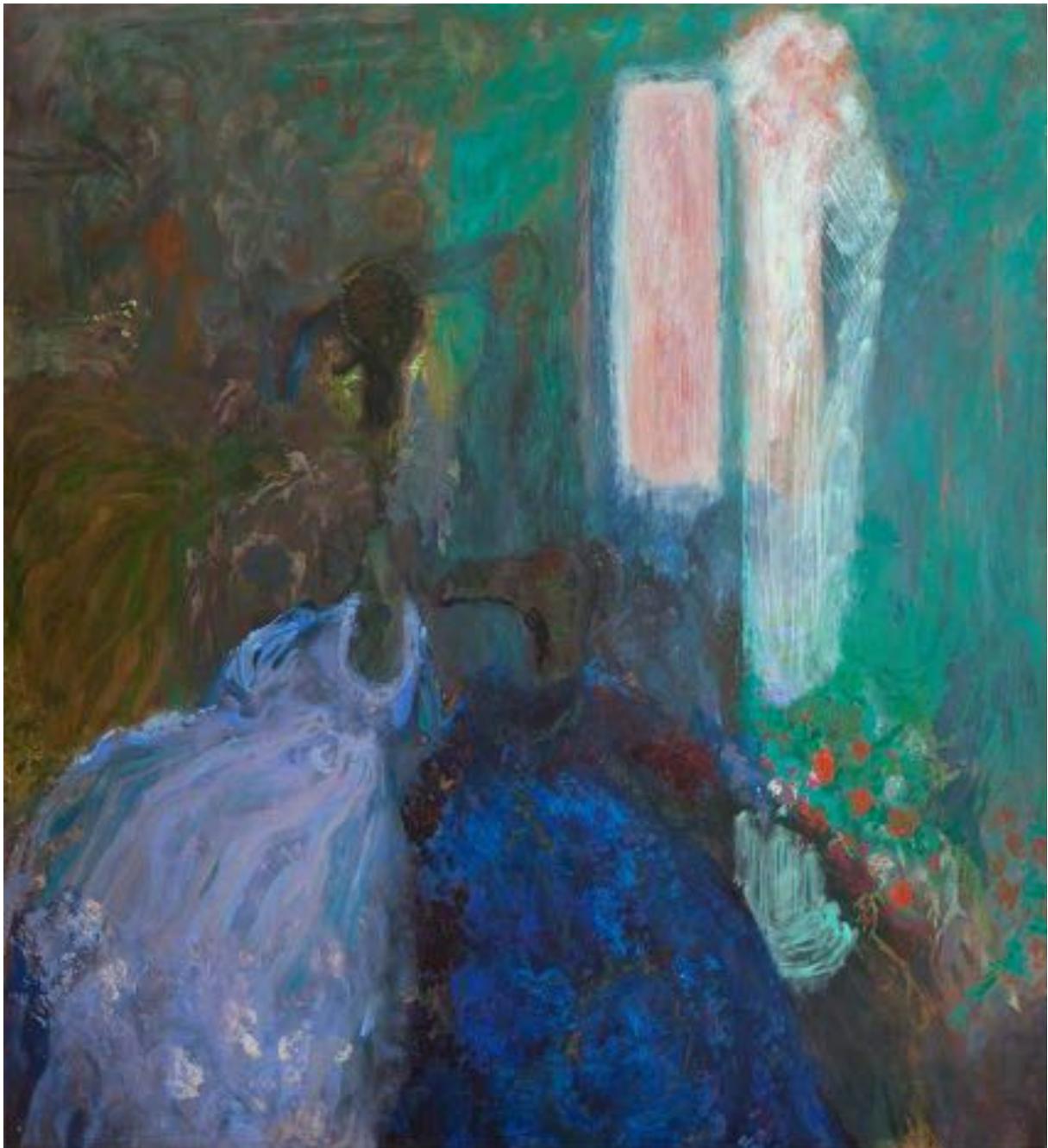


## The Shock of the Old

Hey, everyone in the Art Class.

I am going to give you a short history of 20th Century Oil painting - from my point of view. I'm sitting here in my studio looking through books on 20th Century painting.

I studied Fine Art as an undergraduate at Leeds Polytechnic in the 1980s. I use to make enormous oil paintings. Here's one I made earlier, from my final year exhibition in 1987. I was really influenced by the Rococo paintings of Fragonard and Watteau, and the more contemporary works of Therése Oulton. This work is in a government art collection: <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/amoureuse-marie-bashkirtseff-80558>.



I still consider myself a painter, though I now work mostly with photography. What I am going to present to you is a History of 20th Century Painting in Oils, in three chapters. It is inspired in part by a book and television series from 1980, that we studied for my 'A' level exams.

*The Shock of the New* (see Youtube link to watch).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3ne7Udaetg>. It's an eight-part series, and it is a bit dated, but the programmes are somehow more powerful for all that. My 'A' Level Art History teacher was a francophile *bon viveur* who managed to engage and enthuse us as bunch of grumpy goth/punk adolescents. But it was author and presenter Robert Hughes who really enthralled us all. Hughes states that his book and TV series constitute a highly a personal view, and were inspired by Kenneth Clarke's *Civilisation*. But Hughes is much funnier, smarter and more entertaining. Watch them all..!

**Part 1** of my talk is entitled *Beg, Borrow or Steal*. I am going to ask some rudimentary questions: *What is oil painting? Where did early 20th Century painters get their inspiration from?* And some more complicated ones, like - *what is originality in painting?* Sounds complicated? It is, but don't worry – it's great fun too.

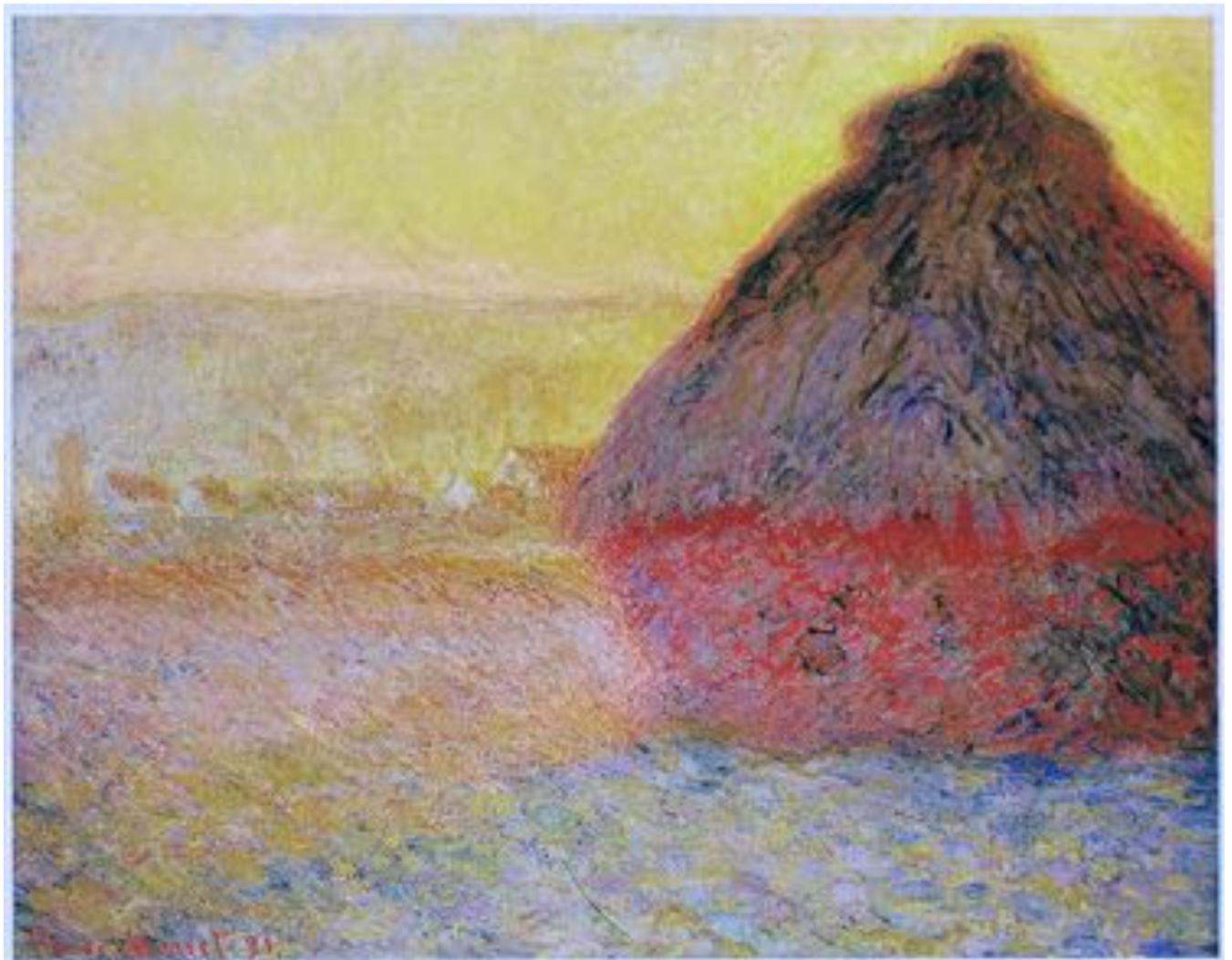
Oil painting is basically the application of pigment mixed with oils and then applied on to some kind of flat support, canvas, boards, panels etc. It can be applied any old how, brushed, rolled, with palette knives or fingers. It has always been high up in the canon of art history because oil paint allows a certain amount of representational semblance or visual correspondence; the colours are rich and varied and can be made fairly 'true to life'. But there is also a lot of mystical old hogwash too, so we are going to skewer that and enjoy. But first a little bit of mystical stuff. When painters start to paint, they translate what they see into the materiality of oils. But this is not a neutral, objective process; all sort of things congregate in the painter's eye and body. The weather perhaps, the time of day, other paintings they may have seen and also other forms of visual representation. Which takes us to.. photography!



*The Balcony, Berthe Morisot, 1872*

Early 20th Century painting was pretty rocked by the invention of Photography. Which is not the same as the Camera - cameras in various forms had been around for years. It was the increasing availability of the photographic print which rocked the worlds of artists such as Claude Monet and Mary Cassatt. By the late 1800s these painters and others such as Camille Pissarro, Edgar Degas and Berthe Morisot had pretty much nailed what we now come to know as Impressionism.

Entirely new subject matters began to appear. Out with Greek Mythology, Biblical scenes, and portraits of the rich and powerful. In with Sunday afternoons in the park, evenings in the bar, days at the races and mostly just hanging around at home, in the garden or sitting on balconies. Sound familiar right now? Sometimes these paintings are really just of nothing at all. Monet's waterlilies, and haystacks - shimmering images on which dabs of colour add up to something rather like a heavily grained colour photograph.



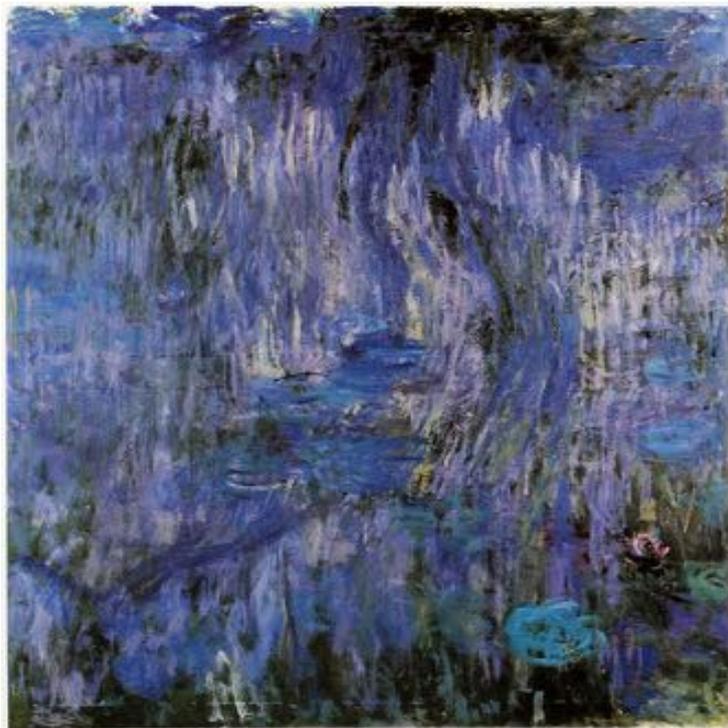
*Haystack at Sunset*, Claude Monet 1891



*Poplars*, Claude Monet 1891



*Poplars*, detail, Claude Monet, 1891



*Waterlilies, Reflections of the Willows*, detail, Claude Monet, 1915



Waterlilies, Reflections of the Willows, detail, Claude Monet 1915



*Nude in the Bath*, Pierre Bonnard 1941-6

Flecks of paint accumulate to produce what often amounts to a shimmering haze – the effects of light on faces, buildings and foliage, seen as might when wandering through parks, along the banks of rivers, through city streets. These painters borrowed the principle of photography; painting outdoors or *en plein air*, to create the look of ‘snapshots’ in paint. Or like Pierre Bonnard, painting indoors – his stippled and dazzling surfaces are like intimate records of daily life, the subjects caught unawares. His wife Marthe having breakfast, lying in the bath, looking out of the window, day dreaming. Yet this an effect of the process of making the work, though clearly accommodating a certain level of spontaneity and rapidity, and borrowing the familiar tropes of photography – the ‘accidental’ cropping of figures and objects, a ‘non-hierarchical’ way of seeing (compare this with earlier European paintings where colour and detail is often centred around important figures or objects within the painting) - oil painting is not photographic by any means. As Bonnard put it: "A painting is a little world which must be sufficient unto itself," "The principal subject," he said, "is the surface, which has its colour, its laws - beyond objects."

His paintings, like those of the other Impressionists, are in a way, less like actual photographs, and more a record of how people lived a hundred or so years ago; what they wore to the opera, how they travelled about, what they ate; most of all they seem to be about the world of leisure. Overall, a privileged class of people really; the European bourgeoisie, at rest and play.

The motifs in these oil paintings were not just clouds and cathedrals, cafés and domestic interiors, but also a particular way seeing. Colour photography was in its infancy, and these paintings burst with vivid, sometimes fiery colour. The Colour theories developed by French chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul influenced many painters, particularly his discovery of complementary colours and the ‘laws of simultaneous contrast’. By comparison, many other more traditional academic paintings of the time appear muted and gloomy, as if they were coated in gravy. Unvarnished, literally and metaphorically, Impressionist paintings are still,

despite their now 'chocolate box' associations, viewed as kick-starting 20<sup>th</sup> C modernist painting.

In the oil paintings of Paul Cézanne, we have another way of seeing, inspired by a type of objective, non-hierarchical optical view, provided by the camera. However, it was also a way of looking at the world which was 'analytical'. Patches and dabs of oil colour are applied to the picture surface, which the eye then 'reassembles' to form an image, and these patches and dabs are attached to a loose set of structures - cones, grids squares and rectangles - like a kind of wonky crochet. His paintings are considered Post-Impressionist; the work takes reality apart in order to understand and restructure it.



*Mont Ste-Victoire, Paul Cézanne, 1904-6*



*Mont Ste-Victoire, detail, Paul Cézanne, 1904-6*

This way of seeing became more acute in what came to be referred to as Cubism, which incorporated different view-points. In an audacious rejection of conventional perspective, it is as if the artist could see the object, figure or space from the front, back, side and above. Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso's early Cubist paintings appear as if someone has taken an Impressionist painting, dialled down the colour, and chopped it all up into little bits. Fragments, planes of stippled greys and browns intersect, disarticulating the real. Modernism's raid on photography was over – for now!



*The Portuguese*, Georges Braque, 1911



*Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)*, Pablo Picasso, 1907

But the subtext of Cubism, and other early Modernist painting movements points to a long history of colonial ransacking. Painters in Paris traipsed up the hill to the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro to see the ethnographic collection in the museum where displays of African and Oceanic masks and sculptures and other cultural artefacts were the objects of fascination. The simplified shapes and geometric forms were assimilated and absorbed into Cubist painting, in acts of what we would now call 'cultural appropriation.'

This brings us to an interesting question; what is originality in a painting? Put simply, a kind of re-invented newness. Modernist painters begged, borrowed and stole the formal devices of not only photography, but Japanese Prints, North African Ceramics and African and Oceanic ritual objects in an attempt to wrench their work away from the stale and restrictive styles of Academic European art, and secure a form of 'originality'. But hang on, most of them were white men. There was Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt of course ..but what were the people who haven't been celebrated as innovators of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century avant-garde up to? If they were women, they were often the models and muses, providing exotic

and erotic content. They were drafted in, in time-honoured tradition, so that painters could hang their technical innovations on their nude, or semi-nude bodies. In the next chapter, I'll look at a few more books and we will take a look at what artists from other social groups were up to.. when they weren't helping out the European male 'genius'!



8. Georges Braque: *Grand Nu*, 1908