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Courbet at the Met

by [Karen Wilkin](#)

On "Gustave Courbet" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The pale, wide-eyed young man tearing at his hair has been everywhere since the juicy Gustave Courbet retrospective opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art at the end of February. [\[1\]](#) He lunges at us, full lips parted, eyes staring in horror, enormous dark irises ringed with white. It's not just the maddened expression or the aggressive frontality that makes the image so compelling—nor the fact that the guy is gorgeous, although it helps—but also the orchestration of contrasts: pale flesh vs. long, dark hair, muscular arms vs. delicate bone structure, full white shirtsleeves vs. big black tie, crazed gesture vs. neat little beard and silky moustache. Yet for anyone who knows anything about Courbet, it's difficult to reconcile this wild-eyed refugee from a gothic novel with the man who described his aim as translating “the customs, ideas, and appearance of my time as I see them” i ...

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