

Félix Fénéon, “Neo-Impressionism” (1887)

I.

Impressionism, merely latent in Turner and Delacroix (the Chapel of the Holy Angels at Saint-Sulpice), tried to turn itself into a system under Edouard Manet, MM. Camille Pissarro, Renoir, Claude Monet, Sisley, Cezanne and Ludovic Piette. These painters are distinguished by their extraordinary sensitivity to their own reactions to color, by a tendency to decompose tones, and by their attempts to imbue their canvases with intense light: In their choice of subjects, they proscribe history, anecdote and dream, and, as their working method, they promote rapid and direct execution from nature:

If we want the word “Impressionism” to have any reasonably precise meaning, we have to reserve this term for the “luminists” alone: This immediately eliminates Miss Mary Cassatt, MM. Degas, Forain and Raffaelli, whom a mistaken public included under the same heading as MM. Camille Pissarro and Claude Monet: although it is true that all of them sought the sincere expression of modern life, scorned the traditions of the schools, and exhibited together.

Let us recall the first Impressionist exhibitions: Given the innate stupidity of the public, the idea of choosing between well-finished paintings and wild daubings left them dumbfounded: They found it crazy that a color should produce its complementary, ultramarine giving yellow, red giving blue-green, since all the most learned Physicists would have affirmed in scholarly tones that the definitive effect of darkening all the colors of the spectrum is virtually to add to it greater and greater quantities of violet light—they would always have infinitely preferred to bow down to the murky violets of a painted landscape: Accustomed to the pitch-black sauces cooked up by the cabin crew of the schools and academies, their stomachs churn at the sight of bright painting: We have to admit however that from time to time the public felt revolutionary pangs and they queued up to take their pleasure with de Nittis, Roll, Carrie-Belleuse, Dagnan-Bouveret, Goenette, Gilbert, Beraud, Duex, Gervex, Bastien-Lepage—and this was their great orgy of modernity:

As for technique, at first there was nothing very specific: the Impressionist works gave themselves airs of being improvised: they were rapid, rough and ready.

II.

Impressionism only developed its rigorous techniques from 1884-5: The instigator was M. Georges Seurat.

The basis of M. Seurat’s innovations, which were already implicitly contained in certain works by Camille Pissarro, was the scientific division of tones: Thus, instead of stirring his mixture on the palette to achieve the more or less finished hues required to represent the surface, the painter will place directly on the canvas brushstrokes depicting the local color, that is the color that the surface of the object would take on in bright light (essentially the color of the object seen from close up): This color which he has not made achromatic on his palette, he has made achromatic indirectly on the canvas, by virtue of the laws of simultaneous contrast and through the intervention of another series of brushstrokes, corresponding to:

- (1) the proportion of colored light reflected unadulterated on the surface (this will normally be an orange sunlight);
- (2) the smaller proportion which penetrates beneath the surface and which is reflected after having been modified by partial absorption:

- (3) light reflected by adjacent bodies;
- (4) surrounding complementary colors:

Stroked executed not through wild slashes of the brush, but through the application of tiny dots of color:

Here are some prerequisites for this way of working:

I: These strokes are composed on the retina, in an optical mixing: Now, the luminous intensity of the optical mixing is much greater than the mixing of pigments: This is what modern physics tells us when it says that any mixing on the palette will eventually lead to black;

II. Since the numerical proportions of the drops of color may vary infinitely within a very small space, the subtlest shifts in relief and the finest gradations of hue can be exactly translated;

III: This splattering of the canvas requires no special manual dexterity, only vision—but what experienced and artistic vision!

III.

The first Impressionists sought to show how our view of sky, water and natural greenery varied from moment to moment. Their aim was to record on canvas one of these fleeting apparitions. This resulted in the need to capture a landscape in a single session, and the tendency to exaggerate the features of nature in order to prove that it was a unique moment which would never be seen again:

What the Neo-Impressionists are trying to do, is to synthesize landscape into:” definitive aspect which will perpetuate that sensation: (In addition to which, their procedures are incompatible with haste, and require work in the studio:)

In their figure scenes, there is the same distancing from the accidental or the transitory. And so those critics who yearn for the anecdotal will grumble: they are showing us puppets not people: They still have not tired of that Bulgarian’s portraits, which seem to ask: Guess what I’m thinking! They feel no shame in seeing on their wall a gentleman whose sarcasm is rendered immortal in the malicious wink of his eye or a flash of light that has been waiting around for years.

The same perspicacious critics compare Neo-Impressionist pictures to tapestries or mosaics, and find them wanting. Even if correct, this argument would be worth very little; but it is fallacious: just take two steps back—and all these drops of reversed color blend into waves of luminous matter; it’s as if the craftsmanship vanished: the eye is now solicited only by the very essence of painting.

Need we add that this almost abstract uniformity of execution does not diminish the originality of the artist, and even enhances it. Indeed, not to distinguish Camille Pissarro, Dubois-Pillet, Signac and Seurat one from another would be ridiculous. Each of them proudly flaunts his individuality—if only through his own distinctive interpretation of the emotional significance of color, and the degree of sensitivity of his optic nerves to varying stimuli—but never through the sole use of some facile device.

Alone among the crowd of mechanical copiers of the outside world, these four or five artists achieve the sensation of life itself this is because objective reality is for them only a pretext for the creation of a higher, sublimated reality, which becomes infused with their personalities.