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Renoir in Paris

Monographies citadines



Was Pierre-Auguste Renoir, the painter of joy and buxom women, the artist who turned every part of the world into an eternal Eden, which he populated with blossoming young girls, not really a much more complex painter than he appeared? The first mystery surrounding the man is his actual character itself. How could this man with frankly reactionary ideas, combined with notions of social order and hierarchy, become part of the revolutionary Impressionist movement since he really did not have a rebellious spirit? In terms of painting, he is the only one of his painter friends – whom he never failed to surprise – to have a passion for 18th century painting, that of floweriness and country balls. When it comes to his mentality, in view of his large-scale production of female nudes, it might be thought that his relationship with women was one, if not of admiration, at least of equality. But, you would be quite wrong. Renoir could not imagine that some women could be intellectuals, convinced that culture was the privilege of the male gender. When it comes to novelty, in terms of painting, again, he advocated a return to the past, that of craftsmanship, when art was working-class, simple and slightly plodding, the same as, when he was young, he reproduced the same floral pattern on porcelain crockery; however, in terms, this time, of progress and modernity, again Renoir regretted what had been and was now gone. Thus, he used to lament the old Paris which Haussmann had reshaped with his large avenues in order to create new, invented perspectives.



«IT IS NECESSARY
TO EMBELLISH»



So, if such a man was able to revolutionise painting, set ablaze and shock the world, was it not precisely because Impressionism was more a movement of sensitivities rather than intellect, which does not in any way diminish its stature, but which helped it to emerge and grow among characters such as Renoir, whom one would not have expected to meet in such a place. It is true that Impressionism was not a movement of theoreticians, nor a hide-out for politicians, and it did not provide the best account of the torments of the time with only Manet, who stayed in Paris to fight, depicting the city under siege by the Prussians. Renoir, more than any other of his partners, left behind a body of work which does not say a great deal about the period, the same as Bonnard shortly afterwards, who, naturally, admired him. Seen from this angle, it is easy to understand why Odilon Redon felt Impressionism to be “slightly limited”. Nevertheless, it was in Renoir’s studio, in his attic room at 35 rue Saint-Georges that the Anonymous Association of Artists, responsible for the first Impressionist exhibition, was founded on 27 December 1873 and dissolved on 17 December the following year. There must be a reason for this. The quality of his work lies elsewhere, in the very foundations of painting, namely the ability to freely observe the world before finding solutions to how to transcribe it. And, Renoir excelled in this ability to mirror life, capable of the best, but, nevertheless wrong for having produced so much and never having destroyed anything: so many sketches which take



«IN MY MIND, SINCE WE
ARE FORCED TO PRODUCE
EASEL PICTURES, A PICTURE
SHOULD BE SOMETHING
PLEASANT, CHEERFUL AND
PRETTY, YES PRETTY!»

OPPOSITE
Le Pont des Arts, 1868
The Pont des Arts, 1868
oil on canvas
103,9 x 62,2 cm
Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena



financial advantage of this market referred to as art, but which does not always justify its name

Pierre-Auguste Renoir was born in Limoges on 25 February 1841. His father, a tailor, struggled to feed his family and decided to head for Paris to make his fortune in about 1845. However, the fortune never came and the children were obliged to start working as soon as they were old enough. From the age of 13 to 18 years, Pierre-Auguste was a porcelain painter, a job which very quickly turned him into a virtuoso with a paintbrush. But, the curse of progress led to the invention of a machine which decorated plates even better and faster than a good craftsman, forcing him to find another occupation. He continued to paint, firstly, he painted fans, then blinds, which, apparently, were used as portable stained glass windows by missionaries.

From 1855, the Renoir family lived a short walk from the Louvre, north of the Richelieu wing which was under construction, at 23 Rue d'Argenteuil. As a result, Pierre-Auguste saw the transformation of Paris and witnessed the demographic upheavals it provoked, which led the poor and the craftsmen to flee the city centre for the suburbs leaving behind just one social class. Gone was the old mix behind the cheeky charms of Paris, when the poor and the aristocracy shared the same pavements, replaced by the cold bourgeois

«ONE ALWAYS
RETURNS TO ONE'S
FIRST LOVE, BUT
WITH SOMETHING
EXTRA.»
LETTER TO DURAND-RUEL,
NOVEMBER 1881



lifestyle imposed by Haussmann's works. Renoir always lamented the Paris of his youth and we will see that it was something he did not forget when he painted.

Renoir was a quick worker and as a piecemaker, he was able to save a little money which helped him to realise his dream of becoming a painter by signing up for classes with Charles Gleyre. It proved to be a stroke of luck! There, he met Monet, Sisley and Bazille, with whom he became friends. In 1867 Manet created a scandal at the Salon des Refusés and became the head of this youth movement which rejected academic teaching, realising that it was time to look at the world without the blinkers of convention. Renoir attended evenings at the Café Guerbois, where a new form of painting was being invented. He was at the heart of the revolution! This revolution concerned landscape painting, at least that was how he saw it, although he was obliged to partly abandon it for portrait painting which was the only thing which provided him with an income and the chance to extend his network of relations. However, up until about 1880, Renoir did not produce portraits in the Impressionist style, as he did with landscapes, making a strong distinction between these two genres and devoting his research to the latter.

One of Renoir's first depictions of Paris shows the Champs-Élysées during the 1867 Universal Exposition. More than the city and the

exhibition itself, Renoir painted a panoramic view of a park where, as in a painting by Watteau, a scattered crowd can be seen walking around. In short, unlike what Manet did with his *Vue de Paris à l'Époque de l'Exposition Universelle de 1867*, Renoir did not take advantage of the occasion to produce a topical work.

With *Le Pont des Arts*, painted shortly after, he joined the great tradition of Paris views devoted mainly to its bridges and quaysides. Renoir must have had the works of his elders in his mind, in particular those by Corot, and he was still interested in the descriptive aspect which took precedence over the actual painting. As a result, there is a slight stiffness in the painting, which the far-reaching work he did on light did not completely mask. However, it is worth noting the great success of what can be seen in the foreground of the painting, in the shadow of the Carrousel bridge, below which he sat, where it is possible to see the mysterious silhouettes of the passers-by.

More surprising still is the painting *Patineurs au Bois de Boulogne* from 1868 for which Renoir must have been inspired by Dutch painting and in which it is possible to glimpse a nod to Manet with the shades of black that give rhythm to the composition. If Monet saw in snow a subject which would be perfect for new chromatic experiences,

OPPOSITE
Le Patinage à Longchamp,
Skating at Longchamp, 1868
oil on canvas
72 x 90 cm
Berne, coll. Robert von Hirsch © akg-images



Renoir hated the cold and very rarely took advantage of climatic excesses. However, winter 1867-1868, which saw the Seine iced over for 11 days, was so harsh that it could not be ignored. However, the interest of this painting, especially when compared to the recent Pont des Arts, resides mainly in the way in which the painter dealt with the figures, which he preferred to depict in the fresh state of a sketch rather than focusing on the descriptive aspect. It is a sign of great emancipation and of the construction of a promising personality.

THE BEGINNINGS OF IMPRESSIONISM

In summer 1869, Renoir and Monet both painted in the area around Louveciennes using the few colours still remaining in the bottom of their poor painters' boxes and invented a new method which could be described as proto-Impressionist. At La Grenouillère, on the island of Croissy, a restaurant on the riverside where people used to enjoy the highly fashionable sport of canoeing as well as bathing, the two friends, as if possessed by a visionary force, worked on several highly experimental paintings and developed a particularly effective brushstroke for rendering the water's reflections, the true art of which should be attributed to Monet, who had already worked on the technique for two years while painting in Sainte-Adresse and Le Havre.

OPPOSITE
Le Pont-Neuf,
The Pont-Neuf, Paris, 1872
oil on canvas
75.3 x 95.7 cm
Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art
© Awesome art



It might have been thought that this discovery would have made a radical and definitive change in Renoir's art, but not at all. Up until 1872, he returned to a compact brushstroke which accompanied a dark colour range, as if this lightning bolt of 1869 had made him feel slightly out of his depth. Monet, in Trouville and then in London, experienced no such denial. But, maybe it was the dramatic events of occupied Paris, followed by the Commune, which prevented Renoir from pursuing this discovery. But if that was the case, it would refute the image of a Renoir insensitive to the events of his time.

Thus, it was not until 1872 and *Le Pont-Neuf* that it was possible, again, to see a genuinely new form of optimism. Although the brushstroke had not yet completely regained its freedom, the tone of the painting at least was in keeping with the blossoming technique of Impressionism. Since it does not comply with any convention, the blue-tinged light of the scene is resolutely modern. The slightly plunging view (Renoir probably painted it from the first floor of the café located on the corner of the Quai du Louvre and Rue de la Monnaie) announces what was to become a constant — especially with Pissarro — of the Impressionist urban landscape: namely a view from an upper floor apartment instead of from the ground. Peace to paint, protection from the elements and the chance to

«WHEN PISSARRO PAINTED
VIEWS OF PARIS, HE ALWAYS
PUT IN A FUNERAL, WHE-
REAS I WOULD HAVE PUT IN
A WEDDING.»

OPPOSITE
**Le Quai Malaquais,
Malaquais quayside, 1874**
oil on canvas
38 x 46 cm
Collection privée/ Awesome art

