

Post-Impressionist and Expressionist Landscapes

Background Notes

Gerald Deslandes - 15 February 2017



Paul Cezanne, *Landscape with Mont Ste Victoire*



Post-Impressionist Landscape 1880 - 1890:

The word 'Post-Impressionism' was invented by Roger Fry when he was prompted by his catalogue printers to come up with a title for the first of two exhibitions of French art that he was organising at the Grafton Galleries in London in 1910. In the heat of the moment he revived his earlier use of a portmanteau term to describe a wide range of avant garde artists working between 1880 and 1900. The common factors among them were that they had begun to move away from Impressionism's preoccupation with the visual world and its emphasis on the transient. Their reasons for doing so were both political and financial. On the one hand some artists seem to have reacted against the apolitical and hedonistic celebration of urban life that the avant garde had embraced even before the defeat of the Commune in 1871 and the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874. At the same time others were inspired by a desire to develop their own styles and reputations outside the group in response to the commercial opportunities provided by new independent galleries.

Some of the original Impressionists continued to exhibit together until 1886. However, during the 1880s many began to adopt a constructive approach to landscape in which they attempted in Cézanne's words to create '*something solid like museum art*'. Both Cézanne and Van Gogh were regarded as outsiders by other artists in Paris because of their awkward personalities and their preoccupation with the landscape and culture of Provence. Both recognised too the way in which the light of the Midi made distant objects seem closer and colours more vivid. Indeed Cézanne's comment that '*The sun here is so tremendous that it seems to me that the outlines were silhouetted not merely in black and white but in blue, red, brown and violet*' might easily be misattributed to Vincent.

These factors encouraged them to adopt a 'decorative' style in which they rhymed different landscape elements with each other and related them to the flat surface and four sides of the canvas. The brilliance of Provençal light encouraged Van Gogh to use emotive colours and a nervous use of line that owed much to the influence of Japanese art. Equally Japanese was his eclectic approach to nature in which he selected particular elements - such as a sprig of cherry blossom or a line of hills - and endowed them with an emblematic significance. Interestingly, when he first arrived in Arles he was struck by the unreal beauty of the town, which he first saw beneath a Hiroshige-like covering of snow. Writing to his brother, he remarked *'We know how much the Impressionists owe to Japanese art so why not go to Japan or to the south, which is the same thing?'*

In contrast Cézanne created landscapes in a more architectonic way by building his individual impressions into a cohesive whole. He emphasised the straight lines of the horizon and reduced the landscape to simple geometric forms. He used pale, washed-out colours that referenced the tones of the paper or canvas beneath them. Unlike Van Gogh, Cézanne was deeply rooted in the south and in his memories of his childhood friendship with Zola. His paintings of bathers recall not just their care-free summers on the banks of the Arc but the antique sculptures that are ubiquitous reminders of the region's Roman occupation. Their influence led his contemporaries to relate his works to the classical sobriety of Poussin and to the primitivism of an artist *'who stammered because he could not speak'*. Mary Cassatt compared his appearance to a cut-throat's and he himself told his coachman that *'The world does not understand me and I do not understand the world.'* Yet by the time of his death in 1906, artists such as Picasso were starting to recognise him as *'the father of us all'*.



Vincent Van Gogh, *Landscape from St Remy*, 1889



Paul Gauguin, *Vision after the Sermon*, 1889

Post-Impressionist Landscape 1890 - 1900

By 1890 a number of other young artists had begun to paint landscapes that emphasised picture-making rather than the imitation of nature or its transient effects. At Pont-Aven in Brittany Gauguin was joined by Emile Bernard, Charles Laval and Roderic O'Connor. Like Van Gogh, with whom he had spent a disastrous autumn in Arles, Gauguin sought to capture the simplicity of rural life through an emotive use of line and colour. Many of his paintings comprised strong outlines surrounding flat, unmodulated areas of tone, which resembled the stained glass windows of local churches. In *The Vision After the Sermon* and *The Yellow Christ* the solemnity of the figures, the omission of light and shade and the revival of religious subject matter produced a timeless quality that is reminiscent of Millet's *Angelus*. Like Van Gogh, Gauguin represented rural life in a nostalgic and sentimental way that suggests analogies to the orientalism of Delacroix's paintings of Algeria. When he transferred the same motifs to the Pacific, he peopled his landscapes with self-consciously naked figures whose apparent disorientation in their surroundings created an impression of a lost paradise. The same interweaving of the themes of nature, primitivism and lost innocence can be found in the landscapes of Henri Rousseau, the Fauves, the *Brucke* and the *Blaue Reiter*.

Meanwhile more socially-conscious artists such as Seurat were using a similar decorative approach to represent the Normandy coastline and the banks of the Seine. The schematised restraint of *La Grande Jatte*, Seurat's portrayal of a Parisian Sunday in the park, contrasts the more vivacious and sensuous portrayals of picnics and boating parties by the Impressionists. It combines a static frieze-like composition

with *pointillism*, a repetitive and disciplined approach to brushwork that imitated the mechanical procedures of photography. The influence of commercial art on landscape painting was symptomatic of the vogue for Japanese screen-making, lacquering and enamel work. The tendency of the decorative arts to represent landscape in terms of pattern and symmetry and without reference to human associations or emotions appears in the work of Vuillard and Puvis de Chavannes. It went hand in hand with a growing interest in an abstract language of form. As Maurice Denis wrote in 1890, *'We should remember that a picture.... before It is a war horse, a nude woman ... or an anecdote.. is essentially a flat surface covered with colours arranged in a particular pattern.'*

The 1890s witnessed a retreat into aestheticism as an escape from *'the near at hand and the everyday'*. This began with the work of Symbolist writers such as Mallarmé and Gustave Khan and influenced painters such as Odilon Redon and Gustave Moreau. The decade was also characterised by a sense of unease that critics have related to contemporary political and economic tensions, the rise of theosophy and the invisible forces associated with the invention of the wireless, the telephone and the X-ray. The drift towards intangibility and the portrayal of inner worlds ranged from the expressionist landscapes of Munch and Strindberg to the immersive, dematerialised veils of Monet's lily-ponds. Klimt's preoccupation with the *'monstrous, the nervous, the artificial and the mystical'* identifies him as a fellow traveller and his landscapes are typical of the late nineteenth century in privileging decorative patterns above the immediacy of *plein air* painting. In common with his peers he rejects Baudelaire's injunction to capture *'the fleeting, the transient and the contingent'*. This had been the call to arms of the Impressionists and is what most clearly separates them from the succeeding generation.

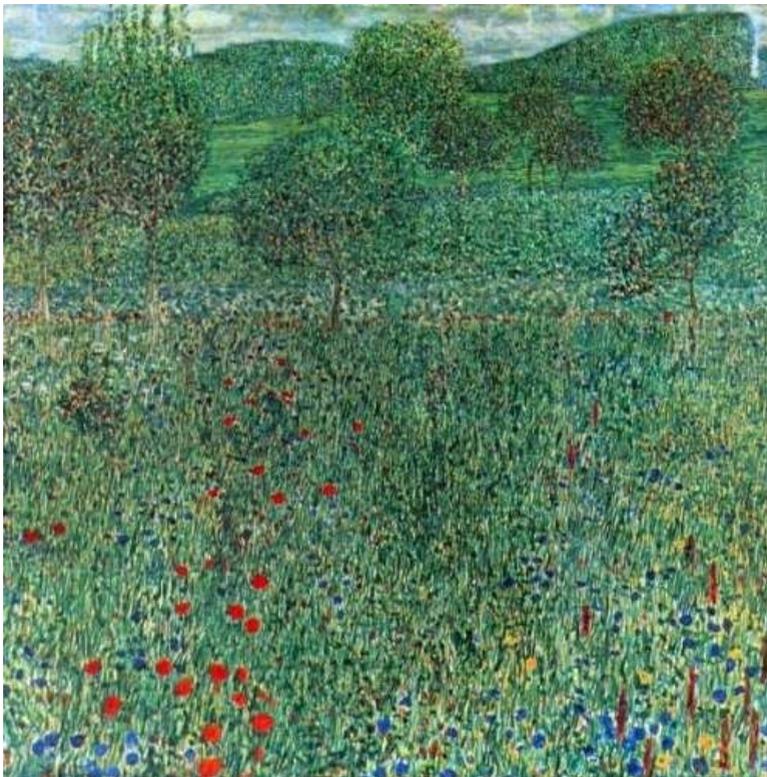
Further reading:

Kendall, Richard (ed.) *Cezanne by Himself: Drawing Paintings and Writings*, 2004

De Leeuw, Ronald (ed.) *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, 1997

Gauguin, Paul *Noa Noa: The Tahitian Journal*, rev. ed., 1985

Thomson, Richard & Rapetti, Rodolphe *Van Gogh to Kandinsky: Symbolist Landscape Painting in Europe 1880 – 1910*, 2012



Gustav Klimt, *Untitled Landscape*