

Scotland and the Origins of Modern Art

The Henry Duncan Prize Lecture

by

Professor Duncan MacMillan, Curator, The Talbot Rice Gallery

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Cézanne is universally regarded as the father of modern art. So what do we see when we look at such classic images as his *Man Smoking a Pipe*, or *Woman with a Coffee Pot*? We see certainty and uncertainty, the monumental and the provisional, all somehow combined. These are images that convince us intuitively of the solidity and grandeur of what we see, yet which we cannot capture intellectually. Indeed in human terms they are enigmatic. The sitters are present, but we cannot reach them. Their image seems permanent, yet somehow it is not fixed, but is part of a world that is in flux; indeed in all Cézanne's mature pictures we seem to see an ongoing process, not a state. Nor can we locate pictures like these as portraits. Their human content is important and they are certainly not still-lives, but nor do they belong in any of the traditional genres of painting whose disappearance was a major part of the new modernism. Instead, like the still-lives which were such a large and significant part of Cézanne's output, these pictures seem somehow to represent an epitome of the complex and elusive phenomena that make up our visual comprehension of the world.

So how did Cézanne get to this point? What was he trying to say to us? I cannot claim to give a whole answer, but I do believe that hitherto people have looked for it in the wrong place. I don't mean simply that they should have been looking in Scotland and have not done so, though Scotland is my main subject today. It is more that the place of modern art in the wider history of western thought has been generally misunderstood and the failure to appreciate the Scottish part of the story has contributed to that misunderstanding. I believe Cézanne is part of the central intellectual and imaginative project that has shaped the modern West; what we have to call the empirical project, the attempt to understand the world around us by investigation and description. This is the intellectual adventure that has given us modern science and technology, but, I will argue, it has also given us modern art. Looked at that way it is clear that this adventure did not begin somewhere in the late nineteenth century, but much further back. In the perspective suggested by the history of empiricism, too, it is beyond argument that the Scottish Enlightenment was a key episode in this story. You cannot fully understand the place of the history of art in this without the Scottish chapter that has hitherto been missing and it is my purpose today to provide that part of the narrative.

So after starting with Cézanne, I will go right back to the beginning and return from there by way of the Enlightenment to that moment at the birth of modernism, a century ago, where I began. This is a drawing of a pelican done from the life by an unknown artist some time around 1620. It is part of a huge collection of some nine thousand similar drawings by many different artists that form the Paper Museum of Cassiano del Pozzo. Cassiano was, like Galileo, a member of the Accademia dei Lincei in Rome. The first great scientific academy of the modern world, its name translates as the Academy of the Lynxes and the lynx is famous for the sharpness of its vision. The academy's name therefore stresses the importance of sight, of direct observation as one of the first principles of modern science and at its very beginning. It is in keeping that these drawings, precise visual records, formed the first ever attempt at an encyclopaedia, an empirical description of everything in the known world based on actual observation. It was a moment when the objectives of art and science were indistinguishable and is a witness therefore to the place of art at the heart of the intellectual revolution that was just beginning.

The Paper Museum could never have succeeded, but before that could even have become apparent, something else intervened to change the course of history. Rembrandt painted the *Blinding of Samson* around 1637 as a gift to his patron, the scientifically minded Constantin Huygens. But the picture does in my view represent only its overt subject from the Bible. The importance of sight itself could not be more plainly stated than in this gruesome image and I believe the real subject of this otherwise unexplained gift was the metaphorical (and later also actual) blinding of Galileo, with his telescope the most sharp-eyed of all the lynxes, when in 1633 he was forced

by the Papal Inquisition under threat of torture and imprisonment to retract his view that the earth was not the centre of the solar system.

It was a view that Galileo had ascertained empirically and so when he was forced to retract, Papal authority overruled the new empirical science. The Italian Renaissance ended abruptly and from that time forward the attempt to understand the world empirically fell to the northern Protestant societies which of course included Scotland. Rembrandt was claiming for painting a central place in this succession and artists did remain very much part of this endeavour in Holland especially. You see very clearly with Vermeer's painting called the Little Street in Delft how they pursued understanding through description and visual investigation. In Delft, too, Vermeer worked alongside such pioneers of optics as van Leeuwenhoek, inventor of the microscope, and there is a clear analogy between his art and the work of his scientific friends and colleagues.

Nevertheless, if you look more closely at Vermeer's work, and indeed if you consider the story that Tracy Chevalier has woven around his painting of the Girl with a Pearl Earring, you realise how he makes clear that all observation, however objective it may seem, is nevertheless inescapably coloured by our psychology. This is even more apparent if you consider Rembrandt's self-portraits. He was as fully conversant as Vermeer with the new science of optics and clearly from such pictures we can see that the painters had already begun to understand something that is central to my whole topic: that quite simply the ambition of objective description on which empirical science is based is deeply and permanently flawed. In his later self-portraits especially, Rembrandt looks at himself and asks, how can I be at once both subject and object? How can I describe objectively what I am inseparably part of? Faced with this paradox, scientists have generally had to ignore the uncomfortable questions it raises in order to maintain the fiction of objectivity on which their discipline depends. It is a variation of the literary idea of suspension of disbelief. From the start artists knew no such constraint. Art could ask such questions. It is there that art and science began to diverge to the point where their common pursuit was no longer recognisable. It does not mean that it does not exist, however, far from it.

Undeterred by such sceptical speculation, in England Locke and Newton formulated more fully than ever before the principles on which empirical knowledge is based. In doing so they helped lay the foundations of the Scottish Enlightenment, but it is also important to remember here how close Scotland and Holland were at this time. It should be no surprise therefore that it was in Scotland that Rembrandt and Vermeer found their first intellectual heirs and while the Scottish philosophers accepted the central principles of empiricism, that all understanding stems and can only stem from experience, examining these principles Hume came to the same conclusion as Rembrandt. He asked the same question: how can we describe a world of which we are part? Or as he himself put it, 'the difficulty is how far we are ourselves the objects of our senses?' He then concludes devastatingly, "it is absurd to imagine we can ever distinguish betwixt ourselves and external objects."

From this he goes on to argue that even when we look within ourselves, we find we are no more than "a bundle of different perceptions which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity and are in perpetual flux and movement." If even our own identity is an elusive and uncertain thing, how can we hope to be certain of anything else at all? What Hume did, as George Davie so eloquently puts it, was to uncover, "the scandal of the basic epistemological contradictions that made nonsense of all the high claims about the Age of Reason."

That is a key observation in this whole story. It is here, I believe, that modern art finds its text. It is founded on a paradox and the search for a way to resolve it and thus to succeed in the ambition to describe the world as we experience it. Art and science still have a common goal. It is only that the artists are free to recognise its elusive complexity. The results they have produced naturally reflect this.

The continuing community of purpose is apparent here where we see Hume's sceptical views reflected directly in the wonderful portrait of him painted by his close friend Allan Ramsay, the second one that he painted dating from 1764. In it we already glimpse something of Cézanne's position; how certainty and uncertainty must somehow coexist; and as part of this, the enigma of otherness even when we are dealing with those closest to us. And if Ramsay looks forward to Cézanne, he also looks back quite deliberately to Rembrandt, pointedly making the link for us between Hume and his greatest predecessor. You see that in the lighting of Hume's portrait. You see it even more explicitly in Ramsay's companion painting of Rousseau, painted to hang beside Hume's portrait, either as a commission from Hume, or as a gift to his friend from the artist. It is not clear which.

Hume gives conflicting accounts, but the fact that he does describe it at one point as a gift does suggest the intimacy and significance of the commission.

In Rousseau's pose, position and in the way his face is lit against the darkness, Ramsay quotes directly from Rembrandt's *Self-portrait with a Hat*, now in Washington. In doing so, I believe, he was taking this argument even further in the direction I am now following. When Rousseau sat for this portrait in the spring of 1766, he had just started writing his *Confessions*. The book is a great self-portrait, the literary successor to Rembrandt's epic of self-examination and, after Rembrandt, the first modern exploration of the nature of self. The book must have been the subject of conversation when he was sitting for Ramsay who spoke good French. At the very least Ramsay's portrait suggests that he knew what Rousseau was writing, for in his picture the painter deliberately equates Rousseau with Rembrandt and thus, implicitly, his exploration of self, and with it the dilemma of the subject/object division at the heart of empiricism on which Hume was so eloquent, with Rembrandt's own exploration of self and his contemplation of the subject as object.

In portraits like these, in the way that Ramsay paints, lightly, suggestively and never definitely, but coaxing the image out of the shadows, identity is held in place in our perception only by imaginative hints as the painter seeks a way of describing the uncertainty of our knowledge, indeed of our identity; but Ramsay also suggests, by this very technique of suggestion, how, above all with those around us, we overcome that uncertainty through imagination.

Here Ramsay also parallels directly, and no doubt consciously, one of Hume's key contributions to this debate, the argument that it is the imagination alone which allows us to hold together our fragmented perceptions and turn them into sense. It is here therefore that the term that has become definitive of the nature and purpose of art actually enters the language of art. But the imagination is also more than just a useful tool in making sense of the world. In the philosophy of moral sense as Hume developed it, it is the active agent of our moral natures, the key to the relationships on which society hinges; and Enlightenment thought was above all else social in its frame of reference.

Human nature was Hume's study and it was also Ramsay's and so you can see in his painting how art is still the peer and companion of empirical thought, even at its most penetrating. Ramsay's portrait of Margaret Lindsay is the epitome of this, of the imagination as the link between people, the only thing that can resolve that enigma of otherness, the agent even of love itself, for that is what we see in Margaret Lindsay's face turned towards her husband as he enters, interrupting her arranging flowers. His familiar presence is reflected in her gaze which is open and without any social barrier visible in it. And in Ramsay's later, red chalk drawing of his wife looking down, apparently unaware that he is drawing her, we also see him contemplating something else that I am sure he had discussed with Hume and which I will return to, the fragmentary nature of actual perception: how little we need to see in order to understand what we are seeing; how much we imagine in fact, and how above all this is true in our response to the human face; how vision itself is psychological.

Here Ramsay is not only working alongside Hume, with whom at just this moment he founded the Select Society here in Edinburgh, but also their mutual friend, Adam Smith. Smith extended Hume's interpretation of moral sense to argue that imagination, and, through imagination, sympathy, is the basis of society itself. Gavin Hamilton was a contemporary of Adam Smith at Glasgow University and a fellow pupil of Francis Hutcheson, first champion of the philosophy of moral sense and so of the argument that morality itself is a product not of reason, but of feeling.

The realisation that morality itself is psychological, not rational was the crucial breach in the integrity of the idea that empiricism and thus reason could describe, understand and also explain all phenomena. We should remember that in the essay that set out this argument, *An Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725) Hutcheson already explicitly makes the connection with art.

It is with Gavin Hamilton's six paintings from the *Iliad* that we see the idea of the role of the imagination expressed for the first time directly in painting. It is implicit in Ramsay's work. For Hamilton and also his followers, however, its presence in a painting was a goal. It was a quality to be cultivated. And in his pursuit of that goal, we encounter another of the definitive ideas of modern art: the primacy of the imagination. But with it

also came too another definitive idea: the superiority of the primitive and its appropriateness as a model for artists in search of the kind of imaginative authenticity that was essential to the proper working of our moral sense. It is its claim to be specially equipped in the pursuit of that vital authenticity which allowed art first to claim the special privilege which it is still granted in the modern world.

Hamilton turned to Homer for inspiration because Homer seemed to be a witness of the earliest history of mankind when human society was young and still unspoiled. He did this in a context shaped not only by Francis Hutcheson, but also by Thomas Blackwell who in his essay on Homer (1735) pioneered the idea of the imaginative and therefore the moral superiority of the primitive, of the original state, long before Rousseau was to take up the same discussion. It was consistent with the idea of moral sense that Blackwell should see Homer as the recorder of an actual, pre-classical state of mankind when, because the human imagination was not yet cluttered with preconception and prejudice, humanity enjoyed far greater imaginative freedom and transparency than in decadent later times. In consequence, he argued, there was much greater moral clarity. The beginning of history was a time when, as he put it so poetically, "So unaffected and simple were the manners of those times the folds and windings of the human breast lay open to the eye; nor were people ashamed to avow passions and inclinations, which were entirely void of art and design."

Blackwell's revolutionary view of Homer as pre-classical, therefore in the proper sense primitive and that his poetry was in consequence superior and more authentic to anything that came afterwards, is echoed by Adam Ferguson: "The artless song of the savage, the heroic legend of the bard have sometimes a magnificent beauty which no change of language can improve and no refinement of the critic reform." You can also match this sentiment very closely in André Breton's first Surrealist Manifesto, incidentally, in case you think I am imagining continuities that do not exist.

As doyen of the painters in Rome, Gavin Hamilton was also the leader of an international community of artists and both his art and his conversation, for he kept an open studio, were the vehicle for the wider transmission of these Enlightenment ideas. His circle included some who are recognised as the pioneers of modern art and others who do not yet enjoy that recognition. David's painting of the *Oath of the Horatii*, for instance, is universally seen as one of the first icons of modern art, but its model was Gavin Hamilton's painting of the *Death of Lucretia*. In that picture Lucretia is the heroine. Inspired by her self-sacrifice, her men folk turned to overthrow the Tarquins and establish the Roman Republic. Progress, moral progress, not technical progress, but improvement, the amelioration of society and its progression from the state of barbarism dominated by the masculine warrior code, depended on the actions of a woman undertaken in defence of the virtues of love, hospitality and individual dignity; the virtues in short of a world governed by true feeling.

This, when it is put alongside other works by both Hamilton and David which demonstrate his considerable debt to the older painter, gives a quite different meaning to David's picture from the conventional one of heroic masculinity heralding the Revolution; a meaning that was also retrospectively imposed on Hamilton's picture by analogy with what David's was believed to stand for. For years Hamilton's painting was called the *Oath of Brutus*. Art historians demoted Lucretia, the woman, in favour of Brutus, the man, though in fact he is not the protagonist, but only an agent in the action inspired by her.

The next act in the drama in David's picture was the slaughter, first of the rival Curatii, and then of the Horatii's own sister Camilla who is seen collapsed in despair with the other women in the picture. This is not just feminine weakness. It is real terror. Camilla had been rash enough to fall in love outside the clan. David's subject is actually a brutal honour killing. There is no reason to suppose that he did not intend us to see it as barbaric. Indeed a contemporary commented on the cruelty of the subject. David's real point, therefore, is the opposite of the meaning usually given and is once again the superiority of feminine feeling, of intuition, over brutal masculine violence and the need for feeling to prevail if society is to advance out of barbarism.

But in the work of the Scottish painters in Hamilton's circle, the modern idea of the primacy of the imagination and the place of the primitive as its model were even more directly expressed. Alexander Runciman's *Origin of Painting* indeed has the primitive, the original, the first state as its actual subject. Derived from Pliny, though rather fancifully, it tells the story of how the very first painting was created when a girl traced the outline of her lover's shadow on the wall as he slept. The shadow is nature's own drawing, art in its elemental, natural form.

But continuing the previous point about sensibility, the first artist is also a woman and her hand is guided by Cupid, by love.

Runciman not only went to Pliny, however. His actual model was what he and his contemporaries perceived as 'primitive art' in exactly the same way as Gauguin, Matisse and Picasso were to regard the art of the Pacific and of Africa nearly a century and a half later. Greek vase painting seemed at the time to be an art contemporary with Homer. This was a mistake we now know, but it was a reasonable one in the state of contemporary understanding and it allowed these vases to be seen as also literally primitive, an artistic witness from the first state of mankind. These artists had access to these vases, or at least to the south Italian form of this art, through the collection formed by Sir William Hamilton in Naples, published with a commentary by a rather doubtful connoisseur called d'Hancarville, in a magnificent series of volumes in the early 1770s. One particular small vase decorated with the head of a girl in profile was identified, with great imaginative freedom and a singular disregard for historical fact, as the work of Debutades, the Corinthian potter to whose daughter Pliny attributes this historic action. Runciman models the strange and distinctive profile of the girl in his painting on that of the girl on this vase.

Ossian, when first published by James McPherson in the 1760s, was also perceived as primitive, a voice speaking to us from the first natural condition of mankind. Ossian also the additional cachet of belonging to the non-classical world and specifically to Scotland's own non-classical past, remembering that the Scots piqued themselves on never having been part of the Roma empire. In a drawing done in Rome in 1771 Runciman represents Ossian and his music as at one with the wind in the trees. Here he is the author of spontaneous, natural poetry. Just as he was described by Hugh Blair as shooting wild and free, as Runciman represents him, Ossian is already the model of the artist as the embodiment of spontaneity and natural freedom, unfettered by rules, a model that has endured to this day. Indeed sometimes now it looks as though that is all we can look for in our artists. Ossian's music is seen as wild and untutored as the waterfall that is associated with him, the Falls of Bran near Blair Castle painted by Runciman's contemporary Charles Steuart. A belvedere still stands over the falls that was designed to capture their natural music as though it was Ossian's song.

This part of the story crosses over to more familiar territory when we look at Runciman's contemporary in Rome and also in Hamilton's circle, David Allan. Allan collaborated with Burns through George Thomson to illustrate the songs that Burns collected and composed. Burns also recognised in Allan's work the qualities of primitive, unspoiled simplicity that he found in these songs. Even more striking, however, in this quest for the defining concerns of modernity, indeed of modernism, is Allan's Preface to his illustrations of the Gentle Shepherd, Allan Ramsay's father's pastoral play, famous for the naturalness with which it was held to record the lives and loves of unspoiled country people. In that text, published in 1788 and dedicated to Gavin Hamilton, not only does Allan claim to have followed Ramsay's example and recorded the actual places and people about whom he wrote, and therefore that his own art is equally naturalistic, but that his own naturalism also mirrors their simplicity, their lack of sophistication, their naivety even. He makes the remarkable claim that his own command of the new technique of aquatint that he used in his illustrations manifestly lacks skill, but that that lack is a virtue. It was not his intention, he says, to produce expensive smooth engravings, but expressive and characteristic designs. In other words he disclaims skill in favour of expression. That is a very modern attitude indeed, the deliberate assumption of untutored naivety.

Thus far we have not yet reached the end of the eighteenth century in this story, but from Hume and the philosophy of moral sense we already have in place some of the key ideas of modern art: the primacy of the imagination, the importance of spontaneity, the disregard of rules, of skill even, the imitation of the primitive and the cultivation of naivety. These are present in the work of these painters and through them are also already being transmitted to their continental contemporaries and most notably as we have seen they are reflected in one of the recognised icons of the early history of modern art, David's *Oath of the Horatii*. They are also seen even more directly, in fact, in the work of one of David's pupils and Ingres's contemporary, Paul Duqueylar. Not only is Ossian the subject of his enormous picture now in Aix en Provence, but simplicity and even naivety are adopted as a virtue by a painter who actually called himself Primitive. For Duqueylar seems to have been the leader of a shadowy group of David's pupils who called themselves Les Primitifs.

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It may seem that in pursuing these ideas I have strayed from the epistemological questions with which I began, but I will now return by a route that I think shows how closely these things are connected. David Allan's Penny Wedding is a scene of rustic simplicity. A penny wedding was an exercise in cooperative living. It represents a world where property is held in common and so is not divisive. It is a world recognisably akin to one that Burns often invokes where the poor are happy and carefree and the rich are miserable, weighed down with the cares of possession.

The key is harmony and that is represented in Allan's picture by the dance and the musicians who lead it. The same image appears in an apparently very different guise in Raeburn's wonderful portrait of Neil Gow, the greatest fiddle player of his age. Gow was untutored. Nominally therefore he was like Ossian, a naive, natural musician. Raeburn captures that brilliantly as he conveys to us how Gow is turned inward to find the music within himself, it is literally original, and he externalises it for us and for the dancers. He is represented as alone, but he is social too. He is surely not playing for himself, but is leading the dance. He is an epitome of the artist and I think this is how Raeburn wanted us to see, not just Neil Gow, but also himself. He identifies himself with Gow. Raeburn painted directly and spontaneously. He did not draw or prepare for his portraits. He may have learnt this from Alexander Runciman too, but more than that if we look at the detail of how he painted in his double portrait of Sir John and Lady Clerk of Penicuik for instance, or his tremendous portrait of Lord Newton, we can imagine how he saw an analogy between his direct and vivid brushwork and the bow of Gow's fiddle.

Gow's music was strong and simple, never flashy, so is Raeburn's art. But more than that, Raeburn's approach brings us back to those questions of epistemics and the role in them of intuition, a quality in both Gow's music and Raeburn's painting. Raeburn too is a social artist. He simplifies in order to emulate our actual social vision, the way we read a face intuitively, broadly and without analysis.

After Hume, the key discussion of these questions was in the philosophy of Thomas Reid. Reid was held to have answered Hume's scepticism, his view of the uncertainty of all knowledge, with his philosophy of common sense; with the argument that Hume had missed the point; we do not understand the world of experience intellectually, but intuitively. Intuition is the key and through intuition the external world impacts directly on our senses. There is no intermediary intellectual stage between experience and knowledge. This is how Raeburn describes the faces of his sitters. Thus just as Neil Gow is an intuitive musician, Raeburn is an intuitive painter.

Indeed all along intuition has been implicit in this argument. What we have seen in the work of the artists I have been looking at is a search for a way to liberate the imagination from the intellect in order to operate more intuitively and therefore with a purer moral understanding.

You can now see Hamilton's argument about the role of the feminine as also about the role of intuition and a century and a half later, when Henri Bergson took up this discussion in a way that again had a direct bearing on painting, he described intuition as specifically feminine. Thus Reid joins up the ends here to bring intuition back into the argument about epistemics, the nature of knowledge.

In his new epistemics Reid recognised that knowledge must have a physiological dimension. There must be a direct medium of exchange between the mind and the external world. Thus he changed completely our understanding of the nature of the mind. But what concerns us first of all here is his explanation of perception. In this he is also radical and his radicalism bears directly on painting because painting is the analogy that he constantly uses to explain how he believes we arrive at our perceptions of the world. He provides a vivid account of the subjectivity of vision; how psychological it is; how it is not a mechanical process of transmitters and receivers, but an intuitive process in which we select what we need from sensations; how it is a language of signs; how they are incoherent and meaningless in themselves, but are the raw material from which the mind constructs perceptions. The painter's position in this process of selection, he says, is what sets him or her apart. His business is with the signs, with the incoherent sensations on which perception is based, not what they signify, nor the perceptions themselves. These are the result of our intuitive interpretation of those signs. Reid constantly reiterates this distinction, between the sign and what it signifies. This is how he puts it: "I cannot therefore entertain the hope of being intelligible to readers who have not by... practice acquired the habit of distinguishing the appearance of objects to the eye from the judgement that we form of their colour, distance, magnitude and figure. The only profession in life wherein it is necessary to make that distinction is painting. The

painter hath occasion for an abstraction with regard to visible objects somewhat similar to that which we here require; and this indeed is the most difficult part of his art. For it is evident if he could fix the visible appearance of objects without confounding it with the thing signified by that appearance, it would be as easy for him to paint from the life ... as it is to paint from a copy”.

Surely Raeburn's art echoes Reid's view of how painting works? There is no question that he was familiar with these ideas. He not only painted Reid's portrait, but he was also a close friend of Reid's principal interpreter, Dugald Stewart. The first volume of Stewart's *Elements of the Human Mind* published in 1804 has perception as its subject. Nor were these ideas abstruse. Philosophy was the dominant discipline, the matter of ordinary conversation. Hume and Dugald Stewart's monuments together dominate Edinburgh still. In the detail of Raeburn's *Lord Newton* you can see how the image is made up of the painter's unmodified record of the raw material of perception. Ideas have no part in it. We reconstruct the meaning from the painter's account of his retinal sensations just as if they were our own.

Not only did Reid dismiss ideas from painting, and they had been its principal justification since the Renaissance, he had by this time also already located it as a wholly psychological phenomenon. Far from resolving the subject/object dilemma, he pushed art firmly towards the subjective, where it has remained ever since. He has made it the sum of two subjectivities, ours and the painter's, and there is no certainty between them. This is already recognisably the modern position.

Pursuing that, let us stay with that idea of subjectivity for a moment. Reid's epistemics have two sides. Perception is the product of the external world acting directly on the mind. Expression is its compliment, the product of the mind acting directly on the body and so becoming apparent in the external world. Expression - facial expression and body language - is also the medium of social exchange. It is one of the principal means by which we understand each other. Society is a psychological construct and its proper working depends on such exchanges.

Charles Bell was Reid's interpreter here and his investigation of the nature of the nervous system was a direct response to the question formulated by Reid and reiterated by Dugald Stewart: that the answer to these epistemological questions must be physiological. Bell provided the physiological answer to this question, but the study of expression was part of the way he reached it. He himself was trained to draw by David Allan and in 1806 he published his *Anatomy of Expression for Artists*. Wilkie shared Bell's interest and indeed contributed to his book. It is a reminder that art and science are still proceeding in close partnership at his point in the Enlightenment.

In the directness of his portrait of Mr and Mrs Chlamers-Bethune and their daughter Isabella, you can see already how psychological Wilkie's painting is, how vividly, through his account of expression, it records his own subjective experience of a situation. Indeed he is visibly present in the gaze of father and daughter; and he did this in 1804 when he was only nineteen. In the little girl Isabella, we see also the innocent eye, the natural untutored critic, intuitive if you will, who clearly warmly admires the artist.

In the same year Wilkie painted *Pitlessie Fair*. It is a rumbustuous picture, but I only want to dwell on one aspect of it, that it is a picture of Wilkie's home village. It is local and autobiographical. Again it locates his art in his own personal experience. What is new about that? Surely that is where we expect painting to find its locus? It was not so before this. Here it owes something to Burns and to Archibald Alison (as did Wordsworth). It is also an idea that Wilkie passed on to his friend Constable who thereafter based his art on his own countryside and his own formative experiences. It represents a crucial step towards the modern position that art is and only can be a matter of personal and inescapably subjective experience. There is no place for generalisation.

These are also ideas that Wilkie shared with Walter Scott and Scott's vision of history itself as personal, subjective and local had a European influence. Scott had a huge reputation in France where his vision of history had enormous appeal in the reconstruction of the country's self-image in the decades after the Napoleonic wars. But if Scott's influence was important in French painting, he could hardly provide a direct model. Wilkie could however and he did. Among French painters he was equally celebrated. His example helped guide them in the vital shift that took place in the late 1820s and thirties away from the primacy of history painting towards an

informal art based on a subjective, psychological vision in which, for progressive painters at least, the classical genres broke down. This was discussed explicitly at the time. Amedée Pichot, for instance, dismissed the official tradition of academic art as 'l'art ministeriel', favouring instead an art that was informal and popular in which he explicitly recognised the importance of the example of the Scots painters.

The key picture in this process was Wilkie's painting of the Chelsea Pensioners reading the Despatch of the Victory of Waterloo. It was as well known in its time as Guernica was in the twentieth century and was so widely imitated that it is hard to see now just how radical it was. The scene is the breaking of the news of Waterloo with the publication of the Gazette Extraordinary on the morning of 22 June. That date is not the date of the battle and so suggests how it is really the subjective dimension of time that is Wilkie's subject, not the apparently objective facts of history. In order to capture the sense of time, Wilkie spent a lot of effort getting the daylight right in his painting. It pins down the moment. The place is specific too. The ultimate measure of time is the sun and the daylight in the picture sets the time of day. History, however grand, takes place under the common light of day. Time does not differentiate. History has no special dispensation. It can claim no privilege.

In the picture neither the time nor the place so carefully represented are in fact those of the actual event. The scene is actually taking place four days after the battle had been fought and won. History is elusive. This great event has no permanent presence. Here in this picture, ostensibly a history painting, history is already remote in time as well as place. It only exists as narrative and here Wilkie gives us a cheeky double take, for of course what he portrays is literally a narrative, a picture of someone reading a story. So much for grand events, this is all that history can ever be, an old man reading a newspaper. There is a similar bit of anti-history in Bonington's *Quentin Durward at Liège*. His most ambitious picture, it was painted when Bonington and Delacroix were sharing a studio. Wilkie's inspiration was behind the picture just as much as Walter Scott's.

History dissolves as it happens into the infinite multiplicity of individual experiences, once again, all those bundles or collections "of different perceptions which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity and are in a perpetual flux and movement." And so the specific time and place in Wilkie's picture are extended into the detailed identification of individuals, who are, nevertheless, not great men and women, just ordinary people.

The change in the status of history painting that Wilkie achieved shaped the art of the nineteenth century and this was not only true in Britain, but also in France. There the reputation of the Chelsea Pensioners began even before it was completed. Géricault saw it when it was still in Wilkie's studio. He praised the picture in glowing terms, but picked out one particular figure for attention. "I shall mention to you only the one figure that seemed the most perfect to me, and whose pose and expression bring tears to the eye however one might resist. It is the wife of a soldier who, thinking only of her husband, scans the list of the dead with an unquiet, haggard eye ... Your imagination will tell you what her distraught face expresses". What he describes, at the very centre of the painting, is one anonymous woman's anxiety, her personal, individual drama. He was right. This figure above all tells us that the narrative can only ever be a compound of multifarious, subjective individual experiences and they are all ultimately unknowable. The great have no priority over the small. There is no grand design. Wilkie takes history, real, actual unfolding history and then turns history painting on its head by gently, but undeniably feeding into it all the uncertainties and subjectivities that Hume had recognised will ultimately confound any proposal to describe the world objectively.

Géricault was predisposed to admire Wilkie because his own great painting of the Raft of Medusa was already directly inspired by Charles Bell. It is in fact a response to a key passage in Bell's *Anatomy of Expression*.

It is only when the enthusiasm of an artist is strong enough to counteract his repugnance to scenes in themselves harsh and unpleasant, when he is careful to seek all occasions of storing his mind with images of human passion and suffering, when he philosophically studies the mind and affections as well as the body and features of man that he can truly deserve the name of a painter. I should otherwise be inclined to class him with those physicians who, being educated to a profession the most interesting, turn aside to grasp emoluments by gaudy accomplishments rather than by the severe and unpleasant prosecution of science.

Like Wilkie, Bell had an enormous reputation in France. His first biographer was Amedée Pichot, Scott's first translator into French, and whom I have already quoted on the subject of 'l'art ministeriel'.

There is also much more evidence than I have time for here of Wilkie's direct impact on Delacroix's art. For the moment it is enough to note that the same passage from Bell, quoted above, also inspired Delacroix in the *Massacre at Chios*. So now two more of the icons of the early history of modern art are located in the exchange between France and Scotland which I have been tracing. But that exchange is reflected even more directly in this picture. It is usually given a special status in this story because, it is held, in it we see for the first time a scientific account of aerial perspective, but that brings us back to Thomas Reid.

In France after the fall of Napoleon, like Scott, Reid played a central part in the imaginative and intellectual reconstruction of the country and was seen as doing so at the time. He was regarded almost with reverence and his philosophy was taught first at the Sorbonne in 1814 by P. P. Royer Collard. This teaching was then continued by Victor Cousin. In 1818 Delacroix wrote in a letter to a friend: "I should be very glad too if we could once again attend the opening of Cousin's course. Then in his *Journal* in May 1823 he noted: "I decided to paint scenes from the Massacre at Scio. I go to see Cousin tomorrow". Many years later in 1855, remembering this period in his early life and confirming Cousin's importance to him, he wrote: "When I left College, I too wanted to know everything; I thought I was becoming a philosopher with Cousin".

Here is just one example of how close a bearing what Reid wrote had on painting. It is a passage on the subject of aerial perspective, the quality that is held to be so important in Delacroix's painting of the *Massacre at Chios*, the painting that here he himself associates with Cousin's teaching: "In an apple tree which stands at the distance of about twelve feet, covered with flowers, I can perceive the figure and the colour of the leaves and petals; pieces of branches, some larger, others smaller, peeping through the intervals of the leaves - some of them enlightened by the sun's rays, others shaded; and some openings of the sky are perceived through the whole. When I gradually remove from the tree, the appearance, even to colour, changes every minute. First the smaller parts, then the larger, are gradually confounded and mixed. The colours of leaves, petals, branches and sky, are gradually diluted into each other, and the colour of the whole becomes more and more uniform. This change of appearance, corresponding to the several distances, marks the distance more exactly than if the whole object had been of one colour".

So by 1824 to add to the catalogue of elements of modernity that had already appeared in Scotland and thence in France, we can now add the overturning of the academic hierarchy of the genres and the dethroning of history painting to replace it with a personal, intuitive and subjective vision of the world, but also crucially the appearance in French art of a kind of scientific naturalism, a phrase that was closely echoed in contemporary French accounts of Reid's philosophy, described by Royer-Collard as both scientific and naturalistic.

But the story does not end there. Perhaps the most celebrated moment in the emergence of the new, modern painting in France was the exhibition in 1849 of Courbet's great painting, *L'Après Midi à Ornans*. It should be no surprise now to find that it is a picture that is intimately linked into this story. It is not simply that Courbet's composition is based directly on Wilkie's *The Cottar's Saturday Night*. But in the picture Courbet makes exactly the same connection as Raeburn had done between the spontaneity and informality of his own painting and the music of the fiddle player. As a painter he even claimed to be untutored and thus himself naive. More than that, like Wilkie, he raises a personal, local (and non-metropolitan) iconography to the level of high art. In doing so he proclaims the primacy of the subjective and intuitive. Indeed, painting *L'Atelier du Peintre*, the largest self-portrait in history, perhaps Courbet is already suggesting that the only answer to the dilemma of trying to find and describe an objective reality is, in spite of Hume, the big 'I am', the naked ego.

Courbet's approach was followed by Manet and the Impressionists, but not, I believe, without a further and unexpected intervention from Scottish epistemics. In 1842 Cousin, as in effect Minister of Education, reformed the Baccalauréat making philosophy compulsory and in doing so laid down a syllabus which had at its heart the writings of Thomas Reid. A student edition was produced and so, if it was indeed still on the syllabus, when they were at school Monet and Manet and all the rest had to read Reid's discussion of perception. As we have seen, he made it extraordinarily vivid and relevant to painters. I believe this may be part of the reason why there seems to be such a close affinity between Manet and Raeburn for instance. Both also owed much to Velasquez and it may be a coincidence, therefore. Nevertheless it is striking that we also find at just this moment, above all with Monet, the emergence of a scientific approach to the description of perception in painting that does match very

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closely what we read about the processes of perception in Reid: how it is the painter's business to put down the unmodified sensations, leaving the viewer to reconstruct perceptions from them.

This is not the whole story of course, but it is a part of it which I believe has not been told before and which seems to locate this whole thrilling episode in the history of painting in the much wider story of the history of Western thought and the exploration of the nature of knowledge.

And so that brings us back to Cézanne. It may again be coincidence and it is certainly not simply cause and effect, but I think his painting does also fit into this interpretation of events. He cultivated a rather illiterate image of himself, but I was intrigued to find that at the Lycée in Aix, far from being the backward boy sent to do carpentry and to join the art class because incapable of more literary pursuits, he won all the prizes. He was a scholar and so as philosophy was compulsory, presumably he too may have studied Thomas Reid. It certainly would seem that there is at least an affinity between this kind of description by Reid and what Cézanne actually does in his painting.

The visible appearance of things in my room varies almost every hour according as the day is clear or cloudy, as the sun is in the east, or south or west, and as my eye is in one part of the room or another: but I never think of these variations otherwise than as signs of morning, noon, or night, of a clear or a cloudy sky. A book or a chair has a different appearance to the eye, in every different distance and position of the body of which it's visible or perspective appearance is a sign and an indication.

It is the painter's job to describe and make sense of all this. The rest of us need not trouble our heads with it. But to add into that complex the recognition of the indivisibility of time from all the rest of our subjectivity and perhaps it does become possible to understand Cézanne's intellectual position as shaped, if not directly by Thomas Reid, at least by a far longer debate than conventional art history can offer. His approach is intuitive, informal and direct. The image is held together by the imagination. These are all the things that had entered painting over the last century and a half, or even longer, for it aligns him not only with Hume, but with Rembrandt before him. The reason why he is rightly regarded the father of modern art is perhaps that with him we reach the watershed, the dividing of the streams, or indeed he is a mountain peak high above the watershed. Certainly he looks both ways. He summarises and draws to a conclusion so much that has gone before and in doing so he opens the way to the future.

And so, before I conclude, what happened next? Does the apparently radical departure that we see in the subsequent emergence of Modernism invalidate this whole argument? Initially at least things continue as before, Cubism in its purest form can be seen as a direct response, not only to Cézanne, but also to Bergson's account of time and space. You might also say Bergson himself began with Reid. An early publication was on Common Sense, *Le Bon Sens et les Etudes Classiques*. He also certainly set intuition at the centre of his own philosophy, and indeed the fragmented vision that Picasso offers us could equally easily illustrate Hume's account of the fragmentary nature of perception and of the subjective self at its heart.

But it was Nietzsche who cut the Gordian knot of the empirical paradox. If we can never resolve the question of the indivisibility of subject and object in our attempt to describe experience, then abandon the search and celebrate the purely subjective, the individual will, for its own sake.

It is no longer a matter of the imagination struggling to make sense of the fragments of experience. All that is needed is an act of will. Picasso made this the starting point for a career of nearly inexhaustible creativity: the artist as net creator is remade in a divine image. It was unsustainable, even by Picasso himself, however. His own sexual impotence was the constant a theme of his old age. His art was so personal and subjective, the artistic urge and the sexual urge were conflated.

Nevertheless, in an action that has been more widely imitated than any other in the century since he made it, Duchamp demonstrated the power of Nietzsche's idea. Art is an exercise of the will. It is simply what you say it is. No doubt it was intended to mark the end, the abandonment of the ambition to describe experience that had driven the evolution of progressive art for three centuries. In spite of Duchamp you can see the art of the twentieth century as a search for new goals and new agendas. In this search artists were liberated by the new freedom. Nevertheless the old goals were not abruptly abandoned. Surrealism which proved to be one of the

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most fertile movements of the mid-century took its text from the eighteenth century as I suggested earlier. Indeed if you consider Freud an empirical scientist, Surrealism could be seen as a renewal of an old partnership. It is only in the last few decades that Duchamp's position has become the dominant one, but it is nevertheless ultimately sterile. It is little more than an aphorism. Leading everywhere, it leads nowhere. It offers no goal. But happily if you consider our contemporaries, such as Eduardo Paolozzi or Ian Hamilton Finlay, you see that the attempt to make sense of the world, to find order in it for us, is still their inspiration. Indeed it is their theme. And imagination is still the key, a point that brings the artists back alongside the scientists. More than ever we need them to work together. On his great sculpture outside the Royal Bank of Scotland's offices at the Gyle in Edinburgh, and which appropriately he called *The Wealth of Nations*, Paolozzi has inscribed a quotation from Einstein that is effectively a summary of Hume: "Knowledge is wonderful, but imagination is even better". And so the story goes on.