

Bjoern Hartmann  
ARTH 285  
October 11, 2000

De Nittis' Return from the Races and Monet's Green Park, London:

Imagery and Effect.

Claude Monet's work Green Park, London and Giuseppe de Nittis' painting Return from the Races present to the viewer two skillful elaborations upon the theme of the modernist landscape in the late nineteenth century. In Green Park, London, finished between 1870 and 1871, Monet shows us a contemporary panoramic view of a large inner-city commons populated by urbanites engaged in leisurely activities. The painting, executed in oil on canvas, measures approximately 90 centimeters in width and 40 centimeters in height. De Nittis' Return from the Races, also executed in oil on canvas and completed only a few years later in 1875, presents a suburban recreational space with a tree-lined road flanked by socializing metropolitans and frequented by carriage traffic. Adhering to the same horizontal format, de Nittis' work is slightly larger at about 120 centimeters in width and 60 centimeters in height. The evident similarities in choice of formal factors as well as subject initially suggest a possible mutual artistic intention. A closer inspection, however, will reveal differences in style that are ultimately based on the artists' different understandings of how to represent modernity. Whereas de Nittis is more concerned with narrating the detailed peculiarities of contemporary life – leading to a work based on representation that we might label *iconographically modernist* - Monet, while also captivated by the condition of modernity, de-emphasizes the actual imagery in favor of a more holistic, yet subjective approach, resulting in a *technically modernist*

style that reflects upon his psyche and his individual experience as much as on the scene itself.

Following Daumier's philosophy of *Il faut etre de son temps*<sup>1</sup> (Eisenmann, p.211), Giuseppe de Nittis offers us a vivid impression of contemporary bourgeois leisure in the Parisian periphery<sup>2</sup>. In Return from the Races, the viewer is initially drawn into the picture by the direct gaze of an elegant woman in the central foreground. The woman is part of a large group of fashionably dressed members of the Bourgeoisie (and quite possibly Clark's petite Bourgeoisie) that are enjoying a retreat to the suburban countryside. Behind the woman's back, a tree-lined road emerges from the background on the left side of the canvas and curves into the foreground on the right. Parading down this road from left to right, a procession of horse drawn carriages is, as we can assume, returning home from the horse races mentioned in the title. Over their heads, a vast blue sky stretches far into the distance, where the skyline of the city is faintly visible against the horizon.

By choosing a subject wholly characteristic of his time, de Nittis firmly establishes himself as a realist painter of modern life. However, the image includes some references to Classic tradition worth noting: the relatively prominent position granted to the sky through the use of a low horizon line and a very dynamic depiction of clouds receding into space establishes depth in a manner similar to that of seventeenth-century Dutch landscape paintings. Additionally, the framing leaves in the upper right-hand corner of the canvas and the general recession of objects in space along a diagonal alludes to French seventeenth-century landscapes (if only loosely). While the combination of the 'fleeting' and the 'timeless' elements can be interpreted as an answer

<sup>1</sup> Translation: "It has to be of its time."

<sup>2</sup> While de Nittis was Italian, he moved to Paris in 1868 and subsequently painted many views of the modern spectacle of city life. (Source: Grove Art Dictionary).

to Baudelaire's challenge to painters of modernity (Recitation notes, see also Frascina et. al, p. 82), manifestations of traditional pictographic standards in other formal elements of the painting suggest that de Nittis is a painter still partially caught up in Classic ideology.

The treatment of the figures in Return from the Races deserves some attention, since even though they occupy less than half of the canvas space, they are undoubtedly the focus of the viewer's attention. The faces and clothing of the Bourgeois figures in the foreground are carefully rendered and show great attention to detail. In fact, almost equal attention is paid to the horse carriages, the chairs and the tables. Put bluntly, all items that anchor the painting in its particular period are depicted in a highly representational manner characteristic of the Classical tradition. Only with recession into the background does the brushwork become looser on these figures and objects (the loosening of stroked was probably applied here because of its effective contribution to atmospheric perspective when used together with desaturation of color). Interestingly, de Nittis' brushwork in the depiction of nature remains rough, sketch-like, 'Impressionist'<sup>3</sup> throughout the canvas. This can be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to emphasize both the figures and the non-natural artifacts. While nature is given the majority of space on the canvas, in Return from the Races it mainly serves as a stage upon which the spectacle of the modern life, acted out by the people of 1875, unfolds. Such a practice, however, is somewhat reminiscent of the arcane landscape painting of Claude Lorrain. Clearly, the snapshot-like scene in Return from the Races does not contain a mythological narrative à la Lorrain, but it can be argued that de Nittis is presenting his painting as an informational, even educational piece about his time whose symbols can be independently 'read' by the viewers.

---

<sup>3</sup> 'Impressionist' here refers to a lack of chiaroscuro, a focus on interaction between light and object, and a relative equalization of brushstrokes across the canvas as outlined in Eisenmann, p. 246

Further corroboration for de Nittis' focus on epoch-specific iconographic display can be found in the painting's composition. Though it is asymmetrically weighed on the left side of the canvas, all movement in the picture is directed away from this area, diagonally downwards and to the right. As a result, the viewer's eye is constantly traversing the picture in a left-and-up, then right-and-down pattern, focusing on ever-new details of clothing and accessories with every pass, but never taking in the image as a whole. (Notably, the very center of the image is occupied by a white umbrella that deflects the view in any and all directions).

The subject of Claude Monet's Green Park, London is remarkably similar to de Nittis' Return from the Races. Again, the viewer is confronted with a natural landscape populated by the painter's contemporaries engaged in leisurely activities<sup>4</sup>. However, Monet's composition is relatively conservative and static compared to that of de Nittis, adhering even more closely to traditional convention. Monet shows us a wide panoramic view of Green Park framed by trees on its perimeters, with a cityscape defining the horizon line under a hazy, almost uniform overcast sky. Although the city appears much closer and more tangible in this urban view than in de Nittis' suburban landscape, the small figures occupying the intermediary space of the park seem much more distant and removed. In fact, by facing away from the canvas surface, they allow the viewer to share their visual experience, while at the same time denying her access into the pictorial space. More than the subject matter itself, however, the formal properties of the painting render a literal 'reading' of the picture impossible for the viewer.

---

<sup>4</sup> The location this time is London, not Monet's more familiar Paris, since the artist left France in 1870 because of the Franco-Prussian war.

The figural brush strokes, which lend only the most elementary shape to the bodies, reject three-dimensional modeling through chiaroscuro and thus appear as objects in space as well as two-dimensional ornaments on the surface of the canvas. Some of the figures, like the centermost couple of a man and his daughter, do not seem to be connected to the ground at all and function almost exclusively on the canvas surface. Monet's brushwork in the grass and the sky succeeds to convey a notion of depth from afar - however, when viewed from a closer distance, the distinctness of the loose marks, the three-dimensional traces left by the brush's bristles in the paint and the noticeable impasto transform the canvas into a patterned surface whose structure permanently competes with the representational aspect of the painting for the viewer's attention.

Monet does not add spatial definition through lighting or shadows, either. In fact, he does not present any discernible light source at all. As a result, Monet's colors are generally less saturated than de Nitti's full palette, and they operate in a narrower range centered around greenish, bluish, and brownish grays, almost merging together in the center of the image. This again complicates the reading of the picture as a window into a three-dimensional scene, once again facilitating its interpretation as a flat, patterned canvas.

Taking into account these deliberate measures undertaken by Monet to complicate iconographic 'reading' of his painting, it becomes apparent that his account of modernity is not based on *describing* the ever-changing, 'fleeting' condition of modernity to the viewer, but rather on capturing a subjective slice of it and presenting it in a representationally ambiguous way that *instills* the transitory experience in the viewer herself. In fluctuating between interpreting the work as either iconographic or surface-

bound, the viewer *experiences* that changing modernity, rather than just having it *described* to her.

The argument has been presented that Giuseppe de Nittis' Return from the Races is modernist in its imagery, but more conventionally narrative in its formal approach. It was then suggested that Claude Monet, in his Green Park, London, employs a different methodology, relying less on iconographic depictions and instead evoking modernity through a modernization of pictorial means, the modernization of the 'impression' (Frascina, p. 180). Although both paintings succeed in imparting upon the viewer a sense of their creator's contemporary social surroundings, it was Monet's innovation of stylistic means that influenced succeeding generations of artists on an unprecedented level.