

• **BLÉMONT**

*The Impressionists*¹

What is an Impressionist painter? We have been given no satisfactory definition, but it seems that the artists who group themselves, or who are grouped, under this name pursue a similar end through different methods of work. Their aim is to reproduce with absolute sincerity, without contrivance or palliation, by a treatment simple and broad, the impression awakened in them by the aspects of reality.

Art is not for them a minute and punctilious imitation of what was once called "the beauties of nature." They are not concerned to reproduce more or less slavishly beings and things, or laboriously to reconstruct, minor detail by minor detail, a general picture. They do not imitate; they translate, they interpret, they apply themselves to extricate the consequence of the many lines and colors that the eye perceives in a view.

They are not analysts but synthesizers, and we believe that they are right in this; for if analysis is the scientific method *par excellence*, synthesis is the true method of operation for art. They have no other law than the necessary relations of things; they think, like Diderot, that the idea of beauty rests in the perception of these relations. And, as there are perhaps no two men in the world who perceive exactly the same relations in the same object, they see no reason to change, according to this or that convention, their personal and direct sensation of things.

In principle, in theory, we believe therefore that we can approve them wholeheartedly.

In practice, it is another matter. One does not always do what one wants to do, as it should be done; one does not always attain the end one sees clearly.

• **ZOLA**

*Naturalism in the Salon*¹

These last few years something very interesting and instructive has been happening under our own eyes. I refer to the independent exhibitions put on by a group of painters that have been called "the Impressionists." [. . .] I use this term "Impressionist" here, because a label is really wanting to name the young artists who, in the wake of Courbet and of our great landscape painters, have devoted themselves to the study of nature. . . . When we come down to it, as a working painter Courbet himself is a magnificent classic. [. . .] The true revolutionaries of form appear with Mr. Edouard Manet, with the

¹Émile Blémont in *Le Rappel*, April 9, 1876. Translated by E. W.

¹Translated by E. W. from *Le Voltaire*, June 19, 1880.

Impressionists, Messrs. Claude Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, Guillaumin, and still others. These propose to get out of the studio in which painters have shut themselves up for so many centuries, and go paint in the open. In the open, the light is no longer uniform, and this means a multiplicity of impressions. [. . .] This study of light in its thousand decompositions and recompositions is what has been called, more or less properly, Impressionism because by it a painting becomes the impression of a moment experienced in nature. The jokers of the press have started from there to caricature the Impressionist painter catching, so to speak, his impressions on the wing in half a dozen shapeless brush strokes; and it must be admitted that certain artists have unfortunately warranted these attacks by contenting themselves with sketches that are far too rudimentary. As far as I am concerned, it is true that one has to apprehend living nature in the expression of an instant; only, this instant must be fixed on the canvas for ever by a fully considered composition. In the end, nothing solid is possible without work. [. . .]

The public is dumbfounded when it comes face to face with certain canvases painted in the open at specific hours; it stands gaping before blue grasses, violet-colored soils, red trees, waters running with all the motley of the rainbow. And yet the artist has been conscientious; he has, perhaps, by reaction, slightly exaggerated the new tonalities his eye has noted; but, when it comes down to it, the observation is absolutely true, nature has never adhered to the simplified notation that the established schools use to treat it. [But it is this last to which the public is used.] Hence the laughter of the crowd faced with the Impressionist paintings, despite the good faith and the very honest, naïve efforts of the young painters.

They are taken for pranksters, humbugs, charlatans making fun of the public and drumming up publicity around their works, when they are, on the contrary, severe and principled observers. What seems to be ignored is that most of these contenders are poor men who work themselves to death, sometimes quite literally from misery and weariness. Strange humbugs, these martyrs for their beliefs!

This is, then, what the Impressionist painters have to offer: a more exact examination of the causes and effects of light, exerting its influence both on color and design. They have been justifiably accused of drawing their inspiration from Japanese prints. . . . It is certain that our dark schools of painting, the bituminous-minded work of our established schools, has been surprised and forced to rethink things when faced with the limpid horizons, the beautiful vibrant spots of the Japanese water-colorists. There was in these works a simplicity of means and an intensity of performance which struck our young artists and drove them on to this path of painting soaked in air and light—a path which all the talented newcomers take today. [. . .]

The great pity is that this new formula which they all bring scattered in their works, not one of the artists of the group has realized it powerfully and definitively. The formula is there, endlessly divided; but nowhere, in any one of them, do we find it applied by a master. [. . .] Yet, while we can take ob-

jection to their personal incapacity, they remain none the less the true representatives of our time. They have plenty of gaps, their workmanship is too often slack, they are too easily satisfied, they show themselves to be incomplete, illogical, exaggerated, ineffectual. No matter: it is enough for them to apply themselves to contemporary naturalism in order to find themselves at the head of a movement and play a great part in our school of painting.