Introduction

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It is a curious fact that the word 'Post-Impressionism' would not have been recognized by any of the major artists to whom it is now generally applied. When the art critic Roger Fry invented what he called this 'somewhat negative label' 1 in 1910, Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh and Seurat were all long since dead, and the younger artists who showed with them in the two Post-Impressionist exhibitions of 1910 and 1912 had already accepted such other labels as 'Fauve' and 'Cubist', albeit reluctantly and not of their own invention. Almost 60 years later we have agreed that 'Post-Impressionism' can now be meaningfully applied to the later work of other great Impressionists – notably Degas, Monet, Renoir and Pissarro – who were specifically excluded by Fry; and more widely still to painting in France and western Europe which reflects an awareness of Impressionism and seeks to move away from and beyond it. Admittedly the Post-Impressionist net has been spread rather wider than before in the present exhibition, but the need to broaden the context in which we look at the paintings of the great Post-Impressionist masters has been felt by all associated with the exhibition and with its catalogue.

It is important to know how a neologism occurs when it describes a new tendency in art or letters. 'Post-Impressionism' is unusual, not only because it was invented 25 years after the art it describes, but because it was the suggestion of an English critic arranging an exhibition of modern French art. That exhibition was put together in a hurry to fill a gap in the Grafton Galleries programme, and its public success astonished all those concerned with it, not least the very young and inexperienced secretary of the exhibition, Desmond MacCarthy.

In a broadcast talk given in 1945 about The Artyquate of 1910, 2 MacCarthy most engagingly admitted that he had 'never seen the work of any of the artists exhibited'. 'By the way', he continued, '[Fry] himself had seen very few of their pictures. But he was a man of exploring sensibility, and those that he had seen had impressed him.' MacCarthy described how the show was put together by Fry visiting a handful of leading Parisian dealers. Including Cézanne's former agent, Vollard, whom he already knew. Then MacCarthy went on his own to Munich, and to Amsterdam, to see Van Gogh's sister-in-law, with whom he made a selection of Vincent's work. 'When we came to price them,' he said, 'she was asking a hundred and twenty pounds or less for some admirable examples of his art.' MacCarthy went on to explain how the name was invented:

What was the exhibition to be called? That was the next question. Roger and I and a young journalist who was to help with publicity, met to consider this; and it was at that meeting that a word which is now safely embedded in the English language – 'post-Impressionism' – was invented. Roger first suggested various terms like 'expressionism', which aimed at distinguishing these artists from the impressionists; but the journalist wouldn't have that or any other of his alternatives. At last Roger, losing patience, said: 'Oh, let's just call them post-impressionists: at any rate, they came after the impressionists'. Later he handed over to me, with a few notes, the ticklish job of writing the preface to the catalogue – the unsigned preface.

So the exhibition that opened on 8 November 1910 was called Manet and the Post-Impressionists. In a way it was an explicitly anti-Impressionist manifesto. Fry took Monet as the starting-point (nine works, including A Bar at the Folies-Bergère, later to be bought by Samuel Courtauld, and now in the Courtauld Institute Galleries). Then there was a massive representation of Gauguin (46 works), Van Gogh (25) and Cézanne (21). Seurat had only two pictures. Sérusier and Denis live works each, Velluton four and Redon three. Twentieth-century art was represented by some Fauve paintings – Marquet (five), Manguin (four), Rouault (six) – and a substantial group of the closest followers of Cézanne, Vlaminck (eight) and Derain (three). As painters, Matisse and Picasso were modestly shown, with two and three oils respectively, though their drawings and, in Matisse's case, sculptures, were numerous.

Fry's own view of modern art at this stage was relatively immature – he had never seen the work of any of the masters, and had already five years before been offered (and had refused) the Directorship of the National Gallery. He had never displayed much interest in Impressionism, and his own painting was still very conservative in character. His conversion to the cause of modern art – and a conversion it certainly was – came only at the age of 40, when in 1906 he saw two paintings by Cézanne in a London exhibition. 3 Reviewing the show, Fry seems suddenly to have appreciated that Cézanne was not what he later described as the 'hidden oracle of ultra-Impressionism' but a modern old master in the succession of Manet: 'We confess to having been hitherto sceptical about Cézanne's genius. but these two pieces reveal a power which is entirely distinct and personal, and though the artist's appeal is limited, and touches none of the finer issues of imaginative life, it is none the less complete.' 4

Fry's view of modern art was to be confirmed and augmented by the great German art critic, Julius Meier-Graefe, whose book Modern Art appeared in English translation in 1908. 5 Fry acquired much of his information and many of his value judgments from Meier-Graefe. most notably the belittling of Monet, and the connection established between Manet and the triumvirate of Cézanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh. The German critic calls the latter artists 'expressionists', and of course this is why Fry wanted to follow suit – had not that young publicist intervened, the
exhibition would probably have been called *Manet and the Expressionists* (and let us not contemplate the terminological confusions that would have ensued).

In the unsigned Fry/MacCarthy preface to the 1910 exhibition another possible appellation was considered and dismissed. The preface is boldly entitled 'The Post-Impressionists', and begins:

"The pictures collected together in the present Exhibition are the work of a group of artists who cannot be defined by any single term. The term 'Synthetists', which has been applied to them by learned criticism, does indeed express 'an interest in the discoveries of the Impressionists only so far as the appearance of things to the geometrical simplicity of naturalism. He 'aimed first at a sign which should produce a broader effect than that alternative development represented by Seurat. Cross and Signac which takes the Impressionists' 'scientific interest in the representation of colour' a step further - a development that Fry allowed into the 1910 exhibition, but only in a very modest way. The emphasis was firmly on Cézanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh, artists who were 'interested in the discoveries of the Impressionists only so far as these discoveries helped them to express emotions which the objects themselves evoked'. The Impressionists' dependence on nature, on the objective recording of visual experience, gives way to a search for the 'emotional significance that lies in things'. And this is to be achieved by a simplification of design that is immediately disconcerting.

Of the three great Post-Impressionists, Cézanne, the heir to Manet, shows most clearly the way out of the cul-de-sac of naturalism. He 'aimed first at a design which should produce the coherent, architectural effect of the masterpieces of primitive [i.e. early Italian] art'. passing from 'the complexity of the appearance of things to the geometrical simplicity which design demands'. Van Gogh is seen as a morbid visionary, expressing his strongest emotions in paint: and Gauguin as a theorist, concerned with 'the fundamental laws of abstract form', and with 'the power which abstract form and colour can exercise over the imagination of the spectator'. He deliberately chose, therefore, to 'become a decorative painter, believing that this was the most direct way of impressing upon the imagination the emotion he wished to perpetuate'.

Matisse is the only follower of the three Post-Impressionists who is mentioned by name. In his work 'this search for an abstract harmony of line, for rhythm, has been carried to lengths which often deprive the figure of all appearance of nature'. It is again 'a return to primitive, even to barbaric art', and primitive art is justified because it is conceptual rather than perceptual, and more expressive than work which displays greater skill.

The final paragraph of the preface contains a comment that the new movement is now widely spread: '... the school has ceased to be specifically a French one. It has found disciples in Germany, Belgium, Russia, Holland, Sweden. There are Americans, Englishmen and Scotchmen in Paris who are working and experimenting along the same lines."

Two years later, Roger Fry provided a follow-up with what was called the 2nd Post-Impressionist Exhibition. opening at the Grafton Galleries on 5 October 1912. This was a much more carefully planned and polemical exhibition, showing the 'contemporary development' of the 'new movement' in England and Russia as well as in France, but, as Fry says, 'it would have been possible to extend the geographical area immensely. Post-Impressionist schools are flourishing. One might almost say raging in Switzerland, Austro-Hungary and most of all in Germany'. But he is rather dismissive of their achievement, as he is of the Futurists of Italy, who have developed 'a whole system of aesthetics out of a misapprehension of some of Picasso's recondite and difficult works'.

Fry also wrote the five-page introduction to 'The French Group', which might well have been called (like the exhibition itself) Cézanne and the Moderns. He personally chose the French work, and of the three Post-Impressionists only Cézanne survived. Matisse was the best represented artist, with 19 oils, 13 drawings and eight bronzes; then came Picasso with 13 oils and three drawings, most of them executed since 1908 and thus showing the development of Cubism. Fry made a point of exhibiting the work of Donian Rousseau for the first time in England: paintings by Braque (four), Vuillimier (eight), Derain (six), Herbin (11), Marchand (four), Lhote (eight), and other lesser-known names completed the French group. The smaller English group was chosen and introduced by Clive Bell; it included work by Duncan Grant, Vanessa Bell, Spencer Gore, Henry Lamb, Wyndham Lewis, Stanley Spencer and Fry himself. In the Russian section were paintings by Roerich, Clurioni, Goncharova and Larionov: here the stress was on an exotic and richly decorative style.

Not much is said about Post-Impressionism in the 1912 catalogue, and one imagines that by this time Fry appreciated that the artists represented in the exhibition had moved on to other things. The term however had quickly gained acceptance, and, faute de mieux, it remains a useful description of that phase in French painting from, say, 1885 to 1905, and of its immediate impact on the art of other countries. Fry himself later softened the anti-Impressionism of his first pronouncements, and extended the term to include the Neo-Impressionism (or Divisionism, or Pointillism) of Seurat, whom he came to recognize as of equal importance to the three great Post-Impressionists.

Yet it is difficult to define Post-Impressionism too explicitly, and one ends up by sharing Fry's unease with the 'somewhat negative label', 'the vaguest and most-committal' name of which he could think. It is a notable fact that no serious comprehensive history of Post-Impressionism has been..."
written, and perhaps none can be written because the unity of an artistic movement is quite simply lacking. That great historian of modern art, John Rewald, to whom we are all so indebted, decided many years ago to follow his definitive history of Impressionism with a study of Post-Impressionism, but the first volume emerged as a parallel treatment of three outstanding artists, Seurat, Gauguin and Van Gogh, and nothing more has appeared. That warning made in the 1910 preface to the effect that the Post-Impressionists were above all individualists could hardly have been better exemplified.

Our thinking about the 1979 Royal Academy exhibition began several years ago with a desire to show the crisis of Impressionism in the 1880s in the fuller context of French painting of the time. It was my conviction, shared by the Directors of the exhibition, Mary Anne Stevens and John House, that it was the right moment to investigate that crucial change of direction in the later 1880s when experience rather than appearance became the reason for art. The personal achievement of the four great painters who pioneered that change – Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh and Seurat – is by now familiar to everyone, but exactly how it came about and what were its immediate repercussions have never been altogether clear.

There is also a danger that in a period when painting of very real originality and high quality is being produced, the lesser figures are neglected. Artists of an older generation find themselves unjustly eclipsed by the young. And we should remember that what looks plain to us now was far from obvious at the time. Until the Caillebotte bequest went on show in 1897* Impressionist pictures were not readily to be seen, and the central importance of Impressionism in art, let alone of Post-Impressionism, was not widely recognized. This is confirmed by the remarkable fact that someone as sensitive and intelligent as Matisse, when an art student in Paris from 1892 onwards, either knew nothing of Impressionism, or showed no interest in it. Instead he looked to such artists as Cottet and Dagnan-Bouveret, and began to spend his summers in Brittany like so many young painters of his generation. If we then assume that he was at once aware of Gauguin and the School of Pont-Aven, we should probably again be quite wrong, for Pont-Aven was only one of a number of artists’ colonies in Brittany, and far from being universally accepted as the most significant.

In the hospitable galleries of the Royal Academy, and in the pages of this catalogue, something of the rich diversity of French painting of this period is presented. The revolutions bred immediate reactions. New theories and new arguments abounded, but Post-Impressionism kept its position as the most challenging form of modern art from its heyday in the late 1880s and very early 1890s until c. 1905. Of the four major protagonists, Van Gogh and Seurat had died young, in 1890 and 1891 respectively; and although Gauguin lived until 1903 and Cézanne until 1906, their later work was done in relative seclusion. All four had their followers, but the absent avant-garde left behind a vacuum (as Mary Anne Stevens points out in her essay). Nobody in France was able to go forward into radically new kinds of art until 1905 when Matisse and Derain painted the first Fauve pictures, and Picasso and Braque began their evolution towards Cubism. It is at this point in time that the French contribution to the exhibition comes to a natural close.

That the exhibition has a full-scale European dimension rather than being confined to French art is largely due to the advocacy of the Royal Academy’s Exhibitions Secretary, Norman Rosenthal. Again we have found it important to provide a broader context for the notion of Post-Impressionism, and if some paintings in the exhibition look like Victorian (and Edwardian) painting this is because Post-Impressionism is Victorian painting, both being products of the same cultural situations. Of course there are differences, but the divide is not unbridgeable, and the questioning of widely held artistic presumptions will surely further our understanding and appreciation of both Victorian and Post-Impressionist art.

Outside France, we have concentrated on those neighbouring countries where the impact of Post-Impressionism was most clearly felt. Retaining the same starting-point in the 1880s, the definition has been stretched backwards in time to permit the inclusion of artists omitted by Fry from his exhibitions. Their work is perhaps not so much Post-Impressionist as after-Impressionist – in other words, the painting shows some awareness of Impressionism without necessarily adopting its style or subjects. In certain cases, in Britain and Germany in particular, the younger artists preferred more conservative models – witness the tremendous enthusiasm for Bastien-Lepage, born in 1848 and thus younger than the Impressionists, and dead at the height of his popularity in 1884. But the doubts about Impressionism felt by some of the most gifted younger non-French artists of the 1880s and 1890s are often the same doubts expressed by the Post-Impressionists proper – notably the absence of spiritual quality in a naturalistic art committed primarily to the objective representation of visual experience.

In each country studied the pattern is revealingly different, conditioned as it often is by geographic, economic and social factors. Chance personal contacts can transform an artistic situation; Toorop’s return to Holland in 1890 is a case in point. Political convictions can explain artistic decisions: Neo-Impressionism, or Divisionism, for example, had a clear-cut socialist/anarchist association, and this perhaps accounts for its particular importance in Italy, where other varieties of Post-Impressionism are less in evidence, and also for its relative absence in the more apolitical climate of Britain, where the painting of Gauguin and then of Cézanne were more likely to attract admirers. In all the countries outside France the artistic time-lag has justified our inclusion of work produced up to c. 1910, the date of the first Post-Impressionist exhibition, and the contents of that exhibition and of its successor two years later have been borne in mind.

Generations of painters have wanted to make an art that is entirely new: only a few succeed. The development of art is not progressive: there are always losses as well as gains. Simplification can result in a loss of subtlety, and a move in one direction implies withdrawal from another. But great artists do stimulate the efforts of all their contemporaries, and
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raise the general level of attainment.

Looking back after almost a hundred years it is hard not to regard the art of Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh and Seurat as an apogee in the history of art, a moment when a high point was reached with a conjunction of stars of a magnitude and illumination unlikely to be seen together again for a very long time.

Norman Rosenthal and Gillian Perry have selected and catalogued the German section of our exhibition which includes those Scandinavian and Swiss artists whose indispensable contribution to the art of the time was made primarily in the German cultural context. The Italian and British work has been chosen by two scholars, Sandra Berresford and Anna Grutzner: the Belgian and Dutch paintings were selected by Mary Anne Stevens. We would all like to acknowledge the help received from Frederick Gore, whose advice has been coloured by both artistry and ancestry. John Milner has tried very hard to provide a Russian contribution, but like the Russian section of the 2nd Post-Impressionist Exhibition it has been hampered by 'delays in transport' and may not be forthcoming. The French section was in the hands of the Directors of the Exhibition, John House and Mary Anne Stevens.

NOTES

1. Introduction to the catalogue of the 2nd Post-Impressionist Exhibition, Grafton Galleries, 5 October - 31 December 1912, pp. 7-8. In the autobiographical Retrospect to Vision and Design (1920) Fry also wrote, rather self-deprecatingly: 'For purposes of convenience it was necessary to give these artists a name, and I chose, as being the vaguest and most non-committal, the name of Post-Impressionist.' I prefer Desmond MacCarthy's more colourful account of this event, which follows in the main text.

2. Published in The Listener, 1 February 1945.

3. The Nature morte (195) and the Paysage (205) at the 1906 International Society's exhibition were probably Venturi 70 and Venturi 154.

4. Fry's review of the exhibition appeared in the Athenaeum for 13 January 1906; his remark about Cézanne is in the Retrospect chapter of Vision and Design (1920).

5. This was first pointed out by Douglas Cooper in his Introduction to the catalogue of the Courtauld collection (1954).

6. All these quotations come from the preface to the catalogue Manet and the Post-Impressionists, Grafton Galleries, 8 November 1910 - 15 January 1911, pp. 7-13. The figures for works shown are taken from the printed catalogue, with some alterations made where it is known that extra pictures were exhibited.

7. As he wrote in 1920 in the Retrospect chapter, '... my most serious lapse was the failure to discover the genius of Seurat.'

8. John Rewald presents these painters with their associates against a rich cultural background, and the continuing importance of his book, first published in 1956, is unquestionable.

9. Strictly speaking, only a part of the Caillebotte bequest, for many important works were refused by the authorities, presumably on grounds of quality and duplication. The bequest was made in 1894; the works were first shown in the spring of 1897, in the Musée du Luxembourg.