 François Chaussier, Planches anatomique à l’usage des jeunes gens qui se destinent à l’étude de la chirurgie, de la médecine, de la peinture et de la sculpture. 1823. Quoted in Fend, p.338, note 52.
11 Fend, p.338.
12 Sidlauskas, p.23-24
13 Nye, p.126.
14 Quoted in des Cars, p.29.
15 Freedberg, p.16
17 Fried, p.210-220.
18 Solomon-Godeau, p.293-296.