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“THE PHILOSOPHY” OF THE IMPRESSIONIST PAINTING

SUMMARY. This article focuses on the problem of defining the philosophical component (outlook) of French Impressionist painting. A search for its origin and features within the scope of West European and Far Eastern (Japanese) philosophical systems determines the novelty of the approach.

KEY WORDS. French Impressionist painting, C. Monet, the crisis of positivism and rationalism, Buddhism.

M. Alpatov asserted that “Impressionism is not a dogma, not a doctrine”; “it’s not a philosophy and not a technique” [1; 96; 90]. In fact, Impressionism never worshipped any philosophy and wasn’t associated with any. It didn’t even claim to have created any theory. C. Monet declared that theories did not paint pictures. But nevertheless, it’s impossible to agree with M. Alpatov’s view that a search for assumed philosophical suppositions in the new trend, aimed at looking for its essence, takes us away from Impressionism as an artistic phenomenon*, since art is a worldview expressed in the artistic form. Irrespective of recognition of the above-said by critics, fine art experts or painters, Impressionism was based on a new perception of the world, a new attitude to life and philosophy expressed in the internal typological attributes belonging both to the new trend and to Impressionist painting created by it. An attempt to find some of these attributes and their origins in the framework of the West European and Far Eastern (Japanese) philosophical systems brings novelty to the research under discussion.

Speaking of the reasons for Impressionism’s origin, researchers, particularly national ones, usually emphasize economic, social, political, scientific and technical factors, leaving aside worldview and philosophical components. From the point of view of the latter, the general cultural crisis of West European civilisation, which started in the 18th Century and was detected only in the beginning of the 19th Century, and the revolution in scientific thinking of the 19th Century, may be considered as the origins of the new trend.

Positivism determined the world perception of the epoch. On the one hand, a person received freedom and a feeling of power over nature; a person achieved unprecedented breadth and depth of knowledge and implemented it in practice. But, on the other hand, liberation from theological dogmas and from union with nature,

* M. Alpatov affirms: “In order to understand the essence of Impressionism, some authors addressed the assumed philosophical suppositions, but at the same time they moved away from Impressionism as an artistic phenomenon” [1; 89].

accompanied with the development of technology, social and political reforms and economic conversion, entailing the alienation of a person from the world, and the dominance of rationalism, led to an understanding of an inability to stay within the limits of the material. Dualism of perception of the world and of oneself became indicative of the Modern worldview.

The epoch, characterized by a gradual transition from obviousness to speculativeness related to epistemological thinking, was coming up to occupy the place of positivism. The "Comprehension of the relativity of "the obvious" led to an understanding of the necessity of uniting the visible and the invisible, the visual and the notional, ... the general and the particular. This revolution in scientific thinking brings us very close to the idea... of the unity of the world" [2; 27-28], turned in the 1860-1870s into the byword for the epoch. The problem of fixing the undifferentiated unity, caught by the most keen writers and painters, became topical. Overcoming positivist restrictions of the epoch, Impressionists re-established contact with the whole. As contrasted to the anthropocentric concept of European art, young painters discovered "that freedom of artistic vision which does not include the central point of view of a painter, ...turning the author into the creator of the visible world" [3; 86].

Thus, Impressionism as a demonstration of an "anti-positivist reaction", manifested "first in philosophical thinking, and then in ... artistic life" [4; 26], became a sort of "response" to the dominance of positivism and the centuries-long dictate of reason. The philosophical and mindset reasons for its origin are rooted in this crisis of consciousness. Impressionism is characterised by such perception of reality when "the logical causes and effects become secondary", and "all attention is focused on just this" [5; 37].

It should be noted that the East, along with the West, was looking to overcome the crisis. It is interesting that researchers associate the creation of irrationalist concepts (F. Nietzsche, S. Freud and others) in European philosophy and growing interest in orientalism, in Buddhism in particular, exactly with the emergence of positivism. According to the contemporaries, "the number of Buddha's friends in Paris was equal to hundred thousands, and the number of followers was at least ten thousand" [6; 23] including Parisian intellectuals, painters, writers and public officials. We do not know what C. Monet studied as information sources on Buddhism, indeed whether he studied them at all. But it is true that experts on Buddhism and people who were keen on it were part of the inner circle of the painter: his friend and biographer Georges Clemenceau, and the Japanese art dealer Tadamas Hayashi who understood his mission in educating French collectors in relation to the history of culture and the significance of the Japanese works of art that he sold to them [6; 23]. Thus, it is impossible to deny the fact that Buddhism had a certain impact on representatives of the new trend, which remains a subject to study for the national researchers.

Based on the known philosophical sources, the critics gave definitions to Impressionism that cancelled each other out. It was accused of dealing "in objectivism and subjectivism, in empiricism and refusal from empiricism,... in rationalism and sensualism; in strong and cold scientific rigour and deliberativeness, on the one hand, and intuitivism and alogism, on the other hand; ... in naturalism and formalism ... and finally even in materialism and idealism" [7; 20].

As far as the term "Impressionism" is connected with the notion of impression, some researchers tried to attribute philosophical subjectivism to Monet and Renoir. J-L Castagnary wrote about the "castaways": "They are Impressionists in the sense that they reproduce not just a landscape, but an impression of it... Thus, they alienate from reality and descend to the positions of idealism" [2; 66-68].

The philosophical basis for this approach was prepared by the subjective, idealist and positivist tradition from G. Berkeley and D. Hume through A. Comte and H. Spencer. If the world is the integrity of individual events coincident with the feelings used to describe them, then we may consider the world as the kingdom of unique moments — as a "swift passing" world [8; 390-391].

R. Hamann, based on the philosophical approach of H. Rickert, considered that Impressionistic world perception is part of a theory deserving the title of psychologism, since it denotes an object of philosophy (or the so-called internal experience) by the term "actuality" and denies the reality of the independent external world [9; 48]. Thus, it becomes clear why Impressionism was called subjectivism or extreme individualism, as far as in accordance with psychology an impression different from the feeling of other people is fixed in its eventuality and is not linked to the generally valid objective nature.

On the other hand, it is impossible to deny the existence of the arguments proving the objectiveness of the Impressionists' concept. From this point of view they are presented as the followers of Courbet's programme, which comprises "maximum passivity of perception" [10; 20]. He wanted "to represent nature in such a way as if he did not exist" [10; 20]. Representatives of the new trend were recording feeling with scientific impartiality and aspired to objective depiction of reality.

So was Impressionist art really based on subjectivity or objectivity of the concept? B. Vipper finds a convincing escape from the vicious circle, paying attention to the difference between two stages of Impressionism's development. In the beginning, young painters "definitely aimed at the utmost objectivity in such a way that their favourite formula — "as I see it" — had the main stress on the word "see", on catching objective features of visibility... On the contrary, in the second stage of impressionism... the gravity centre moves to "I", "as I see it", to the independent, spontaneous, subjective painter's explanation of nature" [10; 21-22].

Impressionism is also characterized by an integrated point of view on the life stream, adopted in unity and at the same time diversity and variability, therefore a principally new attitude towards the occasional and "insignificant". The Impressionist world outlook ideal does not break ties with an emotional attitude to the visible world, and it does not appeal to the invisible, which makes it significantly different from the philosophy of Symbolism and brings it close to Realism. But as opposed to the latter it stressed an emotional attitude to the non-typical — the unique, ephemeral, swift-passing. The ephemerality of things expressed in their peculiar diffusivity, according to V.P. Bransky, is characteristic of Impressionist painting. "The latter lies in the aspiration of all things stable and recurrent to reach zero and in leaving all things changeable and unique behind. As a result, the things acquire "instability" and "weakness" [9; 49], making us remember the Buddhist notion of the ephemerality of everything.

Some researchers link the origin of impressionism with the philosophy of life. The ideal of learning of the latter is direct experience of events.

"Monism of gradual transitions" [9; 50] as a totally new type of thinking attitude is set: avoiding embracing the whole by concentrating the groups of phenomena around some centre, and gradual transition from one thing to another. Such refined thinking allows the presentation of an object in a different light, and to demonstrate it in ultrafine nuances. The philosophical concepts of Simmel, Rickert and Nietzsche may serve as examples of it.

The new type of thinking allows seeing the beauty in simple things, which leads to aestheticization of the social realm, specific in the first instance to the Far Eastern artistic tradition. In accordance with the latter, beauty may be well-hidden. From this point of view, Renoir speaks like a maestro of Japanese painting, affirming: "If I arrange a bunch of flowers with the intention to paint it, then I will attempt to paint the side of it I did not care about while arranging it" [11; 67]. The peculiar worship of beauty developed in Japanese culture has more ancient roots than Buddhism. It originated in the Shintoist adoration of the perfection of the world. Shinto animism, rich in ideas of Taoism and Buddhism, favoured the development of an "instinctively artistic" attitude to nature [9; 64]. "The total aestheticization of the social realm specific to Japanese art leads to recognition of beauty in the ordinary and usual. This specific feature resonates with the "dissolving" of the traditional borders of the genres by the Impressionists, with confusion of genres and with stable popularity of the social genre" [9; 62]. Besides, an Impressionist painter considers beauty as not only an aesthetic, but also an ethical value that gives us another opportunity to compare with the Far Eastern tradition characterized by fusion of the moral, ethical and aesthetic domains.

The opposition between academic art and the new trend highlights the problem of "a human being and nature". As distinct from the desire to subdue nature and to exploit it, which is common for the Modern time and which dates back to the European rationalist doctrine, Impressionism affirms a new attitude to the world and the person close to the artistic tradition of the East. The leading principle of the latter is the unity of the human being and nature, the universe. The idea of isomorphism of a human being (microcosm) and the universe (macrocosm) has existed since the earliest times. The basis for unity was in projecting a human being's image to the universe in all its guises [12; 80]. The Impressionists, "explaining the world, come to universal empathy (panpsychism) ..." [13; 43]. In the opinion of V.A. Lenyashin, they were the first who approached another reality, "where things reveal themselves in their authenticity; one can feel the nature behind a landscape, the world — behind nature and the supramundane — behind the world" [14; 58-59].

One more common feature of the art of Zen and Impressionism is "the exposure of an object ... as one of the figures included in the general structure of the world which follows the universal rhythm" [9; 65]. This represents a philosophical position manifested in Far Eastern culture. Following this position, the world comprises a global connection, mutual exposure and mutual transition of concepts — "one in all and all in one", the unity of permanent (fueki) and changing (ryuko), total harmony (wa), "which is thought of as unity of the different, the balance of the internal and the external, ... the natural and the man-made, yin and ye [15; 66]".

* "Yin and ye" are Japanese words standing for the Chinese notions "Yin and Yang".

“Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji” by Hokusai (1823-1831) may be cited as an example of wa implementation. In this work, nature and human life are depicted as a unique process in all variety of manifestations. E. Degas (“Ballet dancers”) and C. Pissarro (“Boulevards”) practised the principle of series of representations in Western art, though in the 1870s it was Monet who initiated conscious and systematic creation of larger series of paintings starting with his works of “Gare Saint Lazare”. The principle of series painting was fully implemented in Monet’s creations in 1880-1890 in the series “Grainstacks” (1888-1891, over 20 paintings), “Poplars” (1891, about 20 works) and “Rouen Cathedral” (1892-1894, about 50 pieces of work).

In letters dated 1895, Pissarro strongly encouraged his son to look at the totality of “Cathedrals”. “I find magnificent unity in them and I wish for such unity in my works” [9; 68]. A series irrespective of the number of different elements is unique. Every painting is closely connected with each other, penetrating in each other and the parts fuse as a whole.

The most grandiose series by Monet — “Nympheas” (1898-1926)— is devoted to the favourite flower of the maotre — water-nymphs. From the point of view of Buddhism, a water-nymph is a symbol of “lucidity of the senses growing from the dirt of ignorance” [6; 24]. The topics common for the East on the whole include concepts of eternity and destiny. The significant share of Buddhism is occupied by the idea that life is a phase of an inexorable process leading to a final re- genesis — nirvana. Jacqueline Baas finds a union of two Buddhistic notions, impermanence (evanescence) and re- genesis, in the favourite brainchild of Monet, since the life cycle of a water-lily is a cycle of revival [6; 24]. Geoffroy finds in “Nympheas” “the ultimate significance of Monet’s art: his adoration of the Universe finishing in pantheistic and Buddhistic contemplation, brining his dream of shape and colour almost to the dilution of his individuality in the eternal nirvana of things changing and permanent at the same time” [16].

Thus, Impressionist painting depicts something new for the European tradition of perception of the world, and a new philosophy different from the dominating positivism and rationalism, in many respects close to the Japanese aesthetic and philosophical (Buddhistic) tradition. It is revealed in shifting the focus to something accidental and non-typical (ephemeral), in confirming the beautiful in the usual (anesthetization of reality) and endowing it with an ethical value, in a new relation towards the human being and nature based on the idea of world unity, global connection and harmony, which, together with the Buddhist notions of impermanence (evanescence) and re- genesis, is implemented in Monet’s series of paintings.

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