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Impressionism and the Decline of Painting

by R. H. Ives Gammell

They put a crayon in our hands when we are seven or eight years old. We begin to draw from models of eyes, mouths, noses, ears, then of feet and hands. For a long period our backs are bent over our portfolios in front of the Hercules or the Torso and you have not seen the tears brought on by this Satyr, this Gladiator, this Venus de Medici, this Antaeus. . . . After we have spent days and worked nights by lamplight before stationary and inanimate forms they confront us with life and, suddenly, the labor of all the preceding years seems to count for nothing. . . . One must teach the eye to see nature, and how many have not seen it and never will! It is the torment of our lives. We are kept working five or six years from the living model before they turn us over to our own genius, if we have any. . . . He who has not realized the difficulties of this art does in it nothing worthwhile.
—Jean Siméon Chardin (1699-1779)

I have [begun] with Chardin's description of the training to which he was subjected in his boyhood to point out the contrast between the teaching dispensed by impressionist painters of our time with that on which the greatest impressionist painter of the eighteenth century founded his own art. The impressionist movement of the nineteenth century itself produced much fine painting and disclosed previously unsuspected material for the use of artists. It added considerably to the technical resources of their craft. By directing the attention of painters to the subtlest manifestations of color, of light, and of atmosphere, it greatly enlarged the known possibilities of painting. And, by reasserting the necessity of the painter's direct approach to nature, it gave new vitality to a then somewhat stagnant art. But this same impressionist movement was largely responsible, directly as well as indirectly, for that collapse of painting as an art which my generation has witnessed. . . .

It was through their presentation to art students that impressionist principles did the greatest damage. This was due in part to the elusive nature of these principles. It was due in a very large measure to the adoption of the art-school, or art-class, system of teaching at about the time when the impressionist method of painting became the generally accepted one. One of the most difficult methods to explain, one of the most personal of all approaches to painting—the teaching of which demands the greatest understanding of the individual needs of each student worthy of being taught at all—[impressionism was] perhaps less [susceptible] than any other way of painting . . . of being taught under art-school conditions. Because of these conditions the sound precepts of the earlier teachers were warped in transmission and crystallized in slightly distorted form or were given an application for which they were not originally intended. A large part of the teaching that is being dispensed today, wherever any pretense is still being made to teach painting as such, is drawn from this body of not wholly understood precepts, further denatured by subsequent transmissions. The painters in whom the ideas originated would, if they were alive, be the first to deny them in their present-day form.

I propose now to discuss one or two of the most maleficent of these principles of recent art

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Jean Siméon Chardin, *Young Student Drawing*, c. 1738, oil on wood, 8¼ x 6¾". Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas. [Not included in *Twilight of Painting*.]

This essay is adapted from "Considerations on Impressionist Teaching," Chapter VIII of Gammell's Twilight of Painting, *first published in 1946. A brief article on the author appears on page five.*

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teaching that owe their origin to impressionism. These principles in their original application were admirable. Probably all of the men who first gave the principles currency in America understood these original applications, but they seem to have been unable to make them clear to the majority of their students. The greater number of painters teaching after, let us say, the year 1920, had themselves acquired only a very limited technical equipment. In some few cases this equipment was sufficient for their own needs and enabled them to produce good work. But it was not adequate to make them good teachers. In their attempt to meet the requirements of their students they gave their own methods a wider scope then these methods were able to meet. The sincerity of some of these men is above suspicion. Their judgment may have been at fault. Their inadequacy to the task of teaching is demonstrated by the work of their pupils. And the evil that they taught lives after them, for some of the misapprehensions born of their teaching are now accepted as fundamental truths.

Depreciation of Drawing

Of all the separate elements of the painter's craft, drawing has always been recognized as the most essential and certainly one of the most difficult of acquisition. For that reason the great teachers of painting and the great teaching traditions have never failed to put drawing first in the student's curriculum. It is very questionable whether it is possible to draw with anything approaching distinction, or even moderate correctness, unless study has been begun early in life under a good teacher. This is much less true of the other elements of painting. If a man can really draw I do not believe he would have great difficulty in learning to paint adequately in middle life, provided, of course, he had natural aptitude. But there is small likelihood that even a very talented man could acquire more than a halting form of draftsmanship if his training started later than his teens or, at least, his very early twenties. There are certainly very few cases on record that can be cited against this view. The experience of centuries has shown that the painter cannot be started drawing too early nor be trained too thoroughly in that art. As far as I know it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that any serious painter professing to prepare earnest young men to be professional painters ever soft-pedaled the overwhelming importance of drawing and the absolute necessity of a careful grounding in drawing as the very basis of their training.

But the twentieth century was to witness the phenomenon of painters who instilled in their students a very different attitude toward drawing, an attitude which did, however, have a perfectly logical origin in the impressionist concept of painting. It is this logical origin that I wish to bring to the reader's attention, as well as the fallacy that was bound up with it. Had the virtual discarding of drawing from the student's curriculum—for to study drawing with anything but the most wholehearted intensity is tantamount to not studying it at all—been due solely to ignorance on the part of the teachers and to its appeal to the laziness of the student, I do not think it would have been so widely accepted at the start. A purely negative attack would have failed to destroy a principle so firmly established by the experience of the ages. What made a tremendous appeal to the students was that the new teaching appeared to substitute a fresh, superior, and vastly more attractive way of learning to draw for the old, severely laborious one. Nothing can better illustrate this attitude than a quotation from the life of William Merritt Chase by Katharine Metcalf Roof (1911). It deals with the early years of Chase's teaching in New York shortly after 1878.

> Irving Wiles distinctly remembers his first criticism, which is interesting because it is an example of the thing Chase meant to American students at that time. Trained in the careful methods of the academic art school of that period, Wiles said he looked with scorn that first day upon the charcoal drawings of the students about him. To his eye they seemed rough and careless, so he took out his little hard crayon, whittled it to the finest point, and began to show what careful and accurate work he could do. What was his surprise, when Chase came along to criticize, to see him look with disapproval upon his work. "No, that isn't the idea," said Chase. "Give me your charcoal. Something more like this." And he proceeded to draw, only with infinitely more skill, in the rough and unfinished manner of his pupils. After this, Wiles said he did not let his master see any more of his work until he had mastered the trick. . . .

The complete deterioration of our knowledge and our standards of draftsmanship is the most disastrous of all the sequelae of the nineteenth-century impressionist movement.

The only trouble with the new method was that it did not work. It did not work because it did not sufficiently take into consideration the difficulty of learning to draw for all but the most exceptional student. Unfortunately the new ideas did suffice to undermine the belief in the old disciplines. The result has been the virtual disappearance, in America at least, of anything that could be called real draftsmanship.

What we call drawing is a convention used to represent the shapes of things on a flat surface. These shapes we indicate most readily by means of the outlines wherewith we bound them. Now things as we see them in nature are not surrounded by outlines. The outline we make is a purely conventional means of representation with no basis in reality. But this convention provides us with an admirable way of stating certain facts about the thing represented. These facts are chiefly connected with its shape, its structure, and its volume. In its higher forms drawing is not only able to record such facts but also to record the draftsman's attitude toward these facts. Drawing, as such, necessarily separates these particular facts from another set of facts which it ignores. These latter, such as color, atmosphere, texture, values, belong to the province of painting.

Now the particular facts with which drawing concerns itself are intensely interesting to the artist and are a very important part of all representation. They are also extremely difficult for the untrained eye to register with any sort of correctness. When they have to do with anything as complex and expressive as the human body they justify a lifetime of study. . . . No artist who makes representation a part of his means of expression can afford to slight these facts. If he does not deal with them adequately his representation will look grotesque. And the ability to handle form adequately comes only from long study.

In painting, the convention of an outline is no longer necessary, as it is possible to represent objects much as they appear in nature by juxtaposed areas of color. Interest in form has led some painters to introduce outlines into their paintings. But an outline can only be introduced at some sacrifice of atmospheric effect. . . .

It is one of the basic principles of impressionism to deny the validity of representing objects by surrounding them with an outline. Some of the caustic comments by which older painters sought to bring home this principle to beginners became classic. Joseph DeCamp told me that he, when a young student, once showed Whistler a painting representing the profile of an old woman. DeCamp had indicated the edge of this profile with a

dark outline. Whistler turned to him with a snicker and asked, "What did you put a shoestring around the old lady's face for? Did she have one there?"

Undeniably, objects do not appear so surrounded in nature. They appear as colored areas bounded by other areas into which they merge or from which they stand out more or less sharply. For a picture to convey the particular sense of beauty and of mystery which we experience when we look at nature itself, it is essential to render these areas just as they appear to the eye, both as to shape, color, and degree of definition. To surround them with a line is to introduce a disturbing element which completely destroys the very quality the impressionist painter is laboring to create. In describing the general procedure of impressionist painting, I have pointed out its logical tendency to leave the exact definition of shapes to a late stage of the work. To painters who felt that the impressionist attitude was the only valid one for an artist—and that is the way most painters did feel at the beginning of this century—there was a logic in the view that the study of drawing as a separate accomplishment was unnecessary, or even harmful to the student. "If you can get all your colored areas of the right shape and in the right place," some of them said, "your picture will be drawn right."

This is true in the abstract, no doubt. That is to say, a painter who is already a fine draftsman and has a highly developed sense of form can make his shapes out of smears of paint without any preparatory outlines. In so doing he is carrying out a number of very complex operations at once, attending simultaneously to his shapes, his values, his color, and the composition of his picture. To do this successfully requires a high degree of skill in each one of these departments. But the teachers of whom I speak went further than advocating this as a method of painting. They fostered the idea that the knowledge and skill to handle these various things could be acquired in a single process by the student.

In the earlier days of impressionist teaching, the old practice still persisted of making students draw for a long period before they were allowed to paint at all. Under this system the student, when he started to paint, was already a competent draftsman, theoretically at least. And for a really competent draftsman the method of painting I have described has a good deal in its favor. But competent draftsmen are rare, even among students who have worked long and assiduously in a drawing class. And with the passing years less and less stress was placed on these preliminary studies. Finally the theory emerged triumphant that they were unnecessary and that the student could be set at once to painting, thereby avoiding the contaminating influence of the nonexistent outline and of the black and white values said to be detrimental to the color sense. A seeming authority was given this theory by the fact that there are very few drawings by Velasquez in existence. Since Velasquez drew magnificently in paint and had seemingly made no drawings (or next to none), it followed that one could learn to draw in paint without making drawings. A new method of teaching was evolved. I do not think I need add that it was given short shrift by all the painters of the day who knew anything about drawing.

I well remember a conversation I had, as a very young student, with one who, in his middle twenties, was acting as assistant instructor to the master. We all considered him at the time to have "arrived," and that was also his own view of the case. He told me that he regretted the months he had spent in the study of drawing. If he could have lived his life over again, he said, he would have scrupulously avoided any work in black and white, but would have started immediately to paint. Unfortunately, that summer was to be the peak of his artistic career. When I met him again, years later, an incompetent failure as a painter, I did not have the heart to ask him if he had changed his mind.

To the majority of students the idea was extraordinarily attractive. The serious study of form is an austere pursuit. The old system of making it a necessary preliminary to painting had the additional merit of frightening away the less earnest students. This was of great benefit to the serious ones, though it made the classes less remunerative. Color, on the other hand, makes an immediate appeal to almost anyone possessed of the slightest flair for painting. Genuine distinction in color is as difficult of attainment as distinction in drawing or design. But the not too exacting pursuit of color values, color relations, tonalities, and what not, can be made very delightful. The vagueness of these names and the elusive character of the qualities they were intended to designate gave their study a special charm. As they were qualities only perceptible to the initiated, the student felt his efforts to capture them were beyond the criticism of the mere layman. This sense of superiority was established in the first few weeks of attendance at the art class. The new principle of teaching assured the financial success of any art class which adopted it. It did more than that. It made of the austere and inaccessible art of painting a fascinating hobby within easy reach of anyone with a taste for it and enough money to pay tuition and buy materials. The virtual elimination of the serious study of drawing as a prerequisite to the study of painting made possible the present-day popularity of art as a pursuit. Once it was firmly established, the number of art students and of self-styled artists increased with tremendous rapidity. No other profession made as few demands on the intelligence or capacity of the individual as painting in the new acceptation. Few forms of activity offered equal opportunities for self-deception to its practitioners. The consequence was that "taking up painting" has become the most widely popular avenue of escape from reality for the maladjusted, the incompetent, and the misfits. The elimination of anything resembling real drawing as a prerequisite to the study of painting, and its absence in the "modern" concept of painting, made possible the immense vogue of painting as a hobby, a pastime, and a pseudo profession, . . . one of the peculiar characteristics of our era.

A generation of painters grew up wholly insensitive to fine workmanship, unable to achieve it, and affecting to scorn it.

A painter of distinction who was teaching in one of the best-known art schools in the country from about 1912 until about 1930 has told me that he was continually amazed by the change in the type of student attending the school during the course of those years. When he began to teach, the general level of the students seemed to him markedly inferior to that of his own student days. But, during the years that he taught, there was a steady decline in the caliber of the students in respect to their talent, their general intelligence, and their personality. I think most painters who have been in a position to observe art students during the last twenty or thirty years have made similar observations.

Deficient Instruction

The complete deterioration of our knowledge and our standards of draftsmanship is the most disastrous of all the sequelae of the nineteenth-century impressionist movement. It started from a new approach to a difficult problem presented in all seriousness by well-intentioned painters. They are less to blame for the error of judgment which led them to adopt it than for their inability to abandon the idea as they observed its unfortunate effect in the work of [their] pupils. The method of teaching devised by these painters failed because the ability to draw cannot be acquired except by the most diligent and concentrated study. A real sense of form can only be developed through long training. They should have recognized this after a few years of teaching, for any relaxation in a painter's

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attitude toward drawing may lead to disaster. "Drawing," runs the thrice-famous dictum of Ingres, "is the probity of art." In art, as in other fields of human activity, it is excessively dangerous to compromise with probity.

Of course, by no means all those who taught the impressionist method of painting accepted this extreme attitude toward the study of form. On the contrary, a goodly number of painters made a valiant stand against it. But, from the very start, the popularity of the new method was against them. Presently, those who had been trained in this method became teachers themselves. To these latter the new doctrine had the authority inherent in most ideas received during the formative years of our lives. Furthermore, this generation of artists was for the most part lacking in any real perception of drawing, owing to their own defective training in that respect. Their own pupils have in turn demonstrated the same attitude and the same defects, still further intensified. The results are now patent for all to see. They will become more evident as the passage of time shows that most of the painting being done today, which still seems to many novel and interesting, is merely incompetent and blundering.

A teaching which failed to develop the ability to draw, which confused rather than clarified the treatment of values and modeling, which slighted composition and ignored the ultimate goal of the artist—picturemaking—had little to offer to young men setting out to be professional painters. It was a teaching virtually reduced to cryptic aphorisms and "pep talks," interspersed with sarcastic attacks on the various forms of painting alien to the ever-narrowing outlook of the individual teachers. . . . This sort of teaching did, and still does, make a strong appeal to the amateur mind. Unfortunately, it often appeals for a brief period to many whose talents and clearheaded artistic outlook would enable them to become painters, once given a sound training. These students have often discovered too late that the intriguing maxims and the artistic mysticism of the art class did not in the long run equip them for painting pictures. It is little to be wondered at if the view spread that attendance at an art school was unnecessary to a painter's development. Under such conditions it very likely is.

The "Innocent Eye"

Impressionist art-school teaching gave currency to a view the exaggeration of which struck at the very principle of art teaching. This was the cult of the "naïve point of view," of the "innocent eye." And this, like the other destructive elements of impressionist doctrine, originated in a perfectly sound idea.

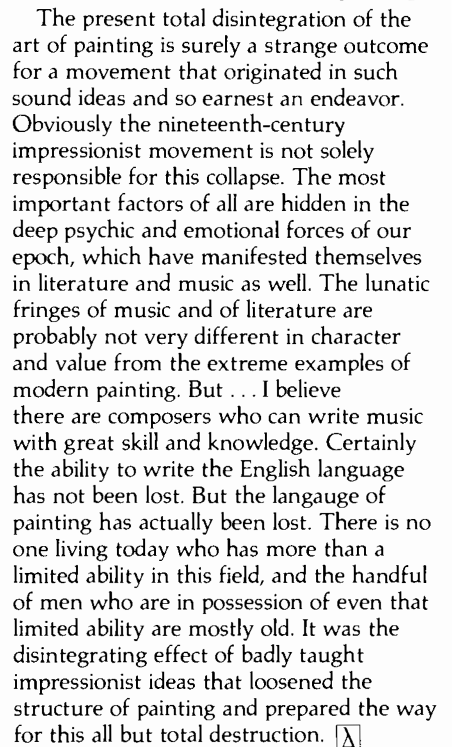
The idea was that we are prevented from recognizing the true aspects of what we see by certain preconceptions having their origin chiefly in our verbal education. We think of snow as white, for instance, and so when we look across a snowy landscape we are unaware of the blue tones which the sky reflects into the shadows and of the rosy or golden tints which the sun imparts to the lights. We are only conscious of the general aspect of whiteness, which long association has led us to expect from snow. It is the theoretical contention of the impressionists that the little child, innocent of such conventional association, perceives the aspects of the world about him as they really are, not as we have come to assume they are through our acceptance of stereotyped concepts. The impressionist painter seeks to recapture that pristine and unbiased view of the world which he believes, theoretically, to be the possession of the child or of the untutored savage. . . .

An insistence on the artist's direct perception of what he sees has probably been a part of all good art teaching. Certainly the idea is implicit in the entire development of European painting from the time of Giotto. Though we find this insistence expressed, almost in the language of today, in fragments of [Jacques Louis] David's teaching that have come down to us, the impressionists accused academic teaching in their own day of warping the vision of art students so unfortunate as to come under its influence. . . . The first-rate academic teachers did insist on a very direct observation, indeed, of many aspects of nature and . . . they regarded the study of classic forms merely as an additional element of the painter's equipment. Nevertheless, the impressionist painters' misunderstanding of the so-called academic concept of painting gave them some grounds for their accusation, grounds which were fully justified by the bad teaching of certain third-rate academic schools.

Imbued with this idea, the teachers of the impressionist point of view stressed and overstressed the evil inherent in using any formula or receipt or convention in rendering the appearance of nature. In their desire to force the student to express his own vision of what was before him, these teachers minimized the value of any working method and deliberately avoided all reference to sound and effective procedures for laying on paint or manipulating pigment. If questioned about these matters they generally evaded the question. "It doesn't matter how you put on your paint," they would say, "as long as you put down the right color in the right place." They fell back on this half-truth as on a sort of moral principle which would have a tonic effect on the student. The best painters at the turn of the century were fine workmen themselves and some of them achieved a very beautiful paint quality. But they concealed their own way of work from their students, as parents conceal sophisticated books from growing children—believing it unwholesome for students to be preoccupied with handling. As a result, a generation of painters grew up wholly insensitive to fine workmanship, unable to achieve it and affecting to scorn it. Their point of view and their ignorance prepared the way for the grotesquely clumsy handling we see in so much modern work.

The belief in the superiority of the "naïve" approach to painting first militated against the teaching of the academicians, but it presently provided a basis for attacking all teaching of any kind.

Today the application of this view seems to have reached its extreme limits. Among the [so-called] esthetically advanced, knowledge, skill, fine workmanship, even a moderate degree of competence, are considered detrimental to the work of art. The most inept and grotesque performances are praised as delightfully naïve and fresh in point of view. And the culmination of this attitude is to be seen in presenting the paintings of children, of semi-illiterates, and even of the insane, as works of art. This is one of the most logical, as it is the most revealing, of all the manifestations of modern painting.



The present total disintegration of the art of painting is surely a strange outcome for a movement that originated in such sound ideas and so earnest an endeavor. Obviously the nineteenth-century impressionist movement is not solely responsible for this collapse. The most important factors of all are hidden in the deep psychic and emotional forces of our epoch, which have manifested themselves in literature and music as well. The lunatic fringes of music and of literature are probably not very different in character and value from the extreme examples of modern painting. But . . . I believe there are composers who can write music with great skill and knowledge. Certainly the ability to write the English language has not been lost. But the langauge of painting has actually been lost. There is no one living today who has more than a limited ability in this field, and the handful of men who are in possession of even that limited ability are mostly old. It was the disintegrating effect of badly taught impressionist ideas that loosened the structure of painting and prepared the way for this all but total destruction. Λ

Reissue of "Twilight of Painting"
Long out of print, R. H. Ives Gammell's *Twilight of Painting* will be reissued next month in a quality paperback edition, on acid-free stock. The price will be $19.95 (Massachusetts residents, add 5% sales tax), plus $1.25 for shipping. Parnassus Imprints, Box 335, Orleans, MA 02653.