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France is next to Flanders. From the countries of fog and canals, from houses solidly built to resist the cold of long winters comes a spirit of security and well-being that we can define as “bourgeois”. A spirit made up of intimacy and thoughtfulness, in a psychological sense, especially because man forced by nature to pass the entire day under a hospitable roof or within the domestic hearth, is inclined to observe his neighbour, to heed him continuously in his habitual behaviour. Flemish painting as a whole is characterised by a sound, rich naturalism, not without irony, which has a beautifully poetic glow to it.

Tranquillity and ease help and encourage the artist in his long labour, resulting in a minute and skilful observation of detail, a love for fine painting that is fully achieved right up to the four corners of the canvas.

In France as in Flanders, the most notable painters are the naturalists. But one must not take this word “naturalist” in the way it is commonly used, for naturalism in both the Frenchman and the Fleming goes beyond the narrow limits of the mere representation of the objects and people seen, it goes beyond this and is reflected in everything that is visible: in landscapes, history, episodes of daily life and in pure fantasy. But one must note that there is a marked difference between French and Flemish naturalism; the Flemish are more unilateral and defined; they are more serene, intimate and are also simpler. The joy of a peaceful, quiet home life and sense of well-being always shows in their work. In French naturalism there are other currents that render it more complicated and with a breath of distant poesy and a striving towards life outside the country’s boundaries, towards ancient classicism, far off lands and colonial longings.

The Revolution was the cause of a powerful force in the psychology of French painters; the great tragedy which reigned over Paris, the heart of France, during the dark days of the Reign of Terror, the glare of sudden fires, the noise of crowds possessed by bestial fury, blood and suffering, rushing along in a classical movement reminiscent of the darkest period of the civil war in ancient Rome. In painters of genius, this tragedy awoke a disquietening sense found in the statue and in severe architecture as well as the tragic fatality of historical episodes. Thus was born the art of Girodet and David who with their disciples and followers created a whole world of sculptural beauty, a world that ended with the art of Ingres. The inborn naturalism of the French nature, the naturalism of Watteau, Lancret, Chardin and the Le Nain brothers, came alive again with Courbet.

Like Watteau and Lancret who so splendidly interpreted the spirit of the century in which they lived, Courbet rendered in his paintings the sensation of life he felt palpitating around him. One must only see the paintings, *Young Ladies on the Bank of the Seine* or *The Hammock*, to understand this. It is the romance and the drama of life, the eternal human tragedy that goes from the house to the street, from the café to the shady avenue, from the garden of a villa to the public square, held within and evoked through a single form.

Naturalism can have different aspects according to the psychology of the people through whom it develops. If in the Flemings it is playful and sensual, in France and in Italy it presents other aspects, with no lack of spectral elements, tragedy and metaphysical significance. Raphael’s *Saint Luke painting the Virgin* carries undisputable signs of metaphysical naturalism. The same can be said of many classical painters, including Caravaggio who presents these same signs in some of his paintings, notably in his *Musicians* and in *Narcissus* of the Corsini gallery.

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As I have said, naturalism was reborn in France after a classic intermezzo. Its most recent, valorous representative is Auguste Renoir. Having lived in the second half of the last century (he was born in 1841), he spent the first years of his artistic life in a period of full flowering and quality French painting, which began to decline after the death of Courbet in 1877. It was a golden age of painting in France when Delacroix, Ingres, Géricault were still alive. It was an epoch of painterly craft and science, of emulation and certitude that somewhat resembled our 17<sup>th</sup> century. Descendants of the great Flemish and Italian schools, the French painters of this period were still all following tradition, although each according to his own manner and expressing various natures and sentiments. They all had the cult of drawing and shape, of volume, of solid and clean surfaces, in a word, of all that defines the value and quality of a painter's work and without which there is no art.

Renoir's first works fully possess these qualities. *The Bathers*, numerous portraits, genre paintings and still lifes that he painted between the age of 25 and 40 have an aspect of extraordinary solidity and of volume rendered with masterly skill. This first manner of Renoir was the finest as it is especially here that he connected his work to the tradition of great painting. This manner is little known in Italy and even in France. Renoir became famous when he joined the impressionist movement.

In his first manner he maintained a feeling for clean surfaces and painterly substance that was later destroyed by impressionism. He also had the cult of chiaroscuro, the direct consequence of which is modelling; his figures "turned" within the canvas and this can only be obtained through perfect modelling seen in the grading of tone from light to dark, a problem that greatly tormented the great painters of the Renaissance and their Flemish followers. Ingres also, in the full maturity of his art, was obsessed by the problem of relief; one day looking at the canvas of one of his pupils he said: "It does not turn enough; I also had a flat period, now I make it turn". Speaking of his flat epoch he was alluding to his portrait of Madame Rivière which is in fact one of his first works and did not yet have that extraordinary relief which distinguishes his later painting.

So even Renoir belonged to the legion of great artists. He also belonged through his sense at the time for matter, of painterly substance, something which is totally lost today. One must not interpret the expression "painterly substance" as a greater or lesser quantity of paint that the painter spreads over his canvas. There are painters who waste tons of paint without producing a square centimetre of painterly substance. This was a secret of classical artists and is not a question of the quantity of material, but rather, of a sense derived from technique and skill which gives the painting an aspect of plastic solidity and clear beauty without which no painting can ever be completely satisfying.

Renoir was in full possession of all these qualities during the first period of his painting. In the Bernheim collection there is a figure of a woman bathing that could hang in a museum by the side of any great master, without fearing comparison. In the foreground one sees the naked figure of a woman entering a pool, behind the figure is a background of dark, dense foliage. Though representing a figure in the open, the painting was executed in the studio, thus avoiding the superficial impression and lack of volume, with always characterises open-air painting.

Nature must not be caught unawares. This was the mistake of and a lack of tackfulness with the impressionists who, whilst painting in the open, strived to fix rapidly an effect of light, a given aspect and thus took nature by surprise. Through their decadence, the impressionists are now paying a debt for offending the chastity of the Great Mother and they will pay even more for this as the day is near when they will be entirely forgotten. Nature must be educated, veiled, shaded, cultivated in the mystery and the silence of the studio.

After all, a painter, when he is not a complete simpleton, has something of the magician and the alchemist in him. Now can you imagine an alchemist sallying forth with all his paraphernalia, his distillation apparatuses, his burners, his spheres, his stuffed bats and other devilries by the light of day amid green fields and almonds in blossom?

Corot, Millet, Courbet as well as classical painters like Poussin, Brill, Claude Lorrain and others made landscape studies in the open. But these studies served for composing their paintings, which they would elaborate and finish in the austere tranquillity of the studio. Because of this their works give off a severe and lusting effect that defies time, whereas the impressionists, who thought they had progressed and made a discovery, by starting and finishing a painting in the open, are already starting to be forgotten.

Let us return to Renoir who, had he continued in the tradition of fine painting in which he began, could have truly progressed and also served as a barrier against the flood of impressionism that ruined painting in Europe. Instead, he let himself be influenced by the impressionists.

It would be out of place here to go over the history of impressionism on which volumes have been written; it is well-known that in some of Delacroix's paintings and Courbet's last landscapes one can find the principles of chromatic luminosity, of vibration and of a negligence in drawing, which are a prelude to an impressionism that however is not purely of French origin.

In Turner one can already find the same principles, according to which the painter chooses the luminosity of colour as the first aim of his work. But Turner was a superficial artist, one of those painters in which chance played a very important part whereas destiny was totally absent. It is enough to say that when Turner came to Rome he often went out to the countryside to paint studies of landscapes in sepia or water colour; he took along a pail of water; when the study was finished he would plunge it into the pail, pulling it out he would let the colours melt and run according to chance; if the resulting mess pleased him, all was well, if not, he would destroy the study and begin another. The principal point of the psychology of impressionists can be seen, I believe, in this episode from the life of one of their most characteristic precursors.

In letting himself be influenced by impressionism, Renoir showed that he had neither a profound spirit nor a solid intelligence; since he was only a painter it was inevitable that he should submit to influence. He was influenced by almost all of the impressionists, from Pissarro to Sisley to Monet, but especially the latter; for some time he did nothing but follow Monet. In other paintings it was Pissarro he followed, but not the Pissarro of the banks of the Seine and snow covered squares, but the rustic Pissarro striving to be as lyrical as Millet. He followed the bundled up, ironic aspect of his figures as well as his pointillist style, very similar to that of Georges Seurat, a painter of great talent who died young.

When this relatively short period was over, Renoir found once more a manner of his own; he returned to large groups of figures, to portraits and to the nude. But he never could recapture the solidity of the first period or the painterly profundity of his earlier work. The impressionist period left an indelible trace on all his subsequent production. He began to neglect drawing; violet and orange entered into his palette; he would later eliminate or rather deaden these two colours, which are at the base of impressionism, and use mostly ochre and terra di Siena. During this period he treated the figure in an exaggerated manner, which often lent his painting a fascinating psychological characteristic. In this sense, his *Luncheon of the Boating Party* and *Family Portrait* are remarkable; these works are full of melancholy and a weary tedium found in the novels of some of France's best authors: the ennui of a bourgeois family, the melancholy of a Sunday afternoon, of a country outing or a minor mundane tragedy imprinted in the attitudes and expressions of its obscure

characters. Such an aspect of ennui and melancholy is not lacking in a certain metaphysical sense, that subtle and inexplicable sentiment that always accompanies a true work of art.

Had Renoir been able to unite his early technique with the character of his last manner he would have left works of far greater value. But he was too much the painter, too deeply in love with the palette and when an artist gets carried away by a passion for chromatic sensuality, he is fatally urged to paint rapidly without affording depth to his work. So it is with the many still lifes he left us, whose flowers and fruit appear superficial compared to the still life of a Flemish master (but what modern painting would not?). They seem, I say, superficial, and they are, but nevertheless they will have a good place in the history of modern art precisely by their strong bourgeois spirit padded with the psychology and poesy of which I have spoken.

The same place will be held by that kind of women Renoir has left us; the small bourgeois, the housekeeper, mother, servant or girl at the piano, in the kitchen garden or among flowers, but always in the slightly suffocating atmosphere of rooms with a low ceiling or, when out of doors, the sultriness of a summer evening or of an oppressive afternoon of late spring as that in which Flaubert has the unhappy husband of Madame Bovary die in the solemn pathos of Greek tragedy.

As an artist Renoir can be included in rank with the sincere and honest. To paint was a vital necessity with him and though he often changed his manner and was subject to influence, it was never with the thought of gain. He always aspired to do better; progress was his obsession. He too was a victim of the stupidity of our times but disregarding the degenerate surroundings in which he lived and the bad examples by which he was surrounded, he managed, thanks to a strong artist's temperament, to rise above them in seriousness and conscientiousness.

Destiny did not lavish him in well-being or riches. At the age of forty, weighed down with a family, though in the full maturity of his art, he was still in great poverty.

Illness (a terrible arthritis which had paralyzed his fingers) tortured him to the end. Only by strength of will did he manage to overcome the obstacles created by disease, in the form of a complicated arrangement of leather straps to hold the brush that he tied every day to his hand when beginning work. In this way he continued to paint to the end of his life.

Despite the influence of new schools, he had the cult of the old masters and knew that theirs was a true, eternal art and that one create lasting works with their principles alone.

He was a constant visitor to the museums. "When one looks at the masters", he would say, "there is really no room to be a smart aleck". With these words he defined his thought regarding all modern art. Undoubtedly, more than once, thinking of the great brothers of times past he must have felt troubled and have discovered, with remorse, an uneasy conscience. At all events, his work will remain because of the plastic quality that distinguishes his painting from the production of his contemporaries. His was not a profound spirit, but a constant love for painting, a continuous effort to attain to ever better forms, mistakes and errors notwithstanding, ennoble both his work and his memory.