

RENOIR – Supplemental Biography

Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841 - 1919)

French painter originally associated with the Impressionist movement. His early works were typically Impressionist snapshots of real life, full of sparkling color and light. By the mid-1880s, however, he had broken with the movement to apply a more disciplined, formal technique to portraits and figure paintings, particularly of women.

In 1854 he began work as a painter in a porcelain factory in Paris, gaining experience with the light, fresh colors that were to distinguish his Impressionist work and also learning the importance of good craftsmanship. His predilection towards light-hearted themes was also influenced by the great Rococo masters, whose works he studied in the Louvre. In 1862 he entered the studio of Gleyre and there formed a lasting friendship with Monet, Sisley and Bazille. He painted with them in the Barbizon district and became a leading member of the group of Impressionists who met at the Café Guerbois. His relationship with Monet was particularly close at this time, and their paintings of the beauty spot called La Grenouillère done in 1869 are regarded as the classic early statements of the Impressionist style.

Like Monet, Renoir endured much hardship early in his career, but he began to achieve success as a portraitist in the late 1870s and was freed from financial worries after the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel began buying his work regularly in 1881. By this time Renoir had ‘traveled as far as Impressionism could take me’, and a visit to Italy in 1881-82 inspired him to seek a greater sense of solidarity in his work. The change in attitude is seen in his color selection at this time. Figures are painted with the feathery brush-strokes characteristic of his Impressionist manner, but the figures are done in a crisper and drier style, with duller coloring. After a period of experimentation with what he called his ‘*manière aigre*’ (harsh or sour manner) in the mid 1880s, he developed a softer and more supple kind of handling. At the same time he turned from contemporary themes to more timeless subjects, particularly nudes, but also pictures of young girls in unspecific settings. As his style became grander and simpler he also took up mythological subjects, and the female type he preferred became more mature and ample.

In the 1890s Renoir began to suffer from rheumatism, and from 1903 (by which time he was world-famous) he lived in the warmth of the south of France. The rheumatism eventually crippled him (by 1912 he was confined to a wheelchair), but he continued to paint until the end of his life, and in his last years he also took up sculpture, directing assistants (usually Richard Guino, a pupil of Maillot) to act as his hands.

Renoir is perhaps the best-loved of all the Impressionists, for his subjects---pretty children, flowers, beautiful scenes, above all lovely women---have instant appeal, and he communicated the joy he took in them with great directness. ‘Why shouldn’t art be pretty?’, he said, ‘There are enough unpleasant things in the world.’ He was one of the great worshippers of the female form, and he said ‘I never think I have finished a nude until I think I could pinch it.’ One of his Sons was the celebrated film director Jean Renoir (1894-1979) who wrote a lively and touching biography (*Renoir, My Father*) in 1962.

Renoir seems to have had the enviable ability to see anything as potentially of interest. More than any of the Impressionists, he found beauty and charm in the modern sights of Paris. He does not go deep into the substance of what he sees but seizes upon its appearance, grasping its generalities, which then enables the spectator to respond with immediate pleasure. “Pleasure” may be decried by the puritanical instinct

within us all, but it is surely the necessary enhancer that life needs. It also signifies a change from Realism: the Impressionists' paintings have none of the labored toll of peasants, for example. Instead they depict delightful, intimate scenes of the French middle class at leisure in the country or at cafes and concerts in Paris. Renoir always took a simple pleasure in whatever met his good-humored attention, but he refused to let what he saw dominate what he wanted to paint. Again he deliberately sets out to give the impression, the sensation of something, its generalities, its glancing life. Maybe, ideally, everything is worthy of attentive scrutiny, but in practice there is no time. We remember only what takes our immediate notice as we move along.