

# Basic Detail Report

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## The Diligence in the Snow

**Date**

1860

**Primary Maker**

Jean Désiré Gustave Courbet

**Medium**

Oil on canvas

**Dimensions**

137.2 x 199.1 cm

**Description**

Struggling in the snow is a diligence or French stagecoach pulled here by oxen and horses. Courbet is said to have witnessed a similar accident when on a hunting expedition in the forest of Livier. While it is possible to see far into the distance, Courbet has also paid close attention to the figures in this painting. Originally called *Naufrage dans la Neige* with *Montagnes du Jura* occasionally added, the current title was also used by the artist. *Naufrage* translates as foundering or is also used to describe a shipwreck. This description is particularly appropriate given Courbet's wave-like depiction of the deep snowdrift. Courbet was born to affluent parents, but retained an affinity to their rural origins. Defying his family's wishes that he should study law, he moved to Paris aged twenty to become an artist, studying under M Steuben, now obscure, and copying Old Master paintings in the Louvre. From the early 1840s he offended critics by painting genre scenes of contemporary life on the monumental scale then reserved for historical or mythological subjects, and emerged as the head of a new school of painting known as Realism. Commercial success did not come until the 1860s with more popular, smaller-scale still lifes and nudes, and landscapes such as *The Diligence in the Snow*, thought to derive from an accident he witnessed while on a hunting trip near his birthplace. A 'diligence' was a type of commercial stagecoach; the main form of long-distance transport before the emergence of the railways. Courbet shows the coach overturned in snowdrifts so deep and sculpted that they resemble a stormy sea, the small figures dwarfed by the expansive landscape setting. The brooding sky heightens the sense of drama and the isolation of the struggling group, despite the presence of the dwelling in the middle distance.