

1. The role of brushstroke in modern European painting

After centuries of guidelines imposed by the French Academy saying that painters were supposed to create an idealized version of reality and a window through which one could view nature in its most perfect form, artists began to rebel from this notion and started to show unique styles and ways to paint. One of the first true pioneers of this break from academic art in the middle of the 19th century was Gustave Courbet. With projects such as *Un enterrement à Ornans*, he began removing himself from the class of painters that focused on accuracy of brushstroke and on creating the illusion of looking at a real picture, and instead purposely left details such as the mountains in the background or the grass in the foreground less refined. He also portrayed the villagers as they truly looked instead of substituting them with beautiful models. This inspired a revolution in the world of art that eventually completely changed how the artists looked at the way in which pigment was applied to the canvas. Three paintings that played a particularly important role in innovating brushstroke through the 19th and 20th century are Édouard Manet's *Olympia*, Henri Matisse's *Calme, luxe et volupté*, and Nicolas de Staël's *L'orchestre*.

Édouard Manet, born in France in 1832, is credited with being one of the artists responsible for the inspiration of the Impressionism movement. His interpretation of the female nude seen in *Olympia* is something that truly shocked the art world of 1863. The subject of this painting is portrayed with a seemingly careless and imprecise facture, a great jump from the hiding of every single brushstroke typical of the realism and

neoclassicism era. The sheets and pillow are simply conglomerations of brushstrokes, and it is up to the viewer to put them in their context and realize what they are supposed to represent. Similarly, the body of Olympia itself lacks any modeling, and Manet makes no effort in trying to blend in the shaded parts around the thighs and arms with the rest of the skin. But the most interesting part of the painting is how the artist completely changes style when it comes to painting the hand covering Olympia's femininity. Contrasting greatly with other elements of the picture that seem rushed and are hardly recognizable, such as the bouquet of flowers, this body part is extremely accurately portrayed, without any imperfect marks and has an observable position in space. Academic critics of the time expected this sort of attention for the entire painting, but Manet employed this technique exclusively for her hand because it is supposed to attract attention to her sexuality, almost daring the viewer to come forward when combined with her confident expression.

One of the artists who was extremely influenced by Manet's work as well as by certain elements of Japanese art was Henri Matisse. Before moving into his trademark fauvist style, he was interested in the divisionist work of Paul Signac, who believed that if one put two colors one next to the other instead of blending them together, the human eye would perceive the color combination with significantly more luminosity. Also inspired by Signac's pointillist work such as *Le démolisseur*, in 1904 Matisse created *Calme, luxe et volupté*. A portrayal of a beach in St. Tropez, this was one of Matisse's most revolutionary works. The short, monochromatic brushstrokes unify Signac's two theories to create a picture that is anything but homogeneous, and an early representation of Matisse's fauvist characteristics. By only using minimal detail to portray the subject

matter, the artist emphasizes his attention to the combination of vibrant colors and to the technique with which the picture was created. The dot-like, rapid strokes are meant to aid the eye in putting together the juxtaposed colors, which are also laid out in a specific manner. One can see that each part of the painting rich in one color is balanced by the presence of the same color in a different part of the picture. For example, the intense blue visible on the trunk of the tree is in equilibrium with the bottom left human figure, also clothed in blue, as well as with the blue mountains in the background. This technique, which Matisse explores more in depth with Fauvism, makes sure that the viewer does not focus on the area with the most intense or predominant color, but instead can roam around the whole ensemble without being distracted.

In the later part of the twentieth century, with Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism dominating the post-WWII art world, there was a major push to avoid the representational art that was at this point well-recognized as Picasso's and other contemporaries' art. However, certain artists such as Nicolas De Staël believed in the coming together of abstraction and recognizable figures. From this belief stemmed one of his more famous paintings *L'orchestre*, created in 1953. This work of art continued the now established way of showing brushstroke to remind the viewer of the process of painting and brought attention back to art itself, rather than to subject matter. However, De Staël brought this idea one step forward. His strikingly thick application of paint is a key step in the way in which this painting was created, since its objective is to completely cover the pigment that was beneath it. In fact, when one examines the canvas it is possible to recognize that while there was an original base of what appears to be white paint, De Staël painted over it various geometric figures in different shades of gray. He

used a similar process to cover the left part of his canvas, though here it seems that he employed a base of a dark blue and covered it with greens. This particular way of applying paint to the surface emphasizes the process even more, since one can see that he added color as his process developed to mute the brilliant white or exceedingly somber blue. Furthermore, one can appreciate his seemingly arbitrary addition of patches of light green to the left of the picture with wide, unrefined brushstrokes. This addition of color is also balanced with the presence of very light spots of green covering the grays in the rest of the painting. Ultimately, De Staël created a masterpiece that not only balances the abstract with the representational, but also balances the various color in a way that, similarly to Matisse, is pleasing to the eye and does not distract the viewer from any particular aspect of the picture.

In conclusion, the 19th and 20th century were truly times of revolution in the world of art. Diverging from the boring, exceedingly realistic technique used by academic painters, modern artists started experimenting with new techniques to both criticize art and to make a statement about the direction of art. Manet's *Olympia* changed the way in which both artists and the general public viewed attention to detail, Matisse's *Luxe, calme et volupté* is an experimentation with color and brushstroke length that would eventually spark an entire artistic movement, and De Staël's *L'orchestre* harmoniously put together the real with the abstract by going over previously painted areas and creating a balance throughout the painting. Together, they played a key role in moving the art world forward and shaped the way in which the modern viewer and critic appreciates art.