

une autre étude
à avec la souche
même ceci



oniment vas la et
sic à Bruxelles.

bien la main
bien tôt
à
Vincent

Letter to His Brother Theo, Arles [End of
ic Society; from The Complete Letters of
, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1959.]

Impressionism and Post-Impressionism

1874-1904

SOURCES and DOCUMENTS

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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 syn-

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.