

## General Research: Techniques of Impressionism

Artists' Techniques: The Development of Impressionism  
By Ellen Lawson

Artistic technique, the practical side of making art, is often neglected in writing and touring. However, understanding how art is made helps to understand art history since individual artistic concerns, as well as styles or movements, are determined by ability and preference in the use of available materials. In 19th century France the techniques of Impressionism came to be preferred by artists in spite of opposition from the government-sponsored Academy.

From the time of the French Revolution (1789), French artists had sought alternatives to the dictates of the Academy. By the turn of the 20th century, younger artists had begun to seek alternatives to Impressionism. The French Academy emphasized the most intellectual aspects of art in an attempt to elevate the status of artists, who before the Renaissance were regarded as mere guild craftsmen. Therefore, Academy-trained artists studied anatomy and the geometry of perspective and spent much time abstracting three dimensions into two using lines nonexistent in nature (i.e. drawing). Appropriate subject matter for art had to appeal to the high, moral side of human nature, and subjects generally came from mythology and history.

The French Royal Academy was founded in the 1640's to bring art under the control of Louis XIV. It was thought that drawing the idealized human figure was the highest expression, and placing figures into a classical setting allowed artists to show their skill at depicting both nudes and drapery. Academic artists did not hawk their wares but showed their work in a dignified competition, the yearly Salon. By the nineteenth century the Academy, renamed the Ecole des Beaux Arts under Napoleon I, and the Salon were conservative forces. The elite corps of Academy member artists were elected for life by their peers. Members judged the drawing competitions which granted entrance to the Ecole and gave private lessons in their ateliers to Academy hopefuls as well as to advanced students. They also gave the drawing instruction at the Ecole, advised the government on all artistic matters, and judged Salon exhibitions, thus dictating artistic taste.

Academy students progressed through an hierarchical curriculum, first working from the flat, copying outlines of other drawings and then hatched shading. After mastering lines made by other artists, students were allowed to work from low-relief sculpture adding their own cross-hatching. The next step was to create the illusion of form in space working in the round from idealized white plaster sculptures. Finally came live models in classical poses. All of this training was drawing, and the sequence encouraged mannered and conventional interpretation. Only when students were proficient in drawing were they allowed to add color, first copying from old masters and finally working from live models. The first step was a

light charcoal drawing on canvas primed in an earth color. Next the artist painted lines and broad masses with a dilute paint mixture (the sauce) of a darker earth tone (often sienna, a red-brown). Background and shadow were next worked up in a still less-dilute sauce. Then, colors were added in mosaic strokes, transferred from a palette on which each color had been pre-mixed in dark, mid-tone and light values.

Finally when value changes were blended and brush marks imperceptible, the artist added a few expressive brushstrokes (pizzicatos). After this stage (the ebauche) was thoroughly dried and scraped down, the artist repainted by building up the colors again, blending minute value transitions. Then he deepened the earth-toned shadows with thin stains and brought highlights to full strength with impasto (stiff paint which retains its body on the canvas), and added again pizzicatos. The finished work had been painted from dark to light and from thin to thick. Carefully painted value transitions created a convincing illusion of form in space. Painting shadows thin and transparent and highlights in thick impasto reinforced this illusion by creating a relief which reflected light.

Many factors contributed to weakening the power of the Academy and changing the accepted standards for subject matter and technique. The French Revolution brought a new individualism and the rise of the bourgeoisie. The number of artists increased with this new middle-class market for subject matter with common appeal and for paintings of reasonable size and cost. The popularity of landscapes with the new bourgeoisie caused the Academy to create a four-year prize in historical landscape in 1816, attempting to insure that landscape would adhere to academic standards and serve a higher ideal. However, ordinary landscape and looser brushwork became acceptable in this expanded marketplace.

The practices of the Ecole were a factor in its own demise. This elite school could not accommodate everyone who wished to paint, and even those who became students had little real hope of achieving the ultimate goal, winning a yearly competition of grand historical paintings called the Prix de Rome (the prize was study at the French Academy there). In fact students had long been encouraged to paint landscapes from nature during the summer in order to train their powers of observation and to develop their ability to paint authentic backdrops for figural compositions. It was also common practice for artists to paint etudes (quickly-executed sketches from nature) as aids to memory. Also, during Academy sessions students spent the majority of their time on the more freely worked stages of painting, the ebauche and the esquisse (an oil sketch broadly painted in light, shade, and color from the imagination). The esquisse communicated the artist's first inspired idea for a painting and was entered in a preliminary competition for the Rome Prize in 1816, corresponding to the Revolutionary or democratic idea that inspiration was more important than the intellect or genius embodied in finishing a work.

Alternatives to the Ecole for training became more available as the 19th century progressed. Independent masters (established artists who had not been elected to the academy) established ateliers. Among them were Charles Gleyre (1806-1874)

who in the 1860's encouraged such pupils as Monet, Renoir, Sisley and Bazille to make outdoor studies, and Thomas Couture (1815-1879), who advised Manet to "keep the first vivid impression." In addition art students looked to the examples of independent artists who did not teach in ateliers, like Delacroix (1798-1863), who invigorated his paintings with expressive color and brushwork and to Corot (1796-1875), who although classically trained had abandoned chiaroscuro. Corot urged, "Never lose the first impression which has moved you," and although he continued to maintain the importance of finish to a painting, he began his paintings outside to establish natural light and shade, using white in his colors, even shadows, to increase their luminosity. Feeling that it bore little resemblance to natural light, he rejected academic landscape standards (a dark foreground with dramatic trees or buildings at the sides to draw the viewer into a lighted middle ground where the historical tableau took place).

As realistic representations of particular places became popular, landscape painters did more painting outside, en plein air, and less reworking in the studio. By the time the Impressionists began to paint the landscape in the 1860's, satirists claimed that more landscape painters than either tourists or peasants were out of doors in the French countryside. According to the critic Jules Castagnary in his commentary on the Salon of 1866, which was predominantly landscapes, the invading army of painters were divisible by region, but only two who would become Impressionists, "Captain" Pissaro and "Second Lieutenant" Monet, were worth noting in the "Army of Paris." It was

after the French were humiliated by Otto von Bismarck's forces in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) and by the failure of the Commune of 1871 that the quest for a national soul centered upon the capital and the School of Paris prevailed. New systems of transport such as raised roadways lined with trees, canals, and railroads made Paris and the surrounding countryside accessible, and, unlike the Barbizon painters who had preferred the solitude of the great forest, the Impressionists painted barges, bridges, and trains--an active, modern world.

Technology influenced how these artists painted. The Flemish method of working from transparent darks to thick opaque highlights became difficult to emulate because mass-produced oil colors dried unevenly causing cracking and discoloring. Artists no longer understood the chemical properties of pigments, binders and solvents and other Secreti once passed down by the guilds and were unable to judge how dangerous additives like spermaceti or mutton tallow might affect their paintings. Mechanically ground pigments were first offered in Paris in 1836, and collapsible tin tubes were developed in the 1840's. Since oil sketching out of doors had been popular from the 1780's, commercial paints did not cause the artist to set up his easel outside but they most certainly made his preparations easier.

However, the overly-ground pigments that were available to artists in the last half of the 19th Century contained far too much oil and wax (generally poppy oil and paraffin) and were mixed to an homogeneous buttery consistency without the natural properties of hand ground pigments, which varied in

texture according to their source. Dark colors were no longer transparent, and so many artists loaded opaque paint in both the shadow and light areas of their paintings without the ability to use finishing transparent glazes. Early independent artists who richly loaded their surfaces were Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) and Jean-Francois Millet (1814-1875). Courbet in particular tried to use a transparent glaze made from a tarry substance called bitumen to enliven his darks, but bitumen never completely dried and cracked and blackened over time. He encouraged Monet to paint on a brown ground because "you can dispose your lights, your colored masses; you immediately see your effect." However, over time surface paint becomes increasingly transparent and a ground becomes darker "swallowing" the hues painted on it. Paint scientists of the day warned against dark grounds and bitumen and recommended painting *alla prima* (all in one sitting) as the soundest technical approach because it was not layered. It became common practice by the 1860's to paint on a pale or white ground for luminosity and durability and to load paint into the shadows in order to cover the white adequately, following the example of Edouard Manet (1832-1883), whose use of black in his shadows at first had been considered shocking. The development of photography in the 1840's showed painters two-dimensional reality for the first time. Early photographs exaggerated darks and lights, creating simplified areas of strong value contrast which flattened three-dimensional forms, sometimes cutting them off. Artificially lighted photography, particularly photographs taken under the bright white flare of burning magnesium wire, created even more contrast. Manet and Edgar Degas (1843-1883) studied photographs to create paintings with simplified shapes and strong contrasts. Snapshot photography gave a uniform focus to every object (unlike our eyes which blur peripheral objects) and captured moving figures. Painters used similarly casually-placed and cut-off figures to give a feeling of immediacy. Another alternative to the conventions of painting came from Japanese woodblock prints, collected by artists at this time, which did not model forms with light and shadow but with flat areas of bright color. Space was merely suggested by overlapping. The lack of central areas of interest in Japanese prints caused the eye to wander over patterns of color, and unusual viewpoints often high above the scene emphasized decorative flatness. Artists used these techniques to complement the new uniform loading of their paint surfaces with bright, light colors. In working out-of-doors, artists like Claude Monet (1840-1926) and Pierre Auguste Renoir (1840-1919), who painted together on the Seine in the summer of 1869, tried to quickly capture the transitory effects of natural light. In the 1870's, the decade in which these independents united to discuss theory in the cafes of Paris and to exhibit in their own alternative exhibitions to the Salon, they continued to try to find techniques to render their visual sensations. They began to exhibit as finished works the *alla prima* sketches they painted so rapidly, seeing them as both chemically sound and visually exciting. They used broken strokes of color similar to the mosaic strokes which built up halftones in the academic technique, a method

which had been recommended from the 17th century as a way of keeping colors pure. To define form they used rapidly executed brushstrokes, varying their size, direction and shape with, for example, larger strokes for the foreground following the contours of buildings or paths, dots and dabs for foliage with longer thinner directional strokes for branches, and horizontal dashes for water. A flickering or broken brushstroke which is distinct and visible has come to be regarded as one of the chief characteristics of Impressionism.

The Impressionists, as they became known after their first show in 1874, when a critic picked up the term from the title of Monet's *Impression Sunrise*, tried to paint what they saw rather than what was intellectually known, which meant painting patches of colored light rather than defined objects and reflected rather than local color. They used limited palettes of prismatic colors, approximations in paint of primary and secondary colors, whose visual properties were first illustrated by Michel-Eugene Chevreul (1786-1889) in his *Chromatic Circle of Hues* in 1839. They simply squeezed out paint on their palettes as needed, often using it unmixed straight from the tube or mixing it on the canvas, quick and practical for plein air painting. They mixed complementary colors for dark or neutral tones to avoid sullyng them by adding brown or black, and they mixed lead white with colors to make tints. Only Renoir and Paul Cezanne (1839-1906) continued to place black on their palettes after the mid 1870's, and they used black as a color, not a darkening agent.

Impressionists experimented with Chevreul's theories about the optical effects of contrasting complementary colors. For example, as the 1870's progressed, rather than uniformly loading all their surfaces, they often chose commercially prepared textured canvases with colored grounds of creams or pinks, letting unpainted areas show through scumbled or dragged paint. A warm-toned cream canvas contrasted with a cool blue sky gave scumbled white clouds the glow of the sun. Canvas was the preferred support because of its liveliness, or give under the pressure of the brush, and artists like Monet and Camille Pissarro (1830-1903) preferred a loose weave so that crusty paint clung only to the raised texture allowing previous paint layers to show through. Vibrant broken color and a lighter, brighter palette on a luminous pale ground is another of the chief characteristics of Impressionism.

In the 1880's the members of the Impressionist group followed individual interests, and their activities centered less upon Paris. A new generation of artists such as Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), Georges Seurat (1859-1891), and Paul Signac (1863-1935) questioned Impressionist ideas, and disagreements within the original group led to its disintegration. Cezanne returned to the south of France and devised his parallel brushstroke technique to create structure. Other artists, including Renoir, followed his lead and tried to find various ways to tighten their work in reaction to a perceived loss of form in the impressionist paintings of the late 1870's. Seurat sought a systematized way of creating shimmering light at the same time as

he molded form with dots of pure color, a stylized and non-naturalistic approach. He and Signac, the theoretician of the Neo-Impressionists or Pointillists, wanted a scientific, universal and timeless record of contemporary life, but after Seurat's early death in 1891, his followers, including Pissarro, who had championed the younger artists and adopted their methods to the detriment both his sales and the unity of the original group, returned to more individually expressive styles. By the 1890's, of the original Impressionists only Monet, with his series paintings of haystacks, poplars, and Rouen Cathedral, and Renoir had obtained some critical and financial success. Younger artists such as Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) exaggerated the colors and lines of the natural world depicted by the Impressionists, and Fauves such as Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and Andre Derain (1880-1954), rejected the restrictions of imitative color and attempted to free figurative subject matter from naturalistic representation, and impressionism became a step towards abstraction.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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