

Optics

Perception

Illusion

Van Gogh

Monet Seurat

“The big picture is all in the detail” Charles Darwin

Impressionism

Impressionism

From the Museum

Vincent Van Gogh: Starry Night: 1889;

Museum of Modern Art, New York

Claude Monet: Impression, Sunrise: 1872;

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris

Georges Seurat: A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte: 1886;

Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago

Starry Night is as famous the world over as its creator was obscure. It is both a mirror of its time and the perpetually troubled soul that created it. The night sky is deconstructed into deepened blues and lightened violets (technical immediacy of Impressionism) and reassimilated into a myriad of energised linear swirls and vibrating pulses of yellow-orange radiating out from variably hot centres as a means of revealing an ecstatic inner vision (expressive power of Post-Impressionism). The emotionally charged night sky is pierced by an upward-reaching, flame-swirling, cypress tree (cemetery association) depicted as a dark green silhouette bordering the shadowy coolness of the sleeping village below. The simplicity and sophistication of this image invites us to reflect deeply on Van Gogh's comment that "...death is the road we take to reach the stars..." expressed with sincere clarity during a moment of visionary enlightenment within a period of asylum darkness.

For the Impressionists, optical realism separated visual experience from memory, cultivating an extreme indifference to pictorial content. Sunlight was broken down to its primary colours which were then recombined with short, rapid brush strokes capturing the immediacy of the fleeting moment. Colour mixing now occurs in the retina and the illusion of form and space is implied by varying intensities of light, shade and colour (detached observer). The intimate relationship between art and the science of light, eye physiology and the invention of the camera is further enhanced by the bi-directionality of cause and effect. In focusing on how we see rather than what we see, perception is now dominated by optical science; the cool objectivity of impressionism becomes a triumph of technique and sight over insight and expression. Van Gogh shattered the power of this illusion by reminding us that all observation is *selection* that is coloured by *feeling* and *experienced* within the context – and as a property of – mind. In painting *Starry Night* because "*the night is even more richly coloured than the day*", choosing what to highlight and what to omit in a reality that can never be fully captured, and re-interpreting the use of colour and movement as metaphors for energy and emotion – all contextualised by his own unique life adversities – Van Gogh helped us see what we had never seen before. Illusion has now transcended into a new reality; superficial realism sacrificed for a deeper meaning.

Van Gogh's star burnt briefly but explosively (1880–1890). His creativity was unleashed during the disintegration of academic art traditions and influenced by both the impressionist message and its logical but paradoxical conclusion in the systematised colour theory of Divisionism-Pointillism. He rapidly assimilated the power of capturing the transient effects of light and the moment that began with Monet's *Impression, Sunrise* (1874 opening impressionist exhibition); the excitement, turmoil and varied individual responses to the multipronged impressionist experiments in means and ends; and the timelessness of sculpting geometry and objects using small dots of meticulously placed colour as exemplified by the neo-impressionistic slice of modern life that was Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grand Jatte* (1886 final impressionist exhibition). However, true to his time of concentrated change and his own inner needs, Van Gogh felt that the world of dissociated two-dimensional appearances neglected psychological and emotional depth, propelling him to an individual synthesis and response. In leaving Paris, going to Provence and doing what he was, Van Gogh romantically helped to realise the full impact of the impressionistic breakthrough – translating it into a far more expressive language... *for the good of all* (the final twist).

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