

“*Stonebreakers* is composed of two very pitiable figures: one is an old man, an old machine grown stiff with service and age. His sunburned head is covered with a straw hat blackened by dust and rain. His arms, which look sprung, are dressed in a coarse linen shirt. In his red-striped vest you can see a tobacco box made of horn with copper edges. At the knee, resting on a straw mat, his drugget pants, which could stand by themselves, show a large patch; through his worn blue socks one sees his heels in his cracked wooden clogs. The one behind him is a young man about fifteen years old, suffering from scurvy. Some dirty linen tatters are his shirt, exposing his arms and his sides. His pants are held up by a leather suspender, and on his feet he has his father’s old shoes, which have long since developed gaping holes on all sides. Here and there the tools of their work are scattered on the ground: a dosser, a stretcher, a hoe, a rustic pot in which they carry their midday soup, and a piece of black bread in a srip. All this takes place in full sunlight by a ditch alongside a road. I made up none of it, dear friend. I saw these people every day on my walk. Besides, in that station one ends up the same way as one begins. The vine growers and the farmers, who are much taken with this painting, claim that, were I to do a hundred more, none would be more true to life.” - Gustave Courbet

Transposing object and image, substance and surface, labor and materiality, *Stonebreakers* wrest meaning from a recalcitrant physical world. Rock pigments are pulverized, mixed into paint, and rearranged into pictures that calcify on the wall and in the mind. Tasks are repeated, time passes, and bodies are routinized. Scratched, painted, printed or projected, matter and image coexist in different registers of reality. Courbet’s depiction of meaningless labor (“one ends up the same way as one begins”) was destroyed in an Allied bombing raid during WWII. Threatened by a digital sublime, artists today produce concrete symbols, real representations and false idols to forestall decay and break up the time.

*(This document was automatically generated by Contemporary Art Library.)*