

#"SHIR O SHAKAR"

The Timeless Appeal of Seersucker

In the United States Congress, there's a tradition known as "Seersucker Thursday," when lawmakers show up dressed in seersucker suits



Seersucker is one of those fabrics that quietly carries a long, global story while still feeling effortlessly modern. Light, breathable, and instantly recognizable by its puckered stripes, it has become a symbol of relaxed elegance in places as varied as summer sporting events and political traditions.

At events like Wimbledon Championships, where style is almost as important as sport, seersucker often makes an appearance. Its crisp yet casual look fits perfectly with the atmosphere, refined, but not overly formal. The fabric's signature stripes and texture give it a distinctive charm that stands out without trying too hard.

Across the Atlantic, seersucker has even carved out a place in politics. In the United States Congress, there's a tradition known as "Seersucker Thursday," when lawmakers show up dressed in seersucker suits. It's a lighthearted custom that breaks from the usual seriousness of government attire, celebrating both heritage and comfort during the warmer months. What many people don't realize is

that seersucker's origins trace back to India. The name itself is derived from the Persian phrase "shir o shakar," meaning "milk and sugar." This poetic description refers to the fabric's texture: smooth stripes alternating with slightly rough, puckered ones. Over time, "shir o shakar" evolved into "seersucker" as the fabric traveled through trade routes and into Western fashion.

Those alternating stripes aren't just decorative, they serve a practical purpose. The puckered sections lift parts of the fabric away from the skin, allowing air to circulate more freely. This makes seersucker especially comfortable in hot, humid climates because it doesn't cling to the body. The result is a fabric that feels as cool as it looks, combining function with understated style.

From its roots in Indian craftsmanship to its presence at iconic events and institutions, seersucker remains a testament to how traditional textiles can find new life across cultures. It's more than just a summer fabric, it's a blend of history, design, and practicality woven into every stripe.



The Desperate Man (Le Désespéré)



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Courbet kept this painting until he died. Why would he keep this? An image most of us would hide.

He pushes his own face right to the front of the painting. His mouth is tight. Caught before speech. Both hands clutch his hair as if he is trying to hold himself together. The white shirt catches the light, but everything around him darkens. There is no landscape, no table, no steady object. Nothing gives this image rest.

Then comes the most unsettling part. He looks straight at us. Not away and not past us. At us. Courbet painted this early in his life before he would become the artist who would challenge French painting. Before the public defiance, and before his name became larger than the man he painted himself. Like this.

He kept it. Most of us carry a version of ourselves we would rather leave behind. The anxious one, the ashamed one, the one who didn't yet know whether life would hold together. But to love oneself begins by seeing yourself without

contempt. Courbet gives us a face held in the edge of panic. And somehow, he lets that face meet our eyes. Maybe, some part of us needs that too. Not to be explained away or to be hidden, to simply to be seen and not cast out.

The 24-year-old stares wild-eyed out at the viewer, his hands tearing at his flowing, unkempt hair. In his blousy white shirt and blue smock, Courbet here appears the quintessential Romantic artist, a tortured genius struggling for recognition and a bite to eat.

"May I meet my frightened self without contempt. May honesty come before performance. I notice the hands in the hair and the eyes that don't look away. Today, I will notice one person who seems tightly held together, and I will offer gentle love without needing them to explain themselves."

While familiar in this folkloric sense, *The Desperate Man* contrasts markedly with the public image Courbet had been steadily crafting for himself. Only a few years later, at the Paris salon of 1850-51, he would cause a sensation with confrontational canvases, *The Stone Breakers* (1849-50, since destroyed) and *A Burial at Ornans* (1849-50) among them, featuring ordinary people from his native Ornans depicted at a large scale typically reserved for lofty history painting.

The unvarnished realism of these works would establish Courbet as the proponent of a new art, one that reflected life, including the lower classes, as it is. "To know

in order to do, that was my idea," the artist wrote in 1855. "To be in a position to translate the customs, the ideas, the appearance of my time, according to my own estimation; to be not only a painter, but a man as well, in short, to create living art, this is my goal."

By the artist's own token, *The Desperate Man* should be taken as a literal expression of his lived experience. After all, in 1843, when Courbet undertook this anxious self-portrait, he was a young man without a manifesto, still laboring to build his reputation.

Courbet had moved to Paris when he was 20, in 1839, to pursue a law degree. He quickly defected from this career path, vowing, he wrote, "to lead the life of a savage," enjoying "the great, independent vagabond life of the Bohemian," as an artist unencumbered by the state. To that end, Courbet skipped enrollment at the Academy of Fine Arts, training instead in various artists' studios and spending hours at the Musée du Louvre copying Old Masters he admired. He also took in works by the previous generation of French Romantic artists, especially Théodore Géricault and Eugène Delacroix, who painted contemporary events on a monumental scale.

Despite his enthusiastic drive, Courbet was still searching for his own artistic identity. Yet, he found

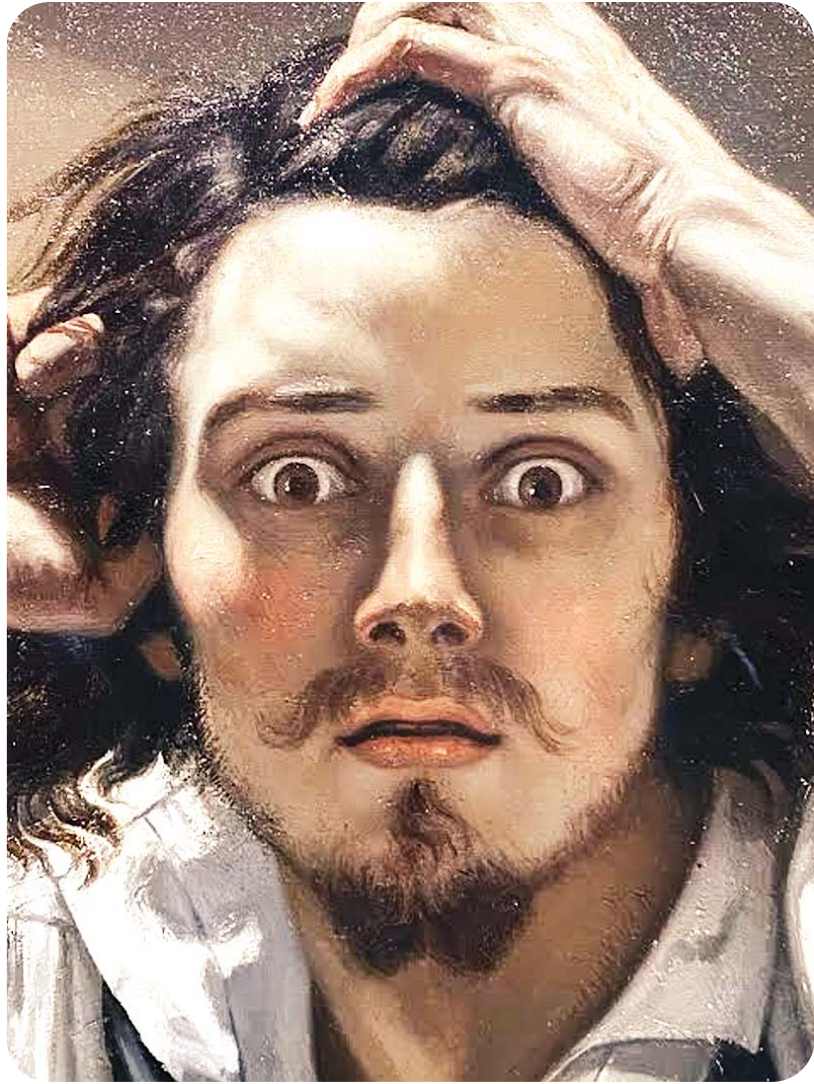
#COURBET



Gustave Courbet (1819-1877)

himself growing increasingly disillusioned by the art establishment as he faced repeated rejection from the state-sanctioned salon. Finally, in 1844, the salon accepted his Courbet with a *black dog* (1842-44), a haughty view of the artist, in black cape and hat, as a resting traveler in a craggy hillside (a trope that repeats in the

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Desperate Man, undergoing a political and artistic awakening in 1848, a pivotal year both civically and personally. A democratic revolution in France deposed the monarchy and resulted in the liberal Second Republic, and Karl Marx published his *Communist Manifesto*. That same year, Courbet moved into a studio on the Left Bank, falling in with the poet Charles Baudelaire, art critic Champfleury, and socialist philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who encouraged him to create the serious, idealized depictions of the working classes that would catapult him to notoriety. By the early 1850s, Courbet had acquired the steady support of Alfred Bruyas, a wealthy collector whose patronage allowed him financial freedom. Still, throughout his life, Courbet retained his provocative sense of dissent, and of being an outsider. (As an active socialist, the artist couldn't resist, for instance, begrudging Bruyas's upper-class status in works like *The Encounter*.) Courbet's characterization of himself as the "proudest and most arrogant man in France" seems distant from the horrified figure in *The Desperate Man*. A little-known self-portrait completed around the same time, entitled *The Man Mad with Fear* (ca. 1843), shows the artist with an almost identically wretched expression, but in this scene, he crouches down at the edge of an abyss. Here, the Romantic prospect of the solitary genius is literalized to comical effect, the looming threat of failure

exemplified by the ridiculous chasm. *The Desperate Man*, therefore, focuses in on a moment of dichotomy in the artist's life. Just as Courbet began to shed the Romantic tropes of his forebears to attend to a new, modern art, he experienced the now-clichéd insecurity of the young artist who stares down his own unknown future. When taken alongside his other self-portraits, and with the fact that it largely remained in his studio during his lifetime, *The Desperate Man* seems intensely personal, and thus, deeply genuine. In many of his paintings, Courbet was committed to capturing the truth of modern life, or the unwashed masses. But in this picture, he takes off his mask, revealing a much more vulnerable truth about himself.

Courbet himself never mentioned this enigmatic work, which remained with him until his death. The painting has been read as an "expressive head," an academic exercise in the tradition of Charles Le Brun (1619-1690), an image of the artist as mad genius, and an autobiographical work depicting the artist in a moment of personal and artistic crisis. It probably was painted about 1844-45, after Courbet had been rejected several times by the Salon jury and was becoming disillusioned with his youthful Romantic ideals. Looking back on his early struggles, Courbet would comment, "How I was made to suffer despair in my youth!"

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