

Art History

Module 1

Studying art history

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Unit 1

What is art history?

Introduction

Before embarking on the art-historical material which makes up the other modules of this course, it is important that we consider just what the discipline of art history involves. This will introduce you to some approaches which you can take to the subject.

Aims of the unit

When you have completed this unit you will be able to:

- consider the interpretation and use of art-historical texts
- identify a number of differing approaches to the subject
- select approaches and material which are most appropriate to your needs
- feel more confident in dealing with art-historical ideas and information.

Some advice on discussing works of art

Anyone studying the history of art needs to understand that there are many possible ways of interpreting a painting, a sculpture or a work of architecture. We might think that it is the role of art history to convey factual knowledge, perhaps about the way a work of art was made and the context in which it was created. Or we may consider that the role of art history is to discover the meaning works of art had for their original audience and explore the ways in which we respond to them nowadays. We might also see art history as informing us about the reasons for the creation of a work or how its form and content communicate a message. In fact, it is essential to remember that it is all these things and more that determine just what art history is and does.

Different ways of interpreting art

Below are two passages discussing Edouard Manet's *Music in the Tuileries Gardens* (sometimes called *Concert in the Tuileries Gardens*). You will find a reproduction of this painting in the **Art History pictures** list of **Web links** available via the Creativity and Arts student interest group at www.nec.ac.uk.

Manet: Passage 1

The canopy of foliage which forms the entire upper half of the painting has every appearance of being unfinished or even damaged – but it is almost certainly unchanged since Manet completed his painting. He clearly intended the effect seen here, perhaps to throw the line of figures below into sharper relief, and achieved it by painting dark green tones and then scraping back almost to the ground [the priming on the canvas] with a palette knife. This was an early passage of painting since it passes under the heads of the figures. Once the figures began to be developed, other opaque greens were brushed on to give form to the foliage, to outline the heads and hats and to link foreground and background by suggesting green filtered sunlight under the distant trees.

David Bomford, Jo Kirby, John Leighton and Ashok Roy, *Art in the Making: Impressionism* (London, 1990)

Manet: Passage 2

[Manet] was in fact at that time producing pictures which were entirely the result of direct observation, such as the Concert in the Tuileries Gardens (1862). In it we find again an extremely sketchy modelling and a composition consisting of large patches of colour and bold silhouettes, with the shadows merely indicated. The gay whirl of women's dresses, which are simply gleaming masses, and the faces which are vague, hovering patches – notwithstanding the fact that they catch likenesses with uncanny accuracy – would not have seemed so strange to the critics of the time if they had remembered that there was a similar confusion of masses, in which single things and single beings are submerged, in the Romanticism of Géricault and Delacroix, and that the principle behind this is already found in Baroque painting. But at that time there was no understanding for such connections, and moreover Manet's pictures, like those of all other artists, were judged according to the amount of realism they contained.

Fritz Novotny, *Painting and Sculpture in Europe 1780–1880* (Harmondsworth, 1978)

Activity 1

Both passages concentrate on how the painting was made by discussing something of the colour, the way Manet applied his paint and, by implication, the evidence of brushwork. However, Passage 2 goes a little further than Passage 1. Using the information from both passages, write a short paragraph – no more than 150 words – about why Manet painted in the way he did.

Discussion

Passage 1 suggests that Manet's colour tones and his use of the brush and palette knife contribute to the effect of making the figures stand forward, as well as linking the background and the foreground of the painting. The assumption is that Manet painted in this way to achieve a compositional effect.

In Passage 2, the author hints at this but goes on to say that it was Manet's intention to create an overall effect which would communicate the 'confusion of masses, in which single things and single beings are submerged'. He further says that, although this is seen in earlier painting (some of that associated with Romanticism and the Baroque), *Music in the Tuileries Gardens* was criticised because it didn't look 'real'. You might assume that, according to Passage 2, Manet was following a particular artistic tradition, as well as being after an effect which created a 'confusion of masses'.

Now I'd like you to read Passage 3, which again concerns Manet's *Music in the Tuileries Gardens*. As you read it, try to remember what was said in Passages 1 and 2.

Manet: Passage 3

Concert in the Tuileries Gardens ... together with thirteen other canvases by Manet, was shown at Martinet's [Gallery] in an exhibition that opened 1 March, 1863 ... But even critics not particularly hostile to new tendencies saw in these paintings a 'medley of red, blue, yellow and black which is the caricature of colour and not colour itself'. 'This art', one of them wrote, 'may be very straightforward but it isn't healthy and we certainly are not taking it upon ourselves to plead M. Manet's cause before the Salon jury' ... Aroused by visitors laughing in front of these works or threatening to tear them up, [the painter] Delacroix upon leaving, said loudly: 'I regret not to have been able to defend this man.'

John Rewald, *The History of Impressionism* (London, 1973)

Activity 2

In Passage 3, the author gives a limited account of the critical reception of *Music in the Tuileries Gardens*. With Passages 1 and 2 in mind, consider what might be meant by 'the caricature of colour and not colour itself', and see if you can identify how the artistic tradition to which Manet's painting alludes was not recognised at the time of its exhibition. This 'tradition' is also noted in Passage 2.

Make brief notes on these points.

Discussion

The notion of a ‘caricature of colour’ has something to do with the meaning ‘realism’ had for viewers of Manet’s painting in 1863, as the author noted at the close of Passage 2. The way in which Manet painted the work, as described in Passage 1, clearly did not conform to what the picture-going public and the critics regarded as a representation of reality. In order to understand what the critic meant by ‘colour itself’, as opposed to his view that Manet’s painting was a ‘caricature of colour’, look at Illustration 328 in *The Story of Art*. Here the colour is subtly modelled in tones, unlike the ‘patches of colour and bold silhouettes’ described in Passage 2. Ingres’s painting constituted a more ‘realistic’ representation for the nineteenth-century audience but it is worth considering that ‘realism’ can be interpreted as something more than illusionistic likeness – such as the ‘realism’ of experiencing a crowd as a ‘confusion of masses, in which single things and single beings are submerged’ (Passage 2).

As for the artistic tradition to which Passage 2 alludes, namely that of ‘the Romanticism of Géricault and Delacroix’, Passage 3 notes that Delacroix himself saw Manet’s painting and, we might assume by his remark, either felt incapable of defending Manet or failed to recognise any affinity between *Music in the Tuileries Gardens* and his own painting.

Next read Passage 4, which develops some of the ideas introduced in Passages 1, 2, and 3.

Manet: Passage 4

... the modern world is seen vividly in Manet’s Music in the Tuileries Gardens, in which the crowd is conveyed by a string of equally weighted touches of coloured paint across the canvas. The picture includes many celebrated contemporaries from the art world, among them Charles Baudelaire ... who is seen in profile in front of the thick tree trunk to the left of the picture [in the top hat directly behind the woman in the left foreground wearing a blue hat]. Baudelaire had made a pioneering appeal in 1845 for artists to ‘snatch [the] epic quality from the life of today and make us see and understand how great and poetic we are in our cravats and our patent-leather boots. He had recently written his essay ‘The Painter of Modern Life’, which advocated an aesthetic of urban modernity very like Manet’s; Baudelaire defined the relationship of the observer to the crowd around him: ‘For the perfect “flâneur” [a modern, casual man of leisure], for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement ... to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world – such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures ... The spectator is the prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito.’

John House, ‘Realism and Impressionism’, in Denise Hooker (ed.), *Art of the Western World* (London, 1989)

Activity 3

In Passage 4, the author mentions the painting technique already considered in the previous passages, but he attempts to put it into some sort of context.

Without forgetting the explanation of Manet's painting technique in Passage 2, regarded as 'the result of direct observation' so as to create the effect of a crowded scene and a 'confusion of masses', write no more than 100 words about how Baudelaire's ideas may have influenced Manet's *Music in the Tuileries Gardens*.

Discussion

The assertion in Passage 2 that Manet was 'producing pictures which were entirely the result of direct observation' means that the artist experienced the scene and that the picture was painted in the way it was to capture that experience. Since the writer Charles Baudelaire was a friend of Manet (he appears in the painting), we could assume justifiably that his ideas informed the artist.

In Passage 4, the author notes that Baudelaire called for artists to paint modern life, to see its 'epic' qualities ('epic' qualities had hitherto been reserved for paintings of heroic history subjects, not relatively ordinary scenes of contemporary life).

Furthermore, the author suggests that Manet's painting is meant to be understood in the light of Baudelaire's *flâneur*, a bourgeois dandy who was in his element as an anonymous figure wandering in the urban crowd and observing the scene. Therefore, what we see in the painting is meant to be the *flâneur's* view, and Manet's view, since he himself was something of a *flâneur*.

A development of the discussion in Passage 4 is made in Passage 5. Please read this now.

Manet: Passage 5

At first sight, Manet appears to position the spectator in the picture as an unselfconscious 'flâneur' watching the crowd that he passes by. Manet even facilitates the spectator's imaginative entry into the painting in this role by using three remarkably daring devices. First, he distributes the focus of the faces in the picture more or less randomly – they appear either sharp or blurred irrespective of their distance from the spectator so that one may find a sharply focused woman's face behind Baudelaire, for instance. This device gives the spectator something of the experience of scanning the crowd. Secondly, Manet extended the tree towards the centre of the painting at a late stage of its execution so that it continues into the foreground. This prevents the spectator seeing any great depth in the picture (block it out and the painting recedes), and forces him instead to scatter his attention backwards and forwards across the whole painting. And lastly, Manet reinforces this effect by leaving the centre of the painting very thinly painted, and indistinctly drawn, which again prevents the spectator from settling on it as a fixed centre of attention.

Paul Smith, *Impressionism: beneath the surface* (London, 1995)

Activity 4

All the passages above are about Manet's painting technique, but there are significant differences in the way each passage discusses it. Briefly answer the following questions:

- a) Passage 1 discusses Manet's painting technique in relation to the way we see the subject – such as throwing 'the line of figures ... into sharper relief', for instance – but how does Passage 2 explain why Manet used such a technique?
- b) Passage 3 reveals some of the criticism levelled at Manet's painting. Why do you think this was?
- c) Passages 4 and 5 imply that Manet's picture is a modern subject painted in a modern way – Passage 4 calls it 'an aesthetic of urban modernity'. Using evidence from all the passages above, and writing in your own words, show in what ways Manet has achieved a sense that the viewer is actually experiencing the scene.

Discussion

- a) Passage 2 attempts to explain Manet's painting technique as a result of his observation of the subject and the desire to create the effect of a crowd, a 'confusion of masses, in which single things and single beings are submerged'.
- b) Contemporary criticisms directed at *Music in the Tuileries Gardens* were largely the result of expectations of what a painting should look like. One critic attacked the use of colour, and Rewald identifies Manet's painting as one of the 'new tendencies' towards which some critics were 'hostile'.
- c) There are a number of references to the way in which Manet may have created the effect of actual experience: Passage 1 notes the 'opaque greens ... brushed on ... suggesting green filtered sunlight under the distant trees'; Passage 2 suggests the impression of a crowd and notes the 'gay whirl of women's dresses, which are simply gleaming masses, and the faces which are vague, hovering patches – notwithstanding the fact that they catch likenesses with uncanny accuracy'; Passage 3 has nothing to say on the matter, but Passage 4 describes the people as 'a string of equally weighted touches of coloured paint across the canvas'; and Passage 5 demonstrates three distinct ways in which Manet used his technique so the viewer could be identified with 'an unselfconscious "flâneur" watching the crowd that he passes by'.

The passages, activities and discussions above have shed some light on the different ways art-history texts can be interpreted and used. Which texts are most appropriate to your needs depends largely on your interests or on the question you are answering. What is revealing about the passages I selected here is that no one of them deals, or indeed could deal, with every aspect of Manet's *Music in the Tuileries Gardens*.

This should tell you a couple of things:

- that it is necessary to look at a number of sources when making notes and writing essays
- that art historians have particular approaches to their subject; you will need to have some appreciation of these so that you are aware of their biases and their sometimes selective considerations.