

## Michael Sangster: 'On Representational Painting'

Representation by man of himself and his gods and of the things and world around him has been going on for a long time. Historically the continuity and metamorphosis of styles, images and ideas in art has often been a case of a younger federation of peoples superseding or conquering a sophisticated but waning older civilization. From this older civilization they take structures of civic and religious life, and forms of art and architecture and breathe new life into them. The European tradition stems from Ancient Greece and before. A chain of mutual influence and succession in which a younger civilization grafts itself onto the stock of an older one, can be traced from Ancient Egypt to Minoan Crete, from Crete to Mycenae, from Mycenae to Classical Greece, from Greece to Rome and from thence eventually to the Renaissance.

The Renaissance in turn generated the succession of artistic schools and traditions that flourished in Europe until the great upheavals, aesthetic, social and political of the 20th Century. Throughout this period of some thousands of years, representation by man of himself and his works: architectural, military, agricultural and domestic; of his religious figures in human or animal guise; of animals, insects and birds; of vegetative nature; is chiefly what is seen in the productions of this artistic tradition.

There are many artistic traditions in the world to which we have ready access, through ease of travel and information technology. But the Greco-Roman-European tradition of naturalistic representation is to me like homeland. I feel native to it, and despite the breakthroughs in form and content of painting in the 20th century, it remains the meaningful medium of expression for me.

The word meaningful is a reminder that the history of European art is not just a history of representations or recordings of appearance. It is also a history of ideas, a history of feelings, a history of symbols, a history of aesthetics. For example take the Madonna and Child paintings that were produced in such numbers from the beginning of the Renaissance until the 17th century. These are not just pictures of a mother with her infant son. They are religious icons expressing profound religious ideas and feelings. The woman is Mary, the Mother of Jesus, the Christian Son of God. Symbolically she is the anima mundi, the fount of gentleness and nurturing energy; and the stout young child on her knee a promise for the future, of strong young providence born to protect and help mankind, a guiding light, a guard against evil, for ever. A potent symbol of a faith's continuity, the child Christ holds in his hand a bird, symbol since antiquity of the soul of man that would fly away at his death. The bird is often a goldfinch, a favourite pet for children at the time of the Renaissance but also linked to Christ symbolically. The goldfinch it is said, 'acquired its red spot at the moment it flew down over Christ's head on the road to Calvary and, as it drew a thorn from his brow, was splashed with a drop of the Saviour's blood.' (1\*)

From this single example one can see how intricate symbolism and layers of meaning can be wound up in a naturalistic representation. All paintings contain meanings and resonances. Even a seemingly straightforward landscape or jug of flowers by Renoir is informed and motivated by ideas and attitudes he would have inherited from his mother culture, and from modes of thought that were in the air at the time. The Impressionists were the culmination of an observational tradition embracing many genres, which began with the development of landscape painting in the 18th century. The fundamental impetus behind this movement was a sense that landscape and nature were the true sources of inspiration. The idea was not new. The early Christian hermits went to the wilderness in order to live close to God. In a sense the 18th and 19th century landscapists were doing the same. But they would also have been prompted by other stimulants, such as the writings

of J.J. Rousseau or the doctrines of nature worship disseminated by the Romantic Movement.

When Renoir painted, I would be very surprised if he was thinking specifically of any of these things. He was essentially a classicist and in his imagination the old Mediterranean gods and nymphs still haunted the groves and streams that he lived near in the South of France. The essential point though, is that all these ideas, these layers of thought and imagery, are present in the mental atmosphere of the painter. This atmosphere is fluid, rather like soup, swirling around, containing things of recent origin but also things of immemorial antiquity. The painter does not paint a picture to express deliberately certain ideas. That would be too controlling and predictable. He paints, within the discipline of his technique, instinctively. But the mental atmosphere goes in, so that in the finished picture there is a miraculous fusion, free and spontaneous, of symbol, idea and naturalistic appearance.

The branch of European painting that I associate with in particular is the tradition of 'plein air' painting, or painting directly from observation, usually out of doors. This development did not emerge until the mid 18th century. Although painting and drawing directly from observation in the studio had been, since the Renaissance, an essential part of artistic production, painting in oil from the motif, out of doors and on the spot in all weathers, had been done rarely, if at all, prior to the 18th Century. The practice grew as a result of painters from all over Europe converging on Rome as the alma mater of civilization. Gradually, taking their lead from the drawn studies of ruins and landscape by Claude and Poussin in the previous century, artists began to take easel and paint with them on their expeditions, returning with brilliant spontaneous recordings of views they had seen. The pioneers of this approach were Claude Joseph Vernet (1714-1789), and Pierre Henri de Valenciennes (1750-1819), who developed in a highly controlled form, the oil study from nature of a particular view and particular effect of light. Valenciennes recommended to his students that because 'shadows change continuously by virtue of the movement of the earth' (2\*), these studies should be limited to two hours' duration. These small paintings were not usually exhibited, though they seem excellent to our eyes, but were used as aids supplying visual data for the completion of the larger finished work, rather as a scientist might gather samples to back up his thesis.

However certain artists of the next generation, particularly Jean Baptiste Camille Corot (1796-1875) took the practice much further. Corot initially followed the established pattern, making studies after nature in preparation for a larger work destined for the Salon in Paris. But very quickly he developed the open-air study to unprecedented levels. With his sensitivity to atmospheric effects of weather and mood, the strength and originality of his compositions, and his profound and luminous sense of tone, his studies for the first time came to be regarded as works of art in their own right.

From Corot and his contemporaries and followers, grew the Barbizon School of painting. The plein-air practice begun in Rome was carried on by these artists in their native Northern France. The so called 'Impressionist' painters of the 19th Century grew directly out of this tradition and were not as revolutionary as is commonly supposed. The painter within the Impressionist group who was still a key figure in the way painting was taught when I was at art school in the 1970's and 80's, was Paul Cezanne. The fact that an empirical study of nature, as exemplified by Cezanne's work, was still being encouraged at art schools in the late 20th century, provides a link between an artist of today and the tradition of painting directly from things seen that emerged in the 18th century. This tradition was itself a branch or outgrowth from a much older tradition.

Not that an artist ever needed permission to choose an earlier tradition or artist as a model to draw guidance from. The history of art is in part made of these strange affinities, which a living artist can

feel for one who lived and worked centuries before. In this respect the artist shares the attribute that Panofsky accords to the humanist: 'the humanist...respects tradition. Not only does he respect it, he looks upon it as something real and objective which has to be studied and, if necessary, reinstated.' Panofsky adds by way of example: 'the works of Newton or Leonardo da Vinci have an autonomous meaning and a lasting value. From the humanistic point of view, human records do not age.' (3\*)

This sense of tradition as being something perennially youthful is exemplified in the plein-air discipline. The practice of the painter, embarking on an empirical study of aspects of the world around him, remains essentially the same today as in the 18th century. To some this might indicate a stale and moribund repetition, but freedom is not necessarily lost by working within guidelines that are old. Paradoxically the opposite is the case. Freedom flourishes under constraint and abhors a vacuum, and in Nature as well as in cultural history, genuine youth or renewal always grafts itself onto, or emerges from, older stock. The dissolution of boundaries and multiplicity of choice normally associated with the concept of freedom can become an arid waste in which the artist loses his way and in which creative energy is diluted, squandered and dissipated.

In choosing a discipline such as plein-air painting, the artist constrains himself to work within certain limitations that are 'traditional.' But the nature of the discipline also ensures that it remains modern. The artist looks out on the world of his own time with a mentality inevitably of his own time. He cannot help being modern but equally cannot help a cultural timelessness entering that modernity. The present is porous and can absorb the past as a dry stone will absorb moisture. Just as the meteorological atmosphere changes from cold to warm, from dry to moist, so the painter's day absorbs the cultural, sentient weather systems that are constantly changing and reforming in the artist's mind.

The mind, that ocean where each kind  
Does straight its own resemblance find;  
Yet it creates, transcending these,  
Far other worlds, and other seas; (4\*)

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(1\*) James Hall: 'Hall's Dictionary of Subjects & Symbols in Art'.1974. John Murray.

(2\*) Peter Galassi: 'Corot in Italy'.1991. Yale University.

(3\*) Erwin Panofsky: 'Meaning in the Visual Arts.' Reprinted in Penguin Books 1993.

(4\*) Andrew Marvell (1621-1678). From 'The Garden'.