MODERN ART
PRACTICES AND DEBATES

Modernity and Modernism
French Painting in the Nineteenth Century

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YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, NEW HAVEN & LONDON
IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

First published 1993 by Yale University Press in association with The Open University

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Modernity and Modernism: French painting in the nineteenth century/
Francis Frascina ... [et al.].
p. cm. – (Modern art – practices and debates)
Includes index.
ISBN 0-300-05513-7 (cloth)
0-300-05514-5 (paper)

1. Painting, French. 2. Impressionism (Art) – France.
3. Modernism (Art) – France. 4. Painting, Modern – 19th century – France.
I. Frascina, Francis. II. Series.
ND547.5.I4M64 1993 759.4'09'034–dc20 92-35017

Edited, designed and typeset by The Open University.
Printed in Hong Kong by Kwong Fat Offset Printing Co. Ltd.

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CHAPTER 2
IMPRESSIONISM, MODERNISM AND ORIGINALITY

by Charles Harrison

Introduction

This chapter will be principally concerned with the style of art known as Impressionism, and with developments in French painting which ensued during the 1880s and 1890s. The paintings of the Impressionists are generally popular and well known. This is more than can be said for many other typical works of modern art. Yet the paintings we shall be considering have played a particularly important part in the formation of various notions and theories of modernism in art. In the process of discussing them we shall be concerned

Plate 132 Auguste Renoir, *Bal au Moulin de la Galette* (*Ball at the Moulin de la Galette*), 1876, oil on canvas, 131 x 175 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique. (Exhibited in the third Impressionist exhibition, 1877.)

Plate 133 Vincent Van Gogh, *Sunflowers*, 1888, oil on canvas, 166 x 242 cm. The National Gallery, London. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees.

less with the history of modern art as such than with the development of a certain set of critical values, those generally referred to as 'Modernist'. It does not follow, however, that the paintings themselves will be treated as objects of secondary interest. On the contrary, to ask whether the properties and qualities ascribed to a work of art are actually discernible in it is to make that work the specific focus of an open inquiry. For what we mean by the term 'works of art' are not necessarily things that we can simply see and know 'for themselves' or 'in themselves'. Rather they are present to us in a world of ideas, theories, values and beliefs, and are inseparable from those.

In fact, I suspect that there will be very few people reading these words who have not *already* been exposed to relevant judgements and interpretations in some form. I mean that most readers of texts like this one are likely, at the very least, to have read about the high prices paid at auction for Impressionist and 'Post-Impressionist' paintings, to have absorbed reports of Van Gogh's madness or Cézanne's obsessiveness, and to have acquired views, however uninformed, on Renoir's pictures of women, and that even these are forms of exposure to judgements and interpretations; I also mean that the values placed upon these artists and their works over the course of a century have had consequences within a wider field of attitudes and beliefs. Monet's paintings of sunlight on water (Plates 155, 156) and Renoir's Parisian women (Plates 132 and 154) have each furnished powerful models of delight and picturesqueness in the modern experience of the visual world.

Plate 134 Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, *c.*1886–88, oil on canvas, 66 x 90 cm. Courtauld Institute Galleries, London. Reproduced by permission of the Home House Trustees.

These are values we may tend to take for granted. Yet the values and meanings we take for granted can be the hardest to examine critically. The supposedly 'innocent' or untheorized view is likely to be one in which certain stereotypes are reproduced as if they were the fruit of 'direct' and 'personal' experience – one that claims, for example, to find Van Gogh's 'madness' in his agitated brushwork (Plate 133) and Cézanne's obsessiveness in his repeated views of the same landscape subjects (Plates 134 and 135). French painting of the late nineteenth century has been a particularly fertile breeding-ground for the myths of modern art. The way to achieve some independence from these myths and stereotypes is not to avoid exposure to the accumulation of judgements and interpretations, since a state of complete insulation is impossible, but to acknowledge the ways in which the accumulation itself may condition the experience of the work. Once we have a conscious sense of that accumulation we can try to see through it, in both senses of seeing through: we can look at the art in the ways that established forms of judgement and interpretation suggest that we should, and we can also expose those judgements and interpretations themselves to scrutiny, the better to perceive the ways in which they may be partial or otherwise fallible. In what follows, I shall consider some of the circumstances under which the image of modern art was formed and developed in criticism and will examine some of the assumptions associated with that image. Taking the first exhibition of the Impressionists as a starting point, I shall try to trace a series of pathways into the art-critical and art-historical issues of the twentieth century, using as principal material for discussion the work of four of the original exhibitions.

Plate 135 Paul Cézanne, *La Montagne Sainte-Victoire*, 1904–6, oil on canvas, 60 x 72 cm. Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum Basel Inv. G.1955.12.

Impression and Impressionism

In the 1870s the concept of art as 'impression' was associated with a 'modern' recognition of the inescapably subjective aspects of perception and experience. It was also associated with those stylistic characteristics in painting through which a personal and spontaneous vision was supposed to be expressed. An 'impressionist' in this sense was one in whose work a certain informality of technique appeared to reveal a vision of the natural world which was both instantaneous and individual. The label became associated with a specific movement in 1874, when it was applied to a group of artists showing together as 'independents' – that's to say showing independently of the official Salon. Though the label was used by some writers to deride the artists,[1] there were those, like Jules Castagnary, who employed it to signal a sympathetic understanding of the work on show:

> What quick intelligence of the object and what amusing brushwork! True, it is summary, but how just the indications are! ... The common concept which unites them as a group and gives them a collective strength in the midst of our disaggregate epoch is the determination not to search for a smooth execution, to be satisfied with a certain general aspect. Once the impression is captured, they declare their role terminated ... If one wants

[1] Notably by Louis Leroy in a now notorious review published in *Le Charivari*, 25 April 1874.

> to characterize them with a single word that explains their efforts, one would have to create the new term of *Impressionists*. They are impressionists in the sense that they render not a landscape but the sensation produced by a landscape.
>
> (*Le Siècle*, 29 April 1874, as translated in L. Nochlin, *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism*, pp.329–30)

The exhibition in question – the first exhibition of the newly-formed 'Société anonyme des artistes, peintres, sculpteurs, graveurs, etc.,' – has come to be known as the 'First Impressionist Exhibition', although the group did not formally adopt the name for themselves until their third exhibition, in 1877. It has also been celebrated in modern art history as the moment of self-conscious establishment of an avant-garde – 'the touchstone for all such future Modernists' efforts' (P. Tucker, 'The first exhibition in context', p.93). Given that avant-gardism is traditionally associated with a hostile critical reception, it should be stressed that by the early 1870s dissent from the decorum of the official Salon was well established among writers like Castagnary, Ernest Chesneau and Émile Zola, whose interests had been aroused by the Realism of Courbet, by the naturalism of the Barbizon painters, or by the 'modernity' of Manet. By 1874, all but the most conservative critics were aware that the criteria of finish prevailing at the Salon – for instance, the 'smooth execution' mentioned by Castagnary – were tending to stultify the development of painting. Independence and originality had come to be accorded dominant positions in the hierarchy of progressive critical concepts, and interested writers looked for signs of these qualities in those techniques that suggested directness of observation and spontaneity of expression.

Plate 136 Claude Monet, *Impression, soleil levant* (*Impression, Sunrise*), 1872, oil on canvas, 50 x 62 cm. Musée Marmottan, Paris. Photo: Routhier/Studio Lourmel. (Exhibited in the first Impressionist exhibition, 1874.)

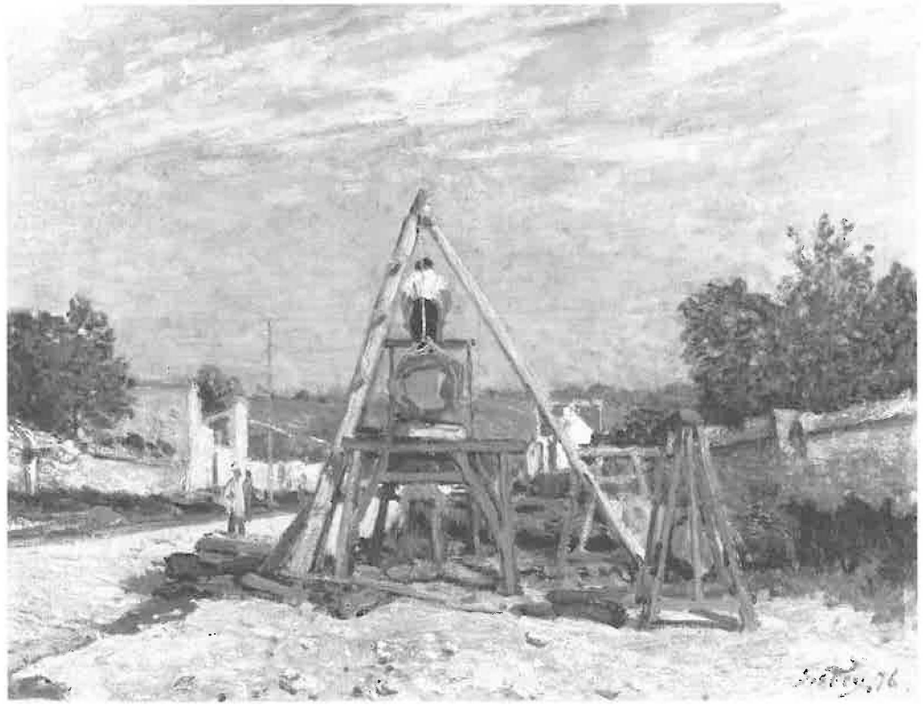


Plate 137 Alfred Sisley, *Scieurs de long* (*Pit Sawyers*), 1876, oil on canvas, 50 x 65 cm. Petit Palais, Paris. Photo: Pierrain, Musées de la Ville de Paris © SPADEM, Paris 1993, DACS, London 1993. (Exhibited in the third Impressionist exhibition, 1877.)

By the mid-1870s a network of connections had developed between the notions of avant-gardism, technical improvization, modernity and originality. Castagnary, a champion of Realism in the 1860s, believed that painting was 'a part of the social consciousness', but he also believed that some people 'saw' more clearly than others: the true artist was someone in close touch with nature and more immediately responsive to sensation than the majority of people. To be 'original' was to offer a (relatively) faithful representation of the material origins of perception and experience in the actual world. It was a small step from this position to the view that to be 'original' was to be able to perceive, to face and to show 'truths' hidden from or disregarded by contemporary society at large. Fidelity to the authentic and subjective impression thus came to be viewed not only as a measure of the 'originality' of the avant-garde artists, but also as a condition of their modernity.

The exhibition that Castagnary was discussing included all those artists who have consistently and uncontroversially been associated with the development of an 'Impressionist' style in the late 1860s and early 1870s: Claude Monet (Plate 136), Pierre-Auguste Renoir (Plate 132), Camille Pissarro (Plate 149), and Alfred Sisley (Plate 137). It also included artists of established importance in the history of modern art whose work is less securely identified with Impressionism as a specific painterly style: Edgar Degas (Plate 138) and Berthe Morisot (Plate 139) – both of whom showed in seven of the eight group exhibitions – and Paul Cézanne who showed in two of the first three. (Renoir and Sisley showed in four.) By no means all the artists involved were as well-known as these have become. In all, thirty artists were represented in the first exhibition and fifty-five contributed to the group shows at one time or another, Paul Gauguin, Georges Seurat (Plates

186 and 187) and Odilon Redon (Plate 140) among them. But we now hear comparatively little of Stanislas-Henri Rouart (Plate 141), a wealthy engineer and part-time painter, who showed in as many of the group exhibitions as Degas and Morisot, or of Adolphe-Félix Cals, who showed in the first four (Plate 142), let alone of those who appeared only once, like Auguste de Molins (Plate 143).

With the benefit of hindsight we tend to accept that the standards and grounds of selection by which Salon exhibitions were regulated in the later nineteenth century were such as to make the virtues of the most technically adventurous Impressionist painting unrecognizable or inadmissible as such, but it would be a ludicrous over-simplification to suggest that only conservative and retrograde art was shown at the Salon, while all that was shown in the independent exhibitions was progressive and of abiding quality. Nor can we say that all those who dissociated themselves from the Salon were necessarily distinguished in terms of the quality of their work. While the historical emergence of the avant-garde was certainly associated both with the increasing conservatism of the Salon and with the critical distinctness of the more 'modern' work, that distinctness – or quality – cannot be defined *simply* by contrast with the run-of-the-mill offerings of the Salon. The idea of an independent exhibition was clearly also attractive to some relatively conservative artists who were accustomed to seeing their work admitted to the Salon. So the desire for independent exposure was not simply a consequence of exclusion on stylistic grounds. Apart from anything else, though many of the Impressionist exhibitions were relatively substantial (165 works in the first, 250 in the second, the rest falling between these totals) they were a fraction of the size of the Salons, in which smaller works in particular were likely to go unnoticed unless they were identified with established names. It also needs to be borne in mind that the great majority of the wider Impressionist group – and some of those most often celebrated as 'moderns' – continued to seek admission to the Salon during the 1870s and 1880s, and for the most part with some reward. This was a

Plate 138 Edgar Degas, *Blanchisseuse, silhouette* (*Laundress, Silhouette*), known as *A Woman Ironing*, *c.*1874, oil on canvas, 54 x 39 cm. All Rights Reserved. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; bequest of Mrs H.O. Havemeyer, 1929, the H.O. Havemeyer Collection (29.100.46). (Exhibited in the second Impressionist exhibition, 1876.)

Plate 139 Berthe Morisot, *Cache-cache* (*Hide and Seek*), 1873, oil on canvas, 45 x 55 cm. Collection of Mrs John Hay Whitney, New York. (Exhibited in the first Impressionist exhibition, 1874.)

matter over which the Impressionists themselves were divided. Renoir in particular was assiduous in pursuit of success in the Salon, while Pissarro kept aloof. Clearly the desire for independence was not straightforwardly a matter of principle – or rather, in so far as it *was* a matter of principle, the principle was not one to which all members subscribed. Nor were the Impressionists the only artists to collaborate on exhibitions outside the Salon in the 1870s and 1880s.

Impressionism and art history

To talk about 'Impressionism', as I have suggested, is inevitably to raise questions about the grounds on which canonical status is accorded in modern art. In talking of the Impressionists as a group we tend to refer to many more contributing individuals than those whose work is normally used to define an Impressionist style. In what terms, then, have the latter been singled out? What is it that qualifies Monet, Renoir, Pissarro and Sisley as the definitive representatives of Impressionism? If the answer is that their work is joined by common features not present in the work of others, could we not object that a richer and less exclusive understanding of the style might be achieved by taking into account the work of Degas, or Morisot, or Cézanne, or of Rouart, or Cals, or de Molins? And does this objection itself have the same meaning or weight in the case of Degas (a 'major' artist whose work is on the whole technically dissimilar to that of Monet or Pissarro), as it does in the case of, say, Cals (a 'minor' artist whose exhibited work looked stylistically like some of Monet's or Pissarro's)? Questions like these invite us to consider to what ends the concept of Impressionism has been used by critics and art historians, i.e. what forms of art have been singled out and why?

For some while the prevailing tendency of art-historical work has been to restore some complexity to terms such as Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, both by re-examining the practical and historical contexts in which such terms achieved currency, and by generating awareness of those wider prejudices and mechanisms of exclusion in which art history is liable to be implicated. 'Women Impressionists' and 'Forgotten

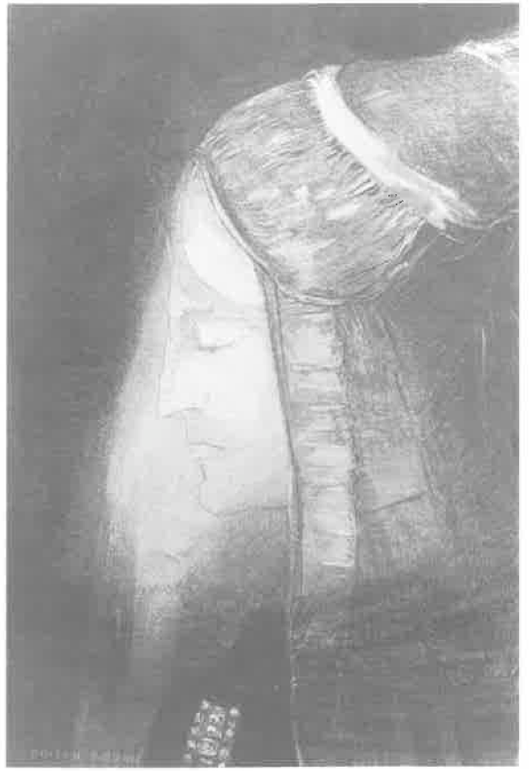


Plate 140 Odilon Redon, *Profil de Femme* (*Profile of a Woman*), known as *Profil de Lumière*, 1886, pastel, 34 x 24 cm. Petit-Palais, Paris. Photo: Pierrain, Musées de la Ville de Paris © SPADEM, Paris 1993, DACS, London 1992. (Exhibited in the eighth Impressionist exhibition, 1886.)

Impressionists' have featured among the topics of recent art-historical study and publication. One aim of such studies has been to correct the normal tendency to concentrate upon a limited canon of supposedly 'major' figures. The concept of 'originality', on the other hand, has been powerfully associated with the formation of a modern artistic canon and it has been art-historically out of favour for a while. Clearly, when employed as an evaluative term, it can be used as a means to restrict the canon, and by implication to disparage those deemed followers or late-comers. In this chapter, I aim to encourage a self-critical awareness about the ends to which evaluative terms are used, but it is not a primary objective that the chapter should offer a revision of the established art-historical canon. Rather I mean to discuss some thoroughly canonical examples of Impressionist and of 'Post-Impressionist' painting and to inquire into the art-historical and art-critical grounds of their supposed originality, modernity and quality. We shall be concentrating upon aspects of the work of Claude Monet and Paul Cézanne, with some discussion of the work of Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Camille Pissarro. We shall also look at some paintings from the 1880s which treat of explicitly human and social themes.

Monet and Renoir figure centrally in all accounts of the Impressionist movement. Monet was closely involved in the setting-up of the independent group and he showed in the first four exhibitions and in the seventh. His *Impression, Sunrise* (Plate 136), shown in the first group exhibition, appears to have played a significant part in establishing the movement's public identity. Renoir was also important in the group's inception, and much of its early critical support followed from his friendship with the writer Georges Rivière. He showed in the first three exhibitions, and was included in the seventh, but he remained ambitious for exposure in the Salon and his commitment to the group waned as he acquired wealthy patrons.

Plate 141 Stanislas-Henri Rouart, *Melun* or *La terrasse au bord de la Seine à Melun* (*The Terrace beside the Seine at Melun*), *c.*1880, oil on canvas, 46 x 65 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique. (Exhibited in the fifth Impressionist exhibition, 1880.)

Plate 142 Adolphe-Félix Cals, *Paysage à Saint-Siméon* (*Landscape at Saint-Siméon*), known as *Landscape with figures*, 1876, oil on canvas. The John G. Johnson Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art. (Exhibited in the third Impressionist exhibition, 1877).

Plate 143 Auguste de Molins, *The Coming Storm*, 1874, oil on canvas, 35 x 55 cm.
Private collection, Lausanne. (Exhibited in the first Impressionist exhibition, 1874.)

Pissarro was the only artist to show in all eight of the group exhibitions. He also helped to establish the style which gave Impressionism its name, and was subsequently closely involved with younger artists, Cézanne and Gauguin among them, for whom Impressionism was a significant transitional phase.

Cézanne showed only in the first exhibition and in the third. A dominant critical tradition has tended to represent him as the most important of the Post-Impressionists. This designation is not one used by the artists concerned – it was coined in 1910 on the occasion of an exhibition of 'Manet and the Post-Impressionists', organized by Roger Fry in London, and has been much used since then. The implication of the term is that the true current of Modernist development flowed directly from Manet to Cézanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh, bypassing the Impressionists, and thus that Cézanne's work represents a stage of development in modern art *beyond* that with which Monet is associated, though Monet died twenty years after Cézanne, in 1926. To the American writer Sheldon Cheney, for example, Monet's Impressionism was 'typical of the last phase of realism', whereas Cézanne 'put an end to the four-centuries reign of imitativeness in painting' (*A Primer of Modern Art*, p.80). Cheney's *A Primer of Modern Art* was first published in 1924. By the time of its revision in 1939 it had already received ten printings, which suggests that it was an accepted and influential text among those interested in modern art. The point I mean to stress is that to consider the work of these artists is also to consider how the image of a modern art was formed by reference to late nineteenth-century French painting, and how this image has developed in the West over the past century. Before going any further, therefore, I would like to examine one specific moment in the formation of that image: a moment explicitly associated with the work of Cézanne, or, to be precise, with a certain *critical response* to his work.

'Significant form'

The Doctor (Plate 144) is a painting by the English artist Luke Fildes. It was exhibited in the Royal Academy in 1891. This is what one notable critic had to say about the painting. He has just finished denigrating another English painting, William Powell Frith's immensely popular *Paddington Station* (Plate 145), which he regarded as an example of a kind of anecdotal and documentary painting now 'grown superfluous' in face of the rise of photography:

> Still [such pictures] are not unpleasant, which is more than can be said for the kind of descriptive painting of which *The Doctor* is the most flagrant example. Of course, *The Doctor* is not a work of art. In it form is not used as an object of emotion, but as a means of suggesting emotions. This alone suffices to make it nugatory; it is worse than nugatory because the emotion it suggests is false. What it suggests is not pity and admiration but a sense of complacency in our own pitifulness and generosity. It is sentimental. Art is above morals, or rather all art is moral because works of art are immediate means to good. Once we have judged a thing a work of art, we have judged it ethically of the first importance and put it beyond reach of the moralist. Not being a work of art, *The Doctor* has none of the immense ethical value possessed by all objects that provoke aesthetic ecstasy; and the state of mind to which it is a means, as illustration, appears to me undesirable.
>
> (Bell, *Art*, pp.19–20)

The writer is Clive Bell. The passage quoted is taken from his book *Art*, published in London in 1914. I want to explore the reasons for the evident strength of Bell's feelings. Apparently, the matter turns upon the question of form – the artist's use of it and the spectator's response to it. Bell employs the concept of 'form' in a special way. In fact his theory

Plate 144 Luke Fildes, *The Doctor*, exhibited 1891, oil on canvas, 166 x 242 cm. Tate Gallery, London.

Plate 145 William Frith, *The Railway Station* (*Paddington Station*), 1862, oil on canvas, 117 x 257 cm. Reproduced by permission of Royal Holloway and Bedford New College, University of London.

of art rests on a distinction between two *kinds* of form. There is form which is descriptive and which imitates the appearance of things in the world, and there is what he elsewhere calls 'significant form' – 'lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms [which] stir our aesthetic emotions' (*Art*, p.15). Clearly, all works of art, except those we call abstract, derive their formal characteristics to some extent from the appearance of things in the world. But Bell wants to distinguish between works which use these appearances *persuasively*, to 'suggest emotion' (*Art*, p.8), and those which use them 'aesthetically' – by which he means in a disinterested fashion:

> Let no one imagine that representation is bad in itself; a realistic form may be as significant, in its place as part of the design, as an abstract. But if a representative [or illustrative] form has value, it is as form, not as representation. The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant. For, to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. Art transports us from the world of man's activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation.
>
> (*Art*, p.25)

Bell overstates his case. There cannot be appreciation without *some* form of knowledge, nor can it be *entirely* irrelevant that a picture of a tree is a picture of a tree and not of a steam-engine. Furthermore we would now be far less inclined to collapse together 'representative' or representational form and realistic form (to put it crudely, form may represent without being realistic) and then to contrast both with the abstract. But one important point may be extracted from Bell's admonitions: neither the meaning nor the value of a work of art can simply or safely be identified with what it depicts or with the story it tells. All things being equal, a picture of the decline of the Roman Empire is not necessarily better or more meaningful – as a *work of art* – than a picture of a pair of boots. Beneath the surface of Bell's argument there lies a quarrel with the kinds of priorities observed in both the French Salon and the English Academy. He is attacking the idea that a fixed hierarchy of genres can plausibly be established on the basis of subject-matter, with moralizing history painting accorded the highest status. The skills that matter, he is saying, are not those involved in the production of recognizable likenesses, the elaboration of

intriguing narratives or the interpretation of moral themes. These lead all too often, he implies, to the mere prompting of such emotions and prejudices as are already present in our social and psychological make-up. In Bell's view the important achievements of art are those which present us with something *other*, something which stands outside ourselves by virtue of the self-sufficiency of its form, which is original in the sense that it is the *origin* – the primary cause – of our responsive emotion (hence his belief that we need bring no prior knowledge of 'life' to our experience of art). For Bell, it is in this sense that works of art are 'means to good': they require of us that we recognize that which is other than ourselves; or, to put it another way, they require that we do not take them as confirmation of the rightness of our beliefs and attitudes, or as evidence of the unquestionable validity of our experience, but that we respond to them *aesthetically*.

Bell's is a partisan form of criticism. He clearly saw the issues as substantial and he invited the reader to take sides. He and his friend Roger Fry were largely responsible for propagandizing the modern movement in art to an English audience (and to an American audience, via those authors like Sheldon Cheney who read their books and who absorbed their ideas). Bell's *Art* was to stay in print throughout the 1920s and 1930s. A new edition was issued in 1949 and a paperback edition was published in 1987. Its easy progress from manifesto of avant-garde opinion to acknowledged art-historical document tells us something about its place within a tradition.

Art is one of a distinct group of publications produced over a period of some twenty-five years in France, Germany, England and America, the common aim of which was to characterize and to proselytize a modern movement in art. The writings of the French painter-critic Maurice Denis were an important source for the critical protocols of early Modernism, as we can now label the tendency to which these various publications belonged and which they helped to form. Denis's essay on Cézanne, first printed in 1907, was translated into English by Roger Fry and was published in the *Burlington Magazine* in 1910. His collected essays were published as *Théories 1890–1910* in 1912. The first substantial book claiming to survey modern art as a whole was published by the German writer Julius Meier-Graefe in 1904 (first English translation as *Modern Art*, in 1908). Other relevant publications include Fry's own collected essays *Vision and Design* (published in London in 1920, it was continuously in print throughout the 1920s and 1930s; a Pelican edition was printed 1937, reprinted 1961, and a new edition was published in 1981). Cheney's *Primer* has already been cited; R. H. Wilenski's *The Modern Movement in Art* was first published in London in 1927 (revised edition 1935) and Amédée Ozenfant's *Foundations of Modern Art* appeared in Paris in 1928, in London in 1931, and in New York in 1952. Each of these publications was concerned to propagandize a break with the past, each represented the distinctive character of modern art as the sign and the qualitative measure of an epochal change, each associated that character with an abandonment of naturalistic description and anecdote, each drew attention to the virtues of the 'primitive', and each accorded Cézanne a pivotal role.

Such works both testified and contributed to the development of a relatively specific system of beliefs about modernism in art during the first three decades of the twentieth century. With the benefit of hindsight we can say that they represent a specific phase in the development of an ideology of Modernism. If the tradition of critical priorities did not emerge coincidentally with the art of Manet and the Impressionists (and various cases have been made for tracing it back further, in some instances well into the eighteenth century), the authority of that tradition during the twentieth century was certainly associated with the international success of modern French art. The success of the art appeared to be both an achievement and a validation of the critical tradition. The status of Cézanne's work in particular is central to Modernist accounts of the nature of quality in art and of virtue in artistic practice. In addition to the publications cited above, Fry published a

Plate 146 Paul Cézanne, *Joueurs aux cartes* (*The Card Players*), 1890, oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm. All Rights Reserved, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

monograph on Cézanne in 1927. Five years earlier Bell had issued his collected essays on recent art under the title *Since Cézanne*. Here is Bell on Cézanne:

> In so far as one man can be said to inspire a whole age, Cézanne inspires the contemporary movement … Cézanne is the Christopher Columbus of a new continent of form … The period in which we find ourselves in the year 1913 begins with the maturity of Cézanne (about 1885) …
>
> (*Art*, p.207)

And here is Cheney:

> … Cézanne is really the first epochal figure since El Greco … of this much I am sure: some rewriting of history is becoming necessary as the world gradually accepts Cézanne's achievement as a turning point in art development, as it becomes apparent that for hundreds of years photography[2] has been a false god among painters and sculptors.
>
> (*A Primer of Modern Art*, p.30)

We may note that when Cézanne was featured in the first of Fry's two 'Post-Impressionist' exhibitions in 1910, three years after his death, the great majority in the English art world treated his supporters as if they had taken leave of their senses. It was to be over twenty years before any work by Cézanne was displayed in an English public collection. If we allow for the fact that *Art* was written in the grip of an enthusiasm for Cézanne's work (Plate 146), it may be easier to understand the vehemence of Bell's condemnation of *The*

2 Cheney means a 'photographic' criterion of likeness.

Doctor. The requirement that the Modernist makes of art is that instead of *illustrating* moral themes it should be pursued as a form of sceptical and self-questioning activity in itself, without the aid of narrative. Writing at a much later stage in the development of the Modernist tradition, in 1965, the American critic Michael Fried claimed that modern art has 'taken on more and more of the denseness, structure and complexity of moral experience – that is, of life itself, but life lived as few are inclined to live it: in a state of continuous intellectual and moral alertness' ('Three American Painters', pp. 9–10). This is the form of (ideal) life and these the values that the likes of Bell saw half a century earlier as exemplified in the carefully worked surfaces of Cézanne's paintings. In the view of the Modernist, the process of painting involves an exemplary struggle to maintain quality in experience. The ethical obligation on the artist is to examine what he or she has done and to do whatever is needed to improve its *formal* quality – which is to say, the quality of its effect on the spectator. The measure of success in this struggle is aesthetic: the achievement of a work of art which is both original and formally self-sufficient.

On the question of this self-sufficiency – or autonomy – one important distinction needs to be made. The tendency of Modernist criticism is to treat the experience of art as an experience of value in and for itself – an experience independent of the 'emotions of life'. That it offers the opportunity for such independent experience is seen as the sign of quality in the individual work of art. It does not follow, however, that critics of a Modernist persuasion have seen the *making* of art as an activity independent of social or historical life. To say that one finds meaning or value in the form of any artefact – considered as a *human* artefact – is to imply that its production has involved some ordering of experience.

Plate 147 Gustave Caillebotte, *Le Pont de l'Europe*, 1876, oil on canvas, 125 x 181 cm. Petit Palais, Geneva. (Exhibited in the third Impressionist exhibition, 1877.)

It is to presuppose some relatively normal background of existence from which this particular object of attention has been detached. Indeed, I suggest that in noticing form in art, it is this very ordering of experience – this detachment – that we are really responding to. It is this response that connects judgements of formal integrity in works of art – aesthetic judgements – to those kinds of judgement about human experience and action which we call ethical. Of course, to say that there must be some such connection is to leave open the question of *how* the ordering of people's experience takes form as art.

Depth, flatness and self-criticism

The concepts of 'depth', 'flatness' and 'self-criticism' are central to Modernist criticism. I'd like to use a comparison in order to connect these critical concepts to developments in the Modernist tradition associated with the writings of Clement Greenberg. Caillebotte's *Le Pont de l'Europe* and Monet's painting of the same title (Plates 147 and 148) were both

Plate 148 Claude Monet, *Le Pont de l'Europe, Gare Saint-Lazare* (sometimes known as *Le Pont de Rome*), 1877, oil on canvas, 64 x 81 cm. Musée Marmottan, Paris; bequest of Madame Donop de Monchy. Photo: Routhier/Studio Lourmel. (Exhibited in the third Impressionist exhibition, 1877.)

Plate 149 Camille Pissarro, *La Côte des boeufs à l'Hermitage, près de Pontoise* (*The Côte des boeufs at l'Hermitage near Pontoise*), 1877, oil on canvas, 115 x 87 cm. The National Gallery London. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees. (Exhibited in the Third Impressionist exhibition.)

shown in the third exhibition of the Impressionist group in 1877. This was the first exhibition in which the members of the group identified themselves as 'Impressionist painters' and, with the total number of exhibitors reduced to eighteen, it provided the most coherent display of work by the principal contributors to the movement: Gustave Caillebotte, Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Berthe Morisot, Camille Pissarro (Plate 149), Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Alfred Sisley.

Caillebotte showed only five works, but two of them, *Paris Street: A Rainy Day* (Plate 150), and *Le Pont de l'Europe* (Plate 147), were large paintings of urban 'modern-life' subjects set on intersections close to the Gare St-Lazare, in an area of Paris which had been partially affected by Haussmann's reorganization of the city. Thirty works by Monet were listed in the catalogue, including six scenes of the Gare St-Lazare, together with his *Pont de l'Europe*, which shows a view from the end of one of the station platforms where the bridge crosses the railway tracks. (The bridge is a complex structure built in 1868 over the tracks where three streets intersect. The small engine at the extreme right of Caillebotte's painting coincides approximately with the viewpoint of Monet's.) Caillebotte's *Pont de l'Europe* attracted considerable comment. One reviewer noted that 'his figures are firmly set down; the perspective is good; and his paintings have space, a great deal of it' (quoted in *The New Painting*, p.208). Its apparent spatial depth is indeed a remarkable feature of the painting. It is of a kind which invites the spectator to enter it, to engage in appropriate imaginative activity and perhaps to accord a fictional life to the represented figures it contains – as with Fildes' painting, though in a very different kind of context. This was an invitation to which contemporary commentators were quick to respond:

> A young dandy walks past an elegant woman, exquisite beneath her flecked veil, a common little vignette that we have all observed with a discreet and benevolent smile ...
> (*L'Homme libre*, 12 April 1877, quoted in *The New Painting*, p.210)

> The main figure is the painter himself, chatting with a very pretty woman close at hand (another portrait no doubt). Our compliments, Caillebotte ... you must have had some very happy *impressions* that day.
> (*L'Événement*, 6 April 1877, quoted in *The New Painting*, p.210)

Clearly the reviewers were at home with this painting. They were able to demonstrate the relevant accomplishments by playing the game of 'reading-in' and they could be both knowing and condescending about the supposed pleasures of the *flâneur* – pleasures which they associated with the distinctive character of 'modern life' (if not with Modernism as later critics were to define it). Another writer paid the artist a doubtful compliment:

> Caillebotte is an Impressionist only in name. He knows how to draw and paints more seriously than his friends. *Le pont de l'Europe* and *Une rue de Paris, par un jour de pluie* ... deserve all possible critical praises.
> (*La Petite République française*, 10 April 1877, quoted in *The New Painting*, p.209)

Despite this implied slur, Monet's painting was also accorded its share of praise. In fact, by 1877 the more representative work of the Impressionist group was receiving a measure of relatively informed and sympathetic attention. The most revealing comment, however, was a pejorative one made by a reviewer writing in *Le Gaulois* under the name Léon de Lora. Monet's *Pont de l'Europe*, he wrote, 'is not without merit but utterly lacks any attraction' (quoted in *The New Painting*, p.224). What this reviewer meant, I suspect, was

Plate 150 Gustave Caillebotte, *Rue de Paris: Temps de pluie* (*Paris Street: A Rainy Day*), 1877, oil on canvas, 212 x 276 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago. Charles H. and Mary F.S. Worcester Collection 1964.336 © 1990 The Art Institute of Chicago. All Rights Reserved.
(Exhibited in the third Impressionist exhibition, 1877.)

that the painting failed to attract the attention of the writer *as a writer*. In front of Monet's painting the usual game could not be played to advantage. Many of the reviewers did try. Writing of Monet's *Interior of the Gare Saint-Lazare* (Plate 151), Renoir's friend Georges Rivière, writing in *L'Impressioniste* on 6 April 1877, claimed with a proto-Futurist enthusiasm: 'We hear the shouts of the workers, the sharp whistles of the engines blasting their cry of alarm, the incessant noise of scrap-iron, and the formidable panting of the steam' (quoted in *The New Painting*, p.223). But the average reviewer's customary skills were not so easily deployed in the construction of a literary equivalent – a kind of story. In place of the expected invitation to 'read-in', what they encountered was a surface, palpably covered with swirls and touches of paint. What was required if Monet's painting was to be written about sensibly was not an arch display of familiarity with the manners of the street, as offered by the critics of Caillebotte's painting, but rather an account of what it looked like as a painting. The problem was that the construction of such an account would require different competences from those with which the typical *writer* was equipped in 1877. For instance it would require a different understanding of the relationship between painting and language – an understanding which acknowledged the *limits* of language as a means of representation of visual experience. To put the matter bluntly, an encounter of the kind Caillebotte represents in his picture would be a technical anomaly in the context of Monet's, just as Jacques's 'discreet and benevolent smile' would clearly be inappropriate as a form of response on the part of the spectator. Rivière's sympathetic imaginings were intended to persuade readers of the virtues of Monet's work, but even *his* prose stood, as it were, some distance to the side of the painting. It is in the nature of the surface of Monet's painting that it acts as a form of barrier, tending to exclude both the anecdotal subject and the practised literary response.

For Clive Bell and the other Modernist critics of the early twentieth century, this double exclusion was a symptom of the relative virtue of the art:

> ... if in the artist an inclination to play upon the emotions of life is often the sign of a flickering inspiration, in the spectator a tendency to seek, behind form, the emotions of life is a sign of defective sensibility always. It means that his aesthetic emotions are weak or, at any rate, imperfect.
>
> (*Art*, pp. 28–9)

In fact Bell, like Cheney, regarded Monet's Impressionism as still too naturalistic to be aesthetically 'perfect'. He saw it as too closely tied to the actual appearance of things in the world and to the impression made by such things upon the senses, and not sufficiently independent in its pursuit of that formal integrity and richness which he found so amply exemplified in Cézanne's painting. We can see clearly enough, however, that the kinds of 'emotions of life' attributed to Caillebotte's painting are very much harder to associate with Monet's (compare Plates 152 and 153).

The relevant technical difference can be thought of in terms of a contrast defined by Clement Greenberg, writing in 1961 at a much later stage in the development of the Modernist critical tradition, by which time Impressionism had been accorded its current status as a crucial stage in the development of modern art.

> The Old Masters had sensed that it was necessary to preserve what is called the integrity of the picture plane; that is, to signify the enduring presence of flatness under the most vivid illusion of three-dimensional space. The apparent contradiction involved – the dialectical tension, to use a fashionable but apt phase – was essential to the success of their art, as it is indeed to the success of all pictorial art. The Modernists have neither avoided nor resolved this contradiction; rather they have reversed its terms. One is made aware of the flatness of their pictures before, instead of after, being made aware of what that flatness contains. Whereas one tends to see what is *in* an Old Master before seeing it as a picture, one sees a Modernist painting as a picture first. This is, of course, the best way of seeing any kind of picture, Old Master or Modernist, but Modernism imposes it as the only and necessary way, and Modernism's success in doing so is a success of self-criticism.
>
> ('Modernist Painting', p.6)

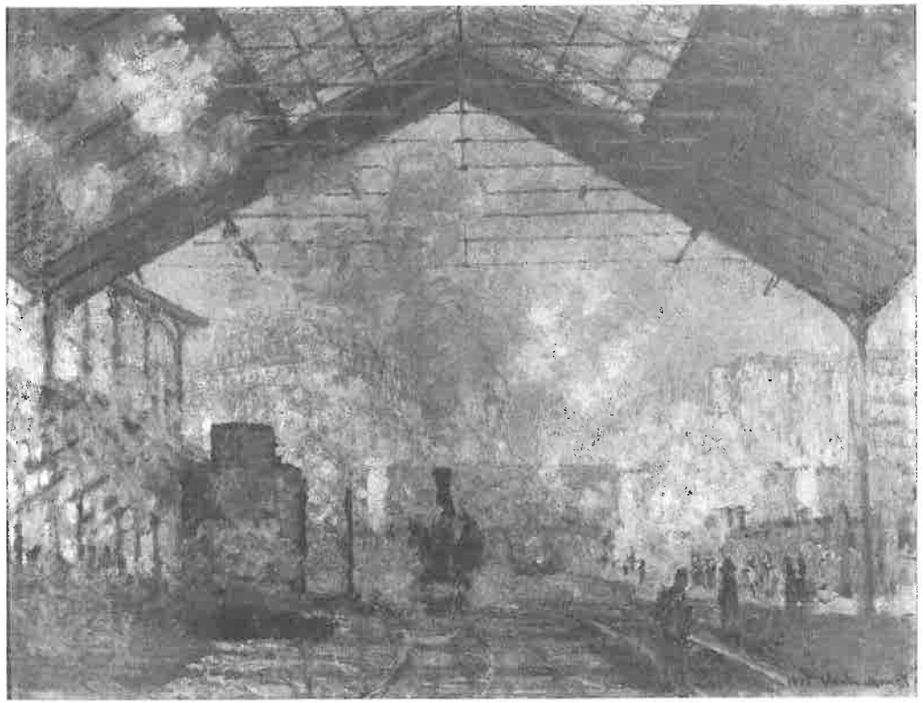


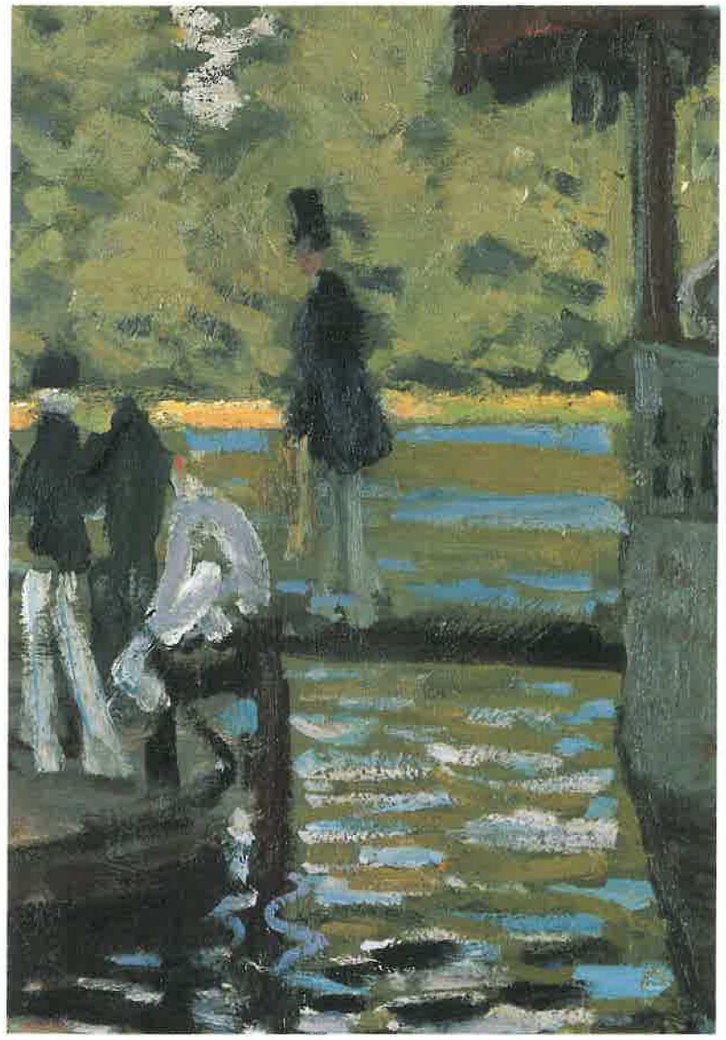
Plate 151 Claude Monet, *Intérieur de la Gare Saint-Lazare* (*Interior of the Gare Saint-Lazare*), 1877, oil on canvas, 75 x 104 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris RF 2775. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique. (Exhibited in the third Impressionist exhibition, 1877.)

Greenberg's concept of 'self-criticism' is crucial to his account of how and why painting changes. The concept as he employs it refers to the ability of a discipline or practice to acknowledge its own proper limits, and to proceed within them. To apply his distinction to our two paintings, we might say that we are aware of the pictured scene Caillebotte's painting presents *before* we are aware of the means by which that scene has been painted, whereas we confront Monet's surface immediately as the surface of a painting – as something *made*. Of course it is not *only* as a surface that we see it. The point is that what Greenberg calls the 'dialectical tension' – the tension between seeing a literal surface and seeing something in that surface – is the more vivid in Monet's painting precisely because the surface is not just 'seen through'. The decorative swirls and touches of paint make some kind of impression upon our senses independently of (or at least concurrently with) their role in forming an image. Applying Bell's terms we might say that the forms of the painting are 'used' to an aesthetic end and are not simply treated as cues to a suggestive scenario. Even Rivière noted 'that skill in arrangement, that organization of the canvas, that is one of the main qualities of Monet's work' (quoted in *The New Painting*, p.223).

Plate 152 Gustave Caillebotte, detail of *Le Pont de l'Europe* (Plate 147).

For Greenberg, Manet's paintings became the first Modernist ones 'by virtue of the frankness with which they declared the surfaces on which they were painted', while, in Manet's wake, the Impressionists left the eye 'under no doubt as to the fact that the colours used were made of real paint that came from pots or tubes', in other words these colours had a 'presence' of their own, and were not merely subservient to the construction of an image. In 'Modernist Painting', from which these further quotations are taken, Greenberg claims that the self-critical tendency of Modernism is its motivating force. It is through the process of self-criticism, he believes, that painting becomes 'modern'. 'The essence of Modernism lies in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself – not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.' He sees this self-critical tendency both as *historically* specific and as

Plate 153 Claude Monet, detail of *La Grenouillère* (Plate 156).



specific to the *medium* of each form of art. Those forms of high culture which were under threat during the nineteenth century 'could save themselves from levelling down [to the status of 'entertainment pure and simple'] only by demonstrating that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity' (such as reading a book or watching a play). The means to this demonstration was for each art to isolate 'the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself', effects which would clearly be proper to the specific nature of the medium:

> The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thereby each art would be rendered 'pure', and in its 'purity' find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence.
> ('Modernist Painting', pp.5–6)

In Greenberg's terms, the kinds of anecdotal effect found in Caillebotte's *Pont de l'Europe* are also discoverable in literature; they would thus count as 'impure' effects in painting. According to Greenberg, one property which painting as a medium shares with no other art form is flatness, two-dimensionality, and so: 'Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else'. On grounds such as these, the relative technical modernism of Monet's painting is taken as the sign of a more acute self-criticism, that is to say of a more advanced grasp of the character and demands of painting as a medium.

Modernism and its priorities

It is important to recognize certain characteristics of the theory which is here being represented. Firstly, it is a theory of *high* art, and of the modern grounds of high art's distinctness (for example its distinctness from 'mere entertainment'). Secondly, it assumes that the definite function of high art is to maintain 'standards of quality' (whatever these may be). Thirdly, it purports to explain changes in high art in terms of a retrospectively perceived and specialized logic of development (for example the 'orientation to flatness'). And fourthly, it argues that there is an inextricable connection, in Modernist art at least, between quality and 'self-definition' or independence (independence, for instance, from the requirements of 'mere entertainment' or of story-telling).

Clearly, there are likely to be sociological implications to a theory which conceives of high art and standards of quality in terms of logical development and independence from the ends of entertainment. It should be noted that both the early version of Modernist theory, represented by Bell, and the more developed (and more sophisticated) form advanced by Greenberg represent attempts to *rationalize preferences* – or, as the writers themselves would have put it, to justify the findings of taste. The question which both writers asked themselves was: what is it that connects those works of art which I find good? Bell's answer was that *all* successful works of art stir the emotions of the viewer, not by appealing to 'the emotions of life', but through their *independent* possession of the property of 'significant form' (whatever that might be). Greenberg's answer was that all successful works of *modern* art are linked as stages in the working out of a specialized and 'self-critical' tendency.

In all phases of its development Modernist theory rests upon three crucial assumptions; firstly, that nothing about art matters so much as its quality; secondly, that for the purposes of criticism the important historical development is the one that connects works of the highest quality; and thirdly, that where judgements of quality appear to be in conflict with considerations of relevance or with moral judgements, what should be re-examined first is not the aesthetic judgement (which is supposed to be involuntary and thus not open to revision) but the particular criteria of relevance being applied and the grounds of the moral judgement. Relevance, in Greenberg's view, must mean 'relevance to the quality of the effect' of the work of art ('Complaints of an art critic', p.8), and no moralizing judgement will be considered pertinent if it simply addresses what the work of art shows rather than the *form* in which the showing is done. In the view of the Modernist critic, this stricture on relevance applies not only to works with overt figurative subject-matter, such as *The Doctor*. It is equally applicable to abstract paintings. In the eyes of the Modernist, if we are to see the work of art for what it is, we should not allow what it happens to look *like* to distract us from the particular quality of its *effect*. (We shall return to the concept of 'effect' in a subsequent section.)

Questions to the Modernist

There are three important and interrelated questions with which these assumptions need to be confronted. The first is: how do we know that the effect which the critic claims to perceive is actually produced by the painting and is not simply a product of the critic's own psychology and self-interest? Another way to put this is to ask: is the judgement of quality backed up by anything *other* than personal preference? (Because if not, no more authority can be attached to that judgement than we are prepared to accord to the person making the judgement.)

The second question is: what kind of evidence is offered to connect the judgements of quality to the account of art's historical development? If only certain works are allowed to count as components of art history, and if all that seems to connect them is that they confirm the findings of the critic's taste, then we shall have a strong reason to suspect a lack of objectivity in the historical account. Of course, all interpretation of history is done in furtherance of some interest or other, and some of the most instructive history is written explicitly to make a case. But we need to be alert to the dangers of what the philosopher Karl Popper has called 'historicism' – the perception of rhythms and patterns in history and their use as evidence for the purposes of prediction and prescription. As defined by Popper, historicism is associated with neglect or even suppression of evidence

Plate 154 Auguste Renoir, *Étude* (*Study*), now known as *Torse de femme au soleil* (*Torso of a Woman in Sunlight*), *c.*1876, oil on canvas, 81 x 65 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris RF 2740. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique. (Exhibited in the second Impressionist exhibition, 1876.)

inconsistent with the writer's own interests and ends. The accusation of historicism is one that has frequently been levelled at the Greenberg of 'Modernist Painting' – this is to impute that, despite the claim to an empirical response, he organizes his retrospective evidence in accordance with his theoretical forecasts.

The third question is: on what grounds are decisions made about what is and is not relevant to the business of judging works of art? If it turns out that the only information allowed to be relevant is information that supports a judgement already made – if, for example, evidence having been offered of the chauvinistic character of Renoir's sexual politics, this evidence is ruled out by an admirer on the grounds that it is rendered irrelevant by the 'beautiful effects' of his paintings (see Plates 154 and 183), and if that admirer claims that the beauty of those effects is *beyond argument* – then we will be justified in returning to our first question and in insisting on an adequate answer to one or both of its versions before we give heed to the criteria of relevance being applied. It is a form of idealism to claim that art can have meaning independently of what it is made of. One way or another, the question of the character of the producer is implicated in the question of the character of the product.

In the next section I aim to bring together and to pursue what have so far been two separate strands in our discussion; on the one hand the relationship between Modernism

Plate 155 Claude Monet, *Les Bains de la Grenouillère*, (*Bathing at la Grenouillère*), 1869, oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm. National Gallery, London. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the National Gallery.

and modernity, on the other the relationship between quality and 'independence'. We shall next be considering a group of paintings which have conventionally been seen as marking the beginnings of the Impressionist project.

Monet at La Grenouillère

Look at the six paintings by Monet and Renoir which show scenes of bathing at La Grenouillère (Plates 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160). La Grenouillère was a boating and bathing place on the Seine, about a mile from the nearest station, to which trains ran from the Gare Saint-Lazare. It was located on the island of Croissy, close to Bougival in the spreading western suburbs of Paris and within walking-distance of the village to which Monet moved in the summer of 1869. In the words of Robert Herbert, the Impressionist painters 'participated in the suburbanization of the area, and they brought back their produce to the Paris market; images of harmonious and productive villages, and of receptive landscapes' (*Impressionism*, p.196). By the 1860s Bougival itself had grown into a popular centre for boating, bathing and fishing. Besides the facilities for bathing and for boat hire, the establishment at La Grenouillère included a floating restaurant and dance-hall and riverside tables for eating and drinking. It could be said that it presented a

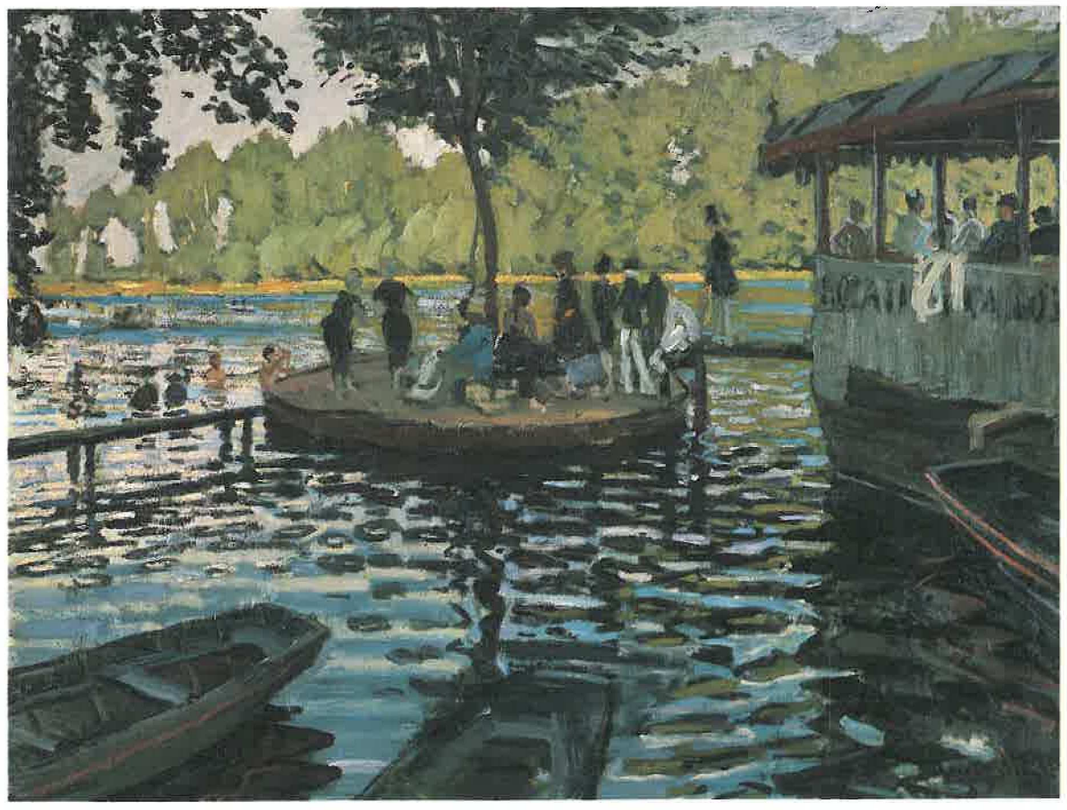


Plate 156 Claude Monet, *La Grenouillère*, 1869, oil on canvas, 74 x 100 cm. All Rights Reserved. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The H.O. Havemeyer Collection, bequest of Mrs H.O. Havemeyer, 1929.

suggestion in the concluding section. Of the core group of Impressionists, Sisley alone remained to the end a painter of sketch-like atmospheric landscapes, and it could be said that, for all the consistent competence which his work displays, that very consistency marks a kind of limit on the interest of his art.

Before we end this section, there is one more artist to be mentioned. In the last Impressionist group exhibition, held in 1886, a new recruit, Georges Seurat, included his *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (Plate 186), a painting which, by virtue of its size, its technique and its multi-figure subject, clearly identified itself as an ambitious attempt to reconcile modern themes with avant-garde technical interests. The picture was painted as a pendant to the same artist's *Bathing at Asnières* (Plate 187). For much of the twentieth century these two paintings were generally viewed in the context of a 'Neo-Impressionist' movement, and thus seen as standing primarily for the radical systematization of Impressionist colour and the Impressionist brush stroke. More recent writing has restored to the two paintings that sense of fascinated but ironic engagement with the appearance of modern life which contemporary commentators were quick to observe, but which the priorities of Modernist criticism have tended to disparage. T.J. Clark writes of *Bathing at Asnières* as a 'serious depiction' not only of that shifting world of scenes and values created by the interaction of industry and nature, but also of the forms of behaviour which these 'new circumstances' determine, while he interprets *La Grande Jatte* as a painting 'which attempts to find form for the appearance of class in capitalist society' (*The Painting of Modern Life*, pp.201 and 261).

Plate 187 Georges Seurat, *Une Baignade à Asnières* (*Bathing at Asnières*), 1883–84, oil on canvas, 201 x 300 cm. The National Gallery, London. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees. (Exhibited in the eighth Impressionist exhibition, 1886.)

In reviewing this group of works I have meant to question the notion that painting in the later nineteenth century can properly be viewed in terms of a divorce between 'reality' on the one hand and 'problems intrinsic to painting' on the other. It should be acknowledged, however, that an important and interesting footnote supports and qualifies the passage from Michael Fried's 'Three American Painters', which I quoted at the outset and to which I now return. Acknowledging that 'Manet's ambitions are fundamentally realistic', he notes the effect on Manet's work of self-consciousness about his *relationship* to reality – self-consciousness of the same order, I think, as we noted in *Luncheon in the Studio*, where it functions to signify an uneasiness and complexity in social and psychological experience which is quite foreign to such works as *The Merrymakers*. Fried describes Manet as 'the first painter for whom consciousness itself is the great subject of his art'. In making the spectator aware that what he or she is looking at 'is, after all, merely a painting' and in that frank assertion of the flatness of the surface remarked by Greenberg, Manet is responding to the need to make 'the estranging quality of self-awareness an essential part of the content of his work'. The 'founding of Modernism', then, is a direct consequence of the attempt 'to achieve a full equivalent to the great realistic painting of the past'. Fried's Modernism is not quite the argument for 'pure art' which it may have appeared to be from the passage quoted at the outset of this section. According to his account, engagement with 'problems intrinsic to painting', even if it is not a direct engagement with social problems, is nevertheless the price modern painting has to pay for its very engagement with the determining realities of human social and psychological existence.

Cézanne

Paul Cézanne was included among the independent artists in 1874 as a consequence of Pissarro's advocacy, and reputedly despite the misgivings of some other of the founder members. He showed three paintings in the first group exhibition: *A Modern Olympia* (Plate 178), a landscape of Auvers-sur-Oise entitled *The House of the Hanged Man* (Plate 188) and a further landscape study of Auvers. Two contemporary notices are deserving of mention. The first, by a writer signing himself 'Jean Prouvaire', is representative of those for whom Cézanne served as an image of avant-garde absurdity and extremism:

> Shall we mention Cézanne, who, by the way, has his own legend? No known jury has ever, even in its dreams, imagined the possibility of accepting a single work by this painter, who came to the Salon carrying his paintings on his back, like Jesus Christ carrying his cross.
>
> (*Le Rappel*, 20 April 1874, quoted in *The New Painting*, p.126)

He had first submitted work to the official Salon in 1863; it was to be a further nineteen years before he had a painting accepted. The second notice was written by the writer Émile Zola, a friend from the artist's boyhood and a supporter of Manet:

> Among the works that caught my eye, I was particularly struck by a remarkable landscape by Paul Cézanne, one of your compatriots from the South, a native of Aix, who shows great originality. Paul Cézanne, who has been struggling for a long time, unquestionably has the temperament of a great painter.
>
> (*Le Sémaphore de Marseilles*, 18 April 1874, quoted in *The New Painting*, p.126)

This favourable mention of Cézanne's work was demonstration of the persistence of friendship, though it is noteworthy that Zola was writing in a provincial paper for the

Plate 188 Paul Cézanne, *La Maison du pendu* (*The House of the Hanged Man*) c.1874, oil on canvas, 55 x 66 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique. (Exhibited in the first Impressionist exhibition, 1874.)

consumption of fellow Provençals and thus not risking his judgement before a Parisian audience, and that the emphasis placed on originality, struggle and temperament was such as to leave an impression of promise unfulfilled. As late as 1880 Zola was to describe Cézanne as one who 'has the temperament of a great painter but who still struggles with problems of technique'.

Three years after the date of the first review quoted, in one of the few favourable notices that Cézanne received on the occasion of the third group exhibition, Renoir's friend Georges Rivière observed that 'Cézanne has come in for more abusive treatment … at the hands of both press and public, over the last fifteen years … than any other artist you care to name'. In Rivière's eyes, however,

> What he most closely resembles is a Greek of the golden age. That imperturbable calm in all of his canvases is also found alike in Greek painting or vases. Those who ridicule his *Bathers*, for example, are just like the Barbarians who find fault with the Parthenon. Cézanne is a great painter …
>
> (quoted in S. Orienti, *The Complete Paintings of Cézanne*, p.8)

Clearly these are widely differing views, and they are not to be explained in terms of progress or development in Cézanne's work between the first exhibition and the third (in which he showed sixteen works). The painting which Rivière singled out for particular praise, now known as *Fantasy Scene* or *The Fishermen* (Plate 189) was almost certainly

executed in the early 1870s. For Rivière, this painting was 'strikingly majestic and extraordinarily calm … vast and sublime, like a beautiful memory' (quoted in *The New Painting*, p.213). It is not hard to understand, however, how the same work might also have been seen, even by the well-disposed Zola, as demonstrating more promise than achievement. At first glance the modelling of the figures appears rough and abrupt, and the composition awkward, with the dark silhouette projecting emphatically into the bottom left-hand corner and the grey sail slicing into the picture space at the right.

This divergence of opinion concerning Cézanne's work is symptomatic of the role he had already come to play in the development of a distinct set of proto-Modernist values. In the late 1870s he seems to have been singled out as the artist of his generation around whose work critical opinion polarized. This polarization was to some extent a reflection of the wider changes taking place within the French art world and within French culture as a whole. Just as the more conservative critics like 'Jean Prouvaire' needed figures of ridicule to use in their justifications of traditional values and traditional notions of artistic competence, so those who identified with the emergent avant-garde needed models of modernity and sincerity to point to. In 1866 Manet had furnished such a model for the young and ambitious Zola. After the first exhibition of the independent artists in 1874, the work of Monet and the other 'Impressionists' provided a new standard around which progressive opinion could rally. By 1877 it was the painting of Cézanne which appeared to offer in strongest measure what Greenberg was to call the 'challenge to taste'. The terms in which Cézanne was singled out by his early admirers reveal a rapid evolution in the conceptual apparatus of Impressionist theory and criticism. 'In all his paintings', Rivière

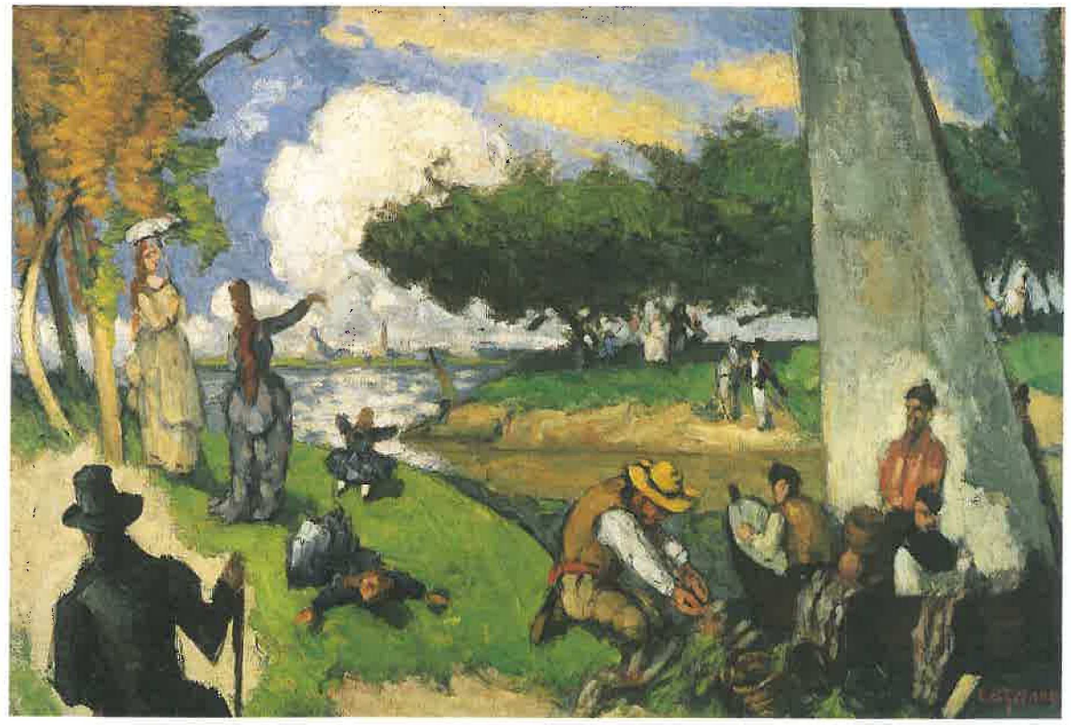


Plate 189 Paul Cézanne, *Scène fantastique* or *Les Pêcheurs* (*Fantasy Scene* or *The Fishermen*) 1873–75, oil on canvas, 54 x 81 cm. Private Collection. (Exhibited in the third Impressionist exhibition, 1877.)

wrote, 'the artist produces emotion, because he himself experiences before nature a violent emotion which his craftsmanship transmits to the canvas'. The notion of painting as the recording of sensation had clearly been accepted into the vocabulary of sympathetic criticism. What was now at stake was the *strength* of this sensation. Where the conservative critic found – or claimed to find – evidence of incompetence, naïvety and even insanity, the sympathetic critic found originality, individuality of temperament and a capacity for strong emotion.

We should not be too ready to ridicule those – Manet reputedly among them – who were unable to take Cézanne's painting seriously in the 1870s. Academic painters such as Alexandre Cabanel, Jean-Léon Gérôme and Bouguereau were unquestionably competent in the procedures they used to plan their paintings and in the techniques they used to realize them – or at least they were while any authority attached to their notion of art. So long as the works of painters such as these were taken as models of accomplishment, how could the work of Cézanne possibly be seen as other than incompetent? For example, if we compare one of Cézanne's studies of bathers from the early 1880s (Plate 190) with a contemporary contribution to the genre from Bouguereau (Plate 191), we may initially be hard pressed to identify the nature of those relative virtues by which the Cézanne is supposedly distinguished.

It may be more instructive to start where the less sympathetic critics themselves started, to note the kinds of technical competence displayed in the Bouguereau – the

Plate 190 Paul Cézanne, *Bathers*, 1883–85, oil on canvas, 63 x 81 cm. Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.

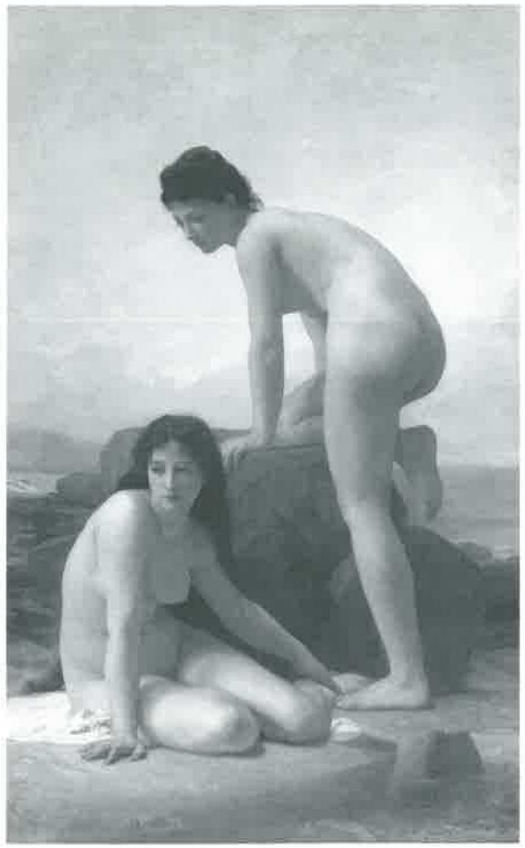


Plate 191 William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *Les Baigneuses* (*The Bathers*), 1884, oil on canvas, 201 x 129 cm. A.A. Munger Collection, 1901.458

careful delineation and smooth modelling of the human form, the practised framing of a deep illusionistic space, the easy blending of colour and tone, the discreet subordination of brushwork to the requirements of illusion – and to observe how few of them are to be found in Cézanne's painting. The majority of contemporary critics noted the apparent lack of such competences in Cézanne's art and not unnaturally viewed that lack as a form of failure. Looking at his paintings of bathers, they assumed that he had attempted works of the order of Bouguereau's and had simply fallen well short. They saw figures which were badly drawn, misshapen and flat; pictorial spaces silted up with variegated texture; abrupt changes of tone and colour; brushwork which was sketchy and unfinished. This is to say that, rather than perceiving the effects of Cézanne's work as intentional, they saw them as the involuntary consequences of incompetence – and thus as insignificant. After all, no serious painter could *intend* to appear incompetent. Hence the tendency to ridicule Cézanne's pretension – his constant attempts to claim a place for his work in the official Salon. To be an 'original' in this sense is to be a figure of ridicule. I suggest, then, that instead of asking why the majority of observers were unable to appreciate the virtues of Cézanne's work, we may learn more by asking how it was that his art came to be seen by a small minority of critics – and more significantly of other artists – as intentional, competent and even exemplary.

One reason, I think, is that certain precedents had been established in France by artists who had achieved recognition in the face of previous ridicule, Courbet and Manet foremost among them. With the benefit of hindsight we can say that this implied that there

had been some form of breakdown in the established consensus of taste, or some substantial challenge to that authority by which taste itself was defined. Although the organization of the Salon des Réfusés in 1863 was by no means an avant-garde enterprise, it was one manifestation of this breakdown, and on that occasion Zola, and Cézanne himself, had been among the visitors who admired Manet's rejected works. The recognition of an avant-garde in art requires an audience wanting to distinguish itself by the difference – in effect the avant-gardism – of its taste (an audience which will be, at least in part, an audience of other artists).

Under these circumstances the 'challenge to taste' was a form of avant-garde call to arms, and by the mid-1870s it could be recognized instantly in the vocabulary of avant-garde criticism as we have already encountered it: 'sensation', 'effect', 'originality' and 'temperament'. According to the avant-garde theory of the time, originality was the quality to watch for and it made itself known through distinctive effects. These effects were read as the signs of those powerful sensations which impressed themselves upon the temperament of the original artist, who became increasingly idealized as the model of the authentic and authentically *uncommercial* being (whatever may have been the nature of his or her actual operations in the market-place). Cézanne was in many ways well cast as the type of the avant-garde artist in the later nineteenth century. After the early 1880s he remained largely isolated from Paris and from the social occasions of the art world, while a myth of his integrity and obsessiveness developed among those few younger artists (Émile Bernard and Maurice Denis foremost among them) who maintained some acquaintance with his work.

One important question is begged by this account. How was the spectator (and how are we even now) to tell the pictorial effects of the original and temperamentally gifted artist from those of the hapless incompetent? Modernist theory offers no easy answer to this question. On the one hand it is assumed, in Bell's words, that 'Art' – authentically original art, presumably, 'speaks for itself to those that can hear' (*Art*, p.98). Greenberg talks of artists 'proving themselves' and of a disinterested and involuntary 'consensus of taste' among those who pay most thoughtful attention to art (T. Evans, 'A conversation with Clement Greenberg', p.8). On the other hand, the insecurity of discriminations based on fixed standards of competence is increasingly acknowledged, indeed even celebrated, in Modernist theory, by extending the canon of approved art to include the work of 'primitives' of various orders: children, craftsmen from tribal societies, the naïve and the untaught (see Plate 192).

It is perhaps easier to address the problem if we think of competence, skill and so forth not as fixed and absolute values (which is how they were largely regarded in the discourse of the Academy), but rather as the modes by which the intentional practice of the artist is at any given time organized and directed in relation to a specific *world* of values – for example a given set of ideas about what art ought to look like. We can sometimes learn as much by noticing which forms of accomplishment artists avoid or discard as we can by attending to those they display.

With this idea in mind we might conceive of the very absence of Academic competences in Cézanne's work as a kind of competence in itself – the result of a determined intention *not* to paint a Bouguereau, *not* to accept naturalistic or photographic likeness as a sufficient form of relationship to the world, instead to make the effects of the painting interesting in themselves. In a letter of 1874 he wrote to his mother:

> I have to work all the time, not to reach that final perfection which earns the admiration of imbeciles. – And this thing which is commonly appreciated so much is merely craftsmanship and renders all work resulting from it inartistic and common. I must strive after perfection only for the satisfaction of becoming truer and wiser.
> (Rewald, *Cézanne's Letters*, p.142)

Plate 192 Henri Rousseau, *La Fabrique de chaises* (*The Chair Factory*), known as *View of the Chair Factory and the Seine Quay at Alfortville*, (large version), *c.*1897, oil on canvas, 73 x 93 cm. Collection J. Walter P. Guillaume, Orangerie, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique.

Conceived in these terms, the attractions of Cézanne's work are perhaps easier to understand. In comparing Cézanne to a 'Greek of the golden age', Rivière was, by implication, levelling a charge of decadence both at the likes of Bouguereau and at those who were his (bourgeois) admirers. For the avant-garde audience which responded to them, Cézanne's paintings stood as powerful forms of refusal or negation, *and thus* as demonstrations of a singular and interesting integrity. According to this point of view, the force of his individual temperament impelled him to work against the grain of established culture – specifically against the grain of such cultural forms as had become representative of a standard bourgeois taste. This very resistance was what 'originality' had come to mean by the 1870s, and it is what it largely continued to mean in the criticism of modern art for the next hundred years.

With the possible interests of contemporary viewers furnishing a form of context, we can perhaps now consider the merits of Cézanne's *Bathers* with more confidence. We can notice how a complex rhythm is established by the silhouettes of the various figures, how the placing of these figures relative to each other creates an effect of space and volume, how, in fact, the entire worked surface of the painting contributes to this almost sculptural effect. We can also observe that the Bouguereau appears by contrast to be weakly theatrical, inert and largely vacant. And if we note the prospect of psychological engagement which the Bouguereau holds out – by virtue of the relative particularization of the features, and the absorbed gaze of the nearer figure – the complete exclusion of any

such prospect from Cézanne's painting seems like a form of critical admonition. In effect, once we are equipped with the means to view Cézanne's painting as competent, it is the Bouguereau which comes to seem suspect. Like Fildes' *The Doctor* as Clive Bell viewed it, it has the aspect of an over-rehearsed performance. However well practised its illusionistic techniques may be, from the stand-point of Modernist interests, it is *aesthetically* incompetent, impersonal and unoriginal.

Cézanne's *Dejeuner sur l'herbe*

I want to consider two further works by Cézanne, one earlier than the *Bathers* and one later. The first, known as *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (*Luncheon on the Grass*, Plate 193) dates from about the same time as Monet's and Renoir's paintings of La Grenouillère. The second, *The Grounds of the Château Noir* (Plate 194) was painted in about 1900, towards the end of the artist's life. The first is one of a group of works of romantic themes which are now generally ascribed to the period 1867 to 1871. It is clearly a 'subject painting', and one which appears to invite psychological interpretation of its symbolism, if only because the bald figure in the foreground is manifestly a self-portrait. Cézanne must surely have had in mind Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* which he had seen in the Salon des Réfusés, and if he did not actually see Monet's work of the same title in the mid-1860s, he must certainly have known of the project. Though there is no reason to suppose that its present title is Cézanne's own, his painting asks to be considered in relation to these, and to the various other multi-figure paintings on outdoor themes which addressed the same persistent problem: how on the one hand to express an interest in the representation of the modern, while on the other addressing traditional measures of elevated painterly ambition and competence. The earlier artists Cézanne admired were all painters in whose work rich

Plate 193 Paul Cézanne, *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, (*Luncheon on the Grass*), 1869–70, oil on canvas, 60 x 81 cm. Private Collection.

Plate 194 Paul Cézanne, *Dans le parc du Château Noir* (*The Grounds of the Château Noir*), *c.*1900, oil on canvas, 91 x 71 cm. The National Gallery, London. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees.

effects of colour were combined with sensuously modelled and animated figures: the Venetians of the sixteenth century, Rubens, Delacroix. In his more romantic works of the later 1860s and early 1870s he seems to have been attempting to find modern pictorial themes with which he could emulate their achievements. Like Monet at La Grenouillère, he may have aimed to succeed as a very different kind of painter from the one he subsequently became.