
Form:

REALISM = all about the present and showing things as they really are

Browns and grays convey the dreary and dismal nature of their work

brushwork is rough = rejection of Neoclassicism

Detail on faces/hands gets the same level of attention as the rocks

Figures are disjointed and do not create a unified composition, lacks the basics of art composition but that makes it feel more real

5’3” X 8’6” – a scale that was previously reserved for grand historical painting

Function:

To "consider two men breaking stones on the side of the highway...to meet the complete expression of poverty." To show poverty and the struggle of working-class peoples in Europe around 1850, especially given recent injustices and the fact that they were never portrayed in art.

The dark hill and small bit of light/sky isolate the laborers to suggest they are physically and economically trapped

youth vs age = people remain in poverty their whole lives. The boy is too young and the man is too old for this kind of work. Creates an accurate account of the abuse common in mid-century French rural life.

Context:

Realism developed in France against the backdrop of increasing emphasis on science. Realist artists argued that only what people could see for themselves was "real." Realists focused attention on experiences/sights of everyday life and disapproved of including historical or allegorical figures. Artists often painted images that were previously deemed to be unworthy of depiction (peasants, working class, the mundane).

Gustave Courbet was a leading figure of Realist movement. He had great concern for the working class and considered himself a socialist. Marx’s Communist Manifesto was published the year before this was painted.