CHAPTER 6

The early Modernist Painters

Introductory

The extraordinary extent to which the paintings of Seurat influenced his contemporaries and successors had much to do with them being produced in a century that was characterised by a series of concurrent, interconnected and on-going revolutions. The scientific one which came with the realisation that colour is created in the head has already been introduced. There were also industrial, commercial, technological and social revolutions, all of which played a part in bringing about the artistic innovations of the Impressionists and their Modernist successors. Although change in the way paintings were thought of and made was very much in the air before the birth of the Impressionism, the pace at which it happened picked up considerably after it. This chapter gives a brief glimpse into some of the forces at work and how they helped to lay the foundations for the widespread interest the work and ideas of Georges Seurat. Although it would be stretching credibility to suggest that he himself would have fully realised the full richness of the ramifications of his proposals, he was certainly aware that he had:

- *Proposed a scientifically based approach to painting light.*
- *Demonstrated significant limitations on the colour potential of paintings due to the limited number of pigment colours used by his predecessors, whether by necessity or choice.*
- *Discovered a powerful, new way of bringing the actual picture surface and illusory pictorial space into a dynamic relationship.*

THE RENAISSANCE MODELS OF 'REALISM' AND 'IDEALISM'.

The *Italian Renaissance* was the fruit of an attempt by philosophers, po-

ets, sculptors, painters and architects, to reintroduce values from a by-gone era. Judged in terms of this original project, the whole initiative can be described as a failure. It could hardly have been otherwise since old ideas are bound to be transformed when introduced into new circumstances. However, this failure turned out to have a particularly a creative influence on the evolution of European painting

An important catalyst to this creativity was a renewal of interest in the somewhat incompatible notions of "*realism*" and "*idealism*". The artists' model of realism was embodied in the fabled competition between the two celebrated Greek painters who vied for the title of "*the best artist in the world*". It was decided that each should produce a painting to submit for judgement to an impartial panel of judges. The first artist painted a bowl of cherries and, while the judges were admiring the picture, a bird flew into the room and started pecking at one of the cherries. Everyone agreed that the fact that the bird had been deceived was the greatest possible accolade for a painting, and the first painter must have thought the competition was as good as over in his favour. However, the second painter had to be given his chance. There was an awkward moment when he stepped back from the easel upon which he had placed his work for he seemed to have forgotten to remove the cloth that was covering it. His rival, eager to see the competing work, stepped forward to remove the offending piece of material, only to find that it was in fact the painting. After that, everyone agreed that the victory should go to the painter of the cloth[1] for, while his rival had only been able to deceive a bird, he had been able to deceive the second best painter in the world.

The implication of the story is clear. No room here for artistic expression. All depended on knowledge of appearances and technical skill. The Renaissance artist who came to typify the search for this kind of realism was Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519).

In contrast, Renaissance artists model of *idealism* was influenced by the ideas of the Greek philosopher Plato, who saw normal human visual awareness as being comparable to that of someone imprisoned in a cave, limited to seeing the two-dimensional, colourless shadows of more fully realised beings moving about in the three-dimensional and colour-filled world outside. Thus, he posited a *supra-reality*, far more meaningful than the mundane experience of ordinary mortals. The artist who typified the attempt to represent the unseen wonders of this exterior existence was Michelangelo (1475-1564). As a *Neoplatonist*[2] con-

1 Apelles, 4th Century BC

2 He consorted with a circle of Neoplatonist philosophers who were intent upon reviving

cerned with the depiction of biblical themes, he was confronted with the problem of representing Adam, said to have been made in the image of the Creator, and Jesus, the acknowledged "*Son of God*". Clearly both qualified for supra-reality status. To do them justice in his paintings, Michelangelo felt himself obliged to create idealised human forms surpassing anything that he or anyone else could possibly have seen.

THE BACKGROUND TO MODERNISM

Artists are always to some degree the product of their times and one of the most evident defining features of the epoch of the nineteenth century was the *Industrial Revolution*. By the time the future *Impressionists* came to serve their apprenticeships in the 1850s and 1860s, there had been the best part of a century for this all-pervasive agent of change to gather momentum, bringing with it a panoply of new ideas and products that entered the fabric of society and influenced patterns of thinking. In one way or another, the daily life of virtually everyone had been transformed.

Many of the new developments were to influence the work of artists. Some were general, affecting the feasibility of dedicating ones life to painting. Others were more specific, relating to technological advances and the evolution of scientific theory.

An example of a general change was the creation of a new moneyed, middle class capable of supporting artistic endeavours, whether directly, because many artists actually belonged to the new rich families, or indirectly, through the purchase of works of art or other forms of patronage.

The existence of additional strata of wealth meant that there was an increased demand for reasonably priced paintings. Important consequences included:

- The possibility of selling more rapidly produced, less finished looking paintings, exploited by artists including Corot (1796-1875), Boudin (1824-1898) and Jongkind (1819-1891).
- The emergence and growth of a commercial gallery system.
- An explosion of interest in fine art print-making.

A parallel development of great significance was the opening up of world-wide commercial markets that enabled a growth of interest in the relatively cheap

Plato's ideas. Notable amongst these was Marsilio Ficino (1433–99).

produce coming from far off places. From the perspective of artists, perhaps the most important of these were the *Japanese prints* representing what was for western artists a completely different way of thinking about the composition and colouring of paintings.

A particularly important example of a technological advance was the invention of photography. This followed the pioneering work of Louis Jaques Mandé Daguerre (1787-1851) who between 1835 and 1837 perfected ways of developing and fixing photographic images. Very rapidly after this, the quality of his "*daguerreotypes*" improved (as did the images produced by competitor processes). The result was a highly ominous threat to the artists' monopoly with respect to making copies of nature, particularly with respect to portraiture and the depiction of status-showing property. To rub salt into the opening wound, colour photography was invented in 1867 and made public roughly ten years later at the "*Exposition Universelle"* held in Paris in 1878 (only four years after the *First Impressionist Exhibition*).

Other technological advances led to the availability of a new range of artists' pigments. It is astonishing to find how many of the colours used by the *Impressionists* were developed and/or made available for general use in their own century.[3]

Alongside the extended palette, came the invention of the paint tube in the 1860's, which made it so much easier to take paints into the countryside and work direct from nature.

As recounted in the last chapter, hand in hand with the advances in technology came progress in the scientific understanding of "*light*" and "*colour*". Of particular importance were:

- The new awareness that *colour is **made in the head*** by means of the eye/brain's visual systems and the associated discovery of "*induced-colour*", "*colour-constancy*", "*simultaneous-colour-contrast*".
- The positing of the *"three receptor-type theory of colour vision*" and the "*opponent-colour theory*".[4]

All of these advances in scientific understanding influenced artistic practice and all have an important part in what is to follow.

3 And how few of the colours used by the "old masters" have survived into the paintboxes of today.

4 Proposed by Ewald Hering 1834-1918 in his paper "*On the Theory of Sensibility to Light*", 1878 (only four years after the "*First Impressionist Exhibition*").

The new realism

Perhaps ironically, the origins of *Modernism in painting* were firmly rooted in a drive towards *realism*. In turn, this was closely linked to a process of consciousness-raising with respect to the beauties of nature which was epitomised in the poems of William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and the paintings of John Constable (1776-1837). In a famous lecture to the Royal Institution in 1836, the latter (whose son was at the time working in the laboratory of the celebrated English scientist Michael Faraday) asserted that, "*painting is a science, and should be pursued as an enquiry into the laws of nature*". He saw no reason why painting should not be regarded "*as a branch of natural philosophy*[5] *of which the pictures are the experiments?*"

The name "*Impressionist*" was coined in 1874 by a critic commenting on the now famous exhibition of that year. However, the exhibiting artists had originally called themselves "*realists*". What they quite meant by this term is far from clear. As I will be suggesting, it concealed an emerging philosophy of great subtlety and richness. However, there can be no doubt that the painters concerned were greatly interested in realism in its normal meaning. Thus, they wanted to be able to paint nature as they saw her, to create effects of light and space and, in general, to get to the bottom of the problem of making convincing depictions of a three-dimensional world on a flat surface.

Ideas from neglected teachers

The importance of the teachers of the young *Modernist Painters* on the evolution of their ideas is widely overlooked. However, it was far from negligible. Below is a list of artists, accompanied by the names of their teachers and followed by a summary of important influences.

Édouard Manet (1832-1883), studied under Thomas Couture (1815-1879) whose studio he joined in 1850. James McNeil Whistler (1834-1903), Claude Monet (1840-1926), August Renoir (1841-1919) and Alfred Sisley (1839-1899) attended the studio of the Swiss artist Charles Gleyre (1808-1874). Whistler arrived in 1855 and the others were classmates in the early 1860's. Camille Pissarro (1830-1903), Berthe Morisot (1841-1895)[6] and Monet all studied under Camille Corot (1796-1875), who was one of the early masters of the new faster painting.

5 The contemporary name for science.

6 Who deserves a great deal more credit than is customarily given for her enormous contribution to the artistic development of the *Impressionist movement.*

Finally, both Monet and Morisot studied under Eugène Boudin (1824-1898) another of the new fast painters finding a economically viable niche for this rather different approach to painting.

Despite exhibiting their paintings at the Paris Salon, both Couture (who had studied under Delacroix) and Gleyre thought of themselves as being apart from the academic system and tried to imbue their students with a certain degree of healthy scepticism towards the prevailing academic aesthetic. Couture, emphasised the *Venetian tradition*. A particular favourite of his was Paolo Veronese (1528-1588) as he acknowledged by referring to himself as "*the Veronese of the North*". He advised his students to "*Make sure first of all that you have mastered material procedures; then think of nothing and produce with a fresh mind and a hearty spirit whatever you feel like doing.*" "Gleyre advocated an independent spirit saying, "*do not draw on any resources but your own*."

The ébauche and fast painting

Despite, their reservations about academic painting and their support of individualism, neither Couture nor Gleyre was a radical revolutionary. Their critique of *The Academy* did not extend so far as to question the accepted procedures by which a painting should be made. Thus, before embarking on the final work, which was to be quintessentially a highly-finished production, it was standard practice for academic artists to go through four preparatory stages. Thus:

- Thoughts about the subject-matter (usually determined by the person or institution who was commissioning the work) and the composition were worked through with the help of rough "*sketches*."
- The structures of objects roughly indicated in the sketches were worked out in detail by means of carefully researched *"studies"*.
- The studies were used to fill in the compositional framework worked out in the sketch thereby producing a drawing that could be copied, by one mechanical method or another, onto the canvas upon which the final painting would be made. A main feature of this "*cartoon*" was a full working out of the lightness[7] relationships.
- A colour-scheme was roughed out.

The roughed-out colour scheme was known as the "*ébauche*". In their different ways, both Couture and Gleyre drew attention to its potential. For his part,

7 *Otherwise known as "tone"* (England) or *"value"* (USA).

Couture recognised a certain energy in the looser paintwork and prided himself on putting some of this quality into his finished products. He guided his students away from the '*niggling brush technique… to a broader conception.*" Gleyre also advocated the benefits of a spontaneous approach to the production of the *ébauche*. He advised his students to premix all the colours which they planned to use when engaged in making it and lay them out ready on their palette. Thus prepared, they would be able to minimise the interruptions to the flow of their creativity engendered by tedious acts of paint mixing.[8] Whistler, an influential precursor and fellow traveller of the *Impressionists*, is known to have adopted Gleyre's idea of premixing his paints on the palette to allow him to work with greater spontaneity. Seurat also adopted it but, as we shall see in Chapter 8, for very different reasons.

Figure 1: Edouard Manet, "The funeral" 1870

8 Thus making him a precursor of the ideas of Jackson Pollock.

One only needs to look at the paintings made by students of Couture and Gleyre in the years leading up to the *First Impressionist Exhibition in 1874* to perceive their debt to the loosely applied paint-work aesthetic. *Figure 1* shows an example produced in 1870 by Edouard Manet. From it we learn that in addition to producing the notorious paintings whose conceptual bravura had been stirring the art-world (such as "*Déjeuner sur l'herbe*" and "*Olympia*"), Manet was in the vanguard of experiments with expressive, loosely applied brushwork.

Although important, the *ébauche* was only one factor amongst many. Of the others, mention has already been made of the influence of the new low-priced market and the fast painting that it encouraged. However far more significant, certainly in the longer run, were a number of developments which were not only to give a deeper significance to loose brushwork, but also to compel the artists to embark upon *a root and branch questioning of the whole nature of their enterprise*. Among these was the photograph.

The two way influence of the photograph

As already mentioned, the arrival of photography had important implications for artists. The new rapid and realistic image-making medium constrained their minds in a variety of ways, forcing them into many new lines of thought, some due to reaction against photography and some to new realisations provoked by it. Being a cheaper and arguably better representation of literal appearances than anything to which painters could aspire, it was seen by many as posing a threat to the future of painting, particularly, as suggested earlier, with respect to commissioned work such as portraiture and the depiction of symbols of status, like racehorses and stately homes.

The question arose, if the worst came to the worst and the mechanical production of images were to be perfected, would there be any role left either for paintings or for the people who make them? Not surprisingly, artists were highly motivated to find an answer to this question and accordingly, they turned their minds to a consideration of the possible shortcomings and strengths of the photograph. Here are four of the ***shortcomings***:

- To a twentieth-century perception, perhaps the most obvious lack in early photographs is that of *colour*. Thus, though certainly not the whole story, it may not be entirely a coincidence that the infancy of photography coincided with a period when colour was given a new priority by

painters.[9]

- The photograph provided its viewers with *very little evidence of a creative process*. In contrast, the plastic artists could leave visible traces of the artists' involvement in the process of facture. Thus, André Malraux identified the start of *Modernism in painting* with the work of Manet on the grounds that, in a portrait by this artist, "*Manet is all and the portrait is nothing*".
- The photograph seemed *tied to reality,* leaving the photographer much less room for manoeuvre when it came to deciding the contents and composition of the image. Elements in natural scenes could not easily be taken out, put in or moved about. Nor could features of them be exaggerated or distorted. As a result, photographs were seen as slavishly representational and lacking with respect to compositional and expressive opportunities.
- What the artists saw as a fourth limitation, though less obvious, had perhaps the most profound ramifications. They came to the conclusion that photographs are by their very nature *untruthful*. Their argument was that the very realism of photographic images discourages people from seeing them for what they really are, namely arrays of grey tones on flat pieces of paper. From this rationalisation came not only to the transformation of the phrase the *trompe l'oeil* (eye-deceiver) from one of the highest praise to one of opprobrium,[10] but also the *new conception of reality* in paintings, that is described in this series of books as "*experienced reality*".

As well as devoting much attention to the limitations of photographs, the artists discovered strengths in them that gave them much pause for thought. The two most significant of these involved a new, more positive look at what had been widely regarded as one of their weaknesses, namely their *composition*.

- Because photographers were not free to mould reality to their wills by exclusion, inclusion, exaggeration, distortion and abstraction, they had

9 However, as mentioned earlier, colour photography had been invented in 1867 (that is to say, seven years before the *First Impressionist Exhibition*) and was very soon after available for the artists to see and think about.

10 Incidentally, the possibility that deceiving the eye might be morally reprehensible brought the wheel full-circle from the pre-Renaissance days, when the Catholic Church banned realism in religious paintings, on the grounds that it might lead the faithful astray. The ecclesiastics wanted to make sure that images of God and the saints should not be mistaken for the real thing and worshipped as "graven images".

much less room for manoeuvre than artists. All they could do was to move the camera from one viewpoint to another, a constraint that left them with little choice but to learn to live with what they could see framed in their viewfinders "*warts and all*". However artists soon came to realise that there was often value in what they had previously been considered as "*blemishes*". Instead they saw them as equivalent to the "*beauty spots*" that were widely felt to set off the beauty of women's faces,. Indeed, for them, they became "*exciting, hitherto unexplored, new compositional possibilities*".

- Photography was also in large part responsible for an arousal of interest in some of the creative possibilities offered by framing. For example, Edgar Degas (1834-1917) was famously inspired by the fact that photographic images often showed people cut in half at the border with the picture-frame. The use of the possibility of doing this in his painting allowed him (and others) to *imply an extension of what was going on in their images beyond the picture frame*.

Consideration of all these factors and more contributed to the answers the artists found to the crunch question of whether they could find any worthwhile alternatives to the *trompe l'oeil* reality found in photographs?

Beauty

The search for answers to this last question plunged the young *Impressionists* into the subject of aesthetics and led them to grapple with an idea coming from the poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867). This friend of Manet and leading advocate of his paintings was much influenced by *Neoplatonist ideas,* particularly with respect to his *conception of beauty*. He saw this much sought after quality as comprising two essential but seemingly incompatible elements. The first of these he described as "*relative and circumstantial*" and the second as "*eternal, invariable, and exceedingly difficult to measure*". It hardly needs saying that this dichotomy could be interpreted in various different ways. One might legitimately say, "*luckily so*", for its pervasive vagueness leaves plenty of room for the exercise of conceptual creativity amongst people trying to make sense of it.

For the young *Modernist Painters,* the question that proved the most influential was whether both parts of the dichotomy could be combined in one painting. Looking for answers was to open up all sorts of new possibilities. Not least

amongst these was the idea of playing off the two aspects against each other. One of the proposed solutions, which was to have a long and distinguished future, depended on the notion of identifying the physicality of the painted ***picture-surface*** with the "*real*" and the contents of ***illusory pictorial space*** with the "*eternal*".

The Japanese print

At the same time as photography was gaining momentum, Japanese prints were both becoming progressively available and were being bought in ever increasing numbers. However, their importance to the future of painting was more than just a matter of their popularity. From the point of view of the young artists in the process of questioning the foundations of their beliefs, they represented a *valid art-form which completely bypassed the rules promoted by the Academy* and, in so doing, questioned their universality.

Besides offering exciting new compositional possibilities, the Japanese prints represented *a different conception of pictorial space*. In particular, the horizontal surfaces of objects were routinely tipped up in the direction of the picture-plane with two highly significant outcomes: *illusory pictorial space* was compressed and receding surfaces were both *freed from the rules of linear perspective* and allowed to *expand upwards* on the picture-surface, giving them greater decorative potential.

Café talk

From the mid 1860s, a frequent meeting place for the nascent *Impressionists* was the *Café Guerbois* in *Paris*. There, Manet, Monet, Renoir and Sisley would regularly meet up with other artists and writers including Charles Baudelaire (until his untimely death in 1867), Edgar Degas (1834 – 1917, at the time a great friend and admirer of Gustave Moreau), Paul Cézanne (1839-1906, a sullen, enigmatic and radically inclined presence), Camille Pissarro (1830-1903, in time to have a great influence over Cézanne), various pupils of the mould-breaking teacher Horace Lecoq Boisbaudran (1802-1897, who promoted a method of drawing from memory).[11] These included James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) and Alphonse Legros (1837-1911), who spread the good word.[12] Other regulars

11 For more on Lecoq Boisbaudran's widespread influence on Modernist painters, see my book *"Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain"*.

12 See my book *"Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain"* which suggests plausible connections between his championing the ideas of Lecoq Boisbaudran and the ideas of Manet, Degas, Van

Emile Zola (1840-1902, writer and close friend of Cézanne) and Nadar (1820-1910, photographer and balloonist who was to host the *First Impressionist Exhibition*). Nobody knows exactly what these artists and writers talked about, but we can be fairly sure that most, if not all, of the above listed topics and questions were discussed and argued about with vigour and in depth. Nor can we doubt that the process engendered a profound and healthy revolution in the way the artists approached their paintings. Monet later asserted that, "*there was nothing more interesting than these conversations with their endless conflict of opinions… You were encouraged to do sincere and disinterested research… You always left with your thoughts sharper and clearer.*"

Although nobody can be sure, it is reasonable to suppose that out of these debates, in addition to the "*disinterested research*" of individual artists, were born the main threads of what came to be known as "*Modernism in Painting*". Here is a list of these, in no particular order of importance:

- The questioning of existing *rules*.
- The search for alternative *aesthetics*.
- The exploration of personal expression through *mark-making*.
- Seeking ways of combining the *permanent and impermanent aspects of appearances*.
- *Awareness of the picture-surface* as a vital component of pictorial dynamics.
- The discovery of the *power of abstract-relations*, including those depending on colour.
- The *research ethic* itself.

It is to the fifth of these and the developing awareness of the picture-surface as a central consideration that we now turn.

Paint and the picture surface: some important steps

James McNeil Whistler is not often given his due credit for his role in the development of *Modernist* art, however, he was not only in the vanguard of those whose compositions were influenced by the Japanese print (he was the first of the *Modernist Painters* to make a personal collection) but, also, with titles like "*nocturne in grey and silver*", he pioneered the idea of naming paintings in terms

Gogh, Gauguin, Bonnard, Matisse and many others.

of *abstract relations* and, by doing so, took important steps in the direction of abstract art and the idea that painterly qualities could be of interest in themselves.

Meanwhile, *Edouard Manet* was developing the potential of the *ébauche*. Reports from the people who sat for his portraits give us some idea of the determination with which he pursued his objectives. His dream was to paint, in one session, a spontaneous painting which satisfied his self-imposed criteria of excellence. However, it is said that he only once achieved this aspiration. Sittings were likely to be punctuated with and usually terminated by expressions of dissatisfaction and followed by vigorous scraping off of wet paint in preparation for another bash at getting what he wanted. We get a good idea of the rigour of the enterprise from the fact that, at least sometimes, he needed forty (Berthe Morisot was getting bored after that number, with no end in sight) fifty or even, I have been told, eighty sittings, before he was satisfied. What a titanic struggle to get the *effortless look*.

Figure 2 : Monet : 'Le Boulevard des Capucines', 1873

At the same time, the slightly younger and exceedingly ambitious *Monet* was intent on launching his career with as much panache as he could muster. Not only did he go around dressed in the nineteenth century equivalent of the gold lame suit sported by the young David Hockney (almost exactly a century later in the 1960s) but also he overreached himself in attempting by far the biggest work ever painted on site, outdoors (approximately 15 ft. X 20 ft.).[13] However, by 1874, the date of the *First Impressionist Exhibition*, his feet were firmly on the ground and he had settled into the groove which was to serve him well for the rest of his life. Press attention suggested that he had emerged as the man to watch within the group.

The commonly held image of Monet (assiduously encouraged by the painter himself) is of the artist trying to pin down fleeting impressions of a rapidly changing world. However, as time went by, the ephemeral was to be gradually subordinated to the more abstract and textural events taking place on the picture surface. It is tempting to see the comments of the art critic Ernest Chesnau in his perceptive and sympathetic article on the *First Impressionist Exhibition*, as evidence both of an early step in that direction and of the influence of the conversations in the *Café Guerbois*. Having described the *"Le Boulevard des Capucines"* (*Figure 1*) as "*this marvellous sketch,*" he continues: "*Standing at a distance, on seeing this stream of life, this quivering of huge lights and shadows, spangled with brighter lights and heavier shadows, one salutes a masterpiece. But when one comes nearer, everything melts away; there remains nothing but a chaos of indecipherable palette scrapings*". Here we see the image of a bustling Paris and the paint used to construct it being considered and experienced separately. Significantly in view of future developments, we also have our attention drawn to the moment of transition between the two.

Chesnau showed no particular interest in the "*palette scrapings*" in themselves, but one way of describing what was to follow in the work of Monet and the other ***Modernist Painters*** is as an upgrading of the characteristics of the paint on the picture-surface into something that is not only worth looking at in their own right but also capable of taking on a central role in creating experiences of "*eternal significance*". Certainly, this would be an appropriate description for what would soon to be taking place in the work of certain of his contemporaries and, in particular, Seurat and Cézanne.

13 Which he eventually cut into pieces, making a number of separate paintings

Implications

With these thoughts in mind we are almost ready to progress to the core subjects of Part 2 namely:

- *Seurat's method of painting reflected light.*
- *How Cézanne and other successors modified it.*
- *How its many ramification for artists can be explained and updated in the light of recent scientific knowledge.*

But first, it will be helpful to illustrate some of the ways in which surface-reflection interacts with body-colour.