Trees

Theodore Rousseau,The Great Oaks Old Bas-Bréau 1864

PAINTING TREES

Rousseau, *The Great Oaks Old Bas-Bréau* 1864
Painting of the Barbican School: painted from observation of a particular cops of trees in a realistic, natural style.

Uccello, *The Hunt in the Forest* c1470
In this late painting (in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford) Uccello (1397-1475) has evolved a generalised, stylistic manner of painting trees. We could say it is more like painting the 'idea' of a tree than a representation of an actual living specimen.

Sandro Botticelli's (1445-1510) technique of painting trees, is also highly stylised, as are the figures. The 'representation' of light on the trunks, which are as straight as telegraph poles, is arbitrary and unnatural. The leaves are each painted individually, with care. No wind will ever disturb them. An idealised form of a tree, existing in a mythological landscape of the mind.

Botticelli, *Birth of Venus* 1445-1510

In this etching we feel that Rembrandt (1606-69) has studied trees and the effects of light, wind and atmosphere on how they appear to us. Although most probably drawn in the studio, possibly from pencil studies it is a representation of a real scene, and each tree has its own form and 'personality.' However, close examination reveals that clumps of foliage are created by a series of looping lines, a kind of shorthand method of defining the forms of leaves.

Rembrandt, *The Three Trees* 1643

In this watercolour sketch by the English artist John Cozens, (1752-97) probably painted on the spot, a formulaic technique is used to represent foliage.

John Robert Cozens,
Lake of Vico Between Rome and Florence c1783   detail

Alexander Cozens (1717-86) wrote a treaty on painting in which he advocated making rapid, rough ink blots on wet paper, and using these free studies as a base for invented landscape compositions. Much in the manner that Leonardo suggested draping a wet cloth over a rough stone wall and seeking in the folds and ruckles suggestions for invented landscapes.

Alexander Cozens, *A Blot, landscape composition* c1770-80

Gainsborough (1722-88) studied landscape in the field, but in the studio fabricated little landscapes from twigs, leaves and pebbles which he worked up into the invented backgrounds for his subjects to inhabit. He uses a formulaic technique to represent leaves – little looping brown lines over splashes of colour.

**Gainsborough,** *Portrait of Anne, countess of Chesterfield* 1777-78

It was not until the 18th century that landscape as a subject in its own right gained respect. Constable (1776-1837) regarded the painting of landscape as a branch of natural science and, although his large finished pictures were composed in the studio from on the spot studies, he was at pains to make them representative of actual scenes and as naturalistic representations as possible. The painting of foliage is as near to how it actually appears to the human eye as any artist has achieved.

Constable, *The Hay Wain* 1821

Corot (1796-1875) adopted a soft, 'impressionistic' style in his later paintings, which proved very popular. They are more atmospheric than his earlier Italian studies, and the trees have a natural, open look, as if the breeze could shake them and the birds could settle in the branches; nevertheless his method of building up foliage with little dabs of paint, has more to do with technique than observation.

Corot, *Ville d'Avray* c1867
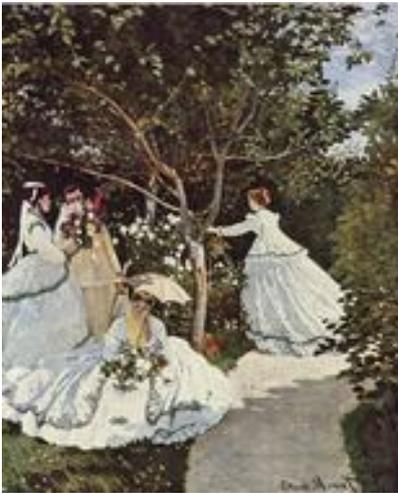
The young Monet (1840-1926) painted this large and highly finished picture from life and out of doors. The leaves are depicted individually and with care, and the impression is of something carefully observed.

Monet, *Women in the Garden* 1866-67

Cézanne's (1839-1906) picture would have been painted entirely in front of the motif. He declared that he wanted to 're-do Poussin from nature.' Every brush mark would be in response to his observation but transmuted through his 'petite sensation.' He links foreground and background together with his use of colour, tone and form.

'Remember that a picture, before being a battle horse, a female nude or some sort of anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order.' Maurice Denis

Cézanne, *Mont Saint-Victoire* 1882–1885

Cézanne gave up classic artistic elements such as pictorial arrangements, single view perspectives, and outlines that enclosed colour in an attempt to get a "lived perspective" by capturing all the complexities that an eye observes. He wanted to see and sense the objects he was painting, rather than think about them. Ultimately, he wanted to get to the point where "sight" was also "touch". He would take hours sometimes to put down a single stroke because each stroke needed to contain "the air, the light, the object, the composition, the character, the outline, and the style".

Cézanne, *The Neighbourhood of Jas de Bouffan* *1885-1887*

A still life might have taken Cézanne one hundred working sessions while a portrait took him around one hundred and fifty sessions. Cèzanne believed that while he was painting, he was capturing a moment in time, that once passed, could not come back. The atmosphere surrounding what he was painting was a part of the sensational reality he was painting.

Influenced by Chevreul's theory of simultaneous contrasts Pointillism, or Divisionism, develops a system for representing nature: in fact all elements of the picture are subjected to the same unifying technique of small coloured dots. In this painting Seurat (1859-91) makes no attempt to paint leaves as leaves, tree trunk as tree trunk; rather we read the individual elements as water, figure, yacht, tree etc. not through differences in the treatment but through association of colour and position in the picture.
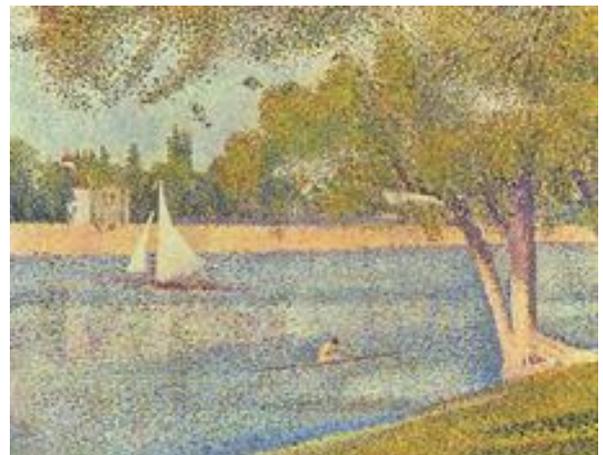
Seurat, *The Seine and la Grande Jatte - Springtime* 1888
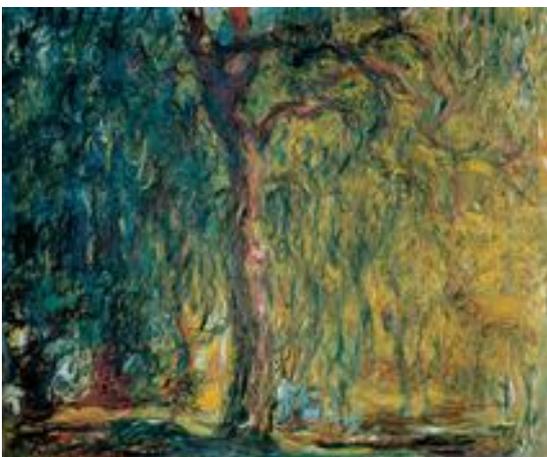
In this late work of Monet 'representation' is evoked through pure colour alone, a technique he developed through his waterlilies series.

Monet, *Weeping Willow* 1918-19

Japanese, sliding door panels 16th century

This 16th century ink drawing on door panels is the product of long contemplation in nature and rapid execution in the studio, which poetically evokes the idea of the tree in the landscape. It uses highly disciplined graphic techniques which would have been passed down from the master and refined and developed by the student.

The untutored artist Henri Rousseau, (known as Le Douanier) (1844-1910) invented his jungle landscapes, based on the leaves and flowers of pot plants, and painted them with a precision and visionary clarity that is reminiscent of Uccello and Botticelli.


Henri Rousseau, *Tiger in a Tropical Storm (surprised)* 1891

The Fauvist painters used colour in a none descriptive manner. Following on from Cézanne, Vlaminck (1876-1958) unites the background and foreground through the use of raw colour and the absence of atmospheric perspective.

Vlaminck, *The Gardener* 1904

Gustav Klimt (1862 – 1918) was an Austrian symbolist painter and one of the most prominent members of the Vienna Secession movement. His rendition of a tree is very much designed, as an overall pattern, and is characteristic of the age of the international Art Nouveau style which was inspired by natural forms and structures, particularly the curved lines of plants and flowers. It is painted in oil on canvas with the addition of gold leaf.
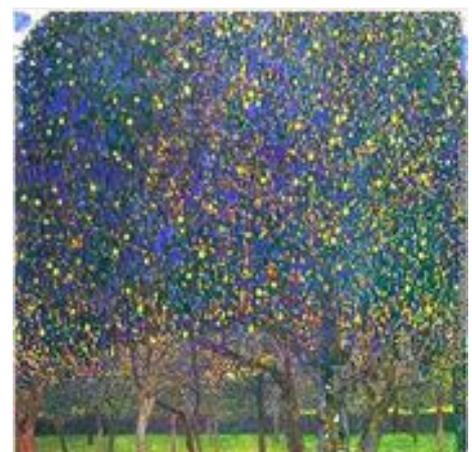
Klimpt, *The Pear Tree* 1903

In this monochrome sketch, inspired by the fragmented surface of analytical cubism, Mondrian (1872-1944) creates an abstract impression of the tree swathed in a grey atmosphere. It is a generalised tree not an individual, as though he is aiming to express the treeness of tree.

'For Mondrian, a tree, or any other aspect of visual reality, came to represent universal forces which could be best expressed by abstract art.' Sam Hunter

Mondrian, *Grey Tree* 1911

Paul Nash (1889-1946) painted these skeletal burnt out stumps as if they are the casualties of war: they seem almost human in their pathetic desolation, isolated from the rest of their kind.

Nash, *We are Making a New World* 1918

In Paul Nash's painting the trees form vertical elements in a designed landscape. In the manner of Cézanne (although with very different colour and application of the paint surface) the foreground and background are woven into a unified whole. Nash was influenced by surrealism and this landscape has a strange unreal feeling. Although based on sketches in front of an actual scene it ultimately is a landscape of the mind.

Nash, *Michaelmas Landscape* 1943

Ivon Hitchens (1893-1975) was unusual in a post impressionist era in painting entirely in front of the subject. However, rather than using conventional devices of linear and aerial perspective to depict space he emphasises the qualities of paint, the colour and the brush marks, to suggest breadth and distance.

**Hitchins, *Damp Autumn,* 1941**

Isolated from the rest of the painting a detail is hardly readable as landscape, in fact nothing other than paint on a flat surface.

Hitchins, *Damp Autumn,* detail 1941

The Australian artist Arthur Boyd (1920-99) used a signwriters 'liner", a soft brush with very long hairs, to paint the trees in his riverside paintings. With a whiplash motion he struck the brush loaded with paint onto the canvas and drew it down to create the effect of the stark, thinly foliated trunks.

Boyd, *River Bank and Four Rocks* 1993
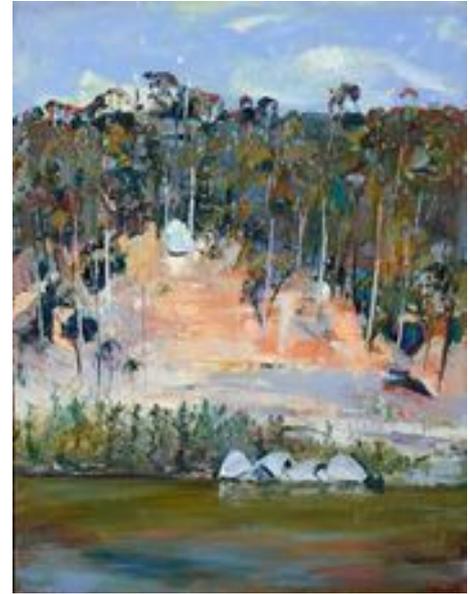
David Hockney (b1937) is heir to all the techniques of representation developed post impressionism. Although painted entirely in front of the scene these stark formulated trees perhaps also hark back to Uccello's conceptual idea of the tree.
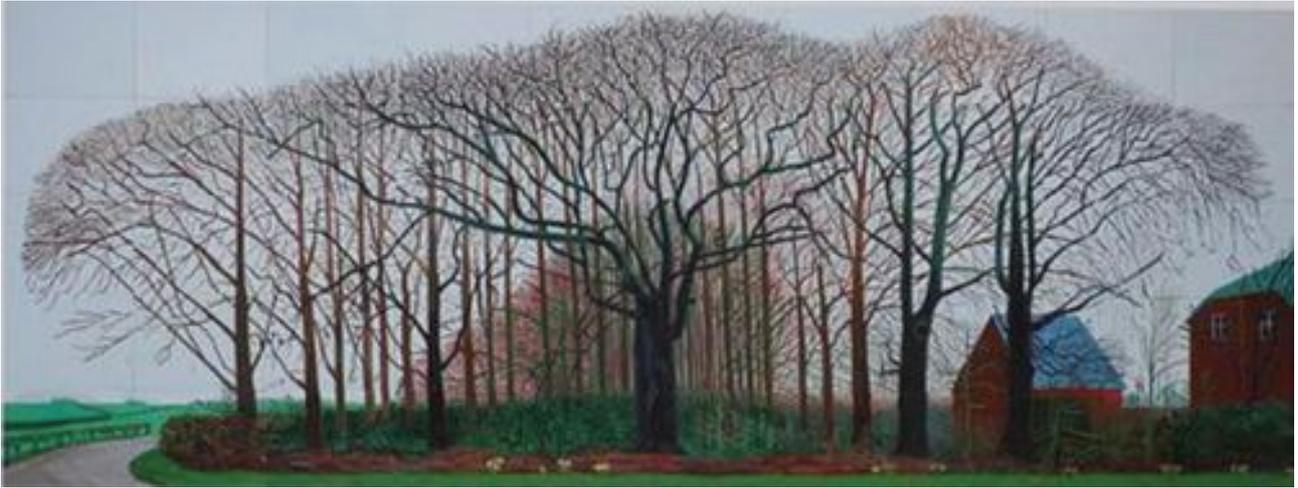
Hockney, *Bigger Trees Near Warter, Winter*

It was Hockney's intention to paint these trees in each season, but when he arrived in the Autumn they had been cut down, so he painted the stacks of logs as memento mori.

Although this painting records an actual copse of trees there is no attempt to simulate reality in the representational manner that Constable or the Barbizon artists worked. Hockney has evolved a symbolic style of representation which signifies tree, sky, road etc.

Hockney, *Bigger Trees Near Warter, Summer*

Hockney, *Bigger Trees Near Warter* 2007
At 4.6 by 12 metres this is the largest painting ever made largely *en plein air.* Painted over a period of five weeks and assembled from 50 canvasses Hockney used digital photography and a computer as he worked on individual canvasses to see each in context with the others.
It was painted in the East Riding of Yorkshire between February and March 2007.The painting's alternative title, *Peinture en Plein Air pour l'age Post-Photographique,* alludes to the technique Hockney used to create the work, a combination of painting out of doors and in front of the subject (called in French 'sur le motif') whilst also using the techniques of digital photography.

Garton, *Stoke Woods*
Mike Garton (1935-2005) was a tutor at Exeter College of Art. His early work was abstract but in the late sixties, in the manner of the Barbican School, he started painting wholly from nature, either from the model, interiors or in the landscape. His major project became his paintings of Stoke Woods near Exeter. This started with a large drawing about three metres by two and a half metres (now lost) made up of separately drawn sheets. He built small platforms on the steep banks on which to stand while working, and dammed a stream to make a pool in which the foliage was reflected. This intense and highly detailed method of painting was the result of his mystical/existentialist way of seeing the world.