

John Walker

Post-Impressionism

a diverse artistic movement whose social and political component is often overlooked.

Anyone who responds to figurative paintings will be delighted by the massive Post-Impressionist exhibition at the Royal Academy galleries, some of the finest spaces for viewing paintings in London². Unlike so many cultural blockbusters this show is genuinely worth seeing even if you do have to elbow your way through the crowds to get near a canvas. After a diet of colour reproductions and television imagery the paintings invigorate the eye by their sensuous materiality, textures and chromatic richness. (Look out for those painters who use thick lumps of pigment raised from the canvas surface to catch the light from above thus producing a double effect of literal light and depicted light — thereby arousing the viewer's tactile sense as well as his or her optical sense).

Gallery 3, the largest room, houses the nuclear core of the exhibition: its walls are radiant with Impressionist paintings by Monet, Renoir, Degas, Pissarro, and with Post-Impressionist painting by Cezanne, van Gogh, Gauguin, Seurat, Signac, and

Toulouse-Lautrec. Nestling around this core are rooms arranged predominantly in terms of national Schools — France, the Low countries, Germany/Norway/Switzerland, Italy and Britain — so that the exhibition as a whole presents a conspectus of European painting from the 1880s to the eve of the First World War. An unfortunate absence is the display of works from Soviet collections which it was planned to include. Alan Bowness, in the catalogue introduction, is less than frank about the reason for this omission ('hampered by "delays in transport"'). The reason for their non-arrival was the refusal of the British authorities to lend in return the Royal Academy's Michelangelo Tondo.

¹Royal Academy of Arts, Picadilly until 16th March 1980: entrance fee £2; catalogue £4.95

²This short article is not intended as a detailed review of the exhibition but a series of reflections prompted by it.



The Fourth Estate by G Pellizza de Volpedo

From outrage to acceptance

The exhibition is, in a sense, a repeat, a return, because it revives — in greatly expanded form — the first two Post-Impressionist exhibitions which the critic and art historian Roger Fry enterprisingly organised at the Grafton Galleries in 1910 and 1912. Of course, the critical and public reception of the work is now completely different: then many people were amazed and some outraged — there were cries of 'revolution' and 'anarchy'. Today, amongst the middle classes the names of van Gogh, Gauguin, Cezanne and Seurat are famous, they are revered old favourites; indeed some of them inhabit a realm of value almost inaccessible to criticism or rational thought. A Marxist response to this show cannot, however, remain content with expressions of pleasure, it cannot remain at the level of art appreciation; there is also a need to understand the exhibition and to evaluate it critically.

If one asks 'Why Post-Impressionism? Why now?' the most immediate answer is that the Royal Academy as a private institution is short of money and has to raise it by the maximum use of its premises. Presumably, a Post-Impressionism exhibition was judged to be a probable money-spinner because the major artists associated with this term are amongst the most popular in the Western world. 'Post-Impressionism' is a negative, nebulous and uninformative art-historical label which was unknown to the artists who are now subsumed by it; the label does not designate a coherent art style or movement. Fry invented it in a hurry to cover the work of those artists who came after the peak of Impressionism (the 1870s), who were influenced by Impressionism but, having recognised its limitations, diverged from it in various ways. (It should be added that the exhibition includes academic painters who were indifferent to Impressionism or who were influenced by it only in terms of a loosening of brushwork.) The term's non-descriptiveness and lack of specificity is an advantage to the exhibition's organisers because it serves as an umbrella beneath which an extremely heterogeneous collection of paintings can be presented.

The huge size and wide range of the exhibition means that quite a lot of dross is included. However, one of the principal virtues of the show is its leavening of second rate and third rate paintings normally excluded from histories of 'mainstream' modern art: the works of the 'great' Post-Impressionists are not great because they possess absolute values but *comparatively*; the exhibition enables the viewer to make those comparisons and thus to see the qualitative differences between a Gauguin and a Bernard, a Bernard and a Laval. Furthermore, by including a fair number of academic salon paintings— some of which are hilariously funny (utopian kitsch fantasies) — the viewer is able to perceive clearly the radical innovations of form and technique which the major Post-Impressionists introduced, and thus the modern viewer gains a glimpse of their original shock-value.

Explosion in a dozen directions

What the exhibition makes evident is that from the mid 1880s onwards European painting exploded in a dozen different directions: towards abstraction, towards science, towards medievalism, towards tribal art, towards subjectivism, towards symbolism, towards classicism, towards expressionism . . . It is virtually impossible to find a common denominator in this outward expansion but one recurrent feature is a shift from a positivistic, naturalistic approach to reality dependent upon visual sensations towards the Idea, spiritualism, and in the 1890s a return to religion. The various contributors to the catalogue make little or no attempt to examine the causes and reasons for this quite striking cultural mutation, except in terms of an internal development within art circles. Yet surely there must have been profounder reasons?

Another recurrent feature is a trend towards naivety of conception

and execution, drawing inspiration from popular prints, Japanese crepons, folk art and tribal artifacts. The paradox of modernism— a self-conscious, sophisticated, city-based, future-oriented artistic programme — is that it based itself on primitivism — the unself-conscious, intuitive, naive, rural and archaic world. But perhaps this should not surprise us: was not European capital renewing itself throughout this period precisely by annexing and exploiting the underdeveloped regions of the globe? Gauguin's use of the Breton peasantry as picturesque subject matter was but a trial run for his later, cynically motivated, journey to the French colonies in the South Seas in search of even more exotic motifs to titillate the palate of a Parisian public by then satiated with peasant pictures³.

Art — and its social causes

It may come as a surprise to some visitors that there are so many paintings of peasants (especially Breton peasants) in the first few rooms and later in the Italian room. Until recent years the immense popularity of the peasant genre of painting in nineteenth century European art had not been fully appreciated by art historians. Both radical and conservative artists, from the capital cities and from the provinces, painted peasant scenes for their various purposes. Also in the exhibition there is a significant number of depictions of industrial labour. Buried within it, therefore, is another exhibition which could

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be entitled 'Social radicalism and painting' or 'The worker and the work of the painter'. However, it is typical of the practice of art history in Britain that the social and political aspects of art are discretely ignored. 'Post-Impressionism' is a purely art-historical category: it depends upon a conception of the development of art as an imminent evolution (a series of reactions to what has gone before taking place entirely within an autonomous realm). Bowness's catalogue essay accepts this line of reasoning uncritically: there is no recognition that the dramatic transformations which took place immediately after Impressionism could have had social causes external to art, that the interest in peasants and workers which existed before and after Impressionism amongst artists of all camps was due to the tremendous economic, technological and social changes taking place as a result of industrialisation, revolution, the spread of socialist philosophy, and the growth of trade unions. (Bowness's only reference to politics is to the connection between the Divisionists in France and Italy and Anarchism).

Van Gogh

Art history in Britain de-politicizes art. Take van Gogh for example: generally he is presented by art historians in purely psycho-biographical terms; the social and political dimensions of his project are suppressed or underplayed. Vincent's artisan-like way of painting (his vehement colours, simplified images, crude drawing, emphatic brushstrokes) — which is just as vital to pictorial meaning as his subject matter — is usually explained only in terms of personal 'emotional' expression, whereas that expression was not merely personal but also *social* in that it signified Vincent's identification with artisans, poor peasants and workers (the identification of *his* work as a painter with *their* work): by the way he painted Vincent sought to embody the values of the working classes and thereby to represent them in a bourgeois milieu⁴. How many of those who pause to relish his splendid portraits of the colour merchant Pere Tanguy and the Postman Roulin (both of which are in Gallery 3) realise, I wonder, that Vincent admired these two men in part because of their radical political convictions.

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There is a need for Marxists to appropriate the cultural heritage of the bourgeois class, to wrench that heritage from today's representatives of that class, in order to prevent them using it and distorting it for their own purposes. I was standing in front of a curious three-part painting by the Italian artist Giacomo Balla entitled 'The worker's day' (1904-8) — the picture illustrates three moments in the day of building workers but unfortunately it does not show them labouring very clearly. A man behind me commented 'Look at those workers taking tea breaks. Things don't change much, do they?'. What shocked me most was the injustice of blaming the workers for the way they had been depicted by an artist! This example illustrates in a crude form the way in which even paintings with social themes from the past are recuperated and their social content sneered at by all too many of the predominantly middle class public who attend art exhibitions, in particular those held at the Royal Academy.

Breton Women on a Wall, 1892, by Emile Bernard



Breton Women at a Pardon by P.A.J. Dagnan-Bouveret

The Italian Paintings

A highlight of the exhibition are the paintings of peasant life by Italian artists such as Giovanni Segantini, Alessandre Morbelli and Guiseppe Pellizza (of Volpedo), whose work is virtually unknown in England. It is especially valuable to be able to see Pellizza's gigantic mural 'The fourth estate' (1901) in the flesh. (This painting was used by Bertolucci in the opening sequences of his epic film *1900*). Over life size and yards wide, the painting — a worthy stab at social realism — dominates the space of the Academy's lecture room. At a distance the work appears naturalistic in conception and academic in execution but close to one sees that it consists of small strokes and flecks of brightly coloured pigment: Pellizza obviously attempted to unify the standards of tradition with the latest artistic techniques and scientific knowledge concerning colour theory. One suspects that this painting, so evidently socialist in its political ideology and sentiment, is an embarrassment to many visitors. The work's pictorial rhetoric is subdued consequently it cannot be faulted so easily as Soviet socialist realist pictures. The peasants (shown without the tools of their trade to ensure greater generality) — men, women and children — walk forward, arguing and debating all the while, with deliberate step towards the viewer; they walk from background to foreground, from the past into the future, from the darkness into the light. So confident a statement does the painting make about the inevitability of the fourth estate's progressive emancipation that it can be accused of determinism. However, if it is viewed not as a statement of fact, not as a statement of something teleologically ordained, but as a goal to be striven for, as an assurance of victory to troops engaged in a struggle, its certainty and optimism becomes understandable.

After the Italians, the British room comes as a depressing anti-climax. The British painters dutifully take note of continental innovations but in nearly every case the national predilection for compromise results in a watering down ending in triviality and prettification. In place of the rough, powerful landscapes and portraits of van Gogh, the British room supplies the vapid depictions of women and children by the 'bohemian' artist Augustus John. I should add that there are some authentic and striking contributions to the peasant genre by British artists, most notably 'Death of a peasant' (1911) by the Australian-born Henry Lamb, 'The stone pickers' (1886/7) by George Clausen, and 'Breton peasant woman knitting' (1893) by the Irish-born Roderic O'Connor, but these canvases are displayed in other galleries.

The Power of Painting

Within the critical discourse of the Fine Arts in the past decade there has been a continuing debate concerning the viability and relevance to contemporary society of such traditional artistic media as painting and sculpture. To some observers it seemed that these media had exhausted their potential, had reached a final crisis. Reassurance on this score is provided by the Post-Impressionist exhibition: the medium of painting triumphantly demonstrates its power to delight, move, inform and inspire. However, the lesson which the best works in this show supply to the contemporary artist is that painting must address itself to contemporary reality, must concern itself with daily human experience in the late twentieth century — painting about painting, painting only about colour relations in a formal sense, is a dead end of interest only to other specialists. This lesson is not merely a question of subject matter/content because form and technique are equally involved in social meaning; nor is it only a question of artistic production but also of reproduction, distribution, circulation and consumption. D

³See my article 'Art & the peasantry' *Art and artists* 13 (9) January 1979 pp26-35.

⁴See my article 'Van Gogh as a peasant painter' *Artery* 17 Dec 1979 pp14-25.