The Tech goes to Renoir

works as The Swing (1876), Manet Charpentier and her Children (1878), A Box at the Opera (1880), and The Three Dancers (1882-83) and countless other textbook mainstays. The essential completeness of this section of the show is astonishing in the light of present-day curatorial constraints, a fact of which the Museum is justly proud.

It is important for the appreciation of this work to realize that the mature Renoir's concerns, unlike those of his Impressionist colleagues, were never of a formal nature. The art of Monet, for instance (which more than any other established the popular conception of Impressionism) can be interpreted as an exploration of the modalities of natural light. Degas opened up new pathways in the treatment of movement and light dynamics. Both of these artists thought of themselves as innovators, and produced many works that can be termed programmatic. Compared to them, Renoir appears as somewhat of a stylistic opportunist.

There can be no doubt that for him the primary was in his subjects, and the painter's task their elevation. All his artistic means are applied toward this single goal. If on his canvases there is fleeting and fleeting, it is not because Renoir believes this to be the essence of our visual experience; it is because he believes it conveys a sense of delicacy and poetry to a cherished subject. If the colors are hot or exuberant (sometimes to the point of assaulting the eye), it is not to make a statement about color, but to stress leadenness in its existence.

Take the landscapes, for instance. The stylistic consistency of the best among them (like High Wind (1872), Landscape at Watteville (1873), Paysan de Marex (1881)) is carried less by a single formal principle than by a common aspect in their subject matter — in these cases the sense of vibrant movement dissolving in a frag- mentary medium. (Renoir was not, and presumably did not want to be, a great psychologist; whether Renoir was a great psychologist; he was not, and presumably did not want to be. His characterization is shallow and his treatment of human features generic. His emphasis on the eyes, windows of the soul, has hardly an equal in art history (except perhaps the Fayum portraits from late Antiquity), yet nothing could be so similar as two of his women or child portraits. Renoir deals in charm, not in vision.

What this amounts to is clearly shown by the group portrait of Manet Charpentier and her Children (1878). The general atmosphere of square happiness, and details like the sentimental motive of the dog having close parallels in other visual imagery of the time, from simple everyday aspects to the court portraits of the Second Empire; the individual characterization is indifferent to the point that one can read the caption to find out that the girl in the middle is actually a boy. It is not even emphatic, straightforward appeal to universal forms of affection and the supporting heavy coloration to make the difference.

This, then, brings us to the core. Renoir's art is an art of representation, rather than perception. What it strives to represent is a particular limit of our world where the sun always shines and everybody is always smiling. And to realize this goal, he was not, and presumably did not want to be. His characterization is shallow and his treatment of human features generic. His emphasis on the eyes, windows of the soul, has hardly an equal in art history (except perhaps the Fayum portraits from late Antiquity), yet nothing could be so similar as two of his women or child portraits. Renoir deals in charm, not in vision.

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All this is fine, but it brings up a problem. The point is, simply, that the ultimate aesthetic allusion of Renoir's art is close to its utter trivialization. Both the highest ambitions and the dalilai cliches have their place in dreams. It is the privilege of a dream that doesn't have to be credible. But it is less than convincing. This, of course, is ultimately a personal affair. Go, judge for yourself whether Renoir's dreams are yours.

Michel Bos