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The French Impressionists

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Impressionism
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The French Impressionists

by

Bill Merrell
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THE FRENCH IMPRESSIONISTS

"Before the arrival among us of the Japanese picture books, there was no one in France who dared . . . put side by side on his canvas a roof frankly red, a white-washed wall, a green poplar, a yellow road, and blue water. The painter told nothing but lies. Nature with its fresh hues put out his eyes . . . and one saw on his canvas only faded colors drowned in a general half tone The impressionist paints without hesitation upon his canvas water which has this, that, or the other hue. The sky is overcast, . . . he paints water that is milky, heavy, opaque; the sky is clear, he paints the water sparkling, silvery, with an azure sheen. The wind is stirring, he paints the reflections broken by the ripples. The sun goes down and darts its rays along the water, the impressionist . . . dashes upon his canvas yellow and red The winter comes . . . the impressionist perceives that in the sunlight the shadows thrown upon the snow are blue, without hesitation he paints blue shadows Certain clayey soils in the country take on a lilac tone, the impressionist paints lilac landscapes. Under a summer sun in the shade of green leafage, the skin and clothes take a violet tint, the impressionist paints violet people in the woods. Then the public lose all self-control and the critics shake their fists They do not

take the pains to see if what they see painted corresponds or not to what the painter has really seen in nature . . . The impressionist's work does not look like the work of the painters that went before him Therefore it is bad."¹

Impressionism seems to have arisen as a close study of nature and external phenomena. It was at first regarded as a meteor destined to go out, but now the name "impressionist" appears to be an imprecise description of the group of painters who in 1874 held an exhibition and by a penny-a-liner were dubbed Impressionnistes. They were a mixed lot: some of them were already known as followers of Courbet and Manet, others had worked under the influence of Corot, one at least was a disciple of Ingres. In 1870 they had been more or less independent painters, each going his own way, and ten or twelve years later the best of them were going their own ways again. While the great influence they have had is undeniable, the end, the ultimate, result, the final estimate to be placed upon an art still savoring of eccentricity, is yet a question.²

Whatever it may have been that these various and independent artists had in common must be sought between the years 1872 and 1882____the formative and golden decade. There was a doctrine and a technique, but not all the impressionist masters believed heartily in the doctrine, and only two practiced the technique consist-

ently. Nevertheless, something was held in common, something vaguer but more significant than a doctrine. There was a point of view, an attitude to life and art, which for a time at any rate inspired them all. For a while they shared a new, an essentially "modern" vision, and a passionate delight therein. Thus they rediscovered Paganism.

"The world is so full of a number of things, I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings."³

That was their discovery. No need for the artist in search of subjects to go to history or mythology or literature; no need to ransack the gorgeous East or the mysterious North; no need to harry a picturesque past in pursuit of fighting *Téméraires* or stage-coaches or knights in armour; let the artist walk into the street or railway-station or suburban garden, or on to the racecourse, and there he will find beauty galore. They were the ravings of madmen or worse; they stank of anarchy. They were deemed a frontal attack on all that respectable people held sacred. And so they were. For behind these pagan paintings lay an assumption that there was no call to worry about the "Grand-Forever" of respectable church-goers, nor yet about the Welfare State of equally respectable anticlericals. Without a hope of Heaven or Utopia, life was well worth living for itself and as it was: so it seemed to the Impressionists between 1872 and 1882 _____ in Paris. And yet most of them were poor.

So far there is something like a common aim or inspiration; and when it came to devising means for expressing this new awareness of the beauty of ordinary sights_____of top-hats and four-wheeled cabs, piles of luggage in railway stations, iron bridges with steam tugs passing under them, embankments and factory chimneys smoking_____of everything in fact that midcentury aestheticism considered most inartistic, the Impressionists proper_____the Pleinairistes_____continued to stick together. Between '72 and '76 (the year of the second exhibition) they evolved a doctrine and a technique. Roughly, the doctrine came to this: if only people would look at what was really there instead of pretending to see the labels imposed on things by the practical intellect or, worse still, by pretentious drawing-masters, they would discover that everything in the garden, or the street, or anywhere else, is lovely_____and presumably would buy impressionist pictures. Well, what is really there? Light; or to be subjective, sensations caused by light. So, to render reality, all the painter has to do is to record accurately his visual sensations. Let him take his canvas out of doors and paint what he sees, his visual sensations that is: he will find that colour merges into colour; that bounding lines, like perspective, are mere intellectual makeshifts; that shadows are neither black nor brown but full of a variety of colours; and all will be well. Only

let him be true to his sensations and he cannot then be false to visual reality. From this doctrine followed more or less logically the impressionist technique: use of pure colours applied in dots and dashes according to laws which were imperfectly understood; the division of tones; the juxtaposition of complementaries; the scientific palette in fact, such as mixed colours, colourless shadows, arranged lights and other studio tricks, literature, anecdote and putting in what isn't really there. In theory, impressionist technique was nothing more than a means of recording visual sensations, and impressionist doctrine boils to this _____ sensational truth is the only proper study of artists. That, of course, is nonsense, like all exclusive doctrines. Presumably the proper study of artists is to create art. And what is art? Nobody knows. But the doctrine served its turn: it kept at the highest pitch of excitement a group of prodigiously gifted painters who have enriched mankind with enchanting pleasures.

That Manet should have been accounted chief of the impressionist school, though he painted only a few impressionist pictures and painted them towards the end of his life, seems odd but was quite natural. Ever since 1863 he had been a rallying-point for young and ardent spirits. To them he seemed the man who stood for the honour and integrity of art against a world of officials, pot-boilers and prizemen. He had money and education. His family

was more than respectable; and he dressed and behaved in a manner suitable to his station.⁴ Socially he was much above most of his followers, though not above Degas.

The truth being that there was no chief of the impressionist school, the name of Claude Monet should perhaps head the list. It may be that he and Sisley were the least gifted of the painters represented in this collection; but certain it is that he and Pissarro were the two who worked out together the theory and practice of Impressionism. And if Pissarro, who had the better brain, did most of the thinking, Monet was the indefatigable practitioner. At the end of his long life he was an Impressionist still.

To what extent Renoir was an Impressionist _____ one who practiced what Monet and Pissarro preached _____ is a question that may be discussed with profit but hardly decided. All that can be said with confidence is that such intimations of Impressionism as are to be found in his work of between 1872 and 1882 had vanished by 1885. While Monet was concerned to render an optical experience, Renoir thought always of making a picture. Making a picture: to that end the genius of the magician was ever bent; to that end his insistence on study in the galleries. If Renoir was hardly an Impressionist proper, Degas, strictly speaking, was not an Impressionist at all. He was a Naturalist; also, in the 'seventies, this devout student of Ingres was probably the most "modern" painter alive. In the Japanese print-makers, then becoming

fashionable, he had found not matches for his master, but manipulators of form whom he could respect. Indeed, a taste for Japanese prints was one of the few things that all Impressionists _____ naturalist or pleinairiste _____ with the possible exception of Renoir _____ had in common. Degas was a classical draughtsman with a restless modern intellect, and Japan satisfied his taste for modernity without shocking his reverence for line. The unexpectedness of Degas' designs has been attributed to the study of instantaneous photography. Possibly some were suggested by photographs, but Japanese prints gave him the idea of turning photographs into aesthetically effective patterns. In one sense, however, his art may be called "instantaneous"; not because his drawings are like photographs, but because he delights in seizing movement and rendering it in the ungainly exactitude of arrested gesture.⁵ What fascinated him was the character that nature rather than pictorial imagination gives to things. A passion for truth impelled Degas, as it impelled Monet, to see things as they are and not as painters were expected to see them.

It is doubtful that Cézanne ever painted a scientifically impressionist picture. But since during those all-important years 1871 to 1877 he was working with, and almost under the guidance of, Pissarro, and since from Pissarro he learnt lessons that he never forgot, it seems reasonable to reckon him of the school. Nevertheless, always there was a profound difference between the impressionist notion of a

picture and Cézanne's. This difference is manifest from the first. To begin at the beginning, in the small 'seventies, when the doctrine and technique were being elaborated, whereas most of those who were to become impressionist masters had already given proof of talent and painted good pictures, Cézanne had given proof of little more than temperament and had a shocking pictorial past to live down. So, in the early years of Impressionism, he had to learn, not only to paint, but to master his emotions. Much he learnt from Manet, whom he did not love, and more from Pissarro, whom no one could help respecting. He learnt to keep his eye on the subject and to eschew rhetoric. By 1880 or so he had learnt all the Impressionists had to teach.

Of the great Impressionists, Sisley is probably the least admired; Pissarro the most under-rated. That Sisley, born of English parents in Paris, was an exquisite painter is freely admitted, but one has only to look at his Inondation in the Jeu de Paume to feel that he was something more. Seeing that he was in London with Monet in 1871, and that together they discovered Turner_____and doubtless Constable_____one may assume he played some part in the formation of Impressionism. He was a poet____an English poet____with delicate perceptions of, and reactions to, the moods of nature. When he allows these to choose his theme and guide his hand he is at his best; when he tries to be a little strong he is a little unsatisfactory.

How unlike that is the case of Pissarro. With his strong, inquisitive mind he was a born explorer. Certainly he was an Impressionist to the end of his days; but he was not an Impressionist every day. Never content to rest under his laurels, he kept an eye on what Signac and Seurat were about, and on Maurice Denis and Gauguin too. There might be something in any new theory, and he was not going to dismiss it until he had explored its possibilities. This open-mindedness and taste for experiment, admirable in themselves, seem in no way to have debilitated the artist's personality. On the contrary, his art was enriched by his researches. Pissarro was a thorough good painter from first to last.

"Ever since the Renaissance, and for hundreds of years before, visual artists had sought a compromise between what they saw and what the grocer thinks he sees (under the honourable style of 'grocer' I subsume the nobility and gentry, merchants and artisans, the law, the church and the armed forces). The Impressionists were the first___with the exception of Turner in his old age___to be quite uncompromising. What they painted was not in the least like what the grocer thought he saw. All grocerdom screamed. When it had done screaming it acquiesced. Henceforth it was agreed that art and what the grocer thinks he sees are two quite different things. 'And so,' says the triumphant but unborn historian, "Impressionism leads straight to Picasso."

F O O T N O T E S

¹Introduction to Catalogue of Works of the Impressionists of Paris, New York, 1886.

²A History of French Painting, C.H. Stranahan. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917. p.459-60.

³The French Impressionists, Clive Bell. Phaidon Publishers Inc., Greenwich, Conn. 1967. p.7.

⁴Ibid., p.11-12.

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