

William McGregor Paxton

by
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Les Poetes, devant mes grandes attitudes,
Que j'ai l'air d'emprunter aux plus fiers monuments,
Consummeront leurs jours en d'austeres etudes,

Baudelaire, *La Beaute*

Introductory Essay on Impressionism

In 1977, as I write this introduction to a biography of William Paxton, a resurgence of interest in the American painters who were prominent during the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the first two of the twentieth is already under way. This entirely predictable revival conforms to a general pattern which has repeated itself again and again throughout the history of European art. When a succession of painters carried a particular interpretation of visual experience to a high level over a period of years, usually approximating three generations, there occurs a shift in esthetic values sufficiently marked to deflect the oncoming young into paths differing sharply from those followed by their immediate predecessors. The painters recently most admired are banished, contemned for a while and soon forgotten. Then, with the passing of another sixty years or so, the momentarily discredited school is brought out for reappraisal, their pictures are seen in a fresh light and each artist's reputation stands or falls in accordance with the actual merit of his work as that becomes apparent in the perspective of time.

When the current manifestation of this familiar cycle runs its course Paxton will emerge as an arresting and significant figure. Historically his pictures will be seen as the ultimate and most uncompromising expression of the concept of painting which was reanimated in France during the last third of the nineteenth century. By the time Paxton returned from Paris in 1893 this pictorial orientation, now quite universally called impressionism by a usage which simply broadens the implications of a singularly felicitous word coined to ridicule the painters of Claude Monet's circle who were also working for similar objectives, was widely regarded by painters as the culmination of the art they practiced. Given its most complete expression in the art of Velasquez, who is still its greatest exemplar, its aim has ever been to convey on canvas the impression made on the painter by the subject he elects to depict. To the impressionist the splendor of the visible world as it appears to his sensitized vision surpasses in esthetic significance and beauty anything that man can invent. His creed by no means belittles the essential role played by the artist in the making of a work of art, a role which is perceptible throughout in his selection, arrangement, emphasis and handling, but he never ceases to feel that the visible world before his eyes provides the surest guidance and criterion. From which it follows that the ability to see and to render truthfully the appearance of things is the prime qualification of the impressionist painter. After he has acquired the ability to do these things well, his stature as an artist will ultimately be determined by his personality. The training of painters in the western tradition was based on this principle from the time of Masaccio and Van Eyck until the twentieth century.

An aim of this book is to point out the role played by the impressionist attitude throughout the history of Western painting and in Paxton's relation to its last great flowering. For the art of painting can no more be divorced from its impressionist factor and survive than literature could continue deprived of the descriptive uses of language. When a vital element of a great art is momentarily abandoned because of some passing freak of esthetic fashion there is grave danger of its being irrecoverably lost before a reverse trend demonstrates its indispensability. Such losses have occurred in the past with lasting injury to the art of painting. And now today, in the nineteen-seventies the disciplined thinking whereby an artist is enabled to analyze his visual impressions and the complex procedures required to render those impressions on canvas are things known only to a handful of painters, and imperfectly known at that. It is reasonable to suppose that when painters of a future generation seek to rediscover, as they will certainly wish to do, the lore which made nineteenth-century painting possible, they will prize any information susceptible of facilitating their difficult task. To these searchers Paxton's pictures, and especially the thinking and the methods which produced them, should be of outstanding interest, for they represent the summing up of a movement which he understood with exceptional lucidity.

After all, the element in painting which we call impressionism is simply the pictorial expression of an artist's reaction to his visual impressions. The dominant characteristic of the painter, the trait marking him out from other men, has always been an exceptional sensitivity to such impressions. Whenever any painter transcribes a visual impression to paper or canvas, to that extent he is an impressionist. Obviously, then, all painters who have made representation a part of their aim have been, to some degree, impressionists. For many, rendering visual impressions was a minor part of their art or at most it remained ancillary to some other esthetic purpose. But others found the phenomena of the visible world so surpassingly beautiful and fascinating that they devoted their lives to rendering with paint or pencil what they saw, as they saw it, using the other elements of their craft to enhance their portrayal. Painters of this latter sort have now been designated impressionists because no other title is so descriptive of their aims. To ignore or to belittle the esthetic value of impressionist painting is to reverse judgments which have prevailed over a very long period. To discard the working methods evolved by the impressionist masters is to greatly reduce the scope of painting as an art.

The essential characteristic of the impressionist painter is his attitude to what, in studio parlance, is often called nature. The word "nature" has long been in common use among painters to designate objectively observed aspects of the visible world. These aspects may be compared with an artist's representation of them and, when the representation differs from the thing represented, the divergence may safely be attributed to the artist's defective powers of observation, to the inadequacy of his rendering or to his intentional alteration. Nature provides the starting point of the rendering as well as a criterion by which the truth of the finished product may be judged. The general validity of this criterion has been accepted by virtually all painters of the Western tradition from Giotto to Cezanne. But the impressionist tends to place visual truth ahead of all other pictorial qualities. He does this because the beauty he perceives in nature seems to him of a higher order and of a more deeply satisfying kind than any other. Consequently nature remains his chief source of inspiration and his dominant purpose is to render as faithfully as possible, those aspects which stir him most. He realizes that an aspect is necessarily conditioned by its beholder, without whom it could have no existence at all. He is perfectly aware, too, that this subjective factor modifies his own observation and introduces an element into his rendering which is largely responsible for its artistic validity. So he strives to render his *impression* of reality, not to create a facsimile of it. But the true impressionist remains humble before nature. And the great practitioners have proclaimed that the more completely they gave themselves to the study of nature the finer were their results, as is attested by a considerable body of tradition based on letters, precepts, anecdotes and studio gossip, as well as by the published writings of painters.

Students of Western painting have observed that periods during which artists were greatly preoccupied with the direct study of nature have alternated with periods when artists fell back upon formulas of representation derived from the work of their predecessors. The nineteenth century, by and large, belongs in the former category. During its first half intensive study of form was carried to a high pitch under the leadership of Ingres and the academic painters of France. This academic art has been so frequently labelled artificial that few people today realize that the idealized forms which its practitioners introduced, when it suited their pictorial purpose, were arrived at by stressing typical structural shapes underlying the idiosyncrasies of the individual model and that this can be done effectively only by a painter who has acquired both a thorough grasp of structure and the ability to set down accurately what he sees. The best nineteenth-century drawing was based on the study of nature and it reached a very high level of draftsmanship. To appreciate this one has but to compare it with the draftsmanship of the late seventeenth and the entire eighteenth centuries until David.

But the chief contribution of nineteenth century painting was the renewed study of color which got under way in the sixties. Landscape painting and the study of color relationships observable in nature out of doors, as demonstrated by the group exhibiting with Claude Monet, brought a new element to the art of painting, an element which actually revolutionized that art and seemed at the time destined to expand its scope immeasurably. We have now so completely assimilated the discoveries of that era that people have forgotten their once revolutionary character. The change which they brought about in our perception of color remains especially evident, of course, in the painting of landscape. More subtle and therefore less perceptible to the untrained eye, but perhaps even more important in its effect on the art of painting, was the change in the painter's perception of flesh-tints. Because the human body, and especially the head, furnishes the most important theme for the painter's art, rendering the subtle and elusive character of flesh has ever been his central problem, the one which has generally been considered the supreme test of his craftsmanship. So a brief examination of the development of flesh painting should lead to a better understanding of the impressionist attitude and of its esthetic contribution.

Painters working before the fifteenth century were content to fill in the outlines of their figures with a conventional tint which could be identified as indicating flesh. Presently the Van Eycks and their followers in Flanders and men like Piero della Francesca in Italy made great advances in this direction. These painters evidently mixed their tones to match actual flesh in light, adding brown or black to suggest the shadows. A little later Leonardo contributed to the understanding of visual impressions by demonstrating that the shadowed parts of an object were those which did not receive direct rays from the main source of light and furthermore that the points at which those rays ceased to illuminate always formed a perceptible line of demarcation between the lighted parts and the shadows. This seemingly self-evident observation constituted probably the greatest single step ever taken in the slow development of man's perception of how things appear to him.

For a time painters merely assimilated Leonardo's discovery with their established practice of coloring flesh. They now set down the shadow area in its full degree of darkness and differentiation, but they made it with a brown or blackish tone which varied with the individual painter rather than with the lighting conditions of the particular - painting. Indeed, it is notable that very little advance was made in observing the true color of flesh in shadow until the late nineteenth century. But certain colorists began to note the subtle shifts of color observable in flesh in light. The evolution of their observation edged away from a warm tonality toward the balance of cool, pearly tones which we now recognize as the characteristic color of flesh in ordinary daylight. It is fascinating to trace this evolution in the work of the great colorist-innovators, Titian, Veronese, Velasquez, Vermeer and Chardin. The extraordinary distinction of color attained by these painters, of which their treatment of flesh is an outstanding factor, is sufficient proof of the esthetic value of their achievement

4. *The Crystal*, 1900
Estate of the Artist

The great change in perception of color which took place in the nineteenth century was primarily due, as I have already indicated, to the vogue of *plein-air* painting. The effort to render brilliant light effects, and especially sunlight, forced painters working out of doors to study color relations as they had never been studied before. Their researches led to the adoption of methods now familiar to all, such as the use of more or less pure tones in juxtaposed touches. Although the more extreme of these methods soon fell into disuse they served to make painters aware of color variations to which they had formerly been blind and this awareness came to be partially shared by the public. *Plein-air* painting became a necessary part of the professional painter's training and the acuity of vision which he developed out of doors affected the work he did indoors as well. He saw that things were colored very differently from the way they had previously been depicted and that they looked vastly more beautiful and exciting to the eye. Small wonder that the painters who were young during the eighties and nineties felt that a new world of painting had opened before them in whose untrodden paths they were destined for great adventures. Yet in less than sixty years the movement engendered by the new perception had petered out. A new generation of painters repudiated its objectives and dismissed the great traditions, visual and technical, from which those of nineteenth-century impressionism had been derived.

Why did this happen? It is sometimes argued that nineteenth-century impressionism destroyed more than it came to fulfill. For reasons inherent in the social and artistic conditions of the times, impressionism developed in opposition to the so-called academic painting, whose erudition and traditional craftsmanship the impressionists attacked and eventually discredited. By so doing the innovators cut themselves off from a vast body of knowledge which some few of them could afford to ignore as individuals but which the art of painting could not dispense with without serious injury to its development. Another causative factor of its early decline lay in certain characteristics of the movement itself. Absorbed as they were in the study of color, of light and of atmospheric effect, the impressionists tended to neglect the study of form, a neglect which resulted in the rapid deterioration of their standards of draftsmanship. Moreover, their emphasis on the immediate impression, on direct notation in the presence of nature, often under uncomfortable working conditions, led them to improvise the composition of their pictures, thereby discarding the carefully considered preliminary studies of their predecessors. Furthermore, this art of observation and interpretation turned its back on the imaginative side of painting. A movement which should have greatly increased the resources of painting, enlarging the scope and possibilities of the art, by cutting itself off from the central tradition of which it was an offshoot, brought about its own decline. The painters who grew up during the earlier years of impressionism and who therefore still benefited by the broad and sound training of the old schools produced fine pictures, but each succeeding generation gave evidence of an evernarrowing outlook and of a weaker technical equipment. By the nineteenth-century the prevailing concept of painting had become so limited and its techniques so feeble that a violent reaction of some sort was inevitable. It gave us Modern Art.

Nineteenth-century impressionism will always be studied for the great pictures that came out of it. When the sterile representational conventions in vogue at the present moment are outworn, painters will turn to the great protagonists of impressionism in an endeavor to rediscover the lost art of painting. They will study the nineteenth-century painters for the skills which were their special province. But the painters of the future will also study nineteenth-century impressionism as a step towards understanding the still greater impressionism of the seventeenth century. It is a hopeless task to emulate the great masters of that time without first acquiring the more readily accessible knowledge of the recent painters who best understood

the objectives of their great predecessors. This has been abundantly demonstrated in our time by the persons who profess to paint "in the manner of" one or another old master but who are quite incapable of making a passable rendering direct from nature. Their would-be *pastiches* of the old masters are acceptable only to themselves and to their disciples.

The pictures, ideas and methods of William Paxton should be of exceptional interest to future students. In several respects his position was unique. He received his early training at a time when drawing was still insisted upon and he was well taught. His first teachers were Dennis Bunker and Jean-Leon Gerome. Their training, superimposed upon his remarkable natural gift for drawing, enabled Paxton to retain a sure grasp of form while pursuing the most subtle color effects. He thus escaped the major defect which too often mars the pictures of his contemporaries. By temperament an impressionist and living in a period when the impressionist ideal was universally accepted, Paxton dedicated his powers to setting down on canvas the beauty he found so stirring in nature, which he looked at with eyes of very exceptional sensitiveness and accuracy. It is not an exaggeration to say that he accomplished his object more completely and faultlessly than any other painter who worked in the color-scale evolved in the late nineteenth century. Paxton's pictures may be taken as examples of the ultimate limit to which that kind of painting can be carried.

9. *Cherry or The Gay Nineties*, 1906
Estate of the Artist

As a conclusion to and a commentary on the great impressionist movement of the nineteenth century Paxton's pictures are eminently worth studying. But they will also be highly prized as paintings. When an artist has been deeply moved by some aspect of life and has devoted his energies with undeviating sincerity to expressing his reaction to that aspect and when such a man also succeeds in giving to his expression an artistic form of great technical perfection his pictures are sure to hold the enduring interest of posterity. The principle will hold in William Paxton's case as it has in others throughout the history of painting.