

**E. H. Gombrich, Recognising the World: Pissarro at the R. A., Royal Academy Magazine, Summer, Vol. 39, 1993, pp.33 [Trapp no.1993.G.1]**

It sometimes happens to a writer that one of his casual remarks comes home to roost, as it were, and he is challenged to explain it. In a recent series of conversations with Didier Eribon (A Lifelong Interest, Thames and Hudson), I talked of my love of the Impressionists and added that I am particularly fond of Pissarro: 'If you ask me what the world looks like to me, it looks like a painting by Pissarro.' I was happy to hear that Joachim Pissarro had picked up this sentence, but I am less at ease being asked to explain it. To account for my difficulty let me rephrase the remark and say that in many of Pissarro's canvases I recognise the world as I know it.

Now, we can use the word 'recognise' in two very different contexts. When we say that we can always recognise Pissarro in any portrait group of Impressionist painters by his beard, we mean that we can identify the portrait. We can recognise him only by inferring his identity from his individual features. There is all the difference in the world between such a piecemeal inference and the experience of global recognition where we do not have to reason at all before it 'clicks' and a familiar face greets us from the canvas, much as we recognise a friend in the crowd or a voice on the telephone without being able to tell how we do it.

I do not know many of the motifs in France that Pissarro painted, but then my act of recognition is of a more generic kind. Should I not leave it at that or can I still go a step further? It so happens that I had some such experience in mind when I wrote in *Art and Illusion*: 'The history of Art... may be described as the forging of master keys for opening the mysterious locks of our senses to which only nature herself originally held the key. They are complex locks which respond only when various screws are first set in readiness and when a number of bolts are shifted at the same time. Like the burglar who tries to break a safe, the artist has no direct access to the inner mechanism. He can only feel his way with sensitive fingers, probing and adjusting his hook or wire when something gives way.'

Which, then, were the levers or bolts in our perceptual apparatus which Pissarro had learnt to manipulate to achieve the effect I have in mind? It is easy to see and to say that it was his handling of light, but exactly what kind of handling? One possibility we can rule out from the start: he cannot have copied the light that illuminated the landscape in front of his easel because that light never remained the same and painting inevitably takes time. All of the Impressionists were aware of this problem and adapted their technique and their working procedures to the need for Speed, often working on several canvases at the same time to be ready when conditions returned. But in the end they all had to fall back on their memory and on their own particular knowledge of the effects of light — observed or invented.

We, in turn, may have to take recourse to the theory of perception to assess their achievement. But ultimately it is the science of optics we must consult to learn the facts about the interaction of colour and light.

We cannot see colour without light, and we can never separate the two experiences. Punch a hole into a piece of cardboard and look through it at any coloured surface: you will not be able to tell whether what you see is a dark green in strong light or a light green in weak light. Physicists will tell you that what we call the colour of a surface depends on the wavelengths of the spectrum that are absorbed and those that are thrown back. Black surfaces absorb all wavelengths while white, ideally, none. Altering the intensity of the incident light or its hue will determine the type of rays that impinge on our retinas. What we call the local colour of an object, its 'real colour', is but a construct of the

mind, a figment of the imagination, because the colour seen depends on the two variables of the absorption rate of the surface and the character of the incident light. Why are we so rarely bothered by this uncertainty in real life? Because our perception rests on the assumption that we live in a relatively stable world and that it is always infinitely less likely that objects change their colour in front of us (unless we observe a chameleon) than that the light has changed.

It was not for nothing that Pissarro in the series paintings exhibited at the Royal Academy so doggedly studied the effects of various illuminations on the same motif — the cool light of the morning, the rosy hues of reflected sunset. Nobody walking through the exhibition will think that it was the colour of the façades of Paris which changed their hue overnight. But needless to say these changes effected by various lights are infinitely subtle and unless the painter achieves complete consistency in these modifications, the result will look unconvincing, if not bizarre. It is this same feeling for coherence that also marks Pissarro's individual paintings.

To be sure, all the Impressionists, and many painters before them, had made a study of light but, while others frequently concentrated on isolated dramatic effects, on reflecting waves, sparkling leaves, dazzle, or coloured shadows, Pissarro seems to me to have studied and mastered the way the ambient light reflected from the sky subtly modifies and unifies our visual environment. And he got it so right his best canvases trigger that global experience of recognition of which I spoke— at least for me.