

Final Examination

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**Art History 366
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Final Examination

Question #1: Discuss the subject matter and formal elements of some of the landscape paintings by Cézanne, Monet, Sisley, Pissarro and/or Vlaminck from *The Modern Tradition: Monet to Picasso* exhibition. Explore these paintings in reference to “Effect and Finish: The Evolution of the Impressionist Style” by Norma Broude and/or “Monet and Neptune’s Sea” by Richard Thomson.

Currently on display at the Musée des Beaux Arts in Montreal, *The Modern Tradition: Monet to Picasso* exhibition, there are some beautiful landscape paintings by artists such as Cézanne, Monet, Sisley, Pissarro and Vlaminck which give us insight into one of the many reasons why the Impressionist period was such an important and pivotal movement in the history of modern art. The evolutionary leap forward that artists made during this period in terms of “effect” and “finish” is still very much a part of our own contemporary art movement. This brief essay will examine a few examples from *The Modern Tradition: Monet to Picasso* exhibition in terms of their formal elements and the “effect” that these artists were able to achieve demonstrating how their avant-garde movement broke away from the conventions of the past.

“Effect” and “Finish” may be obvious terms at first glance but it is what they don’t say that is also important. Effect is simply the artist’s attempt to capture their first impressions of a scene at a particular moment in time. Somehow through their application of their artistic medium they try to capture the freshness and spontaneity of this original moment. The hope is that if they are successful in capturing and retaining the mood in the painting then they will be able to share that exact moment and that exact impression with audience viewing the finished painting. The way that impressionists attempted and successfully accomplished this was capturing the luminary

qualities of the subject at that given moment in time. By studying and producing preliminary oil sketches (*pochades*) these artists were able to note the “effect”.

The tool used by these artists to preserve their impressions of natural luminary effects was the *pochade*, a particular type of outdoor landscape study (*étude*) devoted to the notation of effect ... “the general impression of an effect in which every part is jotted down with its respective value, and contributes to the whole.” ... To achieve this aim, one must observe constantly and draw one’s impressions from nature alone ... making very small *pochades* with no other object that to capture the exact effect ... and reproduce a fugitive impression. (Norma Broude, Pg 229)

“Finish” is the resulting completed work of art or painting (*tableau*). The impressionist artists would use these *pochades* to note all the luminary effects in plein-air often working with different canvases at different periods of the day to paint the exact same light and mood that they were trying to capture. This preliminary sketch was then used as a guide of their first impression and mood captured from painting in nature for use in painting the final canvas.

It is important to observe at this point that the terms “effect” and “finish” do not tell us about the struggle that artists had when moving from the initially captured “effect” to the final “finished” work of art. This is much more difficult than it sounds. At what point does the artist consider his or her work finished? How much of the very important initial impression has been sacrificed or retained in the final painting? This is where the impressionist artists and the impressionist movement were able to achieve something that their predecessors had not been able to do. We know that producing preliminary oil sketches were not invented by the impressionist artists. Even in the *Girodet, le rebelle romantique* exhibition also at the Musée des Beaux Arts there are many excellent examples of oil sketches on display that were used by Girodet as guides for his finished works. But there are several important differences. Earlier artists used this as a tool “created in the studio” to work out challenges with perspective, scale,

colour, composition and lighting for effects they were “trying to create” and not necessarily as a tool to “capture” an effect from nature at a given moment in time. The other main difference was that these earlier artists and their critics felt that sketches were only sketches and should never be passed off as finished works of art. This is where the impressionists deviated from history and pushed art in a new direction. Even though many of the critics at that time were initially not appreciative of what they were trying to capture, the impressionist artists were committed to their goals of capturing and retaining that initial first impression of their subject.

It has long been thought that the Impressionists were revolutionary and unique for their ability to renounce these arbitrary standards of finish, standards to which even the most avant-garde painters of earlier generations had acceded to some degree. (Norma Broude, Pg 231)

The challenge that the impressionist artist now had was achieving the right balance between “effect” and “finish”. Each artist would therefore have to determine at which point they successfully captured and retained the effect they initially felt and saw in nature and at which point the painting would be considered a finished work of art by themselves and their critics.

Now let us turn to a few of the landscape paintings in *The Modern Tradition: Monet to Picasso* exhibition. In Paul Cézanne’s *Bend in a road in Provence* (see Image References), the subject is a small country road that leads from the bottom of the painting, bends and then disappears over a small hill in the middle of the painting. The road is narrow and well used as is evident by single wagon tracks. The country road is wedged between two hills and there is an abundance of vegetation amongst the rugged rocky slope on the right side and there is one single large tree half way up the road also on the right side which extends to the top of the painting. On the left there is a slight slope upwards with very little vegetation other than the mass of trees at the end of the road just as it disappears into the next valley. The background includes a small

amount of unclouded clear blue sky and one large distant hill that competes the image that we are in a hilly area of Aix-en-Provence. This painting would have been started outdoors and may have even been completed there as well, although many of the impressionist artists would have applied their finishing touches in the studio. The composition is simple and we are naturally drawn down the road to the center of the painting. Cézanne used a small palette of colours, mostly earthy warm colours but similar to his contemporaries he effectively used large tonal ranges of those colours to create volume and perspective. Examples of this effect is how the same colour of the road changes from the foreground to the middle of the painting and how the light hits the tracks made by the wagons in the road. There is a gradual change in the colour of the road to provide this effect. Another more obvious example of this is the distant hillside which changes in tonal value from the near part of the hill at the bottom which is a lighter tone to the distant top part of the hill which is in a darker more grey blue tone of the same colour. Again, the hill is the same colour of green but the tonal values change to provide the depth and perspective to the painting. And lastly, as with many artists at this period, Cézanne was not so preoccupied with his artistic schooling that he painted this motif in a particular order: that being background to foreground and dark to light. Instead he painted exactly what he saw as he saw it. He painted colours with thick bold brush strokes when and where they appeared before him versus an academic, pragmatic, or orderly approach. This is clearly seen in the one large tree whose branches cover the sky in front of us. We know the sky is behind the tree and logic implies that we should paint the sky first and then paint the branches and leaves in front of the sky so to ensure they appear closer to us than the sky. Cézanne however ignores this traditional approach and paints the sky over the branches and leaves. Strangely enough for the viewer this does not create a problem and in fact it creates a more real “effect” that the light of the sky from behind the tree is coming through the tree. In general Cézanne’s creates and shares with us his

impression. The simple composition, the warm earthy colours, the luminary quality of the gradual tonal changes, and the road all pull us into this very friendly, inviting hillside in Aix-en-Provence.

One of my favourite landscapes in *The Modern Tradition: Monet to Picasso* exhibition is the painting by Alfred Sisley, *Autumn: Banks of the Seine near Bougival* (see Image References). This is a quaint rural scene along the banks of the Seine River. We are immediately drawn into the painting by the river that winds from the lower right of the painting towards the left and then to the center around the far shore in front of us. On the left bank, in the foreground in a small inlet, there is river crossing boat or barge with a couple workers on it and further down the river, again on the left bank, there is a small riverside village (perhaps Bougival). In behind the village and on the opposite bank are trees in full autumn colours. Behind this there are low rolling hills in the distance completing the landscape. The landscape itself takes up less than half of the painting with the remaining larger half filled with a blue, somewhat hazy, sky. The composition is simple and balanced with no element that is overpowering. The brush strokes are short, free flowing yet intentional. The colours are warm autumn colours that are purposely darker in the foreground, lighter and colourful on the opposite bank and then a warm autumn grey in the distant hills so that we know that the sun is setting (or perhaps rising) behind us to the left. Although very real in appearance, the people and the barge have been created with very simple, quick and purposeful brush strokes suggesting work activity. I really like this painting because some very beautiful effects have been created and shared with us by Sisley. He has successfully captured and retained this early morning or dusk lighting “effect” for us. The slope in front of us leading down to the barge is in shadows with the sun just barely hitting the vegetation just to the right of us. This sun setting/rising effect is captured by the light hitting the left side of all the

homes in the village in the distance, again revealing for us where the sun is at this very moment. And most importantly, Sisley has show that the sun is also hitting the row of trees on the opposite bank lighting them up filling the painting with a warm orange autumn colours. He then extends this effect from the trees themselves onto the reflection in the water and then gently pushes this warm colour up into the sky. Notice how the hazy sky allows this ever so slight reflection and then he uses very subtle tonal changes to gradually add more and deeper blues to provide the impression that the sky continues to extend beyond the painting above our heads. The last effect that I want to note here is the reflections in the water. I really like how Sisley has accomplished this effect. By first painting the reflection of the trees in a blurred out fashion and “then” painting the colour of the sky into the water on “top” of the reflected trees he has beautifully captured this “effect”. It feels real and there is a slight sense of movement in the water. Through careful observation of colour and light Sisley has found a successful balance between effect and finish in this beautiful autumn scene.

The final painting that I would like to discuss is Claude Monet’s *A Cliff at Pourville in the Morning* (see Image References). This is a beautiful morning coastal motif. The foreground sweeps across the front from right to left and then reappears in the background cliff which gradually disappears down to the horizon line where it meets the ocean. The ocean occupies a large portion of the motif coming as well from right toward the left border of the painting into a cove on the left side at the middle of the painting. The composition is simple and the brush strokes throughout the entire painting are light, delicate and intentional. The colours are applied in golden hues to provide the early morning “effect” and the large tonal ranges provide clear depth and perspective to the landscape. The shadows and cliffs have been beautifully integrated with pastel mauves, blues and greys. Monet has very effectively mixed all of these various

colours from the land to the sea and to the sky to create a “oneness of effect” which many of the impressionist artist were noted for. Similarly to Sisley’s painting, Monet through close observation has successfully captured and presented a precise moment in time by carefully and masterfully painting the luminosity of the morning light. We feel we are there and experiencing the morning light for ourselves. It is a beautiful “effect” and for us this painting feels finished. We know, however, from Monet’s correspondence with friends and other artists that he initially struggled with this balance between “effect” and “finish”. He was frustrated with many of his attempts of using his first impressions of a particular motif, his *pochades*, and somehow getting it to that final work of art, *le tableau*. We also know that Monet eventually deviated from many of his contemporaries who painted outdoor nature scenes with just two canvases, one for grey days and one for sunny days. He discovered that in order to capture a specific moment in time, “instantaneity”, he needed to capture the luminary effect for just that particular moment, a moment where the light was the same everywhere. Monet then developed a system where he would work on many canvases at the same time, switching from canvas to canvas when the light changed and only going back to the same canvas when the light was the same. Through repeated application while observing his subject under the same light he was able to capture the luminary effect he had originally experienced. Whereas most people think of a preliminary oil sketch as “less” of what is truly there, this slow and deliberate process of working from his *pochade* as a guide interestingly enough did not add more “realistic” detail to his paintings but rather allowed Monet to elaborate on the his initial luminary impression by enriching the tonal contrasts and nuances. In the end, he was creating the *tableau*.

In conclusion we have seen from the examples provide here from Cézanne, Sisley and Monet that “effect” and “finish” were very much a part of the impressionist period of paintings. These

impressionist artists, as well as many others, successfully captured their initial impression through the use of initial sketches, *pochades*, as guides for the final canvases. Through close and careful observation of light at that precise moment in time and how it illuminated the subject, they were able to re-capture the freshness and spontaneity of that original moment. Along with this revolutionary application of luminary “effect”, the impressionist artists used simple compositions, evocative use of large tonal ranges of colours and a variety of different brush strokes to create texture, all of which added to the allure of the final and “finished” work of art, the *tableau*. While some, like Monet, may have laboured over their “effect” to get it just right, others would have recognized the beauty of the original sketch and decided not to sacrifice their original impressions. And, although at the time there may have been a real struggle for artists to achieve this balance between “effect” and “finish”, we have come to recognize and accept these paintings a finished works of art.

In the twentieth century, we have come to regard as “complete” many works of art that, in earlier periods, would have been deemed “unfinished.” We recognize in these works, which are often rapid sketches of one kind or another, the attainment of a precarious, but precious state of aesthetic and expressive harmony and balance, one that would have been lost had the artist attempted to add further descriptive detail or surface finish to the work. (Norma Broude, Pg 233)

Final Examination

Question #2: Provide an in-depth analysis Käthe Kollwitz's *Piece Worker* (1925) from *The Modern Tradition* exhibition. Compare this work with other paintings of men and women at work in the nineteenth century.

Théophile Thoré once proclaimed that “Art changes only through strong convictions, convictions strong enough to change society at the same time” (Linda Nochlin, Pg 3). In our class this year we have had the opportunity to study one of the most interesting periods in art history: a period that began with a movement away from Neo-Classicism and Romanticism to Realism and then into the Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. The remarkable artists of this time period broke through the art academic traditions of the past and for the first time the term “Avant-garde” is heard. These artists challenged the system, challenged the art institutions and challenged people to think and “see” differently than they had ever seen before. Two female artists from this period have left a lasting impression on me and have certainly changed my own artistic path: Berthe Morisot for her brilliant impressionistic style and Käthe Kollwitz for social and political messages she brought to the forefront with her work. This short essay will take an in-depth look at one of Kollwitz's works and then compare it to similar works by other realists and impressionists painters.

The goal of the artistic avant-garde from Courbet to the Surrealists has been to intervene in the domain of real life by changing the language of art so as to turn passive spectators into active interlocutors (Linda Nochlin, Pg 27). Artist's beginning with Courbet sought to depict the everyday life of the common people. Unlike their predecessors who used learned artistic techniques and idealized subject matter, artists now felt compelled to show life as it truly was. If

life was hard and full of suffering then why depict it differently? And if the lower classes and the impoverished groups where the people actually suffering, then should they not be represented in these paintings? In so doing, the avant-garde artists brought art to the common people. The paintings provided a direct and instant emotional appeal to the lower working class through truthful and honest depiction of the motif. This new way of painting no longer presented “ideals” but rather “facts” of what every day life was like.

The search after truth, peculiar to modern artists, which enables them to see Nature and reproduce her, such as she appears to just a pure eyes, must lead them to adopt air almost exclusively as their medium ... (Stéphane Mallarmé, Pg 149)

One such incredible and important artist of this time is Käthe Kollwitz. Not only is her work an honest portrait of the common people but she takes that next step forward and shows the plight and struggles of the lower working class. Her works express their suffering and hunger in a difficult period in Germany history stricken by the affects of poverty and war. In a very direct and overt way she brings these emotional motifs to us and at the same time she shows their incredible strength and resilience.

In Kollwitz's *Piece Worker* (see Image References), we have a great example of her ability to convey the emotions, mood and impression of her subject. This is a black and white lithograph of a middle aged or older woman labourer in Germany in the early 20th Century. We know from the title that she is a piece worker implying that she is factory worker and given the time frame when this was completed (1925) the “piece” could be for the automotive or aerospace industry but also may have been for the German military. She is sitting at her work table, her eyes are closed and she is propping her head up on her right forearm with her left hand resting on the table. The composition is simple and triangular. We are immediately drawn to the woman by the large black negative space on the left side of the lithograph which frames her right arm.

There is a nice contrast between the dark left side and the lighter right side. The lines are simple with very little detail in the foreground and no detail in the background. The majority of the detail and emotional expression come from the physical body and composition of the woman. She is not only tired, she is exhausted: so much so that she is resting or perhaps even sleeping. We can feel the heavy sigh in her breath. Her right arm is propping her up but even her hand, in its limp form, indicates fatigue. Her left shoulder has dropped completely, also out of exhaustion, and her left hand is resting very heavily on the table as if it can no longer grasp anything. The large dark circles around her eyes indicate that even her face is beginning to show signs of fatigue. Most likely, her fatigue is coming from both the very long hours of work she must perform to help provide for her family and from the social burdens of the working poor at this time. We get a sense that she can no longer continue even though she knows she must. This is a moving, powerful and beautiful piece of art work. We are completely drawn into the situation and our hearts open to the suffering this woman is going through. Kollwitz has successfully depicted this scene as honestly and truthfully as she could. There is nothing “idealized” about this drawing and the social message (the plight of the hardworking female working class) is clear.

In comparison, now let us now look at some of her earlier contemporary artists and how they dealt with similar subject matter. Gustave Courbet’s *The Stone Breakers* and *Grain Sifters* (see Image References), were some of the earliest examples of how the Realist painters were interested in painting the peasants and working class in their paintings. In keeping with what is real and truthful Courbet tried to accurately report the life of the common people. In *The Stone Breakers*, two men, one old and one young have been forced out of sheer survival to break stones for the road. We see by their physical positions how the young (upright) replaces the old

(crouched) and at the same time we can observe the mechanical and painful nature of their labour. In *Grain Sifters* two young peasant girls are sifting grain. One continues to work while the other, slumped against a bag of grain after hours of work, takes a much needed break knowing that soon it will be her turn again to sift and separate the grain. The physicality of the labour in both of these paintings is very evident. In the painting *The Gleaners* (see Image References) by Jean François Millet we are presented with another rural peasant scene of three impoverished women gleaning for wheat. We know they are very poor because only they would have entered the fields after the harvest to gather what wheat has been left so they could make bread for their families. Although this was considered one of the lowest jobs in society Millet successfully shows the virtue of hard rural labour and nobilizes the poor through effective lighting of their bodies and by painting the fields in golden hues and tonal ranges. Although many of the impressionist artists did not specifically deal with the rural or urban working class many paintings like Edouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (see Image References), and Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *At the Milliner* (see Image References), did provide us with some insight into the struggle of the female working class in the late 19th Century in Paris. Most woman at that time in Paris were seen by men as wives, prostitutes, or covert prostitutes (meaning they may have worked part-time but their main source of income came from prostitution). And even though many of the artist's attitudes towards this working class and especially towards the covert prostitution may have differed, both these paintings give us a sense of the mood of the subjects. In *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* the barmaid is standing behind the bar and looking directly at the viewer but we can see from the reflection in the mirror that there is a man in front of her. This may be one of Paris's most famous and popular bars but Manet has effectively captured a very different mood. The mood feels somber and the barmaid's expression is stoic. She appears very uninterested in her job or the conversation she is having.

In *At the Milliner* Renoir depicts a familiar place in French society known for covert prostitution (the Milliner). Similar to the mood set in Manet's painting, the main subject, a woman is seated in a hat shop in front of a mirror, appears to be very distant (in thought) or disinterested in her surroundings or of the conversation amongst the women at the shop. Both paintings honestly portrait women in non-idealized roles and is truthful to the surroundings, impressions and mood. The last painting I would like to mention here is Adolf Menzel's *Steelworks* (see Image References). In this very busy and somewhat overwhelming image, Menzel has presented a typical scene of industrialization. In a very realistic way he has shown in great detail the hard labour required by the working class in urban factories in the late 19th Century. The heat, sweat, physical and even mechanical nature of the human work is the predominant feeling of this painting. Again, this is a very honest and real example of the working class and another example of a painting that would not have been attempted or presented so overtly in previous periods of art history.

In conclusion, there are many great examples from this period that demonstrate the intention by artists to move away from the classical and romanticized portrayal of the working man or woman in very idealized scenarios to very honest and truthful portrayals showing real men and women in real working conditions. What is interesting to note is how this realistic depiction grew and evolved over time to include more and more passion, emotion and we can also say now, social messages. It is clear in the paintings by Courbet, Millet, Manet, Renoir and Menzel the effort the artist took to capture life as it really was and purposely show the life of the common people. And we know from their other works that Courbet, Millet and Menzel were particularly sensitive to this working class of people and felt compelled to paint these kinds of motifs often. What is revealed on closer study of Kollwitz's work is her commitment and

passion for the suffering of the working poor, the underprivileged and the sick and through her creative abilities to also capture the “real” emotions and mood of the subjects themselves. Her work goes beyond representing the physicality of the working poor to producing very moving, sensitive and emotionally charged works of art. Kollwitz’s art demonstrates more than an intention to portray what is real but an intention to demonstrate a genuine concern for the poor. For her it was not just about reality, it was also about using her art to convey a socially powerful message. What Emile Zola saw in Manet, we can now see in Kollwitz.

Every great artist who comes to the fore gives us a new and personal vision of Nature. Here ‘reality’ is the fixed element, and it is the differences in outlook of the artist which has given to works of art their individual characteristics. For me, it is the different outlooks, the constant changing viewpoints that give works of art their tremendous human interest. (Emile Zola, Pg 152)

Image References

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Paul Cézanne, *Bend in a road in Provence*, 1866, oil on canvas



Alfred Sisley, *Autumn: Banks of the Seine near Bougival*, 1873, oil on canvas



Claude Monet, *A Cliff at Pourville in the Morning*, 1897, oil on canvas

Question #2: Provide an in-depth analysis Käthe Kollwitz's *Piece Worker* (1925) from *The Modern Tradition* exhibition. Compare this work with other paintings of men and women at work in the nineteenth century.



Käthe Kollwitz, *Piece Worker*, 1925, Lithograph



Gustave Courbet, *The Stone Breakers*, 1849, oil on canvas



Gustave Courbet, *Grain Sifters*, 1855, oil on canvas



Jean François Millet, *The Gleaners*, 1857, oil on canvas



Edouard Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1881-82, oil on canvas



Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *At the Milliner*, 1876-78, oil on canvas



Adolf Menzel, *Steelworks*, 1875, oil on canvas