



Gustave Courbet

(1819-1877)

Beach

(Marine/Paysage de Mer)

1865/66

signed bottom left:

„G. Courbet“

not dated

Oil on canvas

h 54,0 cm x b 64,0 cm

WRM Dep. 2905





Brief Report

The picture with an outgoing tide beneath a wintry autumnal sky is one of the numerous seascapes painted by Courbet in 1865/66 during his three-month stay in Trouville [Bailly-Herzberg 2000, p. 98; Courthion 1985, p. 99, 100; Fernier 1977, p. 266] (fig. 1). For the picture support, he used a net-like fabric which he stretched himself and primed with a single layer of white. As further preparation of the ground, he applied two opaque layers of white and brown paint on the entire surface, comparable in function to an imprimatura. A striking feature even here is the discriminating use of the brush and the trowel, something we see again later in the painting process. Already in the preparation stage this leads to the surface structure and coloration influencing the later painterly execution (fig. 6). It was on this brown ground, permeated with white, that Courbet applied the motif

in his usual virtuoso trowel technique [Morton/Eyerman 2006, p. 7], using various tools, for example a bristle brush and the edge of a palette knife, to apply a further glazing and structuring of the semi-dry but still soft paint (figs. 7-12). This proves that Courbet clearly attached great importance to the haptic reproduction of the motif. Accordingly, he also varied the consistency and smoothness or structure of the paint, which was applied in principle from light to dark. Thus in the region of the sky he applied fairly thin paint very smoothly, achieving the fine and gradual transitions by using a soft, broad brush to push the paint which had already been applied by a trowel (fig. 9). In the cloud, water and beach areas, by contrast, the paint is increasingly impasto, with a stronger surface structure (figs. 10, 11).



Picture support canvas

Standard format	not a standard size
Weave	tabby weave
Canvas characteristics	vertical 15, horizontal 10/11 threads per cm; fine threads, net-like fabric with interstices between the threads of up to 1 mm, similar to the study canvases <i>toile étude</i> or <i>toile pochade</i> in use at the time
Stretching	no longer original; original fastening intervals of 4.5-6.0 cm
Stretcher/strainer	no longer original (fig. 2); the craquelure in the ground/paint layers reveals that the original strainer or stretcher had a vertical centre-bar (fig. 3); the breadth of the outer bars was c. 5.5 cm, of the centre-bar 5.5-6.0 cm
Stretcher/strainer depth	1.8 cm
Traces left by manufacture/processing	–
Manufacturer's/dealer's marks	not visible owing to lining



Ground

Sizing	not determined, as the ground has partially penetrated the interstices between the threads
Colour	off-white, slightly tinted with yellow ochre and red ochre along with black
Application	ground applied after the canvas was cut to size and stretched, in a single layer and probably by hand; two preparatory layers: the first white, the second brown; the first, white, preparatory layer probably applied with a brush as suggested by fine, evenly diagonal strokes; the second, brown, preparatory layer was trowelled into the crevices of the surface structure of the white layer, whose peaks, lightly scuffed, remain uncovered (fig. 6)
Binding medium	not determined
Texture	homogeneous, fine, dense, compact

Composition planning/Underpainting/Underdrawing

Medium/technique	no underdrawing can be detected, a partial underpainting cannot be distinguished from the complex, many-layered paint application
Extent/character	–
Pentimenti	–



Paint layer

Paint application/technique and artist's own revision

over thicker applications embedding the remaining structure of the ground in various grey hues, there are, in the region of the sky and the sea, blue and grey paint layers in additional nuances; these are both on top of, and mixed into each other (figs. 7-10); for the mud and the sand, various ochre hues were used, with the partial addition of red and orange as well as browns; paler colours in the sky were subsequently wholly or partly scratched or dabbed off in places to reveal the darker underlying layers and to create harder structures and transitions (figs. 11,12)

Painting tools

paint layers applied with trowel, palette knife, brushes, bristle brushes, sticks (figs. 7-12)

Surface structure

the surface structure of the paint layers is largely characterized by the trowelled application: alongside very smooth areas of paint, there are clear edges which have not been smoothed down, little swellings where paint has been pushed to one side, as well as traces of hacking and scratching produced by the application utensil in paint layers already applied (figs. 7, 8); above all in the sky can be seen the places where a very soft brush was applied to the canvas (fig. 9); the light-grey of the clouds was opened up by jabbing a hard, bristly utensil into it, thus creating the harder structure of the clouds, in places the still soft paint, smoothly applied with a trowel, was roughened with a stick or brush (figs. 11, 12); probably owing to the use of a trowel to apply the paint, microscopic inspection reveals the coarse-grained lead-white pigments standing proud of the paint layers, creating a somewhat rough surface

Palette

visual microscopic inspection reveals: (lead) white; very fine-grained orange, red, blue, brown and black pigments; white is the main component of all the paints used; given the heavy admixture of white, no VIS spectrometry was carried out

Binding mediums

presumably oil

Surface finish

Authenticity/Condition

at least two coats of varnish; it was not possible to determine whether the first is authentic



Gustave Courbet – Beach

Brief Report on Technology and Condition

Signature/Mark

When?	following completion of the painting process
Autograph signature	not determined: the signature and paint layer are permeated by the larger age-related cracks and craquelure in the varnish, but not by the finer network of age-related cracks; the signature evinces uncertainties, corrections and smears (figs. 4,5); in addition, the signature contains no white; what we have here is a very finely pigmented orange matrix with somewhat larger orange and very dark red particles and other unidentified dark components
Serial	–

Frame

Authenticity	not original
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State of preservation

Lined and minimally cropped along all edges; very marked curved craquelure (fig. 3), large cracks with deformation of the ground and paint layers, very fine wavy network of cracks (figs. 9, 10), pronounced stretchmarks above all in the top corners (fig. 3); components of the lining adhesive have penetrated the craquelure recto, where they can be seen as narrow dark stripes on either side of the age-related cracks (figs. 7, 10, 11, 12).

Additional remarks

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Literature

- Bailly-Herzberg 2000: Janine Bailly-Herzberg, “L’art du paysage en France au XIXe siècle. De l’atelier au plein air” (Tout l’art Encyclopédie, Guide Culturel XIXe siècle), Paris 2000
- Courthion 1985: Pierre Courthion, L’opera completa di Courbet. Classici dell’Arte, Milan 1985
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- Morton/Eyerman 2006: Mary Morton and Charlotte Eyerman, Courbet and the modern landscape, Los Angeles 2006, pp. 6 ff., 104
- Roy, Ashok, “Barbizon Painters: Tradition and Innovation in Artists’ Materials”, Barbizon. Malerei der Natur – Natur der Malerei, ed. Andreas Burmester, Christoph Heilmann, Michael Zimmermann. Munich 1999, pp. 330-342

Source of illustrations

All illustrations and figures Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud

Examination methods used

- | | |
|--|--|
| ✓ Incident light | – VIS spectrometry |
| ✓ Raking light | – Wood identification |
| – Reflected light | – FTIR (Fourier transform spectroscopy) |
| – Transmitted light | – EDX (Energy Dispersive X-ray analysis) |
| ✓ Ultraviolet fluorescence | – Microchemical analysis |
| ✓ Infrared reflectography | |
| – False-colour infrared reflectography | |
| – X-ray | |
| ✓ Stereomicroscopy | |

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Gustave Courbet – Beach Brief Report on Technology and Condition

Fig. 1
Recto



Fig. 2
Verso





Gustave Courbet – Beach
Brief Report on Technology and Condition



Fig. 3
Raking light

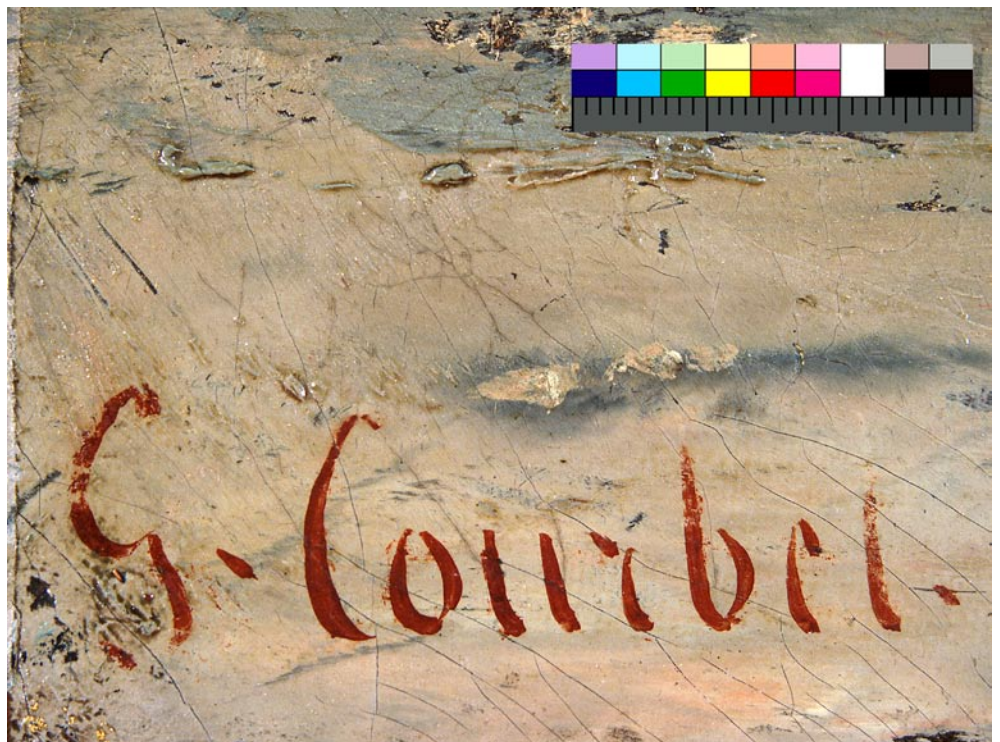


Fig. 4
Detail, signature



Fig. 5
Signature, absence of
fine age-related cracks
(arrows),
microscopic photograph
(M = 1 mm)

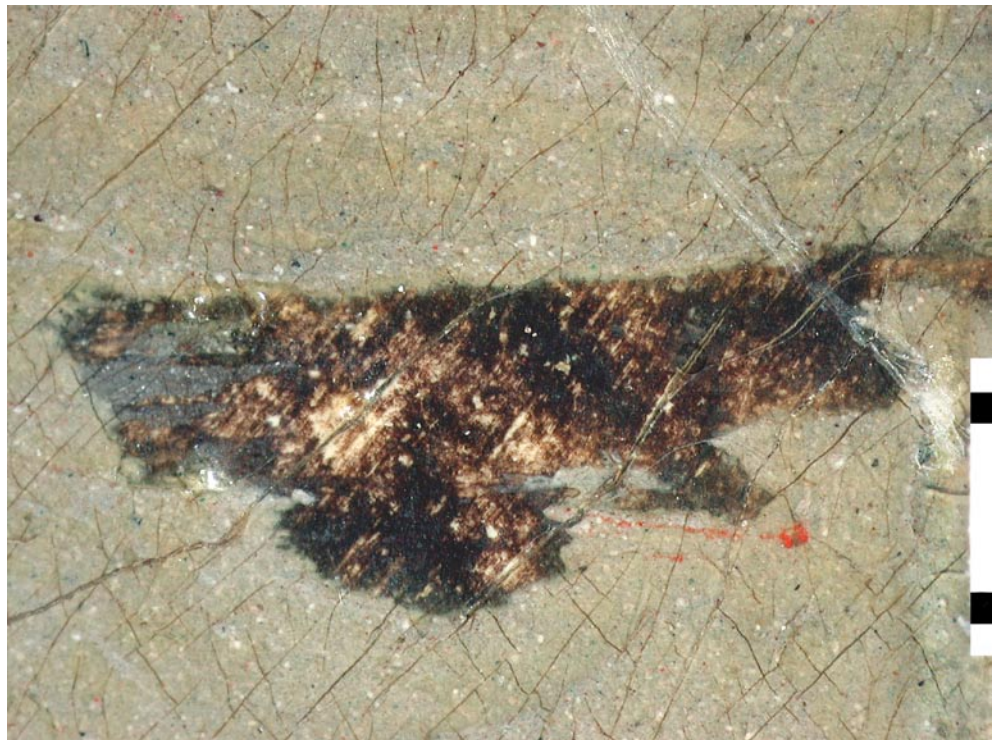


Fig. 6
Surface structure of
the white and brown
preparatory layers



Gustave Courbet – Beach
Brief Report on Technology and Condition

Fig. 7
Detail, trowelled grey
of sky over blue

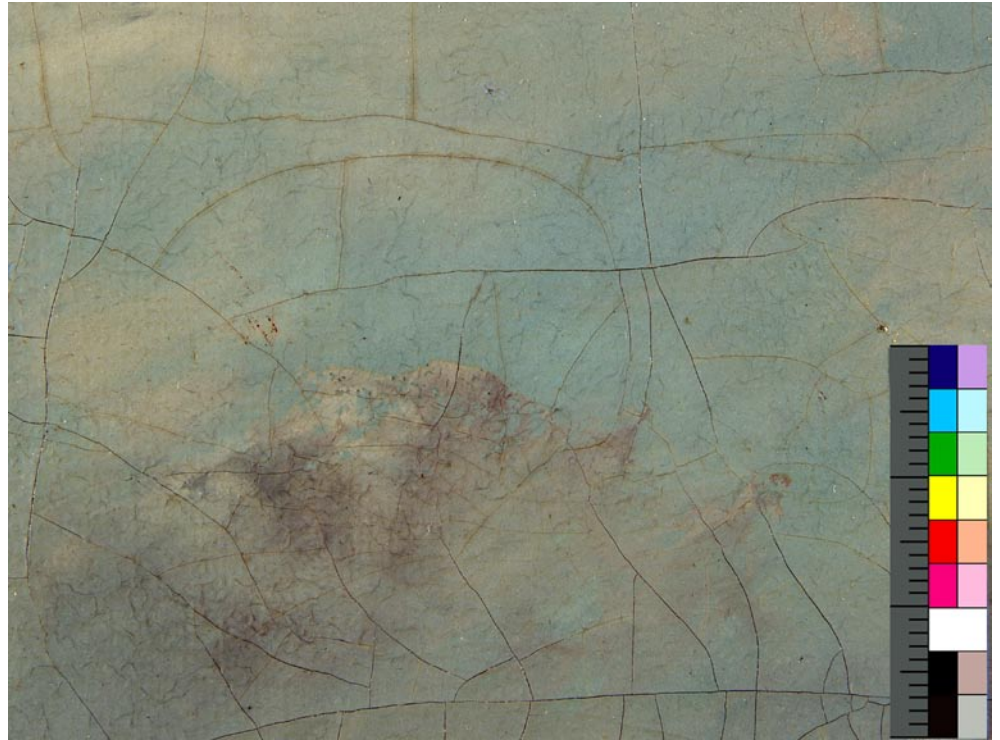


Fig. 8
Detail in raking light,
trowelled grey of sky
over blue (arrows)

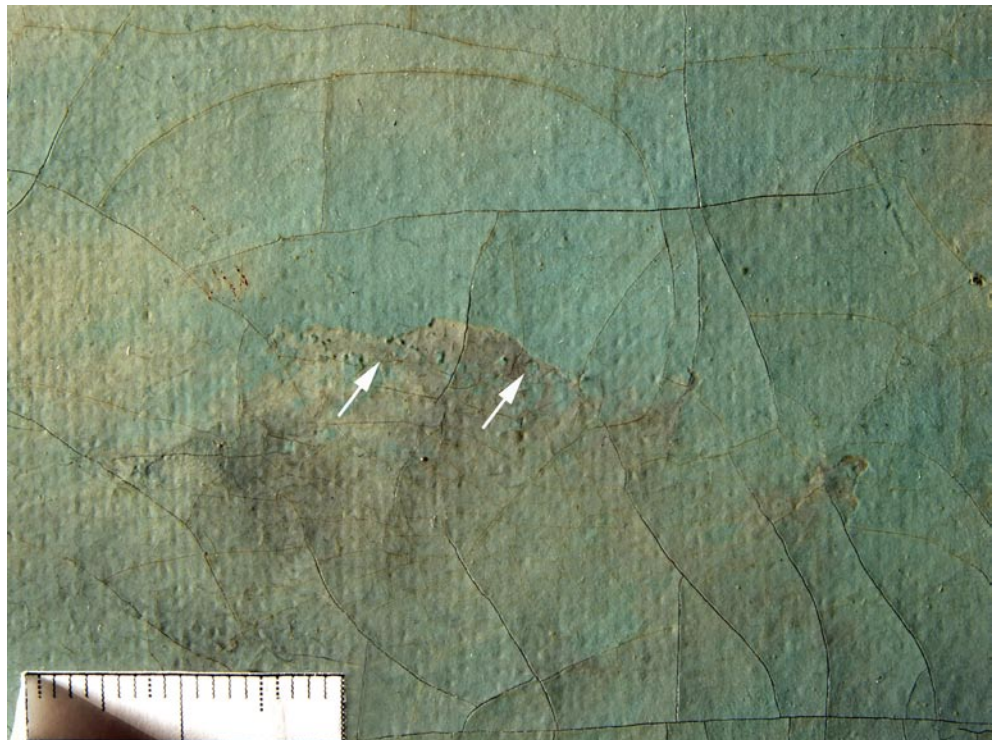




Fig. 9
Glazed thin paint
application (arrows),
microscopic photograph
(M = 1 mm)



Fig. 10
Trowel and brush
application (arrows),
typical fine craquelure,
microscopic photograph
(M = 1 mm)





Fig. 11
Scratches in light-grey
paint layer in the clouds,
microscopic photograph
(M = 1 mm)



Fig. 12
Characteristic impres-
sion of jabbing utensil,
microscopic photograph
(M = 1 mm)