

Bjoern Hartmann  
ARTH 102 Paper 2  
TA: Alison Bechtel  
04/17/2000

***Context, context, context.***

**The relationship between seventeenth-century Dutch and nineteenth-century French landscape painting, and the fallacies of museum exhibitions.**

Art does not arise out of the void. It can only be created by a particular artist, at a particular moment in time, at a particular location in space. Art communicates a meaningful message to its audience. But while we readily attribute the origin of that meaning to the individual creator's genius, we often overlook the importance of the artist's contemporary society in guiding and shaping this message. Whether consciously or subconsciously, all artists inevitably must include in their works the core practices and ideas of their times – simply because they cannot do otherwise. Art is created in context, and as the social context changes over time, so do the meanings of the artworks.

Equipped with this framework, an extended comparison of landscape paintings from the seventeenth-century Netherlands and from nineteenth-century France reveals how societal structures create cohesion between paintings of the same time period and location as well as division between works of different periods and spaces. Furthermore, an analysis of the present-day display of these pieces in a major American museum shows that for similar reasons, decontextualization is inevitable in the exhibition of non-contemporary works.

The Netherlands of the seventeenth century held a unique position in Europe after their official national independence in 1648. In a republic unlocked from aristocratic despotism and clerical oppression, an economy built on commerce thrived and gave rise to a wealthy upper class of trades people.<sup>1</sup> This new urban group of art buyers was interested in decorative pictures for their city homes that celebrated the particularities of their *present* nation. (While similar in pictorial style, the more generic ‘Classical landscapes’ of Claude Lorraine paid homage to a Golden Age of the *past* and were less sought after by this particular group of buyers.)<sup>2</sup> Thus a distinct style of carefully crafted dramatic landscape painting depicting the local Dutch countryside emerged as a successful new field.<sup>3</sup>

Salomon van Ruysdael’s Landscape with Cattle and an Inn serves as a good example of the favored visual style of the day. The low horizon line and the infinitely stretching skies with spectacular towering clouds unmistakably place the depicted scene in the Low Countries. A group of traveling merchants anchors the painting in Ruysdael’s times. Scrupulous attention to detail satisfies the demand for realism. Only the small scale of the human figures and the emphasis on natural forces come as a surprise given the assumed clientele of wealthy urban merchants. This paradox can be resolved by taking religion into account. While the Dutch republic was relatively tolerant of most beliefs, Calvinism, with its emphasis on frugality and industry, was still the predominant religious conviction of the time. Thus the small-scale depiction of the merchants can be interpreted as a moral reminder to the painting’s owner to live humbly.

Salomon van Ruysdael’s better-known cousin, Jacob Isaacksz. van Ruisdael, employs the same discrepancy in scale between man and nature but exaggerates it even

<sup>1</sup> Honour and Fleming, 1995, pp. 530, 544.

<sup>2</sup> Honour and Fleming, 1995, pp. 550, 561.

<sup>3</sup> Silver, 1993, pp. 270-271.

more in his undated oil painting Landscape with a Waterfall.<sup>4</sup> The pictorial style is quite similar to his uncle's and it shall suffice here to point out Ruisdael's extraordinarily life-like rendering of splashing water at the bottom of the shown waterfall. The low-value, gloomy color scheme reinforces the overbearing impression of nature's power. The principle figure pointing at the falling water could be interpreted as a warning not to underestimate this power, or conversely, not to overrate one's own importance.<sup>5</sup>

Meindert Hobbema, a pupil of Jacob Isaacsz. van Ruisdael, depicts a scene strikingly similar to Salomon van Ruysdael's Landscape in his Landscape with Wooded Road, executed in oil on canvas in 1662. Again, a group of majestic trees occupies much of the left half of the picture and a dynamic sky introduces great depth. The rendering is once more very meticulous, stressing verisimilitude and hiding the individual brushstroke, although the palette in general appears to be more subdued. As before, manmade structures hide behind the grand profile of nature, and the depicted figures are dwarfed by the scale and force of nature. However, where Ruysdael's figures are confined and restricted by nature, Hobbema arranges them openly and conversely fences in trees and bushes. While closely following the pictorial manner of Ruysdael and Ruisdael, Hobbema thus shows a less threatening relationship between nature and mankind.

Interestingly, another picture by Salomon van Ruysdael breaks out of this so far very narrowly defined visual style of Dutch landscape painting. In his 1650 oil painting, Canal, he delivers a different perspective on rural Dutch life, focusing on a seascape. The painting is smaller than the other pictures discussed so far, and presents a balanced arrangement between people and nature. While the horizon line is still in the lower third

<sup>4</sup> The PMA dates the painting very vaguely as "17<sup>th</sup> century."

<sup>5</sup> This once again could be linked to Calvinist theology. Unfortunately, I was unable to substantiate a link between the image and a fitting German proverb linking falling water to the loss of material possessions.

of the picture, for the first time, the clouds in the sky are not of the voluminous and imposing low cumulus type, but rather of the lighter, less tangible cirrus type. In the foreground, a boat with fishermen is the focus of attention, and in the background, a massive church spire and the jutting sails of merchants' boats define the horizon line. Some animals are present in the scene, but they are small in scale and do not exhibit the kind of violent self-determination found in Salomon's other painting. Importantly, this image precedes his previously discussed work in time, so it would be false to infer an increasing control of mankind over nature from the sequential presentation chosen here. Rather, it appears that the dialogue between people and nature was a constant theme of the period, and that the occasional infusion of the scenes with religious symbolism determined the balance of the relationship between the two entities. This finding diverges significantly from the interpretation of Salomon van Ruisdael's landscape in the earlier paper, which can be taken as a first indicator of the importance of proper contextualization of any work of art for an accurate ascription of meaning.

While the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic was arguably the most advanced and democratic nation of its time in Europe, the social changes that took place in the two hundred years between the worlds of the wealthy Low Countries merchant and the urban *flaneur* of nineteenth-century France could not have been greater. While the Dutch Republic carried many of the seeds of what would later grow into the characteristics of modernity, it would take the violent upheavals of societal as well as technological revolutions to truly transform every aspect of people's day-to-day life. The Industrial Revolution ineradicably altered the nature of work while the French Revolution irrevocably changed the way people thought about society. Constant change and

progress was now seen as positive, natural and necessary. Life was moving at a rapid, ever-accelerating speed. To stand still was to fall behind. Since the development of photography had made life-like representations ubiquitous, artists set off on a journey of new experimental visual expression.

For the Impressionists, this journey entailed a fundamental change in their approach to painting. Claude Monet and his circle of friends deconstructed the process of seeing itself. Focusing on how things look, not how things are, their paintings reflect the experience of perception rather than that which is being perceived. (Comm 260 Fall '99, Lecture notes) Monet's oil painting Railroad Bridge at Argenteuil (1874) exhibits the three unifying characteristics that signify this Impressionist approach: direct painting from observed reality; lively, detached brushwork; and unmodulated patches of color. (Dr. Silver, lecture notes) Not only the pictorial style, but also the chosen subject necessarily and unmistakably reflect Monet's times. The railroad itself is undeniably the single most important symbol of progress of the nineteenth century. Perhaps less obvious but no less important is the choice of the particular location. The maturation of the Industrial Revolution saw the creation of the work-free weekend, which created an entire leisure culture. The railroad provided city dwellers with easy and affordable transportation to suburban vacation spots. Argenteuil, the place depicted, was such a Sunday outing location and Monet himself was one of the many bourgeois vacationers.

Although Monet's The Sheltered Path (Oil on canvas, 1873) does not explicitly tell us about its location, the similarities to Railroad Bride at Argenteuil in the depicted environment and in the color choices together with the two images' close succession in time suggest that this painting shows us another view of the vacation spot in the Parisian periphery. While there are no visible artifacts of industrial technology, the figure of the

male *flâneur* strolling down the path of what seems to be a riverbank succeeds at pinpointing the work in space and time just as well as the image of a passing train could have done. The Sheltered Path even surpasses Monet's other view of Argenteuil in its 'Impressionist' pictorial qualities. The brushwork is almost completely detached from objects and the color patches represent exclusively optical, not local, color.<sup>6</sup>

In comparison, Camille Pissarro's Quai Napoleon, Rouen (1883, Oil on canvas) looks less radical in its departure from conventional landscape painting. While employing the principles of Impressionist painting outlined above, Pissarro's brushstrokes are generally more descriptive of the objects themselves than Monet's. In addition, Pissarro's colors are less saturated and thus do not allow for wide-ranging modulations in each object's optical color. This becomes especially apparent in his rendering of water, which shows considerably less reflection than Monet's. It is significant to note that the subject matter that is superficially so similar to Monet's Railroad Bridge, exhibits a distinctly different focus underneath. Whereas Monet shows us the countryside as a recreation spot for urbanites, Pissarro paints the less illustrious countryside of the people living and working there.<sup>7</sup>

Yet another variation on Impressionist principles is given by Paul Cezanne's oil painting Quartier Four, Auvers-sur-Oise (1873). The color of his strokes does not vary as much within objects. He uses fewer, bolder brushstrokes that are not only detached from the objects, but that start to obscure them entirely. The horizon line has moved up to the top of the picture and has effectively tilted the ground plane towards the viewer. As a result, all objects seem to be sliding towards the bottom and off the canvas - the background is pushed into the foreground. By expanding on the Impressionist style,

<sup>6</sup> Optical color refers to the perceived color of an object at a certain point as it hits the eye, taking into account lights, shadows, reflections, etc.

<sup>7</sup> Silver, ARTH102 lecture notes, Spring 2000

Cezanne effectively makes the surface of the picture more important than the space depicted. Confronted with the painting, the eyes' focus continually switches between surface and image. Viewing becomes an active experience with a temporal dimension – a development only too appropriate for a society obsessed by movement, activity, and progress.<sup>8</sup>

Of the four Impressionist paintings surveyed, only the picture analyzed in the first paper, Monet's Railroad Bridge at Argenteuil, explicitly depicts a technological mark of the Industrial Revolution. In the earlier essay, I argued that the railroad was used as a symbol for the larger process of submitting nature under mankind's will through the means of technology. After putting Monet's work into the context of other Impressionist paintings, it becomes apparent that the focus instead is on a *return* to nature, made possible through inventions that allowed city dwellers to escape the loud and noisy cities that the Industrial Revolution had made so popular.

The argument has been made that both seventeenth-century Dutch landscape paintings as well as nineteenth-century French landscape paintings are inextricably linked to their contemporary cultures' practices and ideas. If all works of art are tied to the social context at the time of their creation, can we, as non-contemporaries, ever fully understand their meaning? Can an attempt at recreating their original context help us elucidate their messages? Or is a different meaning automatically created in a different context, and if so, how does that new meaning relate to the original message as understood by the artist's contemporaries? An analysis of the exhibition technique of the

---

<sup>8</sup> Gross, COMM 260 lecture notes, Fall 1999

discussed works at the Philadelphia Museum of Art will seek to answer some of these questions.

In seventeenth-century Holland, artists produced paintings for an open market of wealthy *burghers* who would buy these images to adorn their private residences. In a supposed attempt to recreate the personal interior setting where these images would have been seen, the PMA constructed a separate gallery devoted to seventeenth-century Dutch painting. The small, intimate room with curved fifteen to twenty foot ceilings features an eight foot high ebonized, ornamented wood paneling which covers all four walls.

Through the presentation of the paintings in similar darkened wood frames, the viewer is initially led to assume that this paneling could have been found in a Dutch upper class member's residence. However, a sign close to the floor reveals that the paneling was purchased at the beginning of the twentieth century at a large American department store. Incidentally, these types of department stores made their first appearance during the Impressionists' post-revolutionary era, a good two hundred years after the Dutch paintings had been completed. Further investigation reveals that all the furniture in the room originated in the right time period, but in the wrong country – the four chairs, a bench and a chest were all made in England. Thus an inauthentic environment that seventeenth-century Dutch citizens could have not experienced in this way is presented to the viewer as a valid context for evaluating the artworks. It is highly questionable whether a wrong context, even an authoritative wrong context, can ever lead to a right interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

Maybe even more important though is the realization that even if the room portrayed an authentic seventeenth century private residence, the viewer would still look

---

<sup>9</sup> the right interpretation being the understanding that a person contemporary with the artist would have had

at the paintings with the mindset of an early twenty-first-century museum visitor. Replicating an environment might help the contemporary viewer visualize a time past, but it can certainly not impart on him the ideas and social practices of that time. In light of this dilemma, it might be more appropriate to discard the notion that non-contemporaries can ever fully discover the original meaning of a work of art. Undoubtedly, artworks of the past still have meaning to us when measured against present-day values and standards. If we accept our current interpretation of a work as exactly that - a current meaning that exists only in the present, did not exist in this form in the past and will be subject to change in the future - only then can we truly speak of an interpretation in context.

The case for the Impressionist exhibition is somewhat different. As Philip Fisher points out in “The Future’s Past”, many of the great museums and public art collections were created in the mid-eighteenth century (for example the Louvre, the Sloane Collection, and Vatican collections). From that point in time on, high art was produced for the purpose of being shown in museums and exhibitions, not just to be sold to private clients.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Monet and his friends (who we know had ambitions to be shown in the *Salon*) were certainly familiar with the exhibition environment and were considering it in their creations. However, this does not mean that the particular method of display in the PMA succeeds at replicating an authentic exhibition environment. The lavishly ornamented gilded frames and extensive descriptions attribute great value and artistic authority to the works. Yet, at its time, the Impressionist style challenged all academic notions of high art and was flat out rejected by other leading artists, critics, and museums.

---

<sup>10</sup> Fisher, 1975, pp. 589, 598.

An even bigger problem in interpreting Impressionist paintings today is rooted deeply in the romantic image of the artist that emerged in the middle of the eighteenth century. With the notion of progress and change as a positive force came the demand for artists to constantly reinvent visual expression, to move ahead of society in the discovery of uncharted visual territory as the “avant-garde.” But a new visual language whose codes the audience could not have learned at the time of the original confrontation must necessarily have led to frustration and the questioning of their own visual competence. Steinberg, in “Modern Art and the Plight of its Public”, argues that this was exactly the function that modern art assumed once it moved away from verisimilitude:

*“Modern art always projects itself into a twilight zone where no values are fixed. It is always born in anxiety, at least since Cezanne. It seems to me a function of modern art to transmit this anxiety to the spectator, so that his encounter with the work is—at least while the work is new— a genuine existential predicament.”<sup>11</sup>*

Now, one hundred and fifty years after the Impressionist movements, their once revolutionary innovations have been seamlessly integrated into the mainstream, the canon of high art. No anxiety remains.

In the earlier visual analysis of Ruysdael and Monet, I argued that a changed perception of nature by the artists and their contemporary societies led to the respective choices of visual attributes and subject matter. After comparing the paintings to works of their contemporaries and after critically analyzing the works’ present exhibition setting, the critical importance of context has become evident. Visual analysis effectively captures the individuality of the artist and stresses the uniqueness of the particular piece – but it cannot tell us about the general social environment in relation to which the artist

---

<sup>11</sup> Steinberg, 1962, p. 15.

originally created his work. Taken alone, it must irrevocably lead to erroneous interpretations, since the critic has no frame of reference within which he can situate his findings. Only the combined scrutiny of context and visual style, of common values and intentional departure from these values, can lead to a broader understanding, namely the appreciation of a painting as a focused look into a mirror of life in the artist's society.

References.

- Fisher, P. "The Future's Past." New Literary History VI.3 (1975).  
Gross, L. (1999). Communication 260 lecture notes, Fall 1999. University of Pennsylvania.  
Honour, H., & Fleming, J. (1995). The visual arts: a history (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.  
Silver, L. (2000). History of art 102 lecture notes, Spring 2000. University of Pennsylvania.  
Silver, L. (1993). Art in history. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall.  
Steinberg, L. (1962). Contemporary art and the plight of its public.