

IMPRESSIONISM⁸

Talking about Impressionism in October 1919 may seem like backward-looking small-talk and yet, this phenomenon may not, as yet, have been defined in its true psychological essence.

In plastic arts, one observes the greatest impressionistic tendencies taking place in peoples less inclined to philosophy and in epochs of transition between periods of metaphysical exertion.

Following the grand age of the Hellenes (an eminently philosophical people) and the decline of classicism's highest point (Phidias and Praxiteles) came Asian art (Laocoon).

The Japanese, Chinese and Russians are populations that have the greatest predisposition for Impressionism due to the fact that in relation to artistic matters they are far from a metaphysical reality and are strongly drawn toward materialistic *rêverie*.

The English gave us the most significant impressionist: Turner.

Proof of this is found in the painter's passion for Venice, an eminently metaphysical city that he saw 'turned around', so very turned around indeed as to become of specific interest regarding the paradoxal materialism of its interpretation. A comparison can be made, for example, between a Venetian scene by Turner and one by Canaletto.

It has been commonplace to consider Impressionism as being of a purely French origin and spirit. The French spirit is too fiercely attached to reality to be truly impressionistic. The reality of the French is certainly not that of an Italian or a German and is less metaphysical, less lyrical and less warm, but is a reality all the same and therefore excludes impressionism. In addition, the French spirit has an inveterate cult for grace, to be understood as *joliess*, which in order to be expressed requires the cult of line and form that, as everyone knows, is the antipode of Impressionism. It suffices to think of the painting of Prudhon, Watteau and Lacroix. This cult of grace links the French spirit to Greek Classicism, even though in comparison to Greek art, French art (especially from a metaphysical point of view) resides on a lesser plane and expresses a kind of grace that is also of a lesser degree.

The phenomenon of French Impressionism is one of a masked tiredness and as such lacks depth and is nothing other than an intermission of the artistic history of this people.

The severeness and the cult of antiquity that animated great French painters during the revolution and later developed during the Napoleonic period, came to an end with the art of two renowned artists, who were significant but in decline: Delacroix (Romanticism) and Courbet (Naturalism). Proof of this is the fact that neither of them had imitators, whilst Girodet, David and Ingres were followed by a legion of disciples. Following this magnificent effort, little by little a more superficial and less strenuous art emerged. One might say that French painters felt the need to work less, to abandon their ateliers for more pleasant out-of-doors research.

Many critics, affected by myopia, placed Cézanne among the Impressionists. It is now the opinion of all who see clearly in matters of painting that the descendant of Cesena immigrants was anything but an impressionist.

At the beginning of this essay it was mentioned that the Italian and German peoples are lesser disposed to Impressionism. One can observe, in fact, how in Italy Impressionism was taken up by painters of minor intelligence and lesser learning and was clumsily confused with naturalism of a Courbetian lineage. Thus came into being a hybrid art that was bourgeois, unrefined and ignorant, which, just to be clear, we could call

⁸ G. de Chirico, *Impressionismo*, in "Valori Plastici", a. I, n. 6-10, Rome June-October, 1919, pp. 25-26; republished in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 41-44. Translated by K. Robinson.

“secessionist”. It still exists in Italy, where it satisfies the official milieu, the pseudo-academic one as well as the learned bourgeois milieu.

We must therefore conclude that Impressionism never existed in Italy; let us look for it then in other countries.

Impressionism offers us its most significant examples in oriental populations such as the Chinese, Japanese and Russians. In the case of Russia, it is interesting to observe the difference that exists between their impressionist art and that of the English, which is more colourful, less spiritual (if indeed one can speak of spirituality in Impressionism), more elegant, less hysterical and always reveals an element of sophistication. Impressionism in Russia, instead, presents itself in a more complex form, more thickset and twisted, and also touches upon the suffering found in popular art. It is more disquietening.

When this kind of Impressionism unites with a more frenzied and capricious musical impressionism, an increasingly clamorous art is born: the Russian ballet.

For that which concerns the Impressionism of the Far East, it is difficult for a European to judge. We tend to believe, however, that it is without particular interest as it is completely lacking in fatality; there is neither eternity in its physical material, nor any sense of beauty.

The greatest damage Impressionism has caused plastic arts regards the loss of painterly quality. This meant something (unfortunately we must use the past tense here) until half a century ago in Europe and today is without meaning. An artist's sense for painting is as deep as his feeling for the lyrical in art and how great his tendency to metaphysics is. It has been commonplace in Europe for those who write about art to attribute inferior painterly quality to works of art that present spiritual manifestations. The famous phrase, *c'est de la littérature*, is a favourite refrain of critics on the other side of the Alps, who are supporters of shoddy painting. A downfall in painterly quality and neglect for its physical material begins when a painter eliminates all spiritual aspiration from his art due to a feeling of powerlessness. In France there are a number of elderly survivors who still conserve something of this lost gift such as Bonnat, Renoir and Jean-Paul Laurens. I should rather say 'conserved' as they too have suffered a downfall due more to an influence from the milieu than from age.

The lack of spiritual power that generates naturalism drags painting fatefully into neglect and thus the work of art, no longer considered as a precious, extraordinary and miraculous object, but rather like something that results from a good guess, more or less original, that satisfies more or less the desires of those who love laundromat or cookery painting.

The mania to 'be quick' brings about neglect in the use of materials: bad use of colour, bad canvases, slovenly works dashed out with dirty paintbrushes on canvases crusted with old paint, messy paint on unwashed palettes that have never been scraped clean as well as complete ignorance and neglect in the use of varnishes.

There are individuals today calling themselves painters who waste gallons of paint without managing to obtain a single square centimetre of painterly material. They paint canvases on which one sees clots and encrustations looking like walls of a urinal on which a hygienically minded Mayor had buckets of plaster thrown. One also sees surfaces with paint so thin that the grain of the canvas is visible.

Humanity can lose certain senses without necessarily suffering a decline; as women today, with regard to their relation to men, have lost their feeling for beards; but in painting it is another matter entirely. The terrible problem of painting (the most difficult art that exists) cannot be resolved with small-talk and slapdash attitudes. The fault of the naturalists, of Courbet and Manet-like painters, and that of the Impressionists, falls upon today's generation of painters in its entirety. In Italy today there are few (we are four at present) who see the situation with clarity and who, disgusted, distance themselves from the carelessness of modern painting and persist in carrying out a great inner dream. In order to have their voices heard they must work one hundred times more than they would have had to in less degenerate times.