

Art Appreciation Group Visit to Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery for 'Landscape Paintings' Guided Visit.



Our guided Tour of the landscape paintings in the BMAG Collection, and others on loan to the Art Gallery, was led by Rachel, who was passionate about the subject, informative and enthusiastic. We were impressed by the fact that she spoke throughout without notes, and also that when we came upon paintings, during the visit, that had a particular connection with the Art Appreciation Group, but had not been included in her itinerary, she was able to give us a lot of helpful additional information.

The purpose of the visit was to examine the development of landscape painting from earliest times to the twentieth century and the group were introduced to many paintings that followed this path, in a chronological order.

The 'journey' started with a look at

Painting 1: Ford Maddox-Brown (1821 - 1893) - 'An English Autumn Afternoon' (1852-3, 1855. Oil on canvas). BMAG. As a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Maddox-Brown was painting true to nature, using vibrant colours and clear lines. Light effects were particularly important and it was explained to us how this was achieved - using a white background/base first; using paints straight from the tube; not mixing the palette so the colour stayed consistent and true. There was no message or narrative in the painting, the focus was entirely on the landscape, capturing light and weather effects on a typical autumn afternoon.

Having embedded this image in our minds, Rachel took us back to the starting point of landscape painting. She explained that the Greeks and Romans did landscape painting, but then it fell out of fashion until the 16th century. Previous to this time landscape

was only used to 'fill in the gaps' in paintings. To enhance this point we looked at **Painting 2: Simone Martini (1284 - 1344) - 'A Saint Holding a Book' (1320 -30. Tempera on panel). BMAG.** The picture depicts a weeping saint; there is no landscape, only a plain yellow coloured background.

In the 15th century skies were introduced and in the 16th century landscapes became more important, but in a formal way, without naturalism. As an example we were shown **Painting 3: Matteo di Giovanni (active 1452 - 1495). 'The Angel Appearing to David' (around 1480. Oil on wood panel). BMAG.** The background is stylised, not real and just to add a setting and 'context'. The artist has painted Jerusalem, in the background, in the form of a 15th century Italian city.

In a similar style

Painting 4: Master of the Prado - 'Adoration of the Magi, the Nativity' (c1475-1500. Oil on wood panel). BMAG. Although the painting is set in the Holy Land, the background depicts a Dutch local scene. The artist had fused a well-known, biblical story with the local geography that he would have been familiar with.

By the 16th century landscapes were becoming more natural and in **Painting 5: attributed to Bonifazio de' Pitati (1487 - 1553).The Adoration of the Shepherds (1520-1540. Oil on panel).BMAG** the landscapes were taking over. In this picture there is a warm-coloured foreground and a cool-coloured, hazy background. There is a sense of recession, the middle ground is reduced in scale and the path renders perspective and demonstrates the artist's skill.

Painting 6: Lucas Cranach (1472 - 1553). 'Lamentation over the dead Christ' (1518-20. Oil on panel). On loan from the Schorr Collection, Germany. The style is desolate, there is no landscape and the picture is very bleak. The background is only sky.

By contrast, the next painting we viewed showed a more realistic landscape. Again it was a scene taken from the Bible:

Painting 7: Jan van Scorel (1495 - 1562). 'Noli me Tangere' or 'Christ as a Gardener, with Donors in the Wings' (1548-54). Oil on panel). BMAG. Although the painter was Dutch, he had taken a journey to the Holy Land and therefore there was an authentic background and scenery in the centre panel.

At this stage we moved on to view

Painting 8: Claude Gellée called le Lorrain (French 1604/5 - 1682). Landscape near Rome with a view of the Ponte Molle (1645 oil on canvas) BMAG. Claude was the first master of the landscape. Rachel told us of the significant historical and religious story behind the painting and the symbolism it contained. Claude developed landscape painting as a flowering genre and used myth and legend and classical references to highlight the landscape. The painting is restrained, serene, poetical, lyrical, depicting the harmony of man and nature. Lorrain sketched en plein air, but added detail in the studio afterwards. The people are classical, painted in primary colours, but landscape was the important element. Trees frame the work and lead you into the painting, as do the bridges and pathways.

Similarly **Painting 9: Francisque Millet (Flemish-French 1642 - 1679). 'Regulus Returning to Carthage' (around 1660-75. Oil on canvas). BMAG** is Arcadian, balanced and classical, with a warm foreground and a cool and hazy background. Trees frame the picture and draw the viewer in. Again Rachel told us the historic background to this scene - the peace and restraint of the painting belied the noble, violent and tragic events that took place.

We then viewed another Claude/Lorrain painting:

Painting 10: Claude Gellée called le Lorrain (French 1604/5 - 1682). The Embarkation of St Paul (1655. Oil on copper). BMAG which comprised a landscape and a seascape of a Biblical event. The figures in the painting add interest but are incidental. The landscape, the sun and the water 'take centre stage'. Rachel explained the technique of painting on copper - a very time-consuming process, but which creates a luminous effect. The colours in the painting appear to glow. Rachel also explained some of the symbolism in the picture and told us the very interesting story of its provenance.

Painting 11: Richard Wilson (1713 - 1782). 'The Villa of Mycaenas, Tivoli' (1767. Oil on canvas). BMAG. The Grand Tour was very important for fashionable and cultured young men of the 18th century as it gave them the opportunity to visit far off places and experience other cultures. Paintings such as this one were souvenirs of the landscapes and views of the Grand Tour and also provided models for domestic gardens and estates. The 'picturesque' became fashionable - wild, imperfect, ragged, romantic and untamed not neat, controlled and orderly. Wilson influenced Turner and Constable. The sketches for the painting were done en plein air and other elements were added in the studio. There is a dreamy atmosphere, with cragginess and irregularity. The clouds and the foliage guide the eye to the villa and the vast sky provokes an emotional response.

By contrast **Painting 12: Samuel Lines (1778 - 1863). 'Llyn Idwal, North Wales (undated. Oil on canvas). BMAG** is wild and volatile, with a vortex of rocks and sheer cliffs. The painting is dark and ominous and provokes emotions of fear and anxiety. The landscape is powerful, unpredictable, majestic and remote, with dark stormy clouds. There are no people in the picture, only a white bird, a focal point which leads the viewer into the area of danger. At this time, with the growth of industrialisation and urbanisation, there was a great nostalgia for nature and for the past.

In a similar vein, but opposite in subject and tone

Painting 13: David Cox (1783 - 1859). 'The Skylark' (1849. oil on canvas). BMAG captures the effects of the wind and the movement of the tree. This painting is nostalgic, harmonious, fresh, the sense of perspective shown by the faint image of the skylark high in the sky, with the children gazing at it and drawing our gaze to it too.

So far landscape painting had developed from an incidental contribution to the painting, to being the purpose of the picture. The Arcadian views of the previous centuries were about to end with the rise of Impressionism. As we viewed

Painting 14: Camille Pissarro (1830 - 1903). 'The Pont Boieldieu at Rouen, Sunset (1896. Oil on canvas). BMAG the contrast with the previous style could not have been more pronounced. Rachel gave us an interesting talk on the background to the picture and the Impressionist movement. This is an industrial landscape, rebelling against the stiff, formal, artificial Salon Establishment. This cityscape portrays everyday life and everyday folk. It is realistic, not glamourised, industrial, smoky, capturing the ripples of the water. These are pure colours, mixed as little as possible. As one of the group commented: 'It's the light that does it'.

Landscape painting was about to go in another direction again, following on from the Impressionists. As we looked at

Painting 15: Maurice de Vlaminck (1876 - 1958). 'La Route avec Peupliers (The Road with Poplars)' . (c 1922. Oil on canvas). BMAG Impressionism gave way to the influences of Gauguin and Van Gogh. Outlines were being simplified, the palette was limited to earthy colours and there was a linear perspective and a sense of speed and movement. The painter was a member of the group known as 'Les Fauvés' or 'The Wild Beasts' and this movement led to Cubism and Abstractism.

Near this painting was another painting by a member of 'Les Fauvés'

Painting 16: André Derain (1880 - 1954). 'Landscape near Gagnes' (1910. Oil on canvas). BMAG. Rachel suggested that we look at this painting later, in our own time, as we were running out of time. It was the next development on in landscape painting - Cubism. Derain was influenced by Paul Cézanne, for whom the landscape was simply a

starting point for arrangements of lines, geometric forms and harmonised colours. Here the hill-top town in the South of France is reduced to a framework of basic forms and earth colours.

Finally we ended this most interesting, well presented and informative tour by looking at two Lowry paintings:

Painting 17: Laurence Stephen Lowry (1887 - 1976). In the Park (1940. Oil on canvas). On loan from the James Archdale Collection.

Painting 18: Laurence Stephen Lowry (1887 - 1976). An Industrial Town (1944. Oil on canvas). BMAG. These are paintings of the industrial north of England, filled with urbanisation, buildings, people. As Rachel told us the story of Lowry's life we could see, reflected in the paintings, his existence of isolation, loneliness and rejection. There are only a handful of colours, and a stark white background.

After the Tour, some members of the group went on to St Philip's Cathedral to look at the magnificent Burne-Jones windows there, while others went up to the third floor of the Museum to the 'History and Development of Birmingham' Gallery, which Rachel had recommended. This helped in understanding some of the landscape paintings, especially the painting of the view of Harbourne in David Cox's 'The Skylark'.

We had come a long way from the lack of landscape painting before 1400; stylised landscapes of the 15th century; via the ground-breaking new genre of rustic landscapes of the 17th century and the 'shocking' landscapes of the Impressionists, Les Fauvés and Cubists to the well-loved but 'eccentric' artist, Lowry. The group agreed it had been a most fascinating 'tour'.

Heidy Hague