from Modern European Art by Alan Bowness

CHAPTER TWO

Impressionism

Right up to his death in 1883 Manet remained in the public eye as the leader of the advanced painters, but he had in fact some fifteen years earlier surrendered this position (in so far as it existed) to a younger man. This was Claude Monet (1840–1926), and the similarity of their names led to confusion at the time, and gave rise in the popular imagination to a kind of composite figure of the iconoclastic avant-garde artist. Innovating artists up to and including Manet had placed their new work before the general public; but Monet and his friends gave up the Salons and worked for a much smaller, more appreciative and more sympathetic audience.

It is of course true that Monet and his friends began to hold public exhibitions in Paris from 1874 onwards, and the eight impressionist exhibitions up to 1886 now figure prominently in any history of the art of the period. Their impact, however, was confined to a very restricted circle, compared with those who were affronted by the *Salon des Refusés* of 1863. Vincent van Gogh, as a young art dealer in Paris in 1875–76, had never heard of the impressionists: for him the modern artists were Millet and Corot and their followers. It was not until some of the paintings in Gustave Caillebotte's bequest were grudgingly accepted by the Louvre in 1897 that the impressionists began to be popularly accepted.

By this time the men who had banded together to show their work in 1874 – Monet, Renoir, Degas, Cézanne, Pissarro – were elderly, tolerably successful, and on the whole accepted painters. As inevitably happens, they had apparently been eclipsed by younger and more intransigent talents, and with the appearance of fauvism and cubism in the early 20th century, they seemed to be pushed still further into the background. Admittedly Cézanne was quite properly regarded at the time as the father-figure of these 20th century art move-

ments, but Monet's position has only recently been clearly assessed. He now appears as Cézanne's equal: between them the two men established the language of modern art, building on foundations laid by Manet.

The late reassessment of Monet arose in part from the fact that his most original work was done at the end of an extremely long career and was in fact contemporary with the invention of cubism, abstraction and even surrealism. Much the same sort of thing happened thirty years later with Matisse, and then again with Henry Moore.

Another reason lies simply in the length of Monet's activity as a painter – more than sixty years – and the difficulty of fully comprehending any man's career until it is completed. This was a particularly acute problem in Monet's case, because he was an extremely consistent artist who pursued a course that was scarcely affected by anything extraneous to his own painting. More than with most artists, each picture generated the next, and Monet worried at a particular artistic problem, searching for a solution, only to find himself more deeply involved in an exploration of the problem itself.

Monet's problem was, to put it crudely, to find the pictorial equivalent for his sensations before nature. He begins, in the 1860s, as a naturalist for whom the final answer seems just round the corner: he ends, in the 1920s, as an almost abstract painter, for whom the act of painting itself has become a mysterious, ineffable gesture. And the way in which this happens has a logic that is irresistible and deeply impressive.

One can start by considering Monet's probable reactions to Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, which he must certainly have admired in the *Salon des Refusés*. It is a fair guess that he would not have appreciated Manet's attempt to revivify traditional pictorial values. Monet was not a young painter who haunted the museums: he had very little use for them. He had grown up in Le Havre, where a struggling young landscape painter, Eugène Boudin (1824–98), had encouraged him to paint from nature, and this seemed artistic ambition enough. Manet's *Déjeuner* was impressive, but by Monet's standards there was something wrong with it – it just did not look like a group of young people sitting out of doors. It was only too obvious that Manet, like Courbet before him, had painted figures and landscape separately. Manet

15 CLAUDE MONET (1840–1926) *Déjeuner, fragment, 1865–66. Oil on canvas, 13′ 9″ × 4′ 11″ (418 × 150). Musée d'Orsay, Paris*

16 PIERRE AUGUSTE RENOIR (1841–1919) *Lise with the Parasol, 1867. Oil on canvas, 41¾″ × 31½″ (106 × 80). Folkwang Museum, Essen*

in any case was manipulating the lighting in his pictures to produce a flattening effect – half tones were deliberately eliminated, and shadowed areas round a face were so reduced as to look like heavy contours.

The 25-year old Monet lacked Manet's feeling for the essential artifice of painting. He accepted the prevailing naturalist aesthetic, which was to put down only what was actually visible. So he set to work to paint a true picture of figures in natural daylight. He abandoned his first composition of a group of Parisians picnicking in Fontainebleau Forest as too ambitious. The fragments that remain (*Ill. 15*) testify to the nature of Monet's talent – tough, intractable, determined. The work is built out of great dabs of paint, each one bearing the clear mark of his brush.

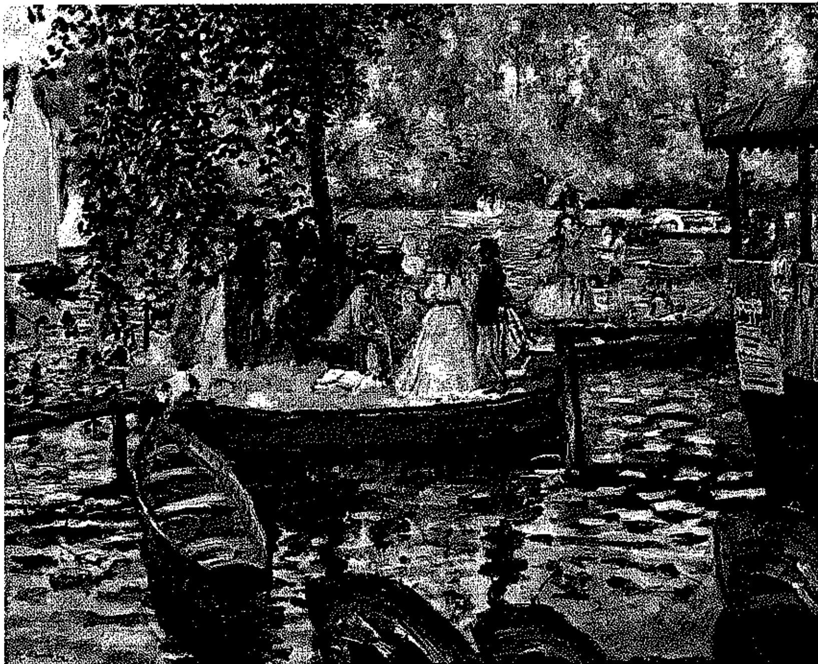
The second attempt was more successful: this was the *Women in the Garden* (*Ill. 14*), in which one model, his mistress Camille, posed for all the figures. Monet worked entirely out of doors, and only when the sun was shining. As a consequence this was the most faithful pictorial record to date of the fall of light on a figure: a little in advance of the *Lise with the Parasol* (*Ill. 16*), painted by Monet's great friend and companion, Auguste Renoir (1841–1919).

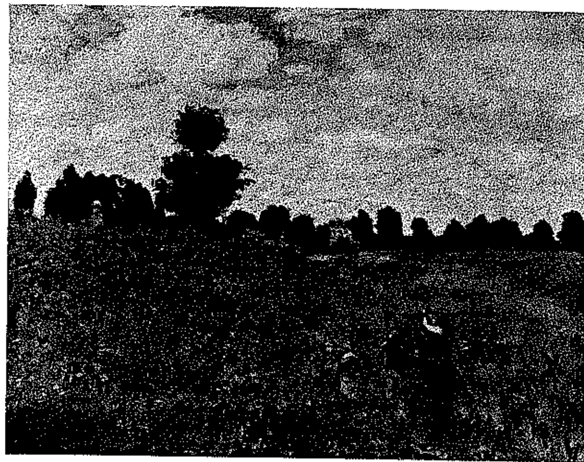
Renoir's picture was shown at the 1868 Salon, but Monet's *Women in the Garden* had been rejected by the Jury the year before. The practical difficulties of executing large figure compositions out of doors were discouragement enough – Monet had had to dig a trench in the garden while he was at work and lower his canvas into it – and Monet therefore turned to landscape painting, which henceforth became almost his total preoccupation.

He was still obsessed with the effects of light, and especially with certain problems of pictorial representation which no one seemed to have tackled before. Who had painted landscapes in bright sunlight? Only the English Pre-Raphaelites, of whose work Monet was probably totally unaware. In the summer of 1869, Monet worked with Renoir at La Grenouillère, a boating and bathing place on the Seine in the outer suburbs of Paris. In the pictures they painted together (*Ills. 17, 18*) of the fall of sunshine on water, Monet used big dabs of pure colour, Renoir a softer, more feathery touch. Both men showed their awareness of the way Courbet painted landscapes – with a feeling for the materiality of things

17 CLAUDE MONET (1840–1926) *La Grenouillère, 1869. Oil on canvas, 29½″ × 39¼″ (75 × 99). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Bequest of Mrs H. O. Havemeyer, 1929)*

18 PIERRE AUGUSTE RENOIR (1841–1919) *La Grenouillère, 1869. Oil on canvas, 26″ × 32″ (66 × 81). Nationalmuseum, Stockholm*





19 CLAUDE MONET (1840–1926) *Poppy Field, 1873. Oil on canvas, 19¾" × 25½" (50.5 × 63.5). Musée d'Orsay, Paris*

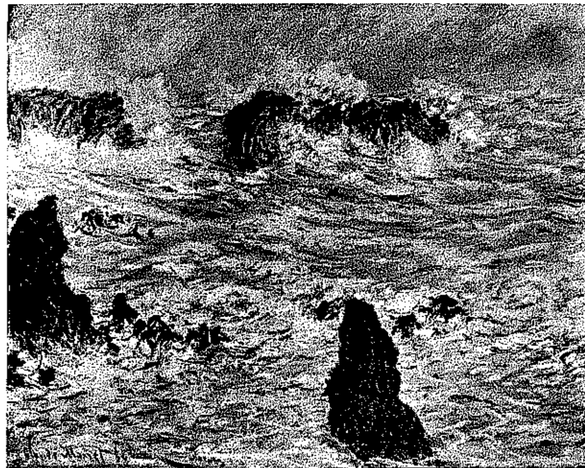
(rocks, trees, grass, water) that he translated into the texture of the paint itself, and with an insistence on local colour. Courbet knew that grass was green, and that was an end to it. But Monet and Renoir saw that grass could look grey, or yellow, or blue, depending on the light, and this observation revolutionized their painting.

One can test the intensity of their perception of nature in a close examination of a shadowed area in one of their paintings. The touch is broken so that a wide variety of pure colours can be juxtaposed. Monet, like Delacroix before him, had been to North Africa where the fall of light and shadow is more extreme than in France, and had realized that shadows are coloured, and not various tones of brown, as in conventional representations. He was also aware of certain optical effects, concerning both tone and colour, and in particular of the way the pure colours attract their complementaries. Monet tried to record his observations as directly as possible. A few years later, a younger artist, Georges Seurat, was to codify them into a system.

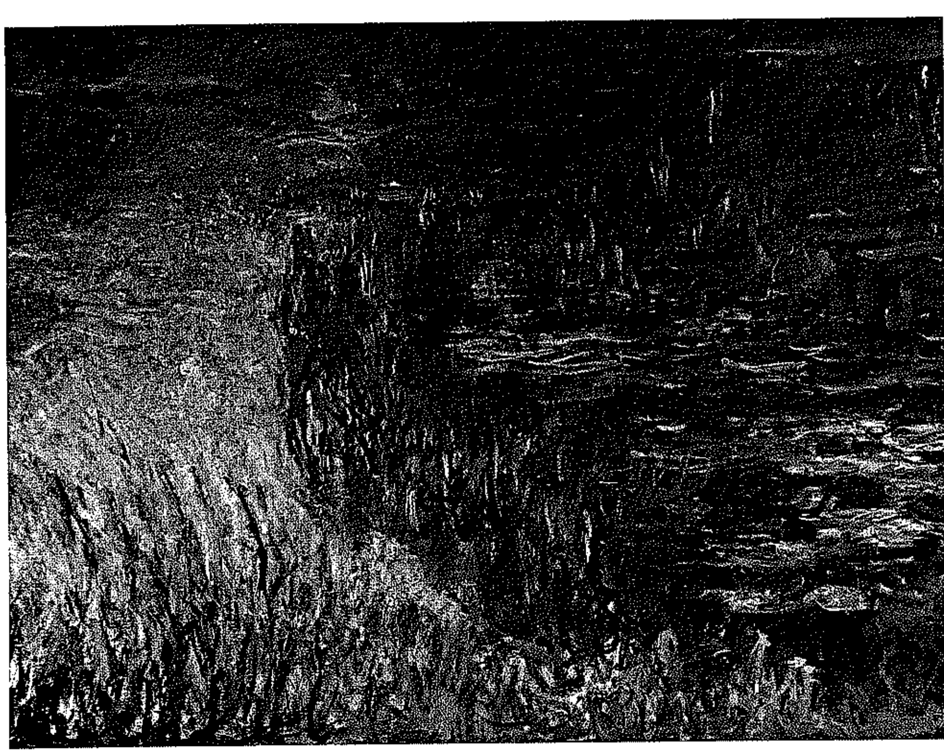
In the 1870s Monet painted a long series of landscapes in which he put these new ideas into practice. Despite personal and financial worries, he worked with extraordinary confidence and optimism, like a man who has found the secret of painting. His subject-matter is invariably serene and delightful – grassy meadows rich with flowers, boats on the river, scenes full of light and air, all painted in bright colours; ochre and black pigments were banished from his palette. In the *Poppy Field* (*Ill. 19*) there is a casual spattering of red on green, a simplicity of design, a feeling of movement that cannot fail to captivate. And yet this was among the paintings dismissed as ephemeral and trivial with the label 'impressionist' when shown in the first independent exhibition of 1874.

By the end of the 1880s Monet was a successful artist, though always aloof from the old and now rapidly decaying Salon establishment. He had created one of the most influential styles in the history of art – impressionism, the culmination of naturalistic painting, but a dead-end as far as the vital development of painting was concerned. The seeds sown by Manet were soon to bear fruit.

Monet remained totally devoted to the recording of appearances, but as he went on grappling with it the problem only became more complex. To put down what one sees sounds easy, but a record of perceptual sensations inevitably involves the artist's own sensibility. Monet was sometimes elated, frequently depressed, in the 1880s, and he discovered that his emotional state affected what and how he saw. In the great seascapes of this period (*Ill. 20*) he seems to recognize the inherent subjectivity of impressionism, and tries to find instead a way of expressing the forces stirring behind appearances. As with Cézanne, there is an awareness of cosmic movement, embodied in the brushwork of the paintings – that calligraphic touch, which becomes the new architecture of painting.



20 CLAUDE MONET (1840–1926) *Rough Sea at Belle-Ile, 1886. Oil on canvas, 25¼" × 29½" (64 × 80). Musée d'Orsay, Paris*



22 CLAUDE MONET (1840–1926) *Nymphéas, detail. Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris*

23 CLAUDE MONET (1840–1926) *Nymphéas, general view, c. 1916–23. Oil on canvas, each 6′6″ × 13′11″ (197 × 425). Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris*

◀ 21 CLAUDE MONET (1840–1926) *Rouen Cathedral: Sunset, 1894. Oil on canvas, 39″ × 25″ (99 × 63.5). National Museum of Wales, Cardiff*

The paint itself is always real; it never disappears into the scene it represents, but forms a coloured web or tissue that hangs on the flat surface of the canvas.

Monet now began to choose intractable subjects, like a morning mist on the river, and he also painted others – a haystack, a line of poplars, the façade of Rouen Cathedral (*Ill. 21*) – over and over again in different light conditions. But people began to suspect that Monet's passion for recording light and atmosphere had led to an indifference to his actual subject. His own reactions now preoccupied him: 'I am driven more and more frantic by the need to render what I experience,' he wrote in 1890. The west front of Rouen Cathedral provided him with an unchanging objective constant: the inconstant, and the more difficult to represent, was his own perceptual experience. In the twenty pictures that resulted, we have, in George Heard Hamilton's words, 'a new kind of painting which reveals the nature of perception, rather than the nature of the thing perceived.'

The truth of this remark is nowhere more apparent than in the water-garden pictures which dominate the last thirty years of Monet's long life. Indeed, apart from the two 'architectural' series of London and Venice pictures, he painted nothing else. The subject itself was, quite literally, planted by Monet – he made the water-garden itself, just as Cézanne set up his still-life groups. The *Nymphéas* – lily pads and flowers floating on the surface of the water, the overhanging willows and their reflections, mingled with the reflections of clouds passing overhead – Monet paints these like a man who is meditating on the nature of reality, and ultimately he seems to break through to a level of reality that is beyond physical vision. Thus Monet's naturalism becomes transformed into a kind of cosmic symbolism that comes very close to abstract art. And in fact the debts owed to Monet by the two great pioneers of abstraction, Mondrian and Kandinsky, are important and quite specific ones.

In the course of his meditation on the *Nymphéas* Monet was led to other pictorial innovations. There exists an equivalence between the surface of the water and the surface of Monet's canvases. Because the subject demands it, the paint texture itself becomes much less tangible and opaque than it had been in the wall-like surfaces of the Cathedral pictures. The space both behind and in front of the picture-surface is increasingly apparent, just as the depths of the water and the vault of the sky are drawn together on the surface of the pond itself.

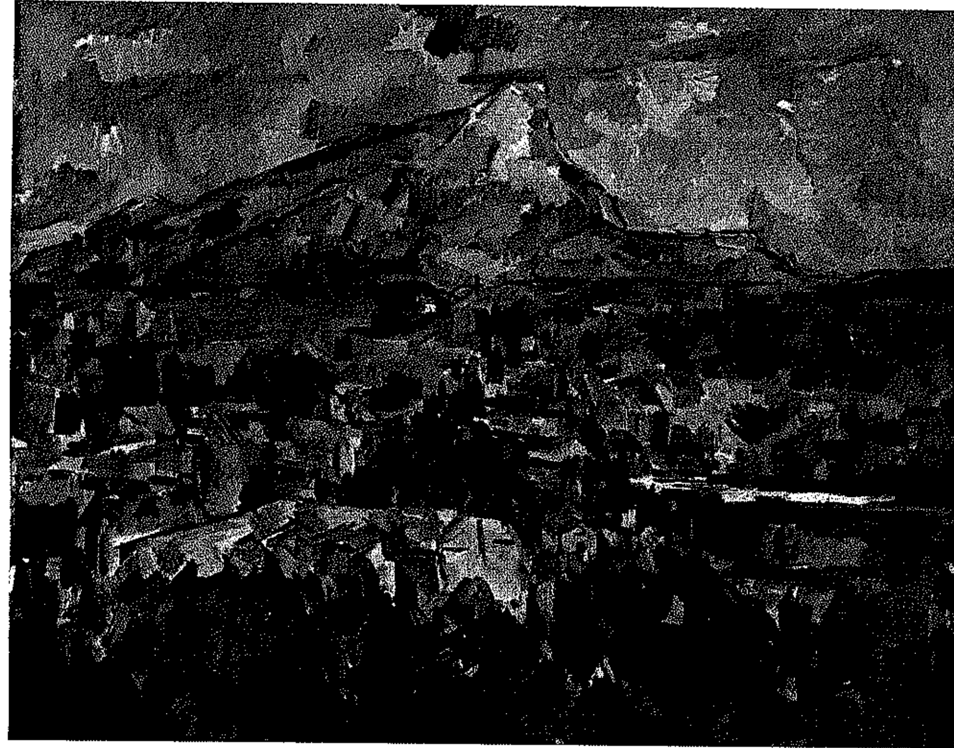
All earlier paintings had been like windows through which the spectator looked: the space lies behind the picture-surface, and the frame is a device necessary to isolate the painting from the real world. Monet dispensed with the frame altogether. He extended the dimensions of his canvases laterally until they completely filled the field of vision, curving the pictures round, and finally, in the two rooms at the Orangerie in Paris (*Ills. 22, 23*) entirely surrounding the spectator, who finds himself immersed in Monet's world. Forms seem to float forward and to recede from the picture-surface, and the barrier between the world of the picture and our own disappears.

It is perhaps not just a coincidence that something of the same sort happens in the last pictures of Cézanne and in the cubist paintings of Picasso and Braque, all executed in the first two decades of this century. The dimension of painting itself seems to change. Monet's particular contribution lay in the new scale of his paintings, for many of the *Nymphéas* panels were more than twenty feet wide and sometimes ten feet high. Paintings this size were not emulated until the middle of the 20th century, when the New York painters began to use canvases of these dimensions with startling results.

Monet's career is paralleled, more closely than was at first realized, by that of Paul Cézanne (1839–1906). They were almost exact contemporaries, though Monet outlived Cézanne by twenty years. They knew each other, but not well. Each seems to have recognized the other as his only rival. They shared certain basic preoccupations – a concern with perception, for instance – but their solutions, like their temperaments, were very different.

For Cézanne, Monet was only 'an eye'. He neglected the problem of picture construction that worried Cézanne, the essential problem of reinterpreting the three-dimensional world in terms of a flat, rectangular picture. Cézanne shared Manet's interest in the art of the past: to the end of his life he always found something to learn from a visit to the Louvre. Monet was almost totally uninterested in other painters' work. In 1869, when Monet was exploring effects of sunlight on water,

24 PAUL CÉZANNE (1839–1906) *The Blue Vase, c. 1888–89. Oil on canvas, 24" × 19½" (61 × 50). Musée d'Orsay, Paris*



25 PAUL CÉZANNE (1839–1906) *Mont Sainte Victoire, c. 1904–06. Oil on canvas, 22" × 36" (53 × 91.5). Philadelphia Museum of Art (G. W. Elkins Collection)*

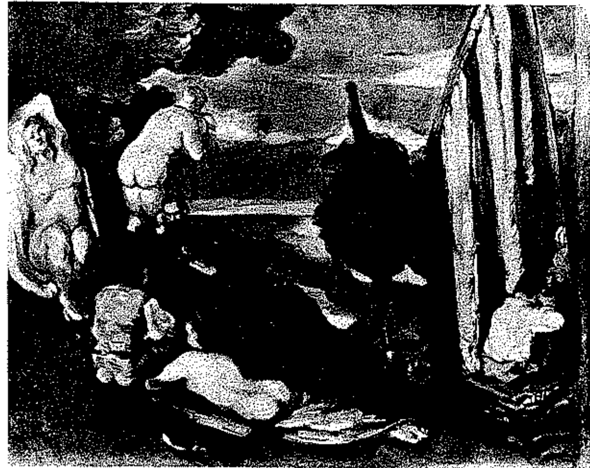
Cézanne, following Manet's lead, was trying to invent a new kind of pictorial composition.

Everyone, without exception, dismissed Cézanne's early attempts as childish: he seemed such a hopelessly untalented artist that even a close and sympathetic friend like Émile Zola (1840–1902) never had any real faith in him. Yet an early picture like *Pastorale* (*Ill. 26*) embodies a Baudelairean naïvety, the prerequisite attitude to any radical reshaping of an art. *Pastorale* seems to be an erotic fantasy, centred both psychologically and formally upon the reclining figure of the artist himself. Here are the same disproportionate figures and unexplained space that occur in Manet's *On the Beach at Boulogne* (*Ill. 12*); Cézanne appears even more wilful until we begin to appreciate the logic behind the pictorial argument.

Cézanne wanted to start with the experience of visual perception itself, which he knew was a much more confused and complex matter than painters had hitherto been prepared to admit. We have two eyes that are always on the move, exploring proximity and depth, darting here and there. Our vision has a central focus, with a vague periphery; things seen out of the corner of our eyes seem blurred.

This was the sort of information that Cézanne applied to such paintings as *Pastorale*. The corners are empty; we focus on the artist on the river bank; the other figures fit into the broad curves around him. Indeed, for Cézanne, space was curved. There are no straight lines in nature. Straight lines are imposed by the artist – they are composition lines which relate to the picture plane and the picture rectangle. They keep the composition in balance, on the surface. Cézanne's head is where the lines of bank and horizon meet, fixed in a locking pose.

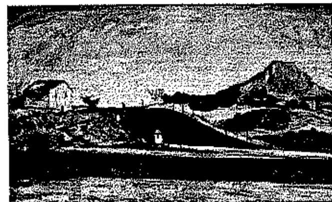
Cézanne also attempts in *Pastorale* something that is to become his common practice – the utilization of discontinuities and alignments. The rules are simple: if a straight line appears to exist in nature (for example, the edge of a table), it must be made discontinuous in the picture. Conversely, objects that have no relationship outside the picture must be brought into alignment, especially if they are in different spatial planes. Thus in *Pastorale* the line of the bottle in the foreground leads directly into the dead tree on the island in the background, establishing a visual link that unifies the picture. Such examples can be multiplied endlessly in Cézanne's work.



26 PAUL CÉZANNE (1839–1906) *Pastorale, c. 1870. Oil on canvas, 25½"×32" (65×81). Musée d'Orsay, Paris*

It was hardly surprising that Cézanne disliked the Florentine system of linear perspective, which related all receding lines to a vanishing point and treated the picture space as a sort of funnel. To Cézanne this made a hole in the picture; he much preferred the alternative Venetian tonal system, which treated the picture as a shallow box, with layers of space behind the surface. Cézanne's first great landscape painting, *The Railway Cutting* (*Ill. 27*), is a perfect example of this approach. There is no vanishing point, only a succession of parallel layers of stratified space, differentiated by tone and colour. The shapes do not diminish in size, but are repeated throughout the picture. There is not even any aerial perspective; the mountain does not fade into the distance, its outline is sharp and clear and contrasts with the ambiguities of the abstracted foreground. It is never certain which plane is receding grass, or rising wall, or receding top of wall.

The Railway Cutting certainly contains space, but as a painting its colours are dull, and it lacks a feeling for light. We may presume this to be Cézanne's own judgment, for in 1872 he asked Pissarro to show him how the impressionists used colour to bring a new sensation of light and space into painting. Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) was a great and good man, but, by comparison with his contemporaries, he was not a very original painter. His ability to recognize their nascent greatness – and he gave decisive early encouragement to Gauguin, Seurat and van Gogh, as well as to

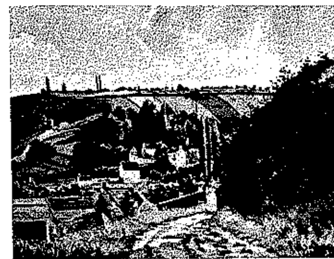


27 PAUL CÉZANNE (1839–1906) *The Railway Cutting, 1868 or 1871. Oil on canvas, 2'8"×4'3" (80×129). Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich*

Cézanne – was perhaps a measure of his own lack of certainty. For one short period in the late 1860s, with such pictures as *La Côte du Jallais, Pontoise* (*Ill. 28*), Pissarro combined elements of Corot and of Courbet into a monumental landscape style, but a year or two later he was so impressed by Monet's more forceful talent that he changed his palette and his compositional methods to follow the younger man's example. Because Pissarro so passionately believed in the village existence that he painted as an exemplar for the ideal life, his work has a generosity and a conviction that are wholly admirable, but he was no visual innovator, and played no part in the reshaping of visual language that his friends were engaged upon. Alfred Sisley (1839–99), was another delightful painter who added nothing to Monet's impressionism except an almost Constable-like sensitivity to cloud effects.

Cézanne certainly learnt from Pissarro during the two years he spent at Pontoise, though it might be argued that he taught Pissarro more. A comparison of the work each painter was doing at this time reveals the obvious contrast in artistic character. Pissarro's *Entry to the Village* (*Ill. 29*) shows him still reluctant to abandon earth colours or break away from conventional compositional formulae. Cézanne's *House of the Hanged Man* (*Ill. 30*), on the other hand, though a clumsy, overworked picture, is an attempt to move forward and has a toughness the Pissarro altogether lacks. Look, for example, at each artist's treatment of the foreground. Pissarro draws the road as he does because that was where he happened to be sitting, and because the scheme could be fitted into a linear perspective construction. Cézanne rejects this sort of casualness, and turns the foreground zone into an abstract shape that provides the foundation on which the picture rests.

Eventually Cézanne decided that he was not an impressionist. He was too slow a worker to be able to catch fleeting effects, as Monet did, and the importance given to light now seemed to him exaggerated. Though still obsessed with his 'little sensations before nature', Cézanne wanted to penetrate appearances to a more fundamental reality. His paintings of the 1880s and 1890s are ordered reconstructions in pictorial terms of confused sensations received over a period of time, laboriously made images of temporal as well as spatial experience.



28 CAMILLE PISSARRO (1830–1903) *La Côte du Jallais, Pontoise, 1867. Oil on canvas, 34¼"×45¼" (87×120). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Bequest of William Church Osborn, 1951)*

29 CAMILLE PISSARRO (1830–1903) *Entry to the Village of Voisins, 1872. Oil on canvas, 18¾" × 22" (45×55). Musée d'Orsay, Paris*

30 PAUL CÉZANNE (1839–1906) *House of the Hanged Man, 1873. Oil on canvas, 22¼" × 26¾" (56.5 × 68). Musée d'Orsay, Paris*

The process is most plain in the still-lifes. Here Cézanne was able to dominate his subject-matter in a manner impossible with landscape or portraiture. Objects could be placed where he wanted them. Shapes could be introduced or dismissed in accordance with formal necessity only. Analysis of a painting like *The Blue Vase* (*Il. 24*) demonstrates the complexity of the situation in which Cézanne found himself by 1890. Ambiguities and uncertainties are everywhere: how can we explain the background of the picture? Cézanne's practice of combining several viewpoints is very evident here: the two parts of the plate on each side of the blue vase, for instance, are treated quite separately. They do not fit together: and this is intended to remind us that the plate cannot be seen as a whole – only part by part, at different moments in time and from different angles.

The Blue Vase also shows us how Cézanne divorced line from colour. Contours – outlines – gave him a feeling of imprisonment, of restriction. Moreover, they did not exist in nature – there is no line around an apple, and only a pictorial convention dictates the drawing of an outline and colouring it in afterwards. Cézanne wanted to abandon this method, and, using thin bluish-violet paint, for reasons shortly to be explained, gave his lines a tentative, indefinite quality. They help to place things, but do not constrict them.

Cézanne also disliked the practice of modelling – the way in which Courbet had painted apples, working from dark to light, and even moulding the form in a very low relief of paint. Instead, Cézanne used what he called colour modulation – touches of thin liquid paint, placed directly on the canvas side by side, which, because of their differences of colour and tone, give the sensation of three-dimensionality. His practice was affected by his interest in the watercolour medium in which transparent washes of colour all relate to the white background of the paper. Cézanne used his white canvas in a similar way, leaving bare patches that a painter of an earlier generation would have found quite unacceptable.

We can also see from *The Blue Vase* how Cézanne was using colour. He had noticed the verifiable optical phenomenon of colour induction – the attraction of the complementary colour. A red apple seen against a neutral grey wall will seem to have a green halo; a yellow apple has an apparent bluish-violet contour around it. Cézanne frequently uses these bluish-violet haloes for objects seen in bright light, because that colour is the complementary of yellow sunlight. His procedure is always empirical, not dogmatic – Cézanne is not following a set of rules, but trying, with every new picture, to record his sensations before nature.

At the same time he is so constructing his pictures that they assume a magisterial, monumental quality. Consider *The Woman with the Coffee Pot* (*Ill. 31*): the subject-matter is utterly simple, with no psychological overtones, yet it provides Cézanne with the materials for a pictorial composition of the utmost subtlety. The woman's head, body and skirt provide a succession of harmonious geometrical forms, arranged on the central axis of the picture, which is, characteristically, tipped a little to avoid over-rigidity and to set in play compensating balances which run right through the picture. One can observe Cézanne's use of alignments and discontinuities, his echoing forms and colours. Recession into space is so strictly controlled that extremes of distortion occur – as in the coffee cup on the table top – and yet these are acceptable within the overall concept of the picture itself. The artist is imposing himself on the natural world in a heroic struggle to create the picture.

As Cézanne grew older, he achieved an increasing integration of the means of picture-making. In a late landscape of *Mont Sainte Victoire* (*Ill. 25*) it is impossible to separate modelling, drawing, colour, tone and composition. Painting has been reduced to the coloured brushmark: this is the all-important common denominator of everything that happens on the canvas. Colour dominates, destroying the more solid forms and linear constructions of Cézanne's earlier work, alone giving spatial definition to the picture. As Cézanne told a visitor at the end of his life, 'The main thing in a picture is to achieve distance: I try to render perspective solely by means of colour.'

In the last years before his death in 1906 Cézanne returned to his obsession of a great composition of nude figures in a landscape. The subject itself recurs constantly throughout the history of art – the vision of an ideal world where man exists in complete harmony with nature. The idea may derive from folk-memory – the Garden of Eden story has its parallel in every culture –

31 PAUL CÉZANNE (1839–1906) *The Woman with the Coffee Pot, c. 1890–92. Oil on canvas, 4'3"×3'2" (130.5×96.5). Musée d'Orsay, Paris*

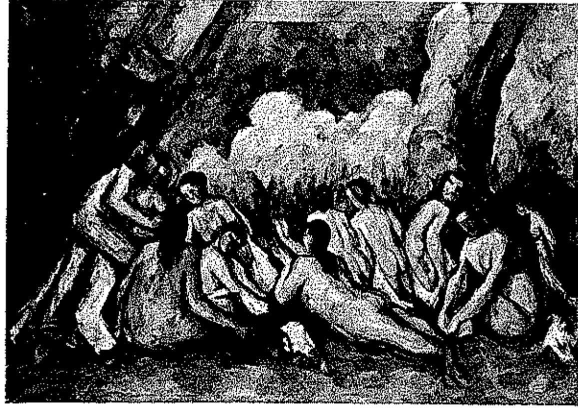
or it may be a personal nostalgia for a lost world of childhood which mature experience has never quite matched. Cézanne indeed seems to have looked back to days spent as a boy with his friends in the woods around Mont Sainte Victoire as the summit of his experience of life.

The memories were overlaid with erotic fantasies and an obscure sense of guilt. In the long series of *Bathers* compositions Cézanne had first to give the erotic a monumental quality. This was partly achieved by incorporating poses derived from other works of art, and especially from the statuary that he had copied in the Louvre: in such a way he achieved the more objective approach demanded by Manet.

The *Bathers* idea culminated in three large paintings – much the largest Cézanne ever did – of which the version in the National Gallery in London (*Ill. 32*) is perhaps the most resolved. In all of them there is a colossal struggle between the artist's vision and the result; Cézanne's ever-present sense of failure was never more acute than with the *Bathers*. 'Shall I be like Moses and die before reaching the promised land?' he asked shortly before his death. As with Monet it was this constant pursuit of the unrealizable that sustained his career at an intense pitch from beginning to end.

The comparison with Monet is apt, because the late *Bathers* compositions, like the late *Nymphéas*, were first widely regarded as failures. Only now do we begin to understand Cézanne's striving after a representation of some kind of symbolic union between desire and reality, between actual and ideal life. Like some ancient seer, the old Cézanne seems to be on the edge of an understanding of mysteries normally veiled. And he has achieved this state through his chosen medium as a painter – colour. Cézanne wanted to penetrate beneath appearances, and his colour somehow comes to express the depths of nature, the roots of the world. The entire picture is alive and caught up in some universal rhythm: it seems to be aglow with an inner illumination.

Cézanne is quoted as saying, shortly before his death: 'I sometimes imagine colours as great noumenal entities, living ideas, beings of pure reason.' The philosophical terminology is strangely out of character, and perhaps, like many of Cézanne's quoted remarks, reflects the questioner rather than the artist himself. But one can



32 PAUL CÉZANNE (1839–1906) *Bathers, c. 1900–05. Oil on canvas, 6′ 4″ × 4′ 3″ (193 × 130). By courtesy of the Trustees of the National Gallery, London*

use it to say that Cézanne, like Monet, proceeds from the phenomenon to the noumenon: after years of recording the appearance of things, these artists grow close to the thing itself, which is essentially unknown and unknowable. In the course of this development their attitude to space changes. Cézanne and Monet both realized that, as Bergson claimed, we can only know space in and through time, and that the changing consciousness of the observer would have to be taken into account. There is a close parallel here between the painters and such prominent literary figures as Mallarmé and Proust. Whether one can also relate pictorial innovations to the scientific discoveries of Einstein and Freud is more disputable.

About the other two great impressionists, Renoir and Degas, less need be said, not because their painting is inferior, but because the implications of their work have had so much less impact on others. Auguste Renoir (1841–1919) was a natural painter. More than any of the other impressionists, he could have had the easy success of a Salon portrait painter; he must have often felt tempted to abandon the intransigent position adopted by his friends. He was never as deeply committed to landscape painting in natural light as his friend Monet was, and landscape is an important but subsidiary part of his *œuvre*.

Renoir was essentially a painter of people, and more specifically of attractive young women. The frank sensuality of his art is evident in his colour, his touch,

his preferred forms, as in the subjects themselves. He was the heir to Watteau, to Boucher and to Fragonard, whose works he greatly admired, and the existence of this bond with the French 18th century is a reminder that at heart Renoir was a traditionalist, not a revolutionary. His tastes were conservative – learnt from other painters, not from nature – and while his friends talked of innovation Renoir quietly continued what others had done before him. Thus his painting relates directly to all his immediate predecessors – Ingres, Delacroix, Corot, Courbet, Manet – in a natural, unforced way.

Renoir had no private means, and had to earn a living from painting. After Salon refusals, he was one of the most active organizers of the first group-exhibition in 1874: it was very important for him that he should get a following of patrons and collectors. Yet the paintings that he showed in 1874 hardly merit the label impressionist: *La Loge* (*Ill. 33*), for example, is a highly sophisticated picture, appropriately for the subject. It shows what Renoir has learnt from the Old Masters, from Titian and Velasquez in particular, and from his older contemporaries, Manet and Degas. The palette is not the rainbow palette of the impressionists, but, as with early Manet, one dominated by black and white. In fact Renoir uses black as a definite colour, at the same time that Monet was urging its abolition.

33 PIERRE AUGUSTE RENOIR (1841–1919) *La Loge, 1874. Oil on canvas, 31½″ × 23½″ (80 × 64). The Courtauld Institute Galleries, London*

Perhaps Renoir felt the force of this argument, because after *La Loge* he adopted a different palette, and began to use cool, chalky colours. In the *Moulin de la Galette* (*Ill. 34*) a flickering light falls over the young people as they sit round the table on the café terrace. The modern life subject-matter derives from Baudelaire, and has its immediate precedents in Manet's café conversation-pieces. But whereas Manet, like Degas, remains emotionally removed from the subject, Renoir is a participant. The *Moulin de la Galette* is a painting of Renoir's friends, and it is this peculiar intimacy that gives the picture and others like it a human warmth and radiance that is Renoir's most striking quality.

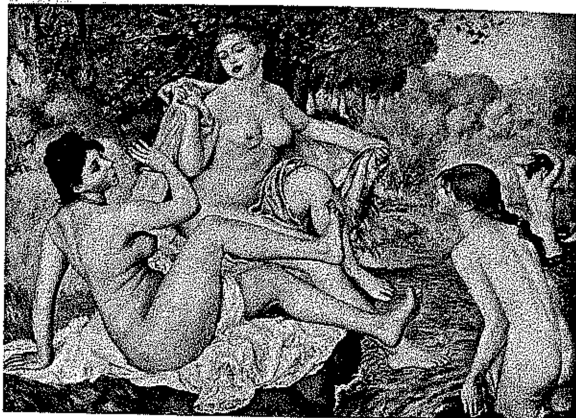
To a certain extent Renoir was putting impressionist principles into practice in the late 1870s. He was painting out of doors, observing the colours of shadows and reflections, and had a particular predilection for dappled, broken-light effects. His rapid, deft technique allowed him to break up colours, juxtaposing complementaries,

34 PIERRE AUGUSTE RENOIR (1841–1919) *Moulin de la Galette, 1876. Oil on canvas, 4′ 4″ × 5′ 9″ (131 × 175). Musée d'Orsay, Paris*

and concentrating sometimes on the hot end, sometimes on the cool end, of the spectrum. But his progress was never consistent; he admitted to Monet late in life that he never quite knew what he was going to do next.

Renoir's uncertainties over his own painting reached a high pitch in 1881. Dissatisfied with the lack of public response to the early impressionist exhibitions, he had started showing at the Salon again. As he told the dealer Durand-Ruel who did what he could to help him, 'There are hardly fifteen art lovers in Paris capable of liking a picture without Salon approval.' And Renoir's paintings in the 1878 and 1879 Salons won him immediate public support and some wealthy and powerful patrons whose personal friendship at once changed his way of life.

Trying to find a way out of his personal dilemmas, Renoir began to travel, visiting North Africa and Italy. The latent traditionalism in his temperament now came out, and he turned to Raphael, to Pompeian painting, to Ingres as exemplars. Feeling increasingly out of sympathy with the younger generation of artists in Paris, and perhaps with Seurat and his followers in particular, Renoir turned away from contemporary subject-matter. The climactic work of this period is a large *Bathers* composition (*Ill. 35*) – a deliberate rejection of the art of his time in favour of a hard, dry technique and a carefully composed articulation of near-sculptural forms. And the whole idea of painting nymphs bathing around a pool seemed a provocative reversion to a timeless,



35 PIERRE AUGUSTE RENOIR (1841–1919) *Bathers, 1885–87. Oil on canvas, 3' 10" × 5' 7" (116 × 170). Philadelphia Museum of Art (Mr and Mrs Carroll S. Tyson Collection)*

unreal, classical subject just at the moment when such painting seemed to be finally dead.

It was scarcely surprising that, when *The Bathers* was publicly exhibited in 1887, Renoir's friends found it disconcerting. 'I do not understand what he is trying to do,' Camille Pissarro wrote to his son. Even Renoir admitted that 'everybody agreed that I was really sunk, and some said I was irresponsible.' One imagines that only Cézanne, who remained close to Renoir at this time, would have had some sympathy for Renoir's ambitions, even if the means used would certainly not have appealed to him.

Renoir rode out the storms of the 1880s, withdrew to Cagnes in the South of France among his growing family, and settled down to paint whatever he enjoyed painting. He softened the harsh forms in his compositions, and allowed his naturally delicate brushwork to dominate his canvases. For a time his preferred palette was of cool greens and blues, often with a pearly, iridescent quality, but as he grew older so the colours became warm and richer, until finally hot reds and a golden-orange predominated.

Most of the late paintings are of women, and many are of Gabrielle, the nursemaid of the Renoir children who became the painter's favourite model (*Ill. 36*). She served as nymph and goddess just as readily as she posed as herself. Renoir saw in her the epitome of woman. His art is a homage to feminine qualities – gentleness, sensitivity, protectiveness – and a testimony to love and affection, both maternal and sensual.

This is at once obvious if one compares Renoir with Degas, the fourth great impressionist and the one who shared with Renoir a preference for figure subjects. Edgar Degas (1834–1917) was also obsessed with women, but his treatment altogether lacks the warmth and humanity of Renoir's. Nor is the detachment with which he paints and draws his models the same as the more objective attitude demanded by Manet: it seems something extremely personal, the consequence of Degas' psychological make-up rather than of any considered artistic position.

36 PIERRE AUGUSTE RENOIR (1841–1919) *Gabrielle à la rose, 1911. Oil on canvas, 22" × 18½" (55.5 × 47). Musée d'Orsay, Paris*

The association of Degas with the term impressionism presents some difficulty of definition. He was an impressionist in so far as he belonged to the group of young men who stopped showing at the Salon and arranged their own group exhibitions between 1874 and 1886. He also, if a little belatedly, adopted subject-matter drawn from everyday existence, but he was not a painter of nature. Degas also lacked Monet's interest in light, and never developed the kind of broken brushwork and divided colour seen in the work of Monet, Renoir, Cézanne and for a time even Manet. If one has to justify using the term impressionist for Degas' paintings it must be on other grounds, and in particular because of his interest in movement, or, more explicitly, in seizing that phase of a movement which somehow reveals both what has passed and what is to come.

This was to become Degas' obsession, but it had already begun to appear in much earlier works. Consider the *Misfortunes of the City of Orléans* (*Ill. 37*), a curious bid for Salon success in 1865, which demonstrates very clearly how this kind of picture lost its *raison d'être* as its

37 EDGAR DEGAS (1834–1917) *Misfortunes of the City of Orléans, 1865. Paper on canvas, 2' 10" × 4' 10" (85 × 147). Musée d'Orsay, Paris*

conventions and assumptions were questioned by younger artists of Degas' intelligence and sensitivity. Degas certainly wanted to paint large figure compositions with classical or historical subjects: he wanted his work to have the harmonious composition and clarity of line of the Old Master paintings that he had studied in Italy. And yet somehow everything falls apart and is unconvincing; we may admire the *Misfortunes of Orléans* for its parts and forget what the whole is intended to represent. It is the details of the horsemen and especially of the fleeing girls with long flowing hair that prefigure exactly the Degas of the future.

Degas was painting these historical Salon pieces at a time when Manet, the disciple of Baudelaire, derided such subject-matter. But once Degas had accepted their obsolescence, he moved quickly into the painting of modern life. He made a special study of horse-racing scenes, the depiction of moving animals offering him the sort of challenge that he best responded to. Again and again he would draw a subject, trying to achieve a satisfactory pictorial representation. His own observations were supported by the evidence of photography, now for the first time available to the artist.

38 EDGAR DEGAS (1834–1917) *The Belleli Family, 1859–62. Oil on canvas, 6' 7" × 8' 4" (200 × 253). Musée d'Orsay, Paris*

It is natural that Degas should have been interested in the camera, because his own early portraits represent that phase of naturalistic painting which comes closest to the photograph. In the portrait of the *Belleli Family* of 1859–62 (*Ill. 38*) every detail is set forth with precision, and the composition is constructed with extreme care. Degas' aim seems to be a sort of stasis, an immobility that represents a moment fixed in time. Only a painter later to be so concerned with movement could paint its absence with such fidelity. Degas went on to exploit the snapshot effects made possible by the camera, even before it was technically possible to use a short exposure. Figures hurrying across a square, dancers rehearsing, the hubbub in an office – such movements caught his eye and tempted his brush.

Degas' portraiture shows an interesting change of emphasis. He was a man of private means, and did not need to seek commissions as Renoir did: he could please himself about his subjects. Most of the portraits are in fact of his family and friends; they start as studies of physiognomy, in the manner of Ingres, but the sitter's environment becomes increasingly important for Degas,

and he devotes more and more time to the setting for the figures. In a sense, both the *Belleli Family* and the *Cotton Market in New Orleans* (*Ill.* 39) are the same sort of picture – family conversation pieces; but in the later one we are made aware of the kind of life the young businessmen lead – how they spend their time, what their working environment is like, who their acquaintances are. More than any other painter, Degas comes close to the naturalist novels of Zola and the Goncourts. *L'Absinthe* (*Ill. 40*) is like an illustration to a novel: we find ourselves asking questions about the personal histories of the man and woman involved, as though their existence was something that extended beyond this scene in the café.

39 EDGAR DEGAS (1834–1917) *Cotton Market in New Orleans, 1873. Oil on canvas, 29" × 36" (71 × 92). Musée des Beaux Arts, Pau*

Degas' interest in the anecdotal, story-telling role of painting was comparatively shortlived, though it was shared by contemporaries like James Tissot and followers like the English painter W. R. Sickert. It was of course opposed to the general tendency in advanced painting in the 1870s, which, as we have seen, was towards the progressive elimination of anything non-pictorial. In itself this helps to explain Degas' isolated, even anomalous, position in the later 19th century: though indisputably a very great painter, he played little part in the movements of his time.

Confirmation can be found in Degas' interest in perspective construction. Manet, Monet and Cézanne were all anxious to flatten their pictures, avoiding spatial recession: they considered a picture essentially a flat surface, covered with colours arranged in a certain order, to paraphrase a later definition. This approach unquestionably became a fundamental of modern art. Degas, however, was slow in accepting it. In the 1870s. as we see from the *Cotton Market* and *L'Absinthe*, he rejects any generally flattening device, and instead exploits the contrasts between shallow and receding space. In his pictures the eye is led back to land upon key features that are pushed to one side or into corners. We get used to jumpy compositions, with figures and vistas cut by the frame, and areas of empty space as formally telling as the figures or objects that inhabit them. The voids between the legs of the dancers may make more interesting shapes than the legs themselves. Degas often shows remarkable originality and audacity in his compositional procedures – as in the way the newspaper bridges the café tables in *L'Absinthe*, holding together a composition

40 EDGAR DEGAS (1834–1917) *L'Absinthe, 1876. Oil on canvas, 36¼" × 26¾" (92 × 68). Musée d'Orsay, Paris*

that otherwise would certainly collapse. Yet this is not the sort of thing that Degas' contemporaries were much concerned with.

Nevertheless, Degas' late work shows that same simplification and concentration that we find in Monet and Cézanne. After the 1870s he progressively limits his subject-matter until finally his exclusive concern is with his female model, whom he paints performing certain basic actions – washing and drying herself, stepping in and out of a tub (*Ill. 83*). Even the actual movement matters less and less, and though the presence of the figure is essential, Degas is now so emotionally detached that the woman's only function is to make the creation of a picture possible.

Figures tend to fill the paintings, excluding all other elements. One gets closer and closer to them, and this is perhaps a consequence of Degas' failing eyesight, as if he needed to reassure himself of their physical existence. Difficulties of vision also encouraged Degas' interest in sculpture; he had for long been in the habit of making three-dimensional studies to help in the preparation of pictures. But it would be a mistake with Degas, as with Monet, to attribute too many facets of his late work to a visual defect.

Degas was always interested in the craft of painting, and his ability as a draughtsman was outstanding. Increasing dissatisfaction with oil paint led him to constant experiment, and he diluted the paint until it flowed across the canvas as easily as watercolour. He revived the use of pastel, sometimes in conjunction with thin oil washes, and the light and bright colour range of pastel dominates his later work. His final preference was for charcoal, often supported by pastel, and the lines are repeated and the emphasis on the form shifts within the painting much as it does in late portraits of Cézanne – the *Old Woman with the Rosary* (*Ill. 41*) for example.

41 PAUL CÉZANNE (1839–1906) *Old Woman with the Rosary, c. 1898. Oil on canvas, 31¾"×25½" (81×65.5). By courtesy of the Trustees of the National Gallery, London*

Degas' best work, like Cézanne's and Monet's, was done at the end of a long career, at a time when younger generations had already surpassed it in invention and daring. Yet all three men approached the ultimate mysteries of painting, leaving behind pictures that silence us by their depth and profundity. On the threshold of the 20th century, it is the old men of the 19th who provide us with the touchstone to which we must constantly revert.

CHAPTER THREE

Post-Impressionism

Inevitably the dissatisfaction with their own work that all the impressionist painters felt in the 1880s was reflected in the next generation. For Seurat, Van Gogh and Gauguin, the painting of Monet and his friends represented a final phase of naturalism which was inadequate to the demands of the time. They all became critical of a certain triviality in the matter and manner of the new painting of the 1870s, and were convinced that something more fundamental, more profound, should take its place.

It was not clear, however, what the alternative should be, and in the later 1880s the avant-garde divided into two sometimes very hostile factions. Seurat and Gauguin were the respective leaders: neo-impressionist (or divisionist, or pointillist) and synthetist (or symbolist, or cloissonist) were the labels attached to them and to their followers and associates. But the antagonism was essentially one of personal antipathy and rivalry, and in some respects the two men had common ground. The greatest artist of this generation, Vincent van Gogh, refused to commit himself entirely to the practices or beliefs of either.

The short career of Georges Seurat (1859–91) has the same kind of logic and precision that his own painting possesses. In place of the disorder and untidiness of the art of his time, whether academic or avant-garde, Seurat offered a carefully worked out alternative. At first he shared the confidence in scientific method of many of his late 19th century contemporaries, and seems to have believed it possible to put the art of painting on a quasi-scientific footing. He, like Courbet, was convinced that the final solution to all pictorial problems was near at hand. His preparation for implementing his ambition, on both theoretical and practical levels, was thorough, comprehensive and rapidly achieved. Born in Paris, he began with a conventional academic training at the