CONTRASTS AND COMPARISONS

Comparisons between the styles and techniques of artists can deepen our understanding and enjoyment of the works. Here we take three themes: Landscape, Nudes and Interiors to see how artist of from different cultures or different periods have dealt with the same subject. Some surprising similarities or interesting contrasts can sometimes be found.

LANDSCAPE 1

Claude
Landscape with Hagar and the Angel (1646)

Rousseau
The Edge of the forest at Monts-Girard (1852-54)

George Vincent
A distant view of Pevensey Bay, (1820)

Ruisdael *View of Haarlem* (c1665)

Claude
The French artist Claude Lorraine (1600-82) made studies from the landscape in the countryside around Rome, which he used to fabricate landscapes in the studio. He was principally interested in landscape and was a master of light. He adds figures from Classical mythology or religious themes in order to make his work more acceptable in a society which relegated pure landscape to the bottom of a hierarchy of subjects. This adds a 'literary' or storytelling element to his pictures. In fact he acknowledged that his skills as a figure painter were not great and said that he charged for the landscape and threw in the figures for free.

Rousseau
By contrast the view at *The Edge of the forest at Monts-Girard* painted in the Barbizon in the Forest of Fontainebleau by Theodore Rousseau (1812-67) has no hint of a story other than that it is a real, identifiable part of a landscape. Rousseau and the Barbizon painters were forerunners of the Impressionists, who set up their easels in the landscape and completed their studies in front of nature. Although worked on over a period of time Rousseau's landscapes have a freshness of touch which belies the origins in the studio, and have distant echoes of the Classical landscapes of his earlier compatriots, Claude and Poussin. The balancing of a large mass (trees or buildings) on one side with a smaller mass on the other, with horizontal bands receding into the scene, and a diagonal line (path, river, bank, quayside etc.) leading the eye into the background are typical motifs of Classical landscapes.

Vincent
English artists of the Norwich School of Painters, such as (the lesser known) George Vincent, (1796-c1832) took their cue from artists of the Dutch Golden Age, such as Jakob Ruisdael. In this view of Pevensey Bay, the landing place of King William the Conqueror, contrasts of light and shade flood the view, which is a device for establishing space and distance more associated with Baroque landscape.

Ruisdale
Jakob Ruisdal (1629-82) would often choose a portrait format for his landscapes, setting the horizon low, as this enabled him to make the cloudy skies a main feature, and their cast shadows to direct the eye through the landscape.

It wasn't until the seventeenth century, and specifically with the artists of the Dutch Golden Age that landscape was seen as a subject in its own right, and not merely as a background setting for subjects of a more 'elevated' content.

Ruisdael *Dune Landscape* (1646)

Hobbema W*ooded Landscape with Farmsteads* (c.1665)

Two more landscapes from the Dutch Golden Age show cloudy skies and patterns of light and shade weaving the landscape together. Meindert Hobbema (1623-1709) was a pupil of Ruisdael, and specialised in woodland scenes.

Bruegel *The Harvesters* (1565)

Crome *Boys Bathing on the River Wensum, Norwich* (1817)

John Crome (1768-1821) was the leading member of the Norwich School of painters, founded in1803 and the first provincial art movement in Britain. He attracted many friends and pupils until his death in 1821. The mantle of leadership then fell on John Sell Cotman, a member of the society since 1807, who continued to keep the society together until he left Norwich for London in 1834. The society effectively ceased to exist from that date.

The scene of harvesting from Pieter Bruegel's (c1525/30-1569) *Four Seasons* series is cast in a clear, almost unnatural light in which all details are clearly revealed, and every leaf on the trees depicted. It was to be another century before artists of the lowlands, discovered a softer 'northern' light, and developed the techniques to represent it.

LANDSCAPE 2

Corot *The Bridge at Narni* (1826)

Cézanne Mont *Sainte-Victoire* (1882–1885)

Pissarro *Lordship Lane Station, East Dulwich, London* (c.1870)

Camoin *Spring* (1921)

Corot
As a young man Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796 – 1875) went to study in Italy, in the wake of his 17th century compatriots Claude and Poussin. This study from life of the ruined Roman Pont d'Augusto at Narni is freshly painted and with a very naturalistic light and atmosphere, which was to inspire the next generation of Impressionists, such as Monet and Pissarro. It has been said that '*So deeply did Corot admire Claude and Poussin, so fully did he understand their work, that from the outset he viewed nature in their terms....In less than a year (since his arrival in Rome) he had realized his goal of closing the gap between the empirical freshness of outdoor painting and the organizing principles of classical landscape composition.'*

The study was later used as a basis for the larger and more finished *View at Narni*, exhibited in1827.

Cézanne
Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) said that he wanted "to make of impressionism something solid and lasting like the art in the museums", In this landscape from his late period his contention that he was recreating Poussin "after nature" underscores his desire to unite observation of nature with the permanence of classical composition.

Although painted in front of the subject (and efforts have been made to find the exact spots where he placed his easel) he makes subtle adjustments to details to arrange the scattered elements of the scene into a harmonious whole. His use of colour is revolutionary. At first glance descriptive: 'blue – sky', 'green – trees and grass', 'ochre – earth', they are not 'natural' in hue or tone; each individually placed stroke of colour is a structural tool used to construct the space that we perceive in the picture. In this he was entirely original and enormously influential on the art of the twentieth century, in particular on the Cubism of Braque and Picasso, the latter referring to Cézanne as "the father of us all."

Pissarro
In this early landscape by Camille Pissarro (1830 – 1903), painted on his first visit to England, when he lived in Norwood, then a village on the edge of London, we see the influence of the British landscape tradition. He was introduced by the Paris art dealer Durand-Ruel to Monet, also in London at the time, and together they viewed the paintings of Constable and Turner, the works of whom influenced the future Impressionists to work *en plein air.* In portraying the recently installed railway he was asserting his modern outlook, and determination to wrought an art that reflected the spirit of the age.

He was taught and influenced in his ideas of naturalism by Corot. The spontaneous look, with loosely blended brushstrokes and areas of impasto, giving depth to the work, has little of the classical design that we see in Claude and Poussin, and to which Cézanne was later to restore post Impressionist painting, albeit, as we have seen, in a modern guise. It appears that Pissarro just set up his easel on a bridge over the railway cutting and painted the view as it presented itself, under a cloudy British sky, before him, with little or no attempt at 'composing' the scene in a traditional sense.

Pissarro made several visits to Britain, and his son, Lucien, and granddaughter, Orovida, are regarded as British artists. Although mentoring many artists of a younger generation, such as Cézanne and van Gogh, he sold little of his own work in his lifetime, all of his seven children became involved in art, three of them and a number of grand and great grandchildren becoming notable artists.

Camoin
Charles Camoin (1879 – 1965) was associated with the Fauves. In this painting he raises the intensity of the natural colours and contrasts them: pink against blue, purple and yellow, the green in the foreground as a foil to the red of a roof on the edge of the picture. In terms of its simple composition a wavy diagonal line leads into the picture space (a common compositional trope), finding its echo in the line of the white clouds, and directing the eye to the violent pink tree on the far edge. From there a staccato movement formed by the verticals of the tree trunks and continued by the wavy line of the distant mountains and the horizontal line of the sea shore brings the eye up against the left picture edge, where it is swung around back into the picture by the 'full stop' of the shockingly red roof.

LANDSCAPE 3

Matisse *The Roofs of Collioure* (1905)

Hitchens *A Shropshire Landscape* (c 1931)

Nash *Landscape of the Vernal Equinox III* (1944)

Lanyon *Offshore* (1959)

Matisse
In 1905 a group of artists, who formed under the leadership of Henri Matisse (1869 – 1954), discovered in Collioure, the vernacular architecture and the light of the Mediterranean. Matisse, Marquet, Manguin, Rouault and Camoin had learned from their teacher, the symbolist artist Gustave Moreau (1826 – 98), the expressive potency of pure colour. The move towards lightening of the pallet, and the abandoning of the dull tertiary colours that characterised academic painting, had

been pioneered by the Impressionists, and the example of Gauguin and van Gogh, but it was in this quiet fishing village in the south of France that the use of pure, unmixed colour came to its fullest expression, and led to the group being labelled *Les Fauves* – The Wild Beasts. Although as a movement it lasted only a few years, and the artists subsequently reintroduced browns, greys and more subtle hues into their paintings, the 'beast' was let out of its cage, and it has had a lasting impact on all the many alleyways of art in the twentieth century.

In *The Roofs of Collioure* Matisse, following the example of Cézanne, uses colour to structure the painting. He puts raw red/pink in the foreground soil, (horizontal plane) the middle ground wall (vertical plane, parallel to the picture plane) and the background headland (receding vertical plane). Red has a tendency to come forward so this device asserts the flatness of the canvas (truth to materials: painting is an arrangement of colours on a flat surface – in the new philosophy to deny this with tricks of illusionism is unreal). He holds the foreground back onto the plane of the vertical wall with small dabs of green, and likewise holds the bay and the distant pink of the headland into the background by cutting them across with the domed church tower; this vertical disruption being echoed by and contrasted with the vertical passageway between the houses, with two patches of blue bringing the colour of the bay down through the picture and into the foreground.

Hitchens
The landscapes of Ivon Hitchens (1893 – 1979), although obviously influenced by fauvism and the painterly gestures of the expressionists, have a quality of Englishness about them, and continue the long tradition of British landscape painting. In this early painting, *A Shropshire Landscape* (c 1931), we see the influence of Cézanne in the use of blocks of paint to create a structure in which a sense of space is created and contained, and of Braque in his use of spots of brighter colour set against duller olive greens, browns and black.

Bombed out of his London home in 1940 Hitchens moved to a caravan on a patch of woodland near Petworth in West Sussex. He worked there for the next forty years, gradually augmenting his caravan with a series of buildings. He is particularly well known for panoramic landscape paintings created from blocks of colour.

He created a highly distinctive style, on the borderline between abstraction and figuration, in which broad, fluid areas of vibrant colour, typically on a canvas of wide format, evoke but do not represent the forms of the English countryside that were his main inspiration.

Nash
Paul Nash (1989 – 1946), another artist who advanced the British landscape tradition, was influenced by Surrealism. He found much inspiration in, and photographed, landscapes with elements of ancient history, such as burial mounds, the standing stones at Avebury in Wiltshire, and the Iron Age hill fort at Wittenham Clumps (the oldest beech tree plantings in England) which featured in many of his paintings, the semi-spherical forms of which echo the discs of the sun and moon in *Landscape of the Vernal Equinox III* (1944).

Lanyon
The Cornish artist Peter Lanyon (1918 – 64) combined the painting of landscape with abstraction, in which he was influenced by his friendship with Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, Naum Gabo, other St ives artists, and Victor Pasmore who he studied under. He later met the American Abstract Expressionist, Mark Rothko, which induced a greater freedom of brushwork in a larger format. He took up gliding "to get a more complete knowledge of the landscape". As in *Offshore* (1959) he uses his gliding experiences as the basis for paintings that gave an aerial perspective to his native Cornish landscape right through to his death in a gliding accident in 1964.

Hitchens *Arched Trees No. 12* (1954)

This is one of a series of works of the same title in the double/triple cube format habitually used by the artist. Hitchens's intention to create 'visual sound' through 'patches and lines of pigment which have an effect on our aesthetic consciousness' was influenced by Wassily Kandinsky's theories of abstraction. Although derived from landscape motifs, this composition is almost entirely abstract.

NUDES

The nude has been a major tradition in Western Art and has been used to express ideals of male and female beauty and other human qualities. It was a central preoccupation of Ancient Greek Art, and after a semi-dormant period in the Middle Ages returned to a central position in Western art with the Renaissance. Athletes, dancers, and warriors are depicted to express human energy and life, and nudes in various poses may express basic or complex emotions such as pathos. In one sense, a nude is a work of fine art that has as its primary subject the unclothed human body, forming a subject genre of art, in the same way as landscapes and still life. Unclothed figures often also play a part in other types of art, such as history painting, including allegorical and religious art, portraiture, or the decorative arts.

Millet *The Goose Girl* (1863)

Manet *Olympia* (1863)

Bouguereau *Biblis* (1884)

Delvaux *The Sleeping Venus* (1944)

Millet
Walking through the wood we come across a young girl taking a moment off from her duties to bathe in the cool stream. Jean-François Millet (1814 – 75) depicts his naked Goose Girl, not as a slender goddess in a fabricated Classical landscape, but as a thick wasted, heavy thighed cottage girl with her white breasts contrasted with the ruddiness of her hands and face, exposed to the sun and the daily toil of a peasant. In other words she is an ordinary young woman, with all of the blemishes that the skin is heir to, who the artist has employed as his model. As a 'realist' artist we may think that his depiction of the flesh of a young woman in a forest is more honest than is Bouguereau's treatment of the same subject.

Manet
When first exhibited Edwardo Manet's (1832 – 83) *Olympia* caused a scandal. Although based on Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538) which likewise depicts a young nude woman (probably a courtesan), similarly lying on a bed, her eyes seductively fixed on the viewer, and with a servant in the background. The older painting, however, being in a long past Renaissance setting and titled as a Roman goddess gained the respectability of time, whereas Manet's Olympia portrays not an unknown idealised woman but a known person about town (the artist and model Victorine Meurent).

What shocked contemporary audiences was not Olympia's nudity, nor the presence of her fully clothed maid, but her confrontational gaze and a number of details identifying her as a *demi-mondaine* or prostitute.These include the orchid in her hair, her bracelet, pearl earrings and the oriental shawl on which she lies, symbols of wealth and sensuality, and the black cat arching its back (which replaces Titian's little dog – a symbol of fidelity.) The black ribbon around her neck, in stark contrast with her pale flesh, and her cast-off slipper underline the voluptuous atmosphere. "Olympia" was a name associated with prostitutes in 1860s Paris.

Also shocking to an audience used to the benign, naturalistic lighting and smooth brushwork of the academic tradition was its style, characterized by broad, quick brushstrokes, studio lighting that eliminates mid-tones, large colour surfaces and shallow depth. Unlike the smooth idealized nude of Cabanel's *Birth of Venus* also painted in 1863, Olympia is a real woman whose nakedness is emphasized by the harsh lighting.

Conservative critics condemned the work as "immoral" and "vulgar." Even (the realist novelist) Émile Zola was reduced to disingenuously commenting on the work's formal qualities rather than acknowledging the subject matter: "You wanted a nude, and you chose Olympia, the first that came along". He paid tribute to Manet's honesty, however: "When our artists give us Venuses, they correct nature, they lie. Édouard Manet asked himself why lie, why not tell the truth; he introduced us to Olympia, this *fille* of our time, whom you meet on the sidewalks."

Bouguereau
William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825 – 1905) is the quintessential salon painter of his generation. In his own time considered to be one of the greatest painters in the world by the academic art community, he was simultaneously reviled by the Impressionist and the avant-garde.

To many, he epitomized taste and refinement, and a respect for tradition. To others, he was a competent technician stuck in the past. Degas and his associates used the term "Bouguereauté" in a derogatory manner to describe any artistic style reliant on "slick and artificial surfaces."

He had a meteoric rise to fame and fortune, selling often to American collectors, sometimes before the paintings were dry or even finished. However, during his lifetime there was critical dissent in assessing his work; the art historian Richard Muther wrote in 1894 that Bouguereau was a man "destitute of artistic feeling but possessing a cultured taste [who] reveals... in his feeble mawkishness, the fatal decline of the old schools of convention."

It is salutary to note that the elderly Bouguereau painted his *Biblis* twenty one years after Millet's *Goose Girl* and Manet's ground breaking *Olimpia.* In it we see the culmination of the development of technical skill from the Renaissance onward in portraying the light and textures of the real world as it appears before our eyes. We can't but admire the expertise he displays in rendering flesh and blood, light and colour, but can we believe in the reality of this simpering maiden with her flawless skin and perfection of form, discovered in a dreamy languor on a fabricated river bank? Why has she taken off her clothes? Certainly not, like Millet's *Goose Girl,* to wash her feet and cool her limbs aching from daily toil. The question prompts itself: is there more to this than a male artist using his consummate skill to create a male fantasy for the male gaze?

Delvaux
Like Bouguereau Paul Delvaux (1897 – 1994) places his *Sleeping Venus* in a fabricated landscape of his fantasy and dreams. On a visit to Brussels in the early 1930s he found inspiration in the medical curiosities found in the Spitzner Museum, where a booth in which skeletons and a mechanical Venus figure were displayed in a window with red velvet curtains. This spectacle captivated Delvaux, supplying him with motifs that would appear throughout his subsequent work, and his dream-like scenes of women, classical architecture, trains and train stations, and skeletons, often in combination. Nude women stare as if hypnotized, gesturing mysteriously, sometimes reclining incongruously in a train station or wandering through classical buildings. Sometimes they are accompanied by skeletons, men in bowler hats, or puzzled scientists drawn from the stories of Jules Verne.

Inspired by the Renaissance and the Classical art of the past he creates a dreamscape of foreboding which is of the twentieth century and the age of Freud. We can only speculate what these apparitions portend.

The nude in the twentieth century
After reaching its culmination in the skilful representation of the human form in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and freed by photography from the need to portray accurate likenesses, the generation of artists following the Impressionists saw the human form, on the one hand, as a resource of shapes to exploit in their search for new compositional ideas, and on the other as a motif capable of any extreme of expressionistic distortion to convey the emotions, tensions and angst of human life in the twentieth century.

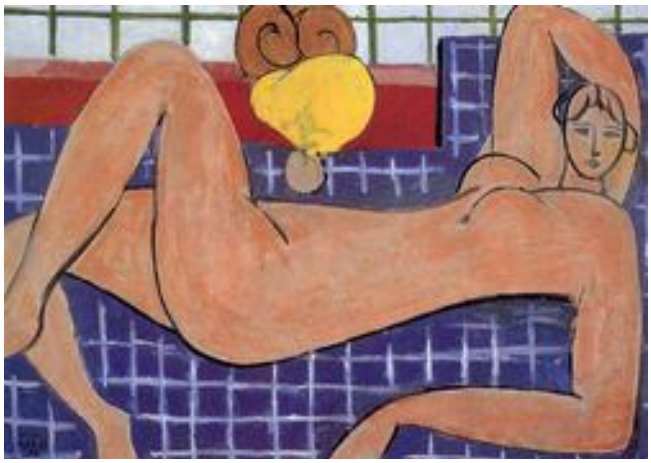
Matisse *Blue Nude (Souvenir de Biskra)* 1907

Matisse shocked the French public at the 1907 *Sociéte des Artistes Indépendants* when this painting was exhibited. It was not only the unnatural colour and awkward pose of the model but it became the source of controversy that involved issues of race, race relations, and colonialism. Complaints by critics and viewers that the race of the figure could not be identified, complicated the issue of "the Other." The ability to identify "the Other" was crucial to the mindset of colonizers, and a major aspect of the colonization programme.

As we have seen in his Fauvist landscape he uses colour not in a descriptive manner but as a technique in the construction of the painting. Blues and pinks 'represent' the highlights and shadowed areas of flesh. Yellows and reds hold the background to the surface causing a flattening of picture space. Curves and arching forms create an arabesque running through the composition.

Matisse said '*What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter - a soothing, calming influence on the mind, rather like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue.*'

Matisse made paintings of the nude throughout his life, and, unlike Picasso, always from life. In this picture, almost thirty years later than the Blue Nude, he refines the figure to a simple flowing form, filling and overflowing the frame. Colour is reduced to stark primaries. The background is 'no more than a pattern' with all the focus on the elegant yet distorted figure. The brushstrokes almost lovingly caress the elongated figure, embodying the energy and warmth of a new love. This monumental and abstracted figure is indicative of a style Matisse would pursue for the rest of his artistic career



Matisse, *Large Reclining Nude (The Pink Nude)* 1935

I have always tried to hide my efforts and wished my works to have a light joyousness of springtime which never lets anyone suspect the labours it has cost me.

The Pink Nude has an informal, almost casual feel, as though painted in a joyous, untroubled afternoon, but this is misleading; the appearance of spontaneity is the result of many hours of labour. Twenty photographs chart the many changes over the course of six months as he altered, refined and simplified the design.

INTERIORS

Until comparatively recently large paintings, even if set in the landscape, were always made in the studio. The interior as a setting for dramatic events, for family group portraits and informal incidents from daily life occurs frequently in art, and creates the mood and determines the way we interpret the subject.

Velásquez *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* 1618

de Hooch *Card Players in a Sunlit Room* 1658

Vuillard *The Seamstress with Chiffons* 1893

Matisse *The Red Room* 1919

Velásquez
The interior space in *Christ in the house of Martha and Mary* is somewhat ambiguous. The foreground is dominated by two half length women, taken to be Martha and a servant, and a bodegon, or still life arrangement on the table, which cuts across the picture, firmly holding the viewer out of the space inhabited by the women; the diagonal of the edge establishing the flat surface. In placing Christ, who we would expect to be the main subject of the painting, and Martha's sister Mary, as tiny figures in the far background Diego Velásquez (1599 – 1650) forces us to try to relate the two episodes together and to interpret the meaning of the Biblical story. The small, framed background scene has been variously interpreted as a view through a hatch between the kitchen and the main room, a picture hanging on the wall, or the reflection in a mirror, in which case this would put Christ outside the picture and into our space (outside of time and space) and making us participants in the story.

de Hooch
In *Card Players in a Sunlit Room* the diagonals of the wall, the ceiling and the floor firmly establish the proportions of the corner of the room where a group of men and a woman are seated around a table, which, as in the Velásquez, establishes a horizontal plane leading into the picture space. Typical of Pieter de Hooch (1629 – 84) his players inhabit a a complex of interior spaces, the open door leading us through to a view of a courtyard with an arched passageway leading to a garden, and hinting at another succession of rooms on the far side. De Hooch was, like his compatriot Vermeer, a master of light, contrasting the sunlit courtyard with the softer interior light, subtly directing the eye of the viewer through and around the spaces.

Vuillard
The *Seamstress with Chiffons* presents a seamstress at work, seated in front of a window. Her face is obscure and the image appears almost flat, dominated by the floral patterns of the wall. A sense of intimacy is created by the floral curtain that occupies the left third of the picture, and barring the viewer from entering the woman's space.

In the paintings of seamstresses which Édouard Vuillard (1868 – 1940) made in the workshop of his mother the space and the figures are difficult to 'read.' Like van Gogh and other artists at the time he was much influenced by the Japanese prints that were cheap and easily available, and of which he had a large collection. In his paintings of interior scenes he assembles areas of pure colour where the figures and the furnishings are blended into colours and patterns.

The Japanese influence appears particularly in his work in the negation of depth, the simplicity of forms, and strongly contrasting colours. The faces often turned away, and drawn with just a few lines with no attempt to create perspective. Vegetal, floral and geometric designs in the wallpaper or clothing were more important than the faces. In some of Vuillard's works, the persons in the paintings almost entirely disappeared into the designs of the wallpaper.

Matisse
In *The Red Room* we see a similar division of the picture space by the use of colour and pattern; also many of the same features: a table, a chair, a single figure a window, which in Matisse's case presents us with a view of a garden and a flash of red building which links back to the dominant red of the interior. Expunging all traditional methods of representing light and shade he uses a dull red to define the darker, shaded interior space, flooding this as if casting all in shadow, over the tablecloth: the vertical side and the horizontal surfaces of table and wall defined only by the changing direction of the arabesque floral patterns; which is echoed in the schematic lines of the tree branches. The various objects on the table – fruit, compotieres, flowers in a vase, wine decanters, even the elaborate coiffure of the maid – are participants in a joyous dance with the floral motifs that abound in Matisse's paintings.

Vuillard *The seamstresses* (1890)

Vuillard *The Flowered Dress* (1891)

In *La Robe Â Ramages* (*The flowered dress*; 1891), the women in the workshop are assembled out of areas of colour; the faces, seen from the side, have no details. The patterns of their costumes and the decor dominate the pictures. The figures include his grandmother, to the left, and his sister Marie, in the bold patterned dress which is the central feature of the painting. Vuillard also placed a mirror on the wall to the left of the scene, a device which allowed him to paint two points of view simultaneously and to reflect and distort the scene. The result is a work that is deliberately flattened and decorative.

Vuillard *Le Corsage Rayé* (1895)

Vuillard *Persons in an Interior - Intimacy* (1896)

Vuillard *Large Interior with Six Persons* (1897)