Influence and the rise of modern art

Turner Whistler Monet: Impressionist Visions, at the Art Gallery of Ontario, June 12 to September 12

Lee Parsons
31 August 2004

This Toronto exhibit at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) brings together the work of three of the foremost artists of the nineteenth century, J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) and Claude Monet (1840-1926). It presents 100 paintings, watercolors, pastels and prints—an expansive project involving the cooperation of some 34 museums and collectors across North America and Europe.

Aside from the considerable artistic merit of the works, the show is exceptional for a number of other reasons. The organizers have assembled representative work that, in their own words, "provides a new interpretation of Impressionism through an exploration of the artistic dialogue between the works of three of the greatest painters in the history of art." The claim is legitimate, and the case could be further made that these works collectively evidence the very seeds of modern art.

The organizers have deliberately chosen artists from three different continents and three different countries—Britain, the US and France—all of whom had a seminal involvement in the development of the "Impressionist" movement that arose in the latter half of the nineteenth century. With a focus on settings and subjects from lands other than the artists' own, the work demonstrates the interpenetration of modern cultures and influences, and their grouping in this fashion offers a rare insight into the progress of artistic development across continents and generations.

It is not likely that a general audience would be familiar with the relationship between these artists or necessarily with their work at all, and it is to the credit of the AGO that it has undertaken to draw the connections between them in opposition to a common trend toward the promotion of regional culture. Again, in their own words—"Artists cannot be understood in isolation or within the confines of a national school. This was especially the case during the second half of the nineteenth century, when the art community became increasingly international and artists interdependent."

It should nevertheless be noted that the written material that accompanies the exhibit—including the catalogue itself—makes little effort to present a broader context for the work, offering informative but relatively superficial background. With only passing reference to the momentous advances taking place in every sphere of social life in this pivotal period, the commentary narrowly defines some common influences affecting these artists and the movements they exemplify. And while it is unclear what each of them consciously drew from the world around them, their work offers its own suggestions.

The lives of these three painters in their aggregate roughly span the nineteenth century, and their work in many ways reflects the dramatic and revolutionary changes of that age. A period of vast political upheaval, the early part of the century also saw the breakup of prevailing conventions in art, most notably the rigid standards imposed on artists by the Academies, which fostered the idealization of nature and the figure. So, while the vast changes of that period may have been centered in France arising from the Revolution, it was in England that a figure such as Turner emerged with a daring "Romantic" style that challenged the existing order.

The earliest and arguably the most significant of the artists in this exhibit, J.M.W. Turner was born, the son of a barber, in 1775 near London, England. He came of age during the years of the French Revolution, captured the art world during the rise of the British Empire and the Industrial Revolution and died in Chelsea, England, in 1851—long enough to see the revolutionary convulsions of 1848 that rocked all of Europe.

Turner spent most of his life in Britain but traveled regularly to France, Switzerland and Italy, particularly in his later life, and much of his work in this show deals with his painting done abroad. It is only recently that Turner has been fully appreciated for his profound contribution to the course of artistic development of his era, and, in fact, much of his enormous bequest to the National Gallery in London was not made public until recent decades.

Among the best known of Turner's works in this show is the oil painting, *The Burning of the House of Lords and Commons, October 16 1834*. It has often been cited as an inspiration for Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* of 1875, both of which are shown below, although Whistler consistently disclaimed the influence. Denials notwithstanding, comparison of these two paintings reveals a commonality in their dramatic use of color, contrast and...in their florid realism, which even in Whistler's time was still considered avant-garde.

Artistic influence is in fact one of the central issues raised in this exhibit. There are few artists who would claim that their work is utterly original and most openly credit their influences—the matter was aptly summed up by one poet: "Originality is a trivial conceit." It is here suggested that the contributions of individual genius are nourished by protracted and broad social developments. Artists of this period, cut loose from the formal constraints of the Academy and the artificiality of neo-classicism that dominated art at the beginning of the nineteenth century, also responded to the democratic advances of that revolutionary period with expressions of a more personal and realistic nature. Turner can be said to epitomize this defiance of established forms in art.

Early in his career, Turner was a follower of the gifted, if conventional seventeenth century landscape painter Claude Lorrain. But through the course of his life, he came to extend his vision beyond an idealized depiction of nature toward a more expressive aesthetic, alarming his following and horrifying critics with what was for its day wildly abstract interpretations. His looser, more unfinished style is particularly evident in many of the watercolors shown in this exhibit that augur the coming Impressionist movement. Rooted firmly in the best traditions of the past, Turner at the same time broke rules he was thoroughly schooled in, knowing full well he was charting unknown waters.

© World Socialist Web Site

Two watercolor versions of the island church San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice vividly illustrate a moment in this development. Although Turner himself did not consider these to be more than sketches, they are now seen as anticipating the course modern art would take.

The school of Impressionism, which continues to attract adherents among artists, coalesced around a number of French artists who took light, open air and interpretive color as their guide. This school was itself an outgrowth of Realism as practiced by painters like Courbet and Corot, who sought to depict everyday settings and people in their art in opposition to existing conventions that dictated an idealization of the world within narrowly defined subjects for painting.

Undoubtedly the best known in this exhibit, the works of the French painter Claude Monet, have been popularized to a near saturation point the world over in recent years. Framed here by his predecessor Turner and his contemporary Whistler, this show allows for a welcome contrast and context for his sometimes overly decorative paintings.

Despite some recognizable parallels of style, Monet was probably not familiar with Turner's work until he was well along in developing his own impressionistic voice. Whether Monet was fully conscious of it or not, his evolution seems to crystallize artistic innovation that had been underway for decades before he presented the world with his *Impression, Sunrise* in 1874, the oil painting from which the movement ostensibly derives its name and which is included in this exhibit.

There is an honest innocence in much of Monet's work that is often both its strength and its weakness. Monet very deliberately sought subjects that were amorphous by nature, such as the cityscapes shrouded in London smog, and while this lends his painting a dreamy quality that has an irresistible appeal, one feels at times that he has excluded less obvious subjects in which to find beauty.

A good deal has been made by the organizers of this exhibit of the role of industrial pollution and smog on the Impressionist style of painting by figures such as Monet and Whistler, Although there is clearly some foundation for this thesis—particularly in light of the toxic conditions produced in London of that period—it seems to trivialize somewhat the deeper influences in their work.

Although Monet may have been among the most accomplished and celebrated in this school, others such as Whistler developed lesser-known works that nevertheless have commensurate artistic value and often a greater seriousness. Whistler was himself a contradictory figure. Born in Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1834, he spent many of his formative years abroad in Russia and England. He returned to the US and entered West Point Military Academy, after which he left America for good at the age of 21.

Struggling for acceptance between France and Britain, Whistler eventually ran afoul of Turner's foremost champion. A respected art critic and commentator in his time, John Ruskin characterized Whistler's painting in 1877 as "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face." The review led to a notorious trial in which Whistler won the right of artists to interpret the world as they wished—but at great cost to his reputation.

For this reviewer, some of the most captivating works at the AGO are from Whistler's *Nocturne* series of oil paintings, which evoke some of the mystery and drama of Turner's watercolors, particularly the accompanying work *Nocturne: Blue and Gold: Old Battersea Bridge, 1872-5*. These simple pieces offer an affecting synthesis of romance and melancholy that is remarkable for its time and must have thrown open doors to a new world of expression in painting.

Whistler in many ways represents a continuation of the work begun by Turner and yet epitomized "aestheticism"—a movement identified with the promotion of "art for art's sake" and an indifference to social life. Of course, the world had changed and the revolutions of the mid-nineteenth century had altered relations within European society. In the 1860s and 1870s, Whistler left behind, for better or worse, the early influence of Courbet. He came to subscribe to the notion that it was in the natural order that only an elite could fully understand beauty. Still, it is not clear how convinced Whistler was of such positions—he seemed to vary according to his particular purpose.

In the explosive era in which they lived, these three were among the most advanced of their time, and many questions naturally arise. What did it mean to their art that they were deeply affected by contemporary ideas about art and society and profoundly influenced by writers such as Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Nietzsche and Zola?

To a large extent the new freedoms felt by the Impressionists went hand in hand with the emergence of a new class of wealthy capitalist patrons who consciously challenged the tastes and forms of the old aristocracy and so emboldened a new generation of artists. This was a time when capitalism was consolidating the social structures necessary to its dominance and cities like London were transformed into major urban centers.

On balance, the greater significance of this is exhibition is the insight it affords into the virtual birth of the modern world as reflected in art. The more difficult task of understanding the relationship of these three artists to the great ideals and social transformations of their age, however, is a matter only indicated in this show. The working out of such relationships is a crucial issue, given the current cultural and intellectual climate in which the consideration of historical processes is generally ignored if not denied.

While it is not possible here to more than suggest such a complex investigation, this show invites us to grapple with such questions, and this in itself makes it fully worthwhile. In conclusion, we can say at least this much: These artists like other pioneers of their time personified a spirit of individualism and democratic striving that in its time was truly revolutionary.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site