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History of Western Art
Part Four – From Neo-Classicism to Impressionism

Assignment Four – Exercise 1

Notes on Chapter Seventeen – Impressionism to Post-Impressionism

France defeated in Franco-Prussian war in 1871. No significant change for artists. Opera opened – Neo-Renaissance, Neo-Baroque elaborate, showy, ostentatious building. Sculpture criticised for indecency – too lifelike and offended some visitors.

IMPRESSIONISM

Impressionists not accepted by mainstream arts critic world; style of painting too rough, unsophisticated for Salons. Were accepted by intelligentsia; Impressionist artists, however, mainly middle class bourgeoisie and subject matter very mainstream; happy sunshine scenes with 'nice' middle class subjects enjoying strolls in the park, picnics in perpetual sunshine. Monet and Renoir first 'Impressionists', painted in observational style, dispassionate style. Realism in art reflected philosophy of experiential science; only that which can be scientifically proved is acceptable. For Impressionists meant painting in open air, capturing real moments with accuracy. Colour captured in small splashes, merging optically from distance. Some thought paintings unfinished. (pp700-704)

Monet

Impression – Sunrise gave movement its name. Idea was to paint only with colour, not light and dark tone or outline. Objects to be thought of in terms of blocks of colour. (p204)

Morisot, Renoir and Manet

Morisot also painted outdoors (before Manet) but with more personal interpretation. Painted scenes of personal significance, eg. local neighbourhood of Passy. Early Renoir fully Impressionist, later grew tired of lack of form and returned to, for example, female nude with more traditional methods. (pp705-06)

Manet didn't exhibit with Impressionists but identified with them. Adopted in particular painting of urban night scenes, suitable contemporary, modern subjects. A Bar at the Folies-Bergere, viewer is reflecting on, but not in, reflection of crowd at bar. Barmaid's air of isolation, distance typical of style. (p706-10)

Degas

Painted mainly in studio and scenes were of tawdry, ordinary real life, so arguably not in keeping with Impressionists. Nature of realism very typical of Impressionism and combination of real and illusion skilfully contrasted. Choice of subject shows dancers in behind the scenes compositions – glamour and glitter packed away, fatigue, endless practice and drudgery depicted without glamour. Regarded by some as misogynist but maintained that he showed 'real' women going about their normal affairs, unposed and unaffected by the sense of being drawn; almost voyeuristic ('keyhole' paintings). Skilled sculptor but only one work exhibited. Fully 3-d and realistic, dancer checks her shoe oblivious to observations of artist. Influenced by Japanese prints, captured fleeting moments, apparently unconsciously but, by his own acknowledgement, carefully and artfully crafted. Moved from oils to small-scale pieces in mixed media use of oils/pastel/watercolour/gouache and ink. (pp710-12)

JAPONISME

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Japanese prints popular; vibrant colour, experimental in viewpoint, vivacious and often vulgar. Significant influence in freeing Impressionists from rigidity of old masters and classical art. Also influenced photography; soft-focus backgrounds and sharp focus on subject; focus as the eye sees when image captured. Different from Chinoiserie which had less influence, Japonisme appreciated by all Western artists of the era (except Cezanne). Addressed key issue of representing 3-d illusionism on flat painted space. Lautrec and Cassat particularly attracted to Japanese resolution to this problem. With advances in lithography, Lautrec integrates image with lettering and incorporation of empty space (per Japanese style). Poster becomes art. Symbolist painters eg. Gauguin, Van Gogh, show strong influences of Hokusai. Flattened forms, dark contours, no shadows and unbroken expanses of pure colour. (pp712-15)

NEO-IMPRESSIONISM

Artists became disillusioned with lack of meaning, depth and ambivalence in Impressionist painting.

Seurat, Divisionism and Socialism

Seurat resolved dichotomy with Bathers, painting large outdoor scene but with refinement and subtlety, not sketchy vagueness of Impressionists. Took sketches of scene but composed work in studio. Used 'Divisionism' or Pointillism to create illusion of luminosity by painting careful, adjacent colours next to each other which, when viewed from an appropriate distance, merged to give striking reflected light. Painstaking work, far from freer style of Impressionists. More rigid use of form and attention to stricter, geometric composition. Subjects working classes not bourgeoisie. Had sub-text of Socialism by depicting working poor and the hardness of their working lives, albeit later political undertones largely unrecognised. (pp 715-17)

SYMBOLISM

Symbolists reject naturalism in favour of expression of ideas in tangible form. Artists seek expression of inner thoughts rather than recording directly what they see.

Gauguin and Van Gogh

Initially stockbroker, Gauguin paints from imagination, drawing on inner vision in context of observation. Visual metaphors.

A prolific, if immeasurably troubled painter, Van Gogh was initially a pastor. Wrote extensively about himself and his work and completed 70 paintings in last 70 days before his suicide. Paintings expressed 'terrible passions of humanity', depicted in powerful use of colour. Although in poverty when he died, seemed to care little for the fact.

Art as religion a feature in both Gauguin and Van Gogh. Desire to return to idea of man as 'noble savage'. Gauguin moves to remote Tahitian island to emulate this romantic ideal. Despite relocation, paintings less, not more, about nobility of the innocent. Bold use of colour, but subject matter often co-composition of images from photographs taken with him. Understanding of Polynesian culture evident in works. (pp 718-20)

Allegories of Modern Life: Munch and Rodin

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Norwegian Munch worked in Paris but brought with him fatalistic, deeply pessimistic, introspective traits of North. Work is neurotic, pathologically unbalanced. Work is emblematic of air of despair experienced by fin de siècle artists. Work is challenging, disturbing and deeply emotionally charged. Rodin similarly affected by fin de siècle malaise. Skill as sculptor enables emotionally imbued works, realistic and immersed in trauma and despair. So realistic accused of using casts. (pp 720-22)

ART NOUVEAU AND THE NEW ARCHITECTURE

Art Nouveau, whilst owing debt to Pre-Raphaelites, Morris, Rococo and Celtic ornament, was nonetheless a rejection of the historical revivals and a true attempt at a new form of building. Foremost proponents, Gaudi, Horta, Van de Velde, created genuinely original forms, sinewy, entwining, curves, twists and spirals. Popularity significantly increased by print technology allowing production and distribution of glossy magazines. (pp723-25)

Sullivan and the Skyscraper

Advances in technology allowed construction of larger, steel-framed buildings. Sullivan proposed buildings with 'form follows function'; minimal ornament, clean design. Following steel grid-frame structure creates buildings in new style, free of earlier unnecessary ornamentation. (pp 727-28)

Domestic Architecture

Rise of housing architect-designed for middle class owners. Styled to accommodate owners' preferences and tastes, began with John Nash's Red House for William Morris, Richardson in USA. In England, quaint, modest, individual houses epitomised middle-class city workers' desire for a county idyll. (p728)

CEZANNE

Studied subjects extensively before painting in search for realisation of both eye and reflection. Sought to reconcile depth and pattern, flat canvas with 3-d form by careful use of colour. Of independent means so with no need to sell work, painted many still lifes and landscapes. Sometimes with oddities in perspective (Fruit Bowl, Glass and Apples) (WHA p731) images nevertheless solid and with real mass and rhythm. In landscape painted native Provence with limited palette of gold, blue, yellow, green and earth shades. Compositions carefully crafted to achieve both depth and balance. Also painted many portraits; family, friends, strangers, depicting with humanity, sensitivity and warmth. (pp 729-33)