

THEORIES AND PRACTICES OF IMPRESSIONISM

Impressionism is based on two main principles:

1. The use of simultaneous vision (seeing the scene as a whole) instead of consecutive vision (seeing nature piece by piece).
2. Chiaroscuro, based on the contrast of light and dark tones (black/ white) was rejected. The Impressionist painter is always concerned to persuade us that his subject is a visual impression of a scene accidentally encountered, and that he has made it a point of honour to accept everything as it chanced to appear at the particular moment when he was present.

Once, it was accepted that the picture must record a scene as it appeared at the moment when the artist chanced to be there, it was logical extension that all pictures of outdoor scenes should be begun and finished on the spot. This was made easier by the new invention of paint in tubes. The handling of the pigment must be obviously spontaneous and rapid. Thus all Impressionist pictures have the spontaneous quality of sketches.

One of the most important discoveries of the later Impressionists was that in shadows, the complementary colour of the object casting the shadow always appears. For example, violet shadows thrown by a lemon on a white tablecloth (to obtain the full brilliance of any given hue, it should be placed alongside its complementary colour).

In translating the purity and brilliance of their vision, the Impressionists largely eliminated earth colour and black from their palettes. The new intensive study of colour brought about a new palette and a new technique - they sought to achieve their aims with warm greys, blues, greens and violets obtained by using only pure colours, applied with a loaded brush in dots and strokes. They held that a true black did not exist in nature, the darkest colour being indigo, dark green or deep violet.

Their palette included indigo, blue, green, yellow-orange, red and violet, the nearest colours to the solar spectrum. They mixed as little as possible - "more mixing means more mud-like ". They applied the colours in minute touches to the canvas. If they wanted green they did not mix it on the palette, but placed the two primary colours, blue and yellow, side by side. Viewed from a distance, these colours fuse together to produce a green of a greater purity. This phenomenon is called optical mixing. The development of this system into a scientific theory was later practised by Seurat and Signac and called Pointillism.

UNDERSTANDING COLOUR

What is colour? In 1666 Sir Isaac Newton discovered that white light from the sun is made up of different colours. He made the discovery by passing a beam of sunlight through a glass prism on to a screen, creating the bands of coloured light we now know as the spectrum.



He decided that these component colours were violet, indigo, blue, green yellow, orange and red.

A rainbow is sunlight split into the colours of the spectrum. Many colour effects are related to the breaking up of white light into the spectrum.

The colours of oil patches on water, soap bubbles, some insects' wings are all examples of the effects of splitting light and are not truly coloured surfaces.

How do we see colour? We see things because they reflect light. Light travels to an object in waves. Part of the light is absorbed by the object and the rest of the light travels to our eyes. The colour of an object depends on which part of the spectrum is reflected to our eyes. For example, a green leaf looks green because it reflects only the green light back to our eyes, and absorbs all the other colours of the spectrum.