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19<sup>th</sup> Century Impressionism

Final

Unlike many of its predecessors, such as neoclassicism and realism, the impressionist art movement did not aim to accurately depict reality in the strictest sense. Rather, impressionism served as a method of expression at the individual level for artists who wanted to capture their perception of a subject. By this, I intend to demonstrate that two impressionists painting the same subject may very well have quite different completed works at the end of the day. This is because at its root, impressionism is unique to the individual; it is the artist capturing the impression a scene or subject has on him. Traditionally, we see impressionist works characterized by brighter colors and an emphasis on the effects of light. Furthermore, there is a significant emotional weight within these works since feeling is a critical aspect of impressionism. In summary, impressionism is art that aims to capture the artist's unique emotion to an event in conjunction with brighter colors and expression of light. The primary focus is not a wholly real-life depiction.

To visualize the aforementioned concept of impressionism, I would like to discuss a painting by the founding father of impressionism, Claude Monet. "La Rue Montorgueil, fête du 30 juin 1878" illustrates a festival in Paris, 1878, celebrating peace and work. Immediately, we see bright colors on most of the canvas. The sky is a light, bright blue, and the clouds are more pink

and orange than they are pure white. Such soft colors are ubiquitous with the impressionist art movement. Looking at the buildings towering on either side of the canvas, we see an endless sea of bright reds, whites, and blues. These colors compose dozens of French flags signifying patriotism and unity. The many small brushstrokes used to build this piece further represent the impressionist technique by suggesting movement. The flags are waving in the wind in this lively painting. More on that note, the people filling the street do not look like people up close. They are just single strokes of dark purples, blues, greens, and blacks, but from afar they create movement and activity. The people are bustling around the street just trying to make their way through the crowd. Through the blurry composition of small, quick brushstrokes that so effectively capture this moment of celebration, we are able to feel the animation of the art. All of the flags are located on diagonals from the bottom left to the upper right, and from the bottom right to the upper left- in essence drawing the eye to the center of the X. Monet chose to paint the flags as blowing towards the center of his painting to achieve this effect. It would seem all the people on the street are moving towards this convergence point as well, and to me, this suggests unity among the French people. They stand together as one with their nation. Let's talk about Monet's use of light in this piece. At first glance, the street appears to be dusty as a consequence of the shuffling people. There is a lot of yellows and beige on the street that juxtapose nicely with the dark strokes of the people; however, after further examination, these colors are the sunlight shining through between the buildings. In a similar fashion, we see dark shadows cast by the buildings that really make this light stand out. It's important to note that these shadows lack hard edges and are soft all around. They are not exact in their depiction, but rather accomplish illustrating that they exist. The buildings are painted in this manner as well- we are able to identify what they are, but they are by no means intended to be entirely realistic.

Vertical strokes of yellows and greens suffice for conveying the impression they had on Monet. All the factors and decisions that went into this painting- the lack of clear lines and figure, the short brushstrokes and use of bright colors, and the portrayal of the effects of light all go into establishing Monet's "La Rue Montorgueil, fête du 30 juin 1878" as an impressionist masterpiece.

It is well worth the time to look at another stellar example of impressionism in practice. For this second piece, I would like to discuss "The Church at Auvers", by Vincent Van Gogh, a Dutch artist in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This piece is different from most impressionist works foremostly due to the darker color pallet. Traditionally, impressionism emphasized the use of bright, light colors; however, Van Gogh utilizes an array of dark shades. In the uppermost corners of the canvas, the sky is a deep, very dark blue that lightens as we move towards the center of the canvas. The effect of this darkness atop the painting is a boundary to keep the audience's eye down and on the church, or the focus of the painting. Speaking more on the portrayal of the sky within this painting, it is not strictly displayed how one might view it in the real world. It is composed of swirling beautiful swirling brushstrokes that sweep across the canvas. This impressionist method conveys an ominous, and almost daunting feeling. While not evoking a happy sensation, the dark and light blue swirls of the sky make it seem as though something troubling is coming. Perhaps this was Van Gogh's impression of the church scene, or even his own state of mind at the time. Point being the sky is painted how Van Gogh uniquely perceived it- not as it realistically was. Furthermore, the cobble stone walkways stemming from the bottom of the canvas are by no means a natural representation. A large number of short brushstrokes make up the paths. Browns, greens, yellows, and blues work together to create the impression of where

the paths begin and lead. The direction of these brushstrokes flows in the direction of the paths, illustrating their design further. Walking along the left path is a woman- no specific features, no unnecessary details. Nevertheless, she is there because Van Gogh wanted to capture the moment he saw her. Looking at the spaces around the pathways and church, there is grass. We cannot see individual blades or a clear distinction between varying parts. Van Gogh uses strokes of different shades of green, light in the foreground and dark towards the background, to convey volume and depth. Actually, the darker sections of green are evidence of light in this piece. Although it appears to be painted at night, the dark greens are merely grass blanketed by shadows cast by the church. While not exact in their depiction, there is more than enough color and technique to provide the impression of grass. Seemingly random strokes of light blue and white atop the masses of green serve to demonstrate the existence flowers. Certainly, these individual brushstrokes do not look like flowers, but from afar they add much to the bigger picture. Impressionism requires us to take a step back and see the art as a whole; up close there is not much to understand. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Finally, the church. Shades of blues and greys, browns and yellows make up the composition of the church. It is not a very welcoming church but is beautiful in its own right. As far as the impressionist technique is concerned, the church is painted fairly accurately. Its edges are soft and curvy, and it looks like Van Gogh painted it just out of focus. Dark blues present through the windows of the church are the same shade as the sky. The church possesses volume. None of the details are readily apparent, but the overall structure, or impression, of the church is absolutely there. On the left side of the canvas, just beside the church, there are dark green circles that can only be trees. These dark blobs are speckled with lighter shades of green and in practice, this creates the image of trees. Nothing in Van Gogh's "The Church at Auvers" is portrayed as it existed in the

real world. The painting is a unique expression of the impression the scene had on the artist, Van Gogh. Ultimately, it is a beautiful work of art and an excellent instance of impressionism mastery.

At its core, impressionism is art that expresses a subject or scene that uniquely affected the artist who created it. Certainly, the impressionist art movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was often characterized by bright colors and emphasized the importance of light, but this was not a rule written in stone, as we see through Van Gogh's work discussed above. The goal of impressionism is not to be as accurate a depiction as possible. It is not realism or naturalism- what matters is conveying how the artist was affected and the emotion of the scene. There are many answers to the question, "what is impressionism?", but the question that really matters is: what is impressionism *to you*?