

THE ART OF IMPRESSIONISM

(Continued from last issue.)

....Lighter, purer blues gave skies of new brilliance, strong reds and oranges evoked the sunset, and combinations of many colors gave the reflecting surface of water in pond or river a far more active part in the drama of light than was afforded by the Dutch tradition. Corot had anticipated this latter possibility, for a number of his landscapes from the 1830's have clearly divided strokes in the water passages. The play of light in the new style was most fascinating where it was most complex, in trees, fields, and ripples where a thousand, a million, facets challenged the eye to see what made them look the way they did under the summer sun. The miracle of Impressionism was the fact that Sisley, Renoir, Pissarro and, above all, Monet were able to solve this mystery so successfully. But the secret of leaves and water and hay was not the same as that of the shadowed side of a building or the light on a distant hill. Flashing bits of paint did for the one, but certainly not for the other.

The question of how the Impressionists saw nature remains. To know they looked at it directly and intensely, but we ourselves do not ordinarily see in the same way. Only when we use their eyes does the outdoor world take on this magnificent new freshness. Strain as he will, the visitor to Rouen will not see the cathedral as Monet paints it, nor will the river at Argenteuil have for him the look it had for Sisley. Everyone agrees that Impressionism is a form of realism, acknowledges its debt to Courbet and possibly even to the introduction of photography, but we cannot get around the fact that its world is very different in many respects from what we really do find when we gaze on water, boats, and trees. If what they give us is indeed reality, it is surely of a very specialized kind. Can we say that if we were to look as patiently, we would see the same? It is

hard to believe. Moreover, we now have their example to help us, but Monet's and Renoir's looking was done with no previous pictorial tradition to guide them. There were suggestions here and there, but essentially what they found they found for themselves--and for the first time in the history of Western art.

The nature of the sketch or "sketchiness" as an aspect of modern art has not received the attention it richly deserves. The development of style from the late eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth was characterized by the gradual emergence of the rough stroke from a concealed position found only in the artist's informal or preliminary efforts to a position of dominance in the finished work. A nineteenth century observer looking at paintings such as the ones considered here would have said, as indeed critics did say, that they looked unfinished and thus ought not to be presented for public inspection.

Thus, color was introduced into the stream of art so forcefully that the general appearance of European painting was altered from that day to this. The bright hue, the gay, even violent canvas were to become not only acceptable, but unbelievably popular. The supremacy of the artist's individual vision, at first naturalistic but later increasingly abstract, was so firmly rooted that a resentful public came in the end to sit at the feet of dozens of more difficult masters to learn quite humbly what style really was, and how to look at pictures unaccompanied by dramatic or anecdotal content. Beyond all this, Impressionism set the pattern for the fabled battle of modern art: the innovator pitted against the serried ranks of the Philistines. The oft-repeated contrast between the strong, vivid painting of the rebels and the niggling pallor of the academics has become part of the legend of modernism. Pissarro's poverty, Monet's struggle for recognition have lent a romantic air to the story of their triumph! (From: Romantic Arts Yearbook 2)
