

Renoir, tradition and the half-life of Impressionism.

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The Universal Exhibitions held in Paris in 1889 and 1900 prompted France to look back and reflect on its cultural achievements over the last hundred years. Responses to the current state of the arts in France were mixed but many art critics agreed that modern school of landscape painting was one of the nation's crowning achievements. After decades of struggle against a conservative Académie des beaux-arts and a philistine middle-class, modern French landscape painters finally received the critical recognition due to them. The key to the success of the school – Corot, Courbet, Daubigny, Jules Dupré, Narcisse-Virgile Diaz de la Peña, Paul Huet, Millet and Rousseau - was their spirit of 'independence', their 'bravery' and capacity to set convention and routine aside and to forge new paths in landscape painting.¹

Impressionism was often seen as their heir to the modern school of landscape and rooted in the same spirit of radical innovation.² Writing just after the second Impressionist exhibition in 1876, the art critic and poet Stéphane Mallarmé noted a new approach to painting and with it a new repertoire of subjects based upon an intuitive record of the sensation of vision. His essay 'Manet and the Impressionists' published in *The Art Monthly Review* in 1876, outlined a method of working in which the artist's 'eye 'learn[s] anew from the lessons before it. The eye should', Mallarmé explained, '...abstract itself from memory seeing only that which it looks upon, and that as if for the first time.'³ This new approach signalled the demise of Romanticism, he went on, and with it the birth of a 'radical' and 'democratic' vision in which the 'multitude demands to see with its own eyes.'⁴ Impressionism's radical character continued to feature prominently in the work of many early twentieth century art critics. In 1937, the two major exhibitions staged at part of the Paris World's Fair, both presented the work of Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, Sisley and Cézanne as a formative force on the development of French art in the twentieth century.⁵ A decade later, the influential American art critic Clement Greenberg saw a clear link between Impressionist painters' concern with the painted surface of their work and contemporary abstract painting.⁶

The longstanding assumption that Impressionism was a vehicle for innovation paints only a partial picture of the movement. While the Impressionists were responsible for a number of highly significant and radical departures in nineteenth century painting, there is also evidence to suggest that they were also dependent on many traditional forms and techniques. Manet was heavily influenced by conventions in seventeenth century Spanish and Dutch painting; Monet's working methods can be understood in terms of well-established working practices used by academic painters when making preparatory sketches.⁷ It is also questionable whether the Impressionists' repertoire of subjects was quite as radical as some of their apologists maintained. Paris was (and remains) the most narcissistic of cities and images of the capital and its inhabitants, its cafés, gardens, parks and suburbs featured in the exhibitions at the Paris Salon throughout the nineteenth century.

In some shape or form, the weight of tradition hangs heavily over all members of the Impressionist circle but arguably none more than Renoir. Renoir was reputed to be uncomfortable with the debates about the new painting that circulated around the cafés of the Batignolles quarter Paris and often preferred to work intuitively, painting the things that pleased him. While Manet, Degas, Caillebotte and Monet may have depicted Mallarmé's 'democratic visions' of Baron Haussmann's newly-constructed capital, Renoir preferred the districts of old Paris -- Montmartre to the north and the quarters on the right bank of the Seine that had largely escaped redevelopment. Renoir's repertoire shows a marked taste for wholly traditional subjects. Sunlit views of the old city, coquettish nudes, flowers, winsome portraits of young women and children, and romantic images of gipsy-girls - subjects that had charmed the Parisian art-buying public since the 1820s - feature prominently in his work. And towards the end of his career, as John House's essay demonstrates, Renoir embraced the venerable tradition of the classical nude in the landscape, a genre dating back to the Italian Renaissance.⁸

In some respects, Renoir's early career was no different to those of many would-be painters who flocked to the capital in the 1850s and 1860s in search of education and employment and, of necessity, were forced to acknowledge the Parisian public's taste in pictures and the decorative arts. Many nursed hopes of wealth and critical recognition and a few were successful. The majority, however, subsidised their aspirations as artists by turning their hands to making 'agreeable' pictures that sold in vast quantities in the commercial galleries in the second arrondissement or to working in the decorative arts, painting porcelain or faiënces, decorating glass, illustrating books or painting

shop signs, murals or decorative blinds. Renoir's work and career, then, can in part, be understood in terms of a long-established repertoire of subjects and working practices that date back to a period before the French Revolution and endured throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Here, I want to examine Renoir's debt to tradition rather than innovation and to examine some of the longstanding artistic and cultural conventions that shaped his work.

II

If we set aside the modern accounts of the history of Impressionism, what kinds of career opportunities and artistic role-models presented themselves to the young Renoir, and what impact did they have on his work? Trade directories of the late 1850s and early 1860s record around 800 painters and sculptors resident in Paris; some 35 art galleries around the second arrondissement; some 20 print publishers, and over 80 suppliers of porcelain and decorative wallpapers and blinds.⁹ Clearly, the market for the fine and decorative arts in mid-nineteenth century was buoyant and the career opportunities for artists and artisans many and varied. A comparison between the painters listed in trade directories of the 1850s compared with those included in the Paris Salon catalogues of the same period indicates that it was by no means unusual for young artists to pursue parallel careers in both the fine and decorative arts. There were a few well-established *artistes-peintres* active in the capital with secure critical reputations, and with them numerous starving bohemians, eternal students or 'greybeards' for whom critical recognition never arrived. There were, however, other artists of a much more pragmatic turn of mind, painters who, in Renoir's words were 'content to let themselves go along in life like a cork in the current of a stream.'¹⁰ Such painters sometimes submitted an ambitious work -- what Renoir termed 'real painting' -- to the Salon but were typically forced to subsidise their ambitions by turning their hands either to 'agreeable' romantic landscapes and genre painting or by decorating faiènces and porcelain, murals and blinds.¹¹ Renoir's career followed precisely this course: in the late 1850s he made sufficient money as a porcelain decorator to finance his career as a painter. Clearly, an examination of the market for the applied and decorative arts would be unnecessary for an understanding of the careers of some other Impressionists. Manet, for example, the putative leader of the Impressionists' circle, was from a wealthy middle-class background. He received a conventional training in the studio of Thomas Couture, a highly successful academic painter with many official commissions and honours. For an understanding of

Renoir's work, however, the operation of this commercialised sector of the Parisian art world is highly instructive. This long-established market not only sustained Renoir in his youth but appears to have had an enduring impact on his work and attitudes throughout his career.

Like a number of nineteenth century landscape painters, Renoir's career began with an apprenticeship at a porcelain factory, Lévy frères et compagnie in the rue des Fossés du Temple (now the Rue Amelot) in the XI arrondissement of Paris. Landscape and flower painters had been employed by porcelain manufacturers since the middle of the eighteenth century. The most accomplished worked for prominent factories, notably the state-run porcelain manufactory at Sèvres. Some of the *décorateurs* attached to the Sèvres factory submitted works to the Paris Salon and enjoyed modest critical reputations. It is also significant that several Barbizon painters – virtually all of whom, like Renoir, were from humble origins and forced to contend with the same highly-commercialised Parisian art market of the 1830s and 1840s -- worked as porcelain decorators at the start of their career, not least Renoir's friend and mentor Diaz de la Peña. As the taste for decorated porcelain and faiènces spread among middle-class consumers in the early nineteenth century, so other factories and decorators workshops were established. By the mid 1850s there were some 75 porcelain decorators in Paris variously turning out images of flowers, landscapes and pastoral scenes and historical characters, each employing a team of artisans.

Renoir's early training in one of these workshops has a close connection both with his technical prowess as a painter and his selection of subjects, and, perhaps most significantly, enabled him to acquire an easy facility in the rapid but precise application of paint. Renoir recalled how he produced decorated plates at around the rate of 5 sous (about half a Euro) per dozen painted 'bouquets'; painted figures were charged at 8 sous and individual historical portraits at 6 sous each.¹² Unlike the malleable medium of oil paint, the glazes used in porcelain decoration require precise application. The medium does not lend itself to over-painting and technical deficiencies on the part of the artisan are clearly evident.¹³ It is interesting to compare the speed and facility Renoir was reputed to have shown as a porcelain painter with the more ruminative process of painting taught at the École des beaux-arts. The École required students to observe strict procedures for the execution of finished oil painting. Preparatory sketches were made to determine the drawing, composition and colour scheme and the process continued with the execution of the final painting starting first with the application of thin layers of dark pigments for areas of shadow, working towards increasingly

thicker areas of paint for the mid-tones and highlights.¹⁴ This carefully planned working process stands in sharp contrast to Renoir's working methods both with the use of coloured glazes and, more significantly for our purposes, his techniques of oil painting. There are numerous examples of Renoir's work – especially in the paintings made before his rediscovery of the Italian renaissance – that are formed with patches of paint that are applied with evident speed. In some of the earliest flower paintings and well as those made in his later years such as the *Roses* of 1915 (Musée national d'art moderne, Paris) and *Dahlias* of 1885 (Figs. X and X) individual petals are constructed with a single brush stroke. In other cases, flowers are formed with the application of minute flecks of pigment. Both of these techniques would have been familiar to porcelain painters.¹⁵

[*Roses*, 1915; *Dahlias*, 1885]

The capacity to work at speed was a particular concern for the young Renoir. Ambroise Vollard's biography published in 1919 recalls how Lévy's business was threatened because of the public's newfound taste for machine-produced transfer printed porcelain.¹⁶ Renoir responded to the threat by waging what he described as a 'battle of speed' and tried to secure the factory's future by hand-painting plates at a speed designed to challenge mechanised methods of decoration. Renoir inevitably lost the battle and the factory closed in 1858. Seen in this context, Renoir's 'Impressionism' has an uncertain origin. On the one hand, the precise and rapid application of paint was a means of capturing the transitory effects of light and shade and fits neatly with our expectations of Impressionism. On the other hand, Renoir's methods of painting and choice of subjects has a curious link with pre-modern traditions and techniques that originate in the decorative arts.

Renoir is an unlikely Impressionist in other ways. For some late-nineteenth century art critics, a highly-refined technical facility and a professional allegiance to the decorative arts was seen as a sign of professional timidity. It marked a lack of the creative 'independence' so prized by the critics that rallied to the Impressionist cause. Paul Mantz's biographical sketch of Diaz de la Peña confidently dismissed his work as a porcelain decorator and painter of pictures insisting that 'for us it is the landscape that counts'.¹⁷ Mantz saw the meticulous methods of porcelain painting and winsome subject matter as a gesture to the demands of the art market and the exact opposite of the 'insurrectional' work of the Impressionists. Renoir, carefree and seemingly oblivious to current debates and divisions in avant-garde painting, continued to express affection for the decorative arts

and an unusual respect for the skills of artisans. The ‘workers’ of the past may not have been blessed with the sublime creative insights of Raphael, Titian, Ingres and Corot, he maintained, but their work could be counted among the greatest achievements in French culture. Here, Renoir asserts the importance of the backwaters of art history, the forms of painting, sculpture and the decorative arts that would have been of enormous economic significance to artists of the 1850s and 1860s but have since been marginalised by the prejudices of more recent art critics and historians.

Renoir first expressed an interest in the crafts in an article written in the form of two letters to Georges Rivière, editor of the journal *l’Impressionniste* in April 1877.¹⁸ Renoir’s primary target was the modern architecture of the newly-constructed public buildings in Paris. In contrast to the architecture of the old quarters of the city he recalled from his youth, Renoir found modern buildings ugly. They were made according to the academic prescriptions taught at the *École des beaux-arts* and variously cobbled together from Greek, Roman and Renaissance, Byzantine and Gothic models with little thought for interior and exterior decorations. For Renoir, poor design also had moral and social implications. Haussmann’s Paris was not only littered with tasteless buildings, the city’s redevelopment also signalled the end of a long-established social order in which the poor and rich lived contentedly as a single community. Haussmannisation forced the working classes to take refuge in enclaves to the east of Paris and around the margins of the city - the *faubourgs* – in which large numbers of the urban poor still reside. By way of a palliative, Renoir looked back to an imaginary Paris before Haussmanisation, a lost world of social contentment. In Jean Renoir’s biography, Renoir père recalled this lost world. He remembered how as a poor child he played with his friends in the courtyard of the Tuileries Palace and how the queen’s lady-in waiting would throw sweets from the palace windows to buy a few moments of peace from the urchins below.¹⁹ That the story is almost certainly fictional matters little. What is important is that in this and in numerous other anecdotes Renoir constantly expressed his antipathy to the modern world. In many his landscape paintings, for example, Renoir literally turned his back on the modern city. In the *Pont Neuf* of 1872, (National Gallery of Art Washington) Renoir depicts the oldest bridge in Paris, one that featured in numerous late seventeenth and eighteenth century paintings. In the mid-ground of Renoir’s painting are the early seventeenth century buildings on the western end of the Ile de la Cité and beyond it, the century building on the Quai des Augustins. Immediately behind Renoir’s vantage point was an icon of modern Paris, the iron-framed department store, *La Belle Jardinière*. In Renoir’s painting the *Place de la Trinité* of 1875 (Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design)

the west facade of Théodore Ballu's church (completed in 1871) to the right of the painting is barely visible and all but obliterated by bright sunlight. The church was one of several modern buildings including the Opéra, the Hôtel de Ville, the new extension of the Louvre and the Hôtel Dieu singled out for criticism by Renoir.²⁰ Instead, Renoir turns his attention to an elegant couple looking at Parisians relaxing in the adjacent gardens fragmented by dappled sunlight.

[*Pont Neuf*, 1872, *Place de la Trinité*, 1875]

In 1884 Renoir attempted to remedy the sorry state of contemporary decoration -- and the sorry state of society that went with it -- not only by painting an ideal of the old city but also by forming the *Société des Irrégularistes*. Likened by Monet to the old Parisian artists' guild of Saint-Luc, the corporation was to take the form of an exhibition society to promote painting, sculpture, decoration, embroidery and the work of silver and goldsmiths. The abiding principles of the society were its reverence for the hand-made, an almost Ruskinian appreciation that imperfections in the making of an artefacts was a mark of the artisan's individual response to nature and, more importantly, a faith that good art and design generates a happy society.

Renoir's views on the arts stand out when compared to those of his contemporaries. There were of course the ideas of the avant-garde for which Renoir had little time. There were also a number of treatises on the arts in circulation in art schools and academies in the late nineteenth century Paris. Some offered largely practical advice about the processes and techniques of painting and were read by artisans and decorative artists. Other treatises derived from the canonical works of academic art theory written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and were read by artists. Treatises in this second category were primarily concerned with the training of the artist's imagination and the intellectual conception of painting. Indeed, it was this intellectual conception that made painting an 'art' similar in conception and social standing to poetry (rather than a humble craft such as porcelain decoration). Weaned on this intellectual conception of painting, academic painters insisted that nature must be idealised and seen through the eyes of classical historians and poets. Renoir's interest in the crafts is conspicuous because, while such concerns may have been of interest for an artisan, the idea that the crafts might rival the fine arts and might improve society had no real precedent in France. An admiration for traditional crafts was common in mid-nineteenth century England. Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin had written in detail about the social virtues of a pre-industrial world and had a marked impact on British designers and artists. Handmade artefacts

were highly valued in Paris of the 1860s and 1870s but more as expensive luxury objects than expressions of the creative temperament of happy workers.

Renoir's affinity for crafts traditions is most fully expressed some years later in preface to a translation of a practical manual on painting written by the early-fifteenth century Florentine painter Cennino Cennini, *Le livre de l'art ou traité de la peinture*. First translated into French in 1858 by the painter Victor-Louis Mottez, Renoir's preface to the second edition of 1910 praised the long-established craft traditions of the pre-modern world. He notes that:

... until the 18th century ... everything was beautiful, from the château to the humble cottage. There was art even in a door button, even in a bolt. They knew how to make cheerful earthenware, tapestries, enamels, forged iron and above all, without suspecting it, the fortune of their country. They had the serenity that makes life easy.²¹

It is interesting to see that even towards the very end of his career when Renoir's reputation as an artist was absolutely secure that he continued to acknowledge his origins and aspirations as an artisan. In an interview with the art critic Albert André in 1919, Renoir recalled that in his youth he had no ambition other than to secure a post as a *décorateur* in the Sèvres porcelain factory.²²

III

There are other aspects of Renoir's work that call upon pre-modern traditions in French painting. Renoir often expressed an admiration for Rococo painters of the eighteenth century and saw within their work precisely that same carefree approach to painting pleasurable things that he brought to his own work. Again a comparison with the work of some of the other Impressionists is illuminating. Manet and Degas famously troubled their audiences with disturbing paintings that showed the modern capital as at once seamy and alluring. Images of the bored shop-girl, the aloof *flâneur* disinterestedly surveying the modern city and the well-dressed working girls of dubious social and moral standing variously troubled conservative art critics. And not without reason. Nineteenth century Paris was infamous for the pleasures – licit and otherwise -- it offered to its citizens. The new middle class wealth that oiled the economies of the Second Empire and the Third Republic turned leisure into a commodity. Wealth provided jobs for a new urban working class but in so doing broke precisely the traditional social bonds and responsibilities between citizens that

Renoir so cherished. Many observers of the period spoke about the way in which it was often hard to assess a citizen's precise social standing. One contemporary guide to the city spoke with lascivious delight about how fallen girls from respectable classes were indistinguishable from 'workgirls' from the old quarters of the city and how by the age of 14 both would have been mired in 'every conceivable vice'.²³

Renoir held vice at arm's length and again represented the city as an ideal community in which virtually all references to the tawdry modernity were either removed or dressed up under a veil of decorative brushwork to render them inoffensive. This is evident in Renoir's depiction of the Montmartre to the north of Paris. What in the 1840s had been a small rural community was transformed by the 1850s to accommodate working class refugees from the city. The area had a notorious reputation for violence and squalor and Renoir was himself attacked in the district.²⁴ Many of its residents lived in the *maquis*, makeshift wooden buildings with little or no sanitation. Renoir engaged in charitable work for the destitute of the district. Nevertheless, in the same way that Renoir turned his back on modern architecture, his paintings show nothing of the social deprivations of Montmartre's inhabitants or the dangers of living there. Rather, Renoir's Montmartre, is, once more, a place of social contentment. The figures in the *Dance at the Moulin de la Galette* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris) are shown in a mood of happy celebration. When Renoir turns his attentions to the surrounding landscape, Montmartre is transformed into an idealised garden dissolved in dappled sunlight. In *The Garden in Montmartre* of 1890 (Fig. X) (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford), Renoir shows a garden close to his studio. The view, like those shown in many of his landscapes, takes on something of the natural informality of an eighteenth century park. Here, the broken patches of paint record the transient effect of light on the figures and foliage in the mid distance but also function as a veil that obscures the horrors of the present.

[*Dance at the Moulin de la Galette*, 1876, *The Garden in Montmartre*, 1890]

Closer inspection of Renoir's connections with eighteenth century art and the modern capital cast an interesting light on both the subject matter and facture of mid-nineteenth century painting. Dappled images of the suburbs and countryside around the capital, the pleasures of on offer in villages such as Argenteuil, Chatou, Croissy and Bougival just to the north west of the capital or the forest of Fontainebleau to the south, are inextricably connected with Renoir and the Impressionists. Such locations offered Parisians an easy escape from the pressures of city life and the Impressionists

a ready repertoire of instantly recognisable modern subject matter. In this respect, images of the hired leisure boat, a pleasant lunch under the dappled shade of a riverside café, iron bridges and commuter trains ferrying day-trippers from the Gare Saint-Lazare to the suburbs, the forests and seaside resorts were as much part of the experience of modern life as the distracted shop girl and *flâneur*.

The Impressionists, however, were by no means the first to escape from Paris for the surrounding countryside, nor the first to consider depicting its transient pleasures in the form of broken patches of paint. In the early 1770s, Charles-Henri Watelet, the author of the highly-influential treatise on landscape painting, the *Essai sur les jardins* of 1774, built a rural retreat, *Le Moulin Joli*, on a plot of land on an island near Colombes downstream on the Seine, a short distance from Argenteuil. Watelet wrote in detail about his perceptions of the modern city and the countryside. The countryside, he explained, was a source of physical and spiritual refreshment, an escape from the rat-race of Paris and, in an aside that could easily have been written by one of Baron Haussmann's many critics, complained about 'capital cities, those centres of accelerated movement, those laboratories where artificial pleasures are concocted for people who have withdrawn from nature.'²⁵ It was only in the countryside, he maintained, that the gentleman could find his true self and immerse himself in the 'pleasures' and 'joys' of nature.

Like the Impressionists, Watelet also refers to nature's 'fleeting effects', the manner in which a shaft of light might catch the tress only to disappear in an instant; the way in which intense sunlight transforms the view into abstract patches of colour, into 'pearls and rubies'.²⁶ Watelet even provided advice about the best way for artists to capture nature. In an article on landscape in the *Dictionnaire des beaux-arts*, he notes how 'Nature always sets out to conceal her beauty' and that it is the artist's task to capture it with a facility so accomplished that it needs no thought. Comparing the depiction of nature with the seduction of a reluctant mistress, Watelet observed that painting nature was 'a pleasure that only becomes keener the harder the task of representing her becomes, the more nature resists [the artist's] attentions, the harder he tries to seize her, at last his joys come from each favour he receives.'²⁷

There is no direct evidence that Renoir was familiar with Watelet's writing. Watelet's work was, however, well-known in the nineteenth century, especially among landscape painters. Renoir was also an admirer of the pictorial embodiment of Watelet's theories, Antoine Watteau's theatrical

painting of aristocratic leisure in an idealised rural setting. Jean Renoir intriguingly records that the gardens of Montmartre depicted by his father were the remnants of an eighteenth century park and notes that the district had long been connected with the amours of aristocratic rakes of the *ancien régime*. Nineteenth century guide books to Montmartre rarely mention the district without some reference its connections with an upper-class demi-monde of the previous century.²⁸ Renoir also painted other locations that were closely associated with the *ancien régime* in the minds of many nineteenth century Parisians.²⁹ His *Garden at Saint Cloud* of 1873 (Fig. X (Private Collection)), for example, shows a pavilion in the park attached to the royal château destroyed during the siege of Paris three years earlier. Once more in Renoir's painting, an image of pleasure (middle-class rather than aristocratic in this instance) is set in a location that had long conjured up memories of a pre-modern past.

[*Garden at Saint Cloud, 1873*]

The idea that the life of the artist was a carefree adventure and that amorous overtures to young women were comparable to the execution of a painting was still part of the popular conception of bohemian life well into the second half of the nineteenth century.³⁰ Writing in *Le paysagiste au champs* (*The landscape painter in the countryside*) of 1876, the landscape painter and historian Frédéric Henriot spoke about the pleasure of painting nature and ways in which an artist absorbed in painting a sunset might momentarily be distracted from his canvas to steal a kiss from some peasant girl. Variations on the theme of the libidinous but good-natured painter laying siege to some benighted servant or peasant were common features in Hippolyte Taine's series of sketches of about life in the capital *Notes sur Paris* (Notes on Paris) and in Georges Gassies account of life in the artists' colony in Barbizon *Le vieux Barbizon* (Barbizon of old) published in 1907.³¹ Renoir painted one such inn, *The Auberge of Mother Anthony* (Nationalmuseum Stockholm) in 1866. Here, Renoir shows the eponymous Mother Anthony watching over the wellbeing of the young Nana who attends to Renoir's friends, the painters Jules Le Coeur and Alfred Sisley. In the foreground of the picture is the three-legged dog 'Toto' (for whom Renoir fashioned a wooden leg); in the background sketches have been daubed on the walls by artist-residents. Taine described such sketches as 'cast off like careless flashes of wit' and held them in much higher esteem than more finished paintings.³² In many instances, the vigorous libido of the artist was popularly considered to be sign of his mettle as a painter. In a passage that is remarkably similar in spirit to both Watelet and Taine's accounts of landscape painting, Jean Renoir recalled how his father:

... succeeded by taking complete possession of his subject only after a struggle. When painting, he sometimes made you think he was fighting a duel. The painter seemed to be eyeing the movement of his opponent and watching for the least weakness in his defences, He harassed the subject ceaselessly as a lover harasses a girl who puts up a struggle before yielding.³³

[*The Auberge of Mother Anthony, 1866*]

Compared to Mallarmé's insights into the scientific and social characteristics of Impressionist painting, accounts about the loves and antics of mid-century French landscape painters look trivial. Sentiments such as these, however, would have been very familiar to artists and their public well into the second half of the nineteenth century and still formed an important point of reference for Renoir's description of his motives and working methods. We can attribute this unfamiliarity to the efforts of Mallarmé, Burty, Mantz and to the generations of art critics that followed them who continued to insist on Impressionism's radical nature. As early as 1904 the public had become so wedded to the idea of the Impressionist as radical insurgent that when visitors came to see Renoir, his charm and insouciance came as a surprise. The art critic for the journal *La Liberté* visited Renoir in 1904 and expected to meet a revolutionary. Instead, he was taken aback to find a 'calm and friendly old man with a white beard and a soft voice who greeted me with the greatest possible cordiality.'³⁴ Renoir, himself, complained that his critical reputation as an artist was compromised by an insistently sunny outlook that was often difficult to reconcile with the avant-garde's often morbid instincts.

Art critics have struggled to make sense of Renoir's paintings. There is a modern expectation that it is the duty of the artist to be exclusive and inaccessible to the public at large. Accessibility has even been seen by some artists and critics as a mark of professional failure.³⁵ It is important to remember, however, that the standards used to judge modern art in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries were not those used in the first half of the nineteenth century. Rather, art history is made up of a number of strands, some of which endure while others have a briefer half-life and are subsequently forgotten. While Renoir rightly commands a place at the forefront of modern art, it is instructive to see that his traditional origins as an artisan, a *décorateur* and a painter with a fondness for romanticism long after the movement went out of fashion, force us to question our

expectations of Impressionism and in so doing to demand a richer and more complex view of the nineteenth century.

Endnotes

¹ P. Mantz, “La peinture française”, *Gazette des beaux-arts*, (1889) vol. 2, pp. 345-358. See also A. Michel, “L’Exposition centennale: la peinture française”, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1900, vol. 2, pp. 296-306, and E. Molinier, R. Marx and F. Marcou, *Exposition Universelle de 1900: l’art français des origines à la fin du XIXe siècle*, Paris, 1900, pp. 4 and 23-24.

² G. Lanoë, *Histoire de l’école française de paysage depuis Chintreuil jusqu’à la 1900*, Nantes, 1905, p. 11.

³ S. Mallarmé, “The Impressionists and Edouard Manet”, *The Art Monthly Review*, 30th September, 1876. Reprinted in *The New Painting 1874-1886*, San Francisco, 1986, p. 29.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 33.

⁵ R. Escholier, “Préambule”, *Maîtres des artistes indépendants 1895-1937*, Paris, 1937. p.5.

⁶ C. Greenberg, “Review of an Exhibition by Claude Monet”, *The Nation*, 5 May 1945. Reproduced in J. O’Brian (ed.) *Clement Greenberg: the collected essays and criticism*, Vol. 2, Chicago and London, 1986, p. 21.

⁷ A. Boime, *The Academy and French painting in the nineteenth century*, London and New Haven, 1986, p. 147-8.

⁸ J. House, ‘Il classicismo di Renoir’, *Renoir La Maturità tra classico e moderno*, Exhibition catalogue, Complesso del Vittoriano, Skira: 2008.

⁹ A. Cambon, *Almanach des 100,000 adresses des fabricants et commerçants de Paris etc.*, Paris, 1861. p. 225.

¹⁰ J. Renoir, *Renoir my father*, London, 1962, p. 72.

¹¹ The term ‘real painting’ was used by Jean Renoir to describe his father’s professionally ambitious works in contrast to the ‘decorating work’ he undertook in the late 1850s and early 1860s. Cit. in J. Renoir, *Renoir, my father*, p. 102.

¹² A. Vollard, *La vie et l’œuvre de Pierre-Auguste Renoir*, Paris, 1919, p. 46.

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- ¹³ For a contemporary summary of the process of painting on porcelain see L. Casimir-Lefebvre, *Peinture sur porcelaine: décoration et impressions de toutes les couleurs d'un seul coup etc.*, Paris, 1872, p. 14.
- ¹⁴ A. Boime, *The Academy and French painting*, London and New Haven, 1998, pp. 79 ff. and pp.133-146.
- ¹⁵ There is an instructive account of the techniques of porcelain painting used by Diaz in the 1830s in Philippe Burty's, *Maîtres et petits-maîtres*, Paris, 1877, p. 362.
- ¹⁶ A. Vollard, *La vie et l'œuvre de Pierre-Auguste Renoir*, pp. 18-19.
- ¹⁷ P. Mantz, 'Le peinture française', *Gazette des beaux-arts*, (1889) vol. 2, pp.345-358.
- ¹⁸ Letter to the editor of *L'Impressionniste*, April, 14th 1877, reprinted in R. L. Herbert, *Nature's workshop: Renoir's writings on the decorative arts*, London and New Haven, 2000, p. 93.
- ¹⁹ J. Renoir, *Renoir, my father*, p. 20.
- ²⁰ P. A. Renoir, 'L'art décoratif et contemporain', Letter of 27th April 1877, Cit. in A. De Butler, *Renoir, écrits entretiens et lettres sur l'art*, Paris, 2002, p. 44.
- ²² A. Chocron, (ed.) *Renoir: Écrits, entretiens et lettres sur l'art*, Paris, 2002, p. 30.
- ²³ *The cocottes or gay women of Paris and Brussels*, Boulogne-sur-mer, 1862, p. 10.
- ²⁴ J. Renoir, *Renoir my father*, p. 261.
- ²⁵ C.-A. Watelet, *Essai sur les jardins*, Paris, 1773, p. 54.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.59.
- ²⁷ C.-H. Watelet, "Paysage" *Dictionnaire des beaux-arts de peinture, sculpture et de gravure*, vol.4, Paris, 1792, p.91.
- ²⁸ C. Le Feuve, *Histoire des boulevards des Italiens, Montmartre, Poissonnière etc.*, Paris, 1863, p. 15.
- ²⁹ *Guide dans les environs de Paris*, Paris, 1855, p. 10.
- ³⁰ For a detailed account of the sexualisation of painting landscape in the mid nineteenth century see S. Adams, "Signs of recovery: landscape painting and masculinity in nineteenth century France", in S. Adams and A. Gruetzner Robins (eds.) *Gendering landscape art*, Manchester, 2000, pp. 13 ff.

³¹ G. Gassies, *Le vieux Barbizon : souvenirs de la jeunesse d'un paysagiste*, Paris, 1907, p. 43.

³² H. Taine, "Notes sur Paris, les artistes", *La vie Parisienne*, No, 24, Paris, May 1865, p. 78.

³³ J. Renoir, *Renoir, my father*, p. 189.

³⁴ "Le peintre Renoir et le Salon d'automne", *La Liberté*, 15th. October, 1904, Cit. in *Renoir, écrits, lettres et lettres sur l'art*. p.9.

³⁵ The idea that the best art remains inaccessible to the public at large was promulgated by Clement Greenberg in the late 1930s, most conspicuously in his essay for the *Partisan Review* of 1939. C. Greenberg, "Ávant-garde and Kitsch", *Partisan Review*, Fall, 1939, pp.34-49.