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## *EDMOND DURANTY: 1833–1880*

### *The New Painting: Concerning the Group of Artists Exhibiting at the Durand-Ruel Galleries (1876)*

*The critic and man of letters Duranty, who had edited the short-lived review,* Le Réalisme, *in 1856–1857, turned to a defense of the "group of artists exhibiting at the Durand-Ruel Galleries" in 1876—the year of the second Impressionist Exhibition (although Duranty avoids the term Impressionist). The exhibition included works by Degas, Monet, Morisot, Pissarro, Renoir, Bazille, Sisley, and others.*

*Duranty is actually, primarily, a spokesman for Degas, and the latter exhibited a pastel portrait of Duranty in the fifth Impressionist Exhibition of 1880. Yet, despite the fact that Degas' ideas probably influenced those of his friend, and that certain passages in* The New Painting *certainly refer specifically to Degas, this does not mean, as has been suggested, that this pamphlet was written by the painter. The connecting link between the two is Duranty's conception of naturalism and his championing of the artist who is an observer of modern life, a mordant commentator on contemporary manners, movement, and gesture. Duranty is far less interested in current landscape painting: about the other Impressionists—Monet, Renoir, and Pissarro—he expressed certain reservations. A comparison of Duranty's ideas in this brochure and those expressed in Degas' notebooks (see below, pp. 60 to 63) reveals the extent of the artist's influence on his friend.*

Here they are then, these artists who exhibit in the Durand-Ruel Gallery, linked to those who preceded or accompany them.[1] They are no longer isolated. One must not consider them as thrown upon their own devices.

I have, therefore, less in view the present exhibition than the *cause* and the *idea*.

What do they produce? What does the movement produce? And, consequently, what do these artists produce, wrestling with tradition body-to-body, admiring it and wanting to destroy it at the same time, realizing that it is great and powerful, and for that very reason attacking it?

Why then should we be interested in them? Why do we then forgive them for too often producing (though not out of laziness) nothing but sketches and abbreviated summaries?

[1] Duranty has just indicated that the origins of the new movement could be found in the innovations of such painters as Courbet, Millet, Corot, Jongkind, Boudin, Legros, Whistler, Fantin-Latour, and Manet, who, in fact, had not participated in this second Impressionist Exhibition.

It is really because it is a great surprise in a period like this one, when it seemed that there was no longer anything left to discover, when preceding periods had been analyzed so much, when we seem stifled beneath the mass and weight of the creations of past centuries, to see new ideas suddenly spring up, a special creation. A young branch has developed on the old tree trunk of art. Will it cover itself with leaves, flowers, and fruits? Will it extend its shade over future generations? I hope so.

What, then, have they produced?

A color scheme, a kind of drawing, and a series of original views.

Among their number, some limit themselves to transforming tradition and attempt to translate the modern world without turning too far from the old and magnificent formulas which served to express preceding worlds, while others sweepingly discard the techniques of the past.

As far as method of coloring is concerned, they have made a real discovery, whose origin cannot be found elsewhere—neither with the Dutch, nor in the pale tones of fresco painting, nor in the light tonalities of the eighteenth century. They are not merely concerned with that fine, flexible play of colors which results from the observation of the most delicate value in tones which contrast with or penetrate one another. Their discovery actually consists in having recognized that full light *de-colors* tones, that the sun reflected by objects tends (because of its brightness) to bring them back to that luminous unity which melts its seven prismatic rays into a single colorless radiance: light.

Proceeding from intuition to intuition, they have little by little succeeded in breaking down sunlight into its rays, its elements and to reconstitute its unity by means of the general harmony of spectrum colors which they spread on their canvases. From the point of view of sensitivity of the eye, of subtle penetration of the art of color, it is a completely extraordinary result. The most learned physicist could find nothing to criticize in their analyses of light. . . .

The romantic artist, in his studies of light, was only familiar with the orange colored strip of the sun setting beneath dark hills, or the white impasto, tinged with either chrome yellow or rose lake, which he threw over the bituminous opacities of his forest floors. No light without bitumen, without ivory black, without Prussian blue, without contrasts which, it is said, make the tone appear warmer, more heightened. He believed that light added color and animation to the tone and he was persuaded that it [light] only existed on condition that it was surrounded by shadows. The basement with a ray of light coming through a narrow air hole—such was the governing idea of the romantic artist. Even today, in every country, the landscape is treated like the depths of a fireplace or the interior of the back of a shop.

And yet everyone has gone through some thirty leagues of countryside in the summer and has been able to see how hillocks, meadow, and field vanished, so to speak, in a single light-filled reflection which they receive from the sky and give back to it; for this is the law which engenders light in nature—aside from the particular blue, green, or composite ray which each substance absorbs; and over and above this ray, it [light] reflects both the ensemble of all the rays and the color of the vault which covers the earth. Now indeed, for the first time, painters have understood and reproduced, or tried to reproduce, these phenomena. In some of their canvases we can feel the light and the heat vibrate and palpitate. We feel an intoxication of light, which, for painters educated outside of and in opposition to nature, is a thing without merit, without importance, much too bright, too clear, too crude, and too explicit. . . .



And the aim of drawing, in these modern attempts, is precisely that of becoming so intimately acquainted with nature and of embracing it so strongly that it [drawing] will become unexceptionable in all its relationships of form and familiar with the inexhaustible diversity of character. Farewell to the human body treated like a vase with a decorative, swinging curve; farewell to the uniform monotony of the framework, the flayed figure jutting out beneath the nude; what we need is the particular note of the modern individual, in his clothing, in the midst of his social habits, at home or in the street. . . .

By means of a back, we want a temperament, an age, a social condition to be revealed; [2] through a pair of hands, we should be able to express a magistrate or a tradesman; by a gesture, a whole series of feelings. A physiognomy will tell us that this fellow is certainly an orderly, dry, meticulous man, whereas that one is carelessness and disorderliness itself. An attitude will tell us that this person is going to a business meeting, whereas that one is returning from a love tryst. *A man opens a door; he enters; that is enough: we see that he has lost his daughter.* Hands that are kept in pockets can be eloquent. The pencil will be steeped in the marrow of life. We will no longer see mere outlines measured with a compass, but animated, expressive forms, logically deduced from one another. . . .

The idea, the first idea, was to take away the partition separating the studio from everyday life. . . . It was necessary to make the painter leave his sky-lighted cell, his cloister where he was in contact with the sky alone, and to bring him out among men, into the world. . . .

For the observer, there is a whole logic of color-method and drawing which proceeds from a viewpoint, according to whether it was chosen at a certain hour, in a certain season, in a certain place. This viewpoint cannot

[2] This passage and the ones that follow refer specifically to Degas.

be expressed, this logic cannot be captured by using Venetian fabrics against Flemish backgrounds. . . .

If one imagines . . . that at a given moment one could take a colored photograph of an interior, one would have a perfect accord, a truthful and typical expression, everything participating in the same feeling. If one waited until a cloud came to veil the daylight and immediately took a new picture, one would obtain a result similar to the first. But if one now took a portion of the details of the first photograph and joined them to a portion of the details of the second to make a painting, then homogeneity, accord, truthfulness, the impression—all would disappear, replaced by a false, inexpressive note. This is, however, what is done every day by painters who do not deign to observe and instead use extracts from ready-made painting. . . .

Views of people and things have a thousand ways of being unexpected in reality. Our point of view is not always in the center of a room with two lateral walls receding toward that of the rear; it does not always gather together the lines and angles of cornices with a mathematical regularity and symmetry. Nor is it always free to suppress the great swellings of the ground and of the floor in the foreground; it [one's viewpoint] is sometimes very high, sometimes very low, missing the ceiling, getting at objects from their undersides, unexpectedly cutting off the furniture. . . .

From within, we communicate with the outside through a window; and the window is the frame that ceaselessly accompanies us. . . . The window frame, depending upon whether we are near or far, seated or standing, cuts off the external view in the most unexpected, most changeable way, obtaining for us that eternal variety and unexpectedness which is one of the great delights of reality.

If one now considers the person, whether in a room or in the street, he is not always to be found situated on a straight line at an equal distance from two parallel objects; he is more confined on one side than on the other by space. In short, he is never in the center of the canvas, in the center of the setting. He is not always seen as a whole: sometimes he appears cut off at mid-leg, half-length, or longitudinally.[3] At other times, the eye takes him in from close-up, at full height, and throws all the rest of a crowd in the street or groups gathered in a public place back into the small scale of the distance. A detailed description of all these viewpoints would go on infinitely, as would a description of all the settings: the railway, the linen-draper's shop, the scaffoldings of construction, the lines of gas lights, the boulevard benches with the newspaper stands, the omnibus

[3] As Marcel Guérin points out in his edition of Duranty's essay, this is of course an allusion to the characteristics of Degas' compositions.



and the carriage, the café with its billiard tables, the restaurant with its tablecloths and place settings.[4]

They [the Impressionists] have tried to render the walk, the movement, the tremor, the intermingling of passersby, just as they have tried to render the trembling of leaves, the shivering of water, and the vibration of air inundated with light, and just as, in the case of the rainbow colorings of the solar rays, they have been able to capture the soft ambiance of a grey day. . . .

However, when I see these exhibitions, these attempts, I become a bit melancholy in my turn and say to myself: these artists, who are almost all my friends, whom I have seen, with pleasure, take off on an unknown path, who answered in part the demands of those art programs we set forth in our youth—where are they going? Will they increase their endowment and keep it?

Will these artists be the primitives of a great movement of artistic renewal and will their successors, if they are relieved of the first difficulties of sowing and manage to reap abundantly, have the piety toward their precursors that the sixteenth-century Italians had for the *quattrocentists?* . . .

And now, I wish a good wind to the fleet, so that it may be carried to the Islands of the Blessed. I urge the pilots to be careful, resolute, and patient. The navigation is dangerous, and they should have set sail in larger and sturdier boats; several vessels are quite small and narrow, good only for coastline painting. Let us remember that, on the contrary, it is a question of ocean-bound painting! [5]

## *THÉODORE DURET: 1838–1927*

### *The Impressionist Painters (1878)*

*Théodore Duret, politician and journalist, art critic and collector, became the chief defender of Manet and the Impressionists and was one of the circle at the Café Guerbois in the late sixties; he published* Les Peintres français *in 1867 and had his portrait painted by Manet the year after. Duret frequently came to the aid of his friends in his Salon reviews during the seventies, favoring especially Manet, Pissarro, Fantin, and Degas, and purchasing their canvases. He recommended, however, that his*

[4] Degas, in his notebooks, had indicated a similar program as early as 1859; see below, pp. 62 to 63.

[5] Edmond Duranty, *La Nouvelle Peinture: A propos du groupe d'artistes qui expose dans les Galeries Durand-Ruel* (1876), ed. Marcel Guérin (Paris: Librairie Floury, 1946), pp. 38–47, 53, 55.

*friends participate in the official Salons, rather than resorting to separate exhibitions. Traveling extensively, he became familiar with the art of the Far East, and was especially enthusiastic about Japanese painting, whose bold effects of coloring and composition he saw echoed in the art of his French protégés.*

*In* The Impressionist Painters, *first published as a pamphlet in 1878, from which an excerpt is printed below, Duret tries to convince the public that all great artists are laughed at in the beginning, and singles out Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, and Morisot as leaders of the group. The critic gave the young artists concrete assistance in finding prospective patrons by linking them to the great traditions of Western art itself. Duret later published numerous studies of Realist and Impressionist painters, including Courbet, Manet, Renoir, Whistler, and a general history of the Impressionist painters as a group.*

The Impressionists did not create themselves all alone; they did not grow like mushrooms. They are a product of a regular evolution of the modern French school. *Natura non fecit saltum* [6]—no more in painting than in anything else. The Impressionists descend from the naturalistic painters; their fathers are Corot, Courbet, and Manet. It is to these three masters that the art of painting owes the simplest methods of construction and that impulsive brushwork proceeding by means of large strokes and masses, which alone defies time. It is to them that we owe light-colored painting, finally freed from litharge, from bitumen,[7] from chocolate, from tobacco juice, from burnt fat and bread crumbs. It is to them that we owe the out-of-doors study, the sensation not merely of colors, but of the slightest nuances of colors, the tones, and still further, the search for the connection between the condition of the atmosphere which illuminates the painting and the general tonality of the objects which are painted in it. To that which the Impressionists received from their predecessors was added the influence of Japanese art.

If you stroll along the banks of the Seine, at Asnières for example, you can take in with a single glance the red roof and the dazzlingly white wall of a cottage, the tender green of a poplar, the yellow of the road, the blue of the river. At noon, in the summer, every color will seem harsh to you, intense, without possible loss of saturation or shrouding in a general half-tone. Well, this may seem odd, but it is true nevertheless; we had to wait until the arrival of Japanese albums before anyone dared to sit down on the bank of a river to juxtapose on canvas a boldly red roof, a white

[6] "Nature makes no leaps." Duret is here trying to establish a connection between the Impressionists and the tradition of Western art in general and of recent French painting in particular.

[7] Litharge is lead monoxide, straw yellow in color; bitumen is a dark brown paint made by mixing asphalt with a drying oil and frequently used as underpainting in traditional art.



wall, a green poplar, a yellow road, and blue water. Before Japan it was impossible; the painter always lied. Nature with its frank colors was in plain sight yet no one ever saw anything on canvas but attenuated colors, drowning in a general half-tone.

As soon as people looked at Japanese pictures, where the most glaring, piercing colors were placed side by side, they finally understood that there were new methods for reproducing certain effects of nature which had been neglected or considered impossible to render until then, and which it might be good to try. For these Japanese pictures, which so many people at first took for a mere gaudy mixture of colors, are strikingly faithful. Ask those who have visited Japan. I find myself continually rediscovering on a fan or in an album the precise sensation of the scenes and landscape I saw in Japan. I look at a Japanese album and say: yes, yes, that is exactly how Japan looked to me. . . . Japanese art conveys the specific appearances of nature by means of bold, new methods of coloring. It cannot fail to strike inquiring artists, and thus [it] strongly influenced the Impressionists.

After the Impressionists had taken from their immediate predecessors in the French school their forthright manner of painting out-of-doors from the first impression with vigorous brushwork, and had grasped the bold, new methods of Japanese coloring, they set off from these acquisitions to develop their own originality and to abandon themselves to their personal sensations.

The Impressionist sits on the banks of a river; depending on the condition of the sky, the angle of vision, the hour of the day, the calm or agitation of the atmosphere, the water takes on a complete range of tones; without hesitating, he paints on his canvas water which has all these tones. When the sky is overcast, the weather rainy, he paints glaucous, heavy, opaque water. When the sky is clear, the sun bright, he paints sparkling, silvery, brilliant blue water. When there is wind, he paints the reflections produced by the ripples; when the sun sets and darts its rays into the water, the Impressionist, in order to fasten down these effects, plasters his canvas with yellow and red. At this point, the public begins to laugh.

When winter comes, the Impressionist paints snow. He sees that the shadows on the snow are blue in the sunlight; unhesitatingly, he paints blue shadows. Now the public laughs outright. If certain clayey soils of the countryside have a lilac tinge, the Impressionist paints lilac landscapes. At this point, the public begins to get indignant.

Under the summer sun, with reflections of green foliage, skin and clothing take on a violet tint. The Impressionist paints people in violet woods. Then the public lets loose violently, the critics shake their fists, call the painter a "communist" and a rascal. The poor Impressionist vainly asserts his complete honesty, declares that he only reproduces what he

sees, that he remains faithful to nature; the public and the critics condemn him. They don't bother to find out whether or not what they discover on the canvas corresponds to what the painter has actually observed in nature. Only one thing matters to them: what the Impressionists put on their canvases does not correspond to what is on the canvases of previous painters. If it is different, then it is bad.[8]

## *LOUIS LEROY: 1812–1885*

### *A Satiric Review of the First Impressionist Exhibition*

*On April 15, 1874,* the Société anonyme des artistes, peintres, sculpteurs, graveurs, *etc., opened its first exhibition at the studio of the photographer Nadar. One hundred and sixty-five works were shown, including paintings by Cézanne, Degas, Monet, Berthe Morisot, Pissarro, Renoir, Sisley, Boudin, and many others, now forgotten. The painters were quickly dubbed "Impressionists" by hostile critics and public, after the title of one of Monet's paintings:* Impression, Sunrise. *During the four weeks it ran, about 3,500 people came to see the show, mainly for entertainment or to express indignation. The critics were for the most part silent or else hostile and cruelly sarcastic, although the group received a few favorable reviews from friends such as Philippe Burty, Armand Silvestre, and Castagnary, the latter expressing certain reservations.*

*Louis Leroy, critic for the satirical journal,* Le Charivari, *bitingly summed up the public attitude toward the exhibition in an article entitled "Exhibition of the Impressionists"—a title indicating the mocking tone of the review itself, since this was the first time the painters were given this appellation. The review also reveals what difficulty the general public, accustomed to the relatively refined brushwork and careful finish of the usual Salon painting, must have had in actually "reading" these works—that is, in managing to obtain a coherent image from the bold, rough brushstrokes and brilliant, broken color patches spotted all over the surface, characteristic of the Impressionists' style.*

Oh, it was indeed a strenuous day . . . when I ventured into the first exhibition on the boulevard des Capucines in the company of M. Joseph Vincent, landscape painter, pupil of [the academic master] Bertin, recipient of medals and decorations under several governments! The rash man had come there without suspecting anything; he thought that he would see the kind of painting one sees everywhere, good and bad, rather bad than good, but not hostile to good artistic manners, devotion to form,

[8] Théodore Duret, *Les Peintres Impressionistes* (Paris: Librairie Parisienne, 1878), pp. 12–16.



and respect for the masters. Oh, form! Oh, the masters! We don't want them any more, my poor fellow! We've changed all that.

Upon entering the first room, Joseph Vincent received an initial shock in front of the *Dancer* by M. Renoir.

"What a pity," he said to me, "that the painter, who has a certain understanding of color, doesn't draw better; his dancer's legs are as cottony as the gauze of her skirts."

"I find you hard on him," I replied. "On the contrary, the drawing is very tight."

Bertin's pupil, believing that I was being ironical, contented himself with shrugging his shoulders, not taking the trouble to answer. Then, very quietly, with my most naïve air, I led him before the *Ploughed Field* of M. Pissarro. At the sight of this astounding landscape, the good man thought that the lenses of his spectacles were dirty. He wiped them carefully and replaced them on his nose.

"By Michalon!"[9] he cried. "What on earth is that?"

"You see . . . a hoarfrost on deeply ploughed furrows."

"Those furrows? That frost? But they are palette-scrapings placed uniformly on a dirty canvas. It has neither head nor tail, top nor bottom, front nor back."

"Perhaps . . . but the impression is there."

"Well, it's a funny impression! Oh . . . and this?"

"*An Orchard* by M. Sisley. I'd like to point out the small tree on the right; it's gay, but the impression . . ."

"Leave me alone, now, with your impression . . . it's neither here nor there. But here we have a *View of Melun* by M. Rouart,[10] in which there's something to the water. The shadow in the foreground, for instance, is really peculiar."

"It's the vibration of tone which astonishes you."

"Call it sloppiness of tone and I'd understand you better—Oh, Corot, Corot, what crimes are committed in your name! It was you who brought into fashion this messy composition, these thin washes, these mud-splashes in front of which the art lover has been rebelling for thirty years and which he has accepted only because constrained and forced to it by your tranquil stubbornness. Once again, a drop of water has worn away the stone!"

The poor man rambled on this way quite peacefully, and nothing led me to anticipate the unfortunate accident which was to be the result of his visit to this hair-raising exhibition. He even sustained, without

[9] Achille Etna Michalon (1796–1822), a painter of classical landscapes who was Corot's first master.

[10] Henri Rouart (1833–1912), painter who exhibited with the Impressionists several times, but who is better known as an art collector, and especially as the close friend of Degas; the latter painted Rouart's portrait several times.

major injury, viewing the *Fishing Boats Leaving the Harbor* by M. Claude Monet, perhaps because I tore him away from dangerous contemplation of this work before the small, noxious figures in the foreground could produce their effect.

Unfortunately, I was imprudent enough to leave him too long in front of the *Boulevard des Capucines,* by the same painter.

"Ah-ha!" he sneered in Mephistophelian manner. "Is that brilliant enough, now! There's impression, or I don't know what it means. Only, be so good as to tell me what those innumerable black tongue-lickings in the lower part of the picture represent?"

"Why, those are people walking along," I replied.

"Then do I look like that when I'm walking along the boulevard des Capucines? Blood and thunder! So you're making fun of me at last?"

"I assure you, M. Vincent. . . ."

"But those spots were obtained by the same method as that used to imitate marble: a bit here, a bit there, slapdash, any old way. It's unheard of, appalling! I'll get a stroke from it, for sure."

I attempted to calm him by showing him the *St. Denis Canal* by M. Lépine and the *Butte Montmartre* by M. Ottin,[11] both quite delicate in tone; but fate was strongest of all: the *Cabbages* of M. Pissarro stopped him as he was passing by and from red he became scarlet.

"Those are cabbages," I told him in a gently persuasive voice.

"Oh, the poor wretches, aren't they caricatured! I swear not to eat any more as long as I live!"

"Yet it's not their fault if the painter . . ."

"Be quiet, or I'll do something terrible."

Suddenly he gave a loud cry upon catching sight of the *Maison du pendu* by M. Paul Cézanne. The stupendous impasto of this little jewel accomplished the work begun by the *Boulevard des Capucines; père* Vincent became delirious.

At first his madness was fairly mild. Taking the point of view of the impressionists, he let himself go along their lines: "Boudin has some talent," he remarked to me before a beach scene by that artist; "but why does he fiddle so with his marines?"

"Oh, you consider his painting too finished?"

"Unquestionably. Now take Mlle Morisot! That young lady is not interested in reproducing trifling details. When she has a hand to paint, she makes exactly as many brushstrokes lengthwise as there are fingers, and the business is done. Stupid people who are finicky about the drawing of a hand don't understand a thing about impressionism, and great Manet would chase them out of his republic."

[11] Stanislas Lépine (1835–1892), pupil of Corot and painter of delicate and sensitive landscapes. "Ottin" perhaps refers to Léon Auguste Ottin (dates unknown).



"Then M. Renoir is following the proper path; there is nothing superfluous in his *Harvesters.* I might almost say that his figures . . ."

". . . are even too finished."

"Oh, M. Vincent! But do look at those three strips of color, which are supposed to represent a man in the midst of the wheat!"

"There are two too many; one would be enough."

I glanced at Bertin's pupil; his countenance was turning a deep red. A catastrophe seemed to me imminent, and it was reserved to M. Monet to contribute the last straw.

"Ah, there he is, there he is!" he cried, in front of No. 98. "I recognize him, *papa* Vincent's favorite! What does that canvas depict? Look at the catalogue."

*"Impression, Sunrise."*

*"Impression*—I was certain of it. I was just telling myself that, since I was impressed, there had to be some impression in it . . . and what freedom, what ease of workmanship! Wallpaper in its embryonic state is more finished than that seascape."

In vain I sought to revive his expiring reason . . . but the horrible fascinated him. *The Laundress,* so badly laundered, of M. Degas drove him to cries of admiration. Sisley himself appeared to him affected and precious. To indulge his insanity and out of fear of irritating him, I looked for what was tolerable among the impressionist pictures, and I acknowledged without too much difficulty that the bread, grapes, and chair of *Breakfast,* by M. Monet, were good bits of painting. But he rejected these concessions.

"No, no!" he cried. "Monet is weakening there. He is sacrificing to the false gods of Meissonier. Too finished, too finished! Talk to me of the *Modern Olympia!* That's something well done."

Alas, go and look at it! A woman folded in two from whom a Negro girl is removing the last veil in order to offer her in all her ugliness to the charmed gaze of a brown puppet. Do you remember the *Olympia* of M. Manet? Well, that was a masterpiece of drawing, accuracy, finish, compared with the one by M. Cézanne.

Finally, the pitcher ran over. The classic skull of *père* Vincent, assailed from too many sides, went completely to pieces. He paused before the municipal guard who watches over all these treasures and, taking him to be a portrait, began for my benefit a very emphatic criticism.

"Is he ugly enough?" he remarked, shrugging his shoulders. "From the front, he has two eyes . . . and a nose . . . and a mouth! Impressionists wouldn't have thus sacrificed to detail. With what the painter has expended in the way of useless things, Monet would have done twenty municipal guards!"

"Keep moving, will you!" said the "portrait."

"You hear him—he even talks! The poor fool who daubed at him must have spent a lot of time at it!"

And in order to give the appropriate seriousness to his theory of aesthetics, *père* Vincent began to dance the scalp dance in front of the bewildered guard, crying in a strangled voice: "Hi-ho! I am impression on the march, the avenging palette knife, the *Boulevard des Capucines* of Monet, the *Maison du pendu* and the *Modern Olympia* of Cézanne. Hi-ho! Hi-ho!" [12]

## *JULES LAFORGUE: 1860–1887*

### *Impressionism*

*The brilliant, short-lived French poet Jules Laforgue, whose far-ranging interests included the realms of science, philosophy, and art as well as that of literature, began as a disciple of Taine, whose lectures he audited at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1880–1881, but soon rejected Taine's stringent determinism and fixed standards of aesthetic value, turning instead to the German philosopher Eduard von Hartmann's theory of the Unconscious and Darwin's theory of evolution. At the same time, late in 1880, he became assistant to Charles Ephrussi, one of the editors of the* Gazette des Beaux-Arts, *who had early taken up the cause of the Impressionists, writing encouraging articles on them in the* Gazette *and buying their works; through Ephrussi, Laforgue met most of the Impressionists, whose aims in painting were so close to his own in poetry; at the same time, at the age of twenty, Laforgue became an art critic for the* Gazette des Beaux-Arts. *He worked in Ephrussi's room, surrounded by Impressionist paintings. When he looked up from his desk, he could see "Two Pissarro fans, solidly constructed with little brushstrokes. . . . The Sisleys—the Seine with telegraph poles and a springtime sky, or a river bank on the outskirts of Paris, with a tramp taking his enjoyment out-of-doors . . . and blossoming apple trees climbing up a hill, by Monet . . . and Renoir's girl with wild hair . . ." Laforgue's double interest in art and in science, exhibited in the essay below, must have found an enthusiastic echo in his friendship with Charles Henry, that remarkably versatile student of science and art who was later to become head of the experimental psychology laboratory at the Sorbonne, who was the friend of Seurat and the Neo-Impressionist painters, who had written on music and on the life of Watteau, and who, like the young Laforgue, attempted a kind of synthesis of all fields of human sensibility, thought and action, science and art.*

*In the remarkable essay that follows—originally written for a small exhibition which included works by Pissarro, Degas, and Renoir, at the Gurlitt Gallery in Berlin in October, 1883, but obviously the fruit of a great deal of prior experience and thought—Laforgue combines his scientific knowledge, including evolutionary ideas, with the philosophical theories of the Unconscious developed by von Hartmann, and above all, his own remarkable powers of insight, sensibility, and expression, to write one of the earliest and most penetrating analyses of the Impressionist movement and its implications. "Object and subject," wrote Laforgue, "are . . . irretrievably in motion, inapprehensible and unapprehending. In the flashes of identity between subject and object lies the nature of genius." One can say that Laforgue's essay is the first coherent expression of the modern view of art, continuing in the path of Baudelaire, who had written as early as 1860, in* The Painter of Modern Life: *"Modernity is the transitory, the fleeting, the contingent . . ."*

*Physiological Origin of Impressionism: The Prejudice of Traditional Line.* It is clear that if pictorial work springs from the brain, the soul, it does so only by means of the eye, the eye being basically similar to the ear in music; the Impressionist is therefore a modernist painter endowed with an uncommon sensibility of the eye. He is one who, forgetting the pictures amassed through centuries in museums, forgetting his optical art school training—line, perspective, color—by dint of living and seeing frankly and primitively in the bright open air, that is, outside his poorly lighted studio, whether the city street, the country, or the interiors of houses, has succeeded in remaking for himself a natural eye, and in seeing naturally and painting as simply as he sees. Let me explain.

Leaving aside the two artistic illusions, the two criteria on which *aestheticians* have foolishly insisted—*Absolute Beauty* and *Absolute Human Taste*—one can point to three supreme illusions by which technicians of painting have always lived: *line, perspective, studio lighting.* To these three things, which have become second nature to the painter, correspond the three steps of the Impressionist formula: form obtained not by line but solely by vibration and contrast of color; theoretic perspective replaced by the natural perspective of color vibration and contrast; studio lighting—that is, a painting, whether representing a city street, the country, or a lighted drawing room, painted in the even light of the painter's studio, and worked on at any hour—this replaced by *plein-air,* open air —that is, by the painting done in front of its subject, however impractical, and in the shortest possible time, considering how quickly the light changes. Let us look in detail at these three points, these three dead language procedures, and see them replaced by Life itself.

[12] Louis Leroy, "L'Exposition des impressionistes," *Charivari* (April 25, 1874), in John Rewald, *The History of Impressionism,* revised ed. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1961), pp. 318–324. Reprinted by permission of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Line is an old deep-rooted prejudice whose origin must be sought in the first experiments of human sensation. The primitive eye, knowing only white light with its indecomposable shadows, and so unaided by distinguishing coloration, availed itself of tactile experiment. Then, through continual association and interdependence, and the transference of acquired characteristics between the tactile and visual faculties, the sense of form moved from the fingers to the eye. Fixed form does not originate with the eye: the eye, in its progressive refinement, has drawn from it the useful sense of sharp contours, which is the basis of the childish illusion of the translation of living non-dimensional reality by line and perspective.

Essentially the eye should know only luminous vibration, just as the acoustic nerve knows only sonorous vibration. The eye, after having begun by appropriating, refining, and systematizing the tactile faculties, has lived, developed, and maintained itself in this state of illusion by centuries of line drawings; and hence its evolution as the organ of luminous vibration has been extremely retarded in relation to that of the ear, and in respect to color, it is still a rudimentary intelligence. And so while the ear in general easily analyzes harmonics like an auditory prism, the eye sees light only roughly and synthetically and has only vague powers of decomposing it in the presence of nature, despite the three fibrils described by Young, which constitute the facets of the prisms.[13] Then a natural eye—or a refined eye, for this organ, before moving ahead, must first become primitive again by ridding itself of tactile illusions—a natural eye forgets tactile illusions and their convenient dead language of line, and acts only in its faculty of prismatic sensibility. It reaches a point where it can see reality in the living atmosphere of forms, decomposed, refracted, reflected by beings and things, in incessant variation. Such is this first characteristic of the Impressionist eye.

*The Academic Eye and the Impressionist Eye: Polyphony of Color.* In a landscape flooded with light, in which beings are outlined as if in colored grisaille, where the academic painter sees nothing but a broad expanse of whiteness, the Impressionist sees light as bathing everything not with a dead whiteness but rather with a thousand vibrant struggling colors of rich prismatic decomposition. Where the one sees only the external outline of objects, the other sees the real living lines built not in geometric forms but in a thousand irregular strokes, which, at a distance, establish life. Where one sees things placed in their regular respective planes according to a skeleton reducible to pure theoretic design, the other sees perspective established by a thousand trivial touches of tone and brush, by the varieties of atmospheric states induced by moving planes.

[13] According to the Young-Helmholtz theory of color vision, there are three elementary retinal and post-retinal processes, which produce sensations of red, yellow-green (chlor), and blue; all other colors, including white, are blendings of these.



The Impressionist eye is, in short, the most advanced eye in human evolution, the one which until now has grasped and rendered the most complicated combinations of nuances known.

The Impressionist sees and renders nature as it is—that is, wholly in the vibration of color. No line, light, relief, perspective, or chiaroscuro, none of those childish classifications: all these are in reality converted into the vibration of color and must be obtained on canvas solely by the vibration of color.

In the little exhibition at the Gurlitt Gallery, the formula is visible especially in the work of Monet and Pissarro . . . where everything is obtained by a thousand little dancing strokes in every direction like straws of color—all in vital competition for the whole impression. No longer an isolated melody, the whole thing is a symphony which is living and changing like the "forest voices" of Wagner, all struggling to become the great voice of the forest—like the Unconscious, the law of the world, which is the great melodic voice resulting from the symphony of the consciousness of races and individuals. Such is the principle of the *plein-air* Impressionist school. And the eye of the master will be the one capable of distinguishing and recording the most sensitive gradations and decompositions on a simple flat canvas. This principle has been applied not systematically but with genius by certain of our poets and novelists.

*False Training of the Eyes.* Now everyone knows that we do not see the colors of the palette in themselves but rather according to the illusions which the paintings of the past have developed in us, and above all we see them in the light which the palette itself gives off. (Compare the intensity of Turner's most dazzling sun with the flame of the weakest candle.) What one might call an innate harmonic agreement operates automatically between the visual effect of the landscape and the paint on the palette. This is the proportional language of painting, which grows richer in proportion to the development of the painter's optical sensibility. The same goes for size and perspective. In this sense, one might even go so far as to say that the painter's palette is to real light and to the tricks of color it plays on reflecting and refracting realities what perspective on a flat canvas is to the real planes of spatial reality. On these two things, the painter builds.

*Mobility of Landscape and Mobility of the Painter's Impressions.* You critics who codify the beautiful and guide the development of art, I would have you look at this painter who sets down his easel before a rather evenly lighted landscape—an afternoon scene, for example. Let us suppose that instead of painting his landscape in several sittings, he has the good sense to record its tonal values in *fifteen minutes*—that is, let us suppose that he is an Impressionist. He arrives on the scene with his own individual optic sensibility. Depending on the state of fatigue or preparation the painter has just been through, his sensibility is at the same time either bedazzled or receptive; and it is not the sensibility of a single

organ, but rather the three competitive sensibilities of Young's fibrils. In the course of these fifteen minutes, the lighting of the landscape—the vibrant sky, the fields, the trees, everything within the insubstantial network of the rich atmosphere with the constantly undulating life of its invisible reflecting or refracting corpuscles—has undergone infinite changes, has, in a word, lived.

In the course of these fifteen minutes, the optical sensibility of the painter has changed time and time again, has been upset in its appreciation of the constancy and relative values of the landscape tones. Imponderable fusions of tone, opposing perceptions, imperceptible distractions, subordinations and dominations, variations in the force of reaction of the three optical fibrils one upon the other and on the external world, infinite and infinitesimal struggles.

One of a myriad examples: I see a certain shade of violet; I lower my eyes toward my palette to mix it and my eye is involuntarily drawn by the white of my shirt sleeve; my eye has changed, my violet suffers.

So, in short, even if one remains only fifteen minutes before a landscape, one's work will never be the real equivalent of the fugitive reality, but rather the record of the response of a certain unique sensibility to a moment which can never be reproduced exactly for the individual, under the excitement of a landscape at a certain moment of its luminous life which can never be duplicated.

There are roughly three states of mind in the presence of a landscape: first, the growing keenness of the optical sensibility under the excitement of this new scene; second, the peak of keenness; third, a period of gradual nervous exhaustion.

To these should be added the constantly changing atmosphere of the best galleries where the canvas will be shown, the minute daily life of the landscape tones absorbed in perpetual struggle. And, moreover, with the spectators the same variation of sensibility, and with each an infinite number of unique moments of sensibility.

Subject and object are then irretrievably in motion, inapprehensible and unapprehending. In the flashes of identity between subject and object lies the nature of genius. And any attempt to codify such flashes is but an academic pastime.

*Double Illusion of Absolute Beauty and Absolute Man! Innumerable Human Keyboards.* Aestheticians have always talked a great deal of nonsense about one or the other of two illusions: the objectivity of Absolute Beauty, and the subjectivity of Absolute Man—that is, Taste.

Today we have a more exact feeling for the life within us and outside us.

Each man is, according to his moment in time, his racial milieu and social situation, his moment of individual evolution, a kind of keyboard on which the exterior world plays in a certain way. My own keyboard is



perpetually changing, and there is no other like it. All keyboards are legitimate.

The exterior world likewise is a perpetually changing symphony (as is illustrated by Fechner's law,[14] which says that the perception in differences declines in inverse proportion to their intensities).

The optical arts spring from the eye and solely from the eye.

There do not exist anywhere in the world two eyes identical as organs or faculties.

All our organs are engaged in a vital struggle: with the painter, it is the eye that is dominant; with the musician, the ear; with the philosopher, the powers of the mind, etc.

The eye most deserving of our admiration is the one which has evolved to the greatest extent; and consequently the most admirable painting will be not that which displays the academic fancies of "Hellenic beauty," "Venetian color," "Cornelius' thought," etc., but rather that which reveals this eye in the refinement of its nuances or the complication of its lines.

The atmosphere most favorable to the freedom of this evolution lies in the suppression of schools, juries, medals, and other such childish paraphernalia, the patronage of the state, the parasitism of blind art critics; and in the encouragement of a nihilistic dilettantism and open-minded anarchy like that which reigns amid French artists today: *Laissez faire, laissez passer.* Law, beyond human concerns, must follow its automatic pattern, and the wind of the Unconscious must be free to blow where it will.

*Definition of Plein-Air Painting.* Open air, the formula applicable first and foremost to the landscape painters of the Barbizon School (the name is taken from the village near the forest of Fontainebleau) does not mean exactly what it says. This open air concept governs the entire work of Impressionist painters, and means the painting of beings and things in their appropriate atmosphere: out-of-door scenes, simple interiors, or ornate drawing rooms seen by candlelight, streets, gas-lit corridors, factories, market places, hospitals, etc.

*Explanation of Apparent Impressionist Exaggerations.* The ordinary eye of the public and of the non-artistic critic, trained to see reality in the harmonies fixed and established for it by its host of mediocre painters—this eye, as eye, cannot stand up to the keen eye of the artist. The latter, being more sensitive to luminous variation, naturally records on canvas the relationship between rare, unexpected, and unknown

[14] Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801–1887), experimental physiologist and formulator of the famous law known as Weber's or Fechner's law: "In order that the intensity of a sensation may increase in arithmetical progression, the stimulus must increase in geometric progression." Fechner's idea that sensation could be measured exactly was of great importance to the future of laboratory psychology.

subtleties of luminous variation. The blind, of course, will cry out against willful eccentricity. But even if one were to make allowance for an eye bewildered and exasperated by the haste of these impressionistic notes taken in the heat of sensory intoxication, the language of the palette with respect to reality would still be a conventional tongue susceptible to new seasoning. And is not this new seasoning more artistic, more alive, and hence more fecund for the future than the same old sad academic recipes?

*Program for Future Painters.* Some of the liveliest, most daring painters one has ever known, and also the most sincere, living as they do in the midst of mockery and indifference—that is, almost in poverty, with attention only from a small section of the press—are today demanding that the State have nothing to do with art, that the School of Rome (the Villa Medici) be sold, that the Institute be closed, that there be no more medals or rewards, and that artists be allowed to live in that anarchy which is life, which means everyone left to his own resources, and not hampered or destroyed by academic training which feeds on the past. No more official beauty; the public, unaided, will learn to see for itself and will be attracted naturally to those painters whom they find modern and vital. No more official salons and medals than there are for writers. Like writers working in solitude and seeking to have their productions displayed in their publishers' windows, painters will work in their own way and seek to have their paintings hung in galleries. Galleries will be their salons.

*Framing.* In their exhibitions the Independents have substituted intelligent, refined, imaginative frames for the old gilt frames which are the stock in trade of academic convention. A green sunlit landscape, a white winter page, an interior with dazzling lights and colorful clothes require different sorts of frames which the respective painters alone can provide, just as a woman knows best what material she should wear, what shade of powder is most suited to her complexion, and what color of wallpaper she should choose for her boudoir. Some of the new frames are in solid colors: natural wood, white, pink, green, jonquil yellow; and others are lavish combinations of colors and styles. While this new style of frame has had repercussions in official salons, there it has produced nothing but ornate bourgeois imitations.[15]

[15] Jules Laforgue, "Impressionism," published under the title "Impressionism: The Eye and the Poet," trans. William Jay Smith, *Art News,* LV (May, 1956), 43–45. Reprinted by permission of *Art News.* Laforgue had planned to have this essay translated and published in a German paper. It was later published as "L'Impressionisme," in *Mélanges posthumes,* in Jules Laforgue, *Oeuvres complètes,* 4th ed. (Paris: Mercure de France, 1902–1903), III, 133–145.