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IMPRESSIONISM IN AMERICAN SCENIC DESIGN--
ITS COMPARISON TO EASEL PAINTING
AND ITS DEVELOPMENT AS A STYLE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of Speech
Kansas State Teachers College

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science

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August 1965

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of the "New Stagecraft," early in the twentieth century, came an ever increasing concern with the visual aspect of theatre production. The traditional method of setting the stage with elaborately painted wings and backdrops was questioned, and the recently developed theatre of realism, with its excessive naturalistic detail, was re-examined. The New Stagecraft artists sought new methods of staging that would allow them to reinforce the dramas being presented. They revolted against the traditional painted backdrop because it was inharmonious with the three-dimensional stage and against the naturalistic detail of the realistic setting because it distracted from the action. The new designer in the theatre attempted to create a design in perfect harmony with the production and in keeping with the principles of design. Each setting was designed to present a mood, an atmosphere, for the action of the drama. The representation of locale was subordinated to an artistic visual presentation of the theme of the play. Much experimentation resulted in this attempt to serve the play. The revolt of these new artists in the

theatre became a search for a new theatre, a theatre of the twentieth century.

In their search for a new theatre many diverse methods of staging were developed. Styles of scenic design were created and labeled with such terms as Impressionism, Expressionism, and Formalism. The problem lies in the fact that these terms are often confusing and contradictory. It is one of these styles--Impressionism--that will be discussed here for a better understanding of its origins and its use in the theatre of today. Impressionism is probably one of the most confusing and contradictory terms applied to scene design today. Since the term is well known and easily defined as it was applied to another visual art, that of easel painting, Impressionism will be examined in scene design as it may or may not be related to Impressionism in easel painting.

I. THE PROBLEM

Statement of the problem. The purpose of this study is to examine the part Impressionism has played in the development of scenic design and to clarify its use as a term indicating a style of theatrical production. In order to clarify its use in the theatre today, an investigation

of the origins of Impressionism in easel painting as well as scene design will be undertaken. Its identifiable characteristics will be enumerated for a comparison of the similarities evidenced in its application to these two separate art forms.

Importance of the problem. Existing studies do not clearly show the relation between Impressionism as it is applied to easel painting and scene design. Furthermore, a study of scenic design reveals that styles of scenic production, past and present, are often considered with little or no discussion of their historical development and place in the evolution of theatrical art. The historical, or chronological, development of any art form is an important consideration when discussing its characteristics. Often labels such as "Impressionism," "Expressionism," "Formalism," and "Realism" are used without reference to the background material needed for understanding these labels. Labels should not be given to stage settings without knowledge of the origin of the label or the reasons for its application.

Other arts are studied in relation to their chronological development. Why not scene design? Is it because scene design is thought of as an eclectic art borrowing from the other visual arts without any development of its

own? Is it because from time to time easel painters have entered the theatre to exhibit their paintings on the stage? Is it because many scenic designers have come to the theatre after having been trained in the visual art of easel painting? Is not consideration given to the special requirements of the stage space to be designed and the limiting requirements often imposed by theatre art?

The statement is often made that Impressionism cannot exist on the stage, because we cannot have the impression of an object and still have a real, solid object for the actor to work on. In other words, the stage is three-dimensional and therefore denies Impressionism. This misunderstanding must result from an ignorance of the historical development of scenic design and the lack of a true understanding of Impressionism in the theatre. It is, instead, based on an understanding of the term when it is defined literally.

What is Impressionism in scenic design? Is it appropriate to apply the term Impressionism to contemporary scenic design? What correlations exist between Impressionism as it is applied to both easel painting and scenic design? This study will attempt to answer these questions that are

only partially answered by the available materials dealing with modern scene design.

II. DEFINITION OF TERMS USED

Impressionism. This term is used as it has been applied to a modern movement of easel painting in the nineteenth century and to scenic design in the twentieth century.

Scenic design. Throughout this study the term "scenic design" will be used interchangeably with "stage setting", "scene design", and "set design" in reference to the stage picture (excluding actors), including all elements of scenery, stage properties, and stage lighting.

Style. For the purpose of this study "style" is defined as a specific manner of design having recognizable characteristics which identify it as separate from other manners of design.

III. ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

Since this study will be historical in part, it will be organized chronologically as Impressionism developed out of the New Stagecraft of Appia and Craig and became a part

of modern scene design. Since the study will also be one of comparison, the second chapter will deal with Impressionism as it developed in the history of easel painting prior to the New Stagecraft, and its major characteristics will be determined for a later comparison to Impressionism in American scenic design.

The third chapter will be an analysis of the New Stagecraft in Europe and America. Its innovations will be identified and analyzed as a foundation for the development of Impressionism in American scenic design.

The fourth chapter will review Impressionism as it has been applied to twentieth century scene design in America by contemporary writers.

The final chapter will draw conclusions from the first three chapters. The major characteristics of Impressionism will be discussed as they have proven evident in the development of scene design. The relation of Impressionism to the contemporary theatre will be examined. And, the identifiable characteristics of Impressionism in both easel painting and scenic design will be enumerated and compared for any similarities that may exist.

IV. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A review of available literature reveals that little research has been conducted dealing with style in scene design. The author has been able to find no study at all of Impressionism in scenic design, yet it is possibly as important to the development of scenic design as it is to the development modern painting.

James Robert Thompson in an unpublished dissertation entitled Twentieth Century Scenic Design--Its History and Stylistic Origins ignores the term in spite of its common usage in the history of American scene design.¹

Lenyth Spenker Brockett in an unpublished dissertation entitled Theories of Style In Stage Production deals with virtually every other term applied to scenic design except Impressionism.²

¹James Robert Thompson, "Twentieth Century Scenic Design--Its History and Stylistic Origins" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1958)

²Lenyth Spenker Brockett, "Theories of Style In Stage Production" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, Palo Alto, 1954).

So far as can be discovered these two people are the only ones to have investigated style in stage design thoroughly and they have both ignored Impressionism in their discussions.

Though Impressionism was a term used not infrequently in connection with the New Stagecraft of the twentieth century in America, little has been written of its relationship to easel painting. In 1921 Sheldon Cheney published a twenty page pamphlet, Modern Art and the Theatre, which states that scenic design was going through a modern movement parallel with, and similar to, the modern movements in easel painting and the other arts; but little research beyond this has been done to show the specific similarities between these two art movements.³

V. METHODS OF PROCEDURE

This study will consider scene design as separate from, but in many ways parallel to, the art of painting.

³Sheldon Cheney, Modern Art and the Theatre Being Notes on Certain Approaches to a New Art of the Stage, With Special Reference to Parallel Developments in Painting, Sculpture and the Other Arts (Scarborough-On-Hudson: The Sleepy Hollow Press, 1921).

Paintings will be selected for discussion from those considered most representative of trends in Impressionism as evidenced in frequent publication and discussion. Scene designs for discussion will be selected from those termed Impressionism by available literature. The stage designs and easel paintings chosen will be compared and analyzed for similarities, using the elements of design common to all visual arts--line, color, space, texture, mass, and form.

The author does not propose to find a formula for the use of Impressionism in the theatre or even to discover all of its manifestations, but this historical analysis and the comparison to easel painting should prove of value in understanding this style of scene design.

CHAPTER II

IMPRESSIONISM--ITS ROOTS IN EASEL PAINTING

The academies of painting in Europe, established in the seventeenth century by the aristocracy, virtually controlled the art of painting well into the nineteenth century. The Academie Royale of Paris (1648) had been established by the monarchy to further glorify the pompous dignity of the court of Louis XIV. Paintings consisted of royal portraits, court scenes, and idyllic landscapes peopled with fashionably dressed courtiers. The canvases all displayed baroque three-dimensional composition with its movement in space attained through the use of aerial perspective. Surface patterns of rich contrasting textures and skillfully balanced light and dark masses achieved a certain grandeur characteristic of the baroque tradition.

In the eighteenth century, for the courts of Louis XV and Louis XVI, rococo art, with its lilting rhythms and soft colors, dominated as a reflection of court taste. By the beginning of the nineteenth century classicism became the accepted form of the academy art. This classic art of David and Ingres was a reflection of the times of the French Empire. It was austere, severe, and colorless as

if to imitate the sculpture of the Attic world so much admired in those times. Emphasis was on line and modeled chiaro-scuro, well drawn figures each standing alone as a statue, modeled in gradated tones to reveal form. This was the art dictated by the French Academy of the nineteenth century.

The Salons admitted paintings for public exhibition only after selection by a jury of the Academy members. In order to become a member of the Academy and exhibit in the State-sponsored Salons a painter was forced to paint in the manner prescribed by academy taste. This was the plight of the Impressionists, a new group of artists, who came upon the scene in nineteenth century France opposed to the traditions of the Academy.

The name Impressionism was derived from a painting by Claude Monet exhibited in Paris in 1874 in what is now known as the First Impressionist Exhibition, and entitled--Impression, Sunrise.⁴ Even though this movement in painting did not receive its name until 1874, it had been officially recognized since 1863 when Napoleon III permitted the first Salon des Refuses. Moreover, Impressionism had its

⁴David M. Robb, The Harper History of Painting (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), p. 744.

beginnings half a century earlier in the work of the English landscape artists, John Constable and Joseph Mallord William Turner.

Constable and Turner were not members of the Impressionist group and cannot be considered Impressionists, but the techniques they introduced became an important part of impressionist painting and must be reviewed in any discussion of Impressionism.

John Constable (1775-1837). Constable was a purely English artist limiting his work to the English landscape. The subject matter of his paintings was unlike the academic tradition of picturesque motifs. He did not look at nature as a pleasing setting for idyllic scenes, but instead sought truth in his choice of subject.⁵ This truth he found in the simple rural scenes he observed in the English countryside.

His pictures displayed a rich varied texture, which he obtained by substituting short thick strokes or dots of various hues for the traditional smooth surface of greens,

⁵E.H. Gombrich, The Story of Art (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1958), p. 374.

greys, and browns. This method of applying pigment was known as divisionism, or broken color, and achieved for him the vibrating qualities of light and air that were his legacy to the Impressionists.⁶ These slender touches of pure pigment in juxtaposition were usually aligned with a brush, but in his later work oftentimes became patches of color spread on the canvas with a knife. In addition to broken color, he especially created the process known as Constable's "snow" which consisted of tiny white dots used to represent the scintillation of light on moist surfaces.⁷

In painting The Hay Wain (Fig. 1), which made Constable famous in Paris when it was shown in 1824, he began with a series of sketches made on the spot and later organized into a full size sketch of the composition. These sketches contain every element of the final version, but are lacking in detail and exhibit a broad impressionistic style, that is they display bold brushwork and vivid color in an attempt to capture fleeting moments in changing light. The final version reveals

⁶Helen Gardner, Art Through the Ages (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), p. 671.

⁷Aurelien Digeon, The English School of Painting (New York: Universe Books Inc., 1955), p. 80.



Fig. 1. Constable. The Hay Wain. 1821.

a great finish of detail which was possibly a concession to academy taste of the time.⁸

The Hay Wain is representative of Constable's work and reveals all of his identifiable characteristics already discussed--the subject is a scene of rural English life, of clouds and sky, of sunlight reflected off objects, embodying the technique of broken color, and demonstrating Constable's "snow." It is said that when the painting was shown in Paris, viewing it caused Delacroix to repaint large areas of his Massacres of Scio with broken color.⁹

Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851). Turner, like Constable, was a landscape painter whose major contribution was in the way he treated areas of color and light in the open air. Light was the unifying element in his work and color the means of creating pictorial light. Unlike Constable's concern with representing nature as it actually appeared, Turner's compositions were characterized by romantic, imaginative, and dramatic subjects which lost their form and

⁸Robb, op. cit., pp. 722-723.

⁹Ibid., p. 724.

solidarity and existed only for the misty light and air that enveloped them.¹⁰ As his style developed in later years, his principal subject matter was more and more light-filled space extolling the grandeur of sun, sky, sea, and mountains.

Turner developed a characteristic technique in his painting. The colors were pure, and were laid on in such a way that they seemed to permeate each other, the upper layers being broken so that those below might filter through, giving a luminous quality to his work.¹¹

Turner's painting, Queen Dido Building Carthage (Fig. 2), painted in 1815 is representative of his earlier work, demonstrating his use of romantic and legendary subject matter and his use of light as the unifying element of the composition. The forms are identifiable with light played upon them in sharp contrasts of highlight and shadow. His later work is better represented by Steamer in Snowstorm (Fig. 3) in which the form of the steamer is little more than a dark mass in a composition of light on air and sea.

Turner's contribution to the Impressionists was

¹⁰Gardner, op. cit., p. 671.

¹¹Ibid., p. 727.



Fig. 2. Turner. Dido Building Carthage. 1815.



Fig. 3. Turner. Steamer in Snowstorm. 1842.

the painting of light and air, later to become so important a part of their work, with the subordination of forms and subject matter. He was also a great colorist helping to free color from the sombre tones of academic taste.

Thus Constable and Turner, English landscape artists, made their contribution to the Impressionists that were to follow; likewise, certain French artists who preceded the movement influenced the directions it would take. Into the climate of classicism, with its legendary and picturesque subject matter, its modeled chiaroscuro, and sombre color, the nineteenth century brought the romanticism of Delacroix.

Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863). It was Delacroix in particular, of the romantic school, who broke from academic tradition and anticipated the development of Impressionism. It has already been mentioned that Delacroix was influenced by Constable, and it was in this vein that he made his contribution to Impressionism. Delacroix had already defied tradition with his very romantic subject matter which was accepted by the Salon painters because of its popularity with the people. By going against tradition in his use of color, Delacroix alienated the officials of Paris and the classicists but gained a following of patrons in the rich

bourgeoisie, who gave enthusiastic support to his romantic themes heightened by his new use of color.¹² His use of broken color, in the manner of Constable, enabled him to give a more direct expression to the emotions contained in his paintings than was possible with drawing and design alone.¹³

"Grey is the enemy of all painting," said Delacroix, "Let us banish from our palette all earth colors-- keep the brush strokes distinct, not fused, and thus secure energy and freshness--the greater the opposition in color, the greater the brilliance."¹⁴

Delacroix found that shadows of objects were not grey and black but complementary in color, and he used complementary colors in juxtaposition with short distinct brush strokes to gain greater brilliance in his work.

Characteristic of his work is Scenes of the Massacres of Scio (Fig. 4) in which he first exhibits the technique he learned from Constable and which marks the beginning of his

¹²Paul Zucker, Styles In Painting (New York: The Viking Press, 1950), p. 322.

¹³David M. Robb, The Harper History of Painting (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), p. 696.

¹⁴Helen Gardner, Art Through the Ages (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), p. 676.

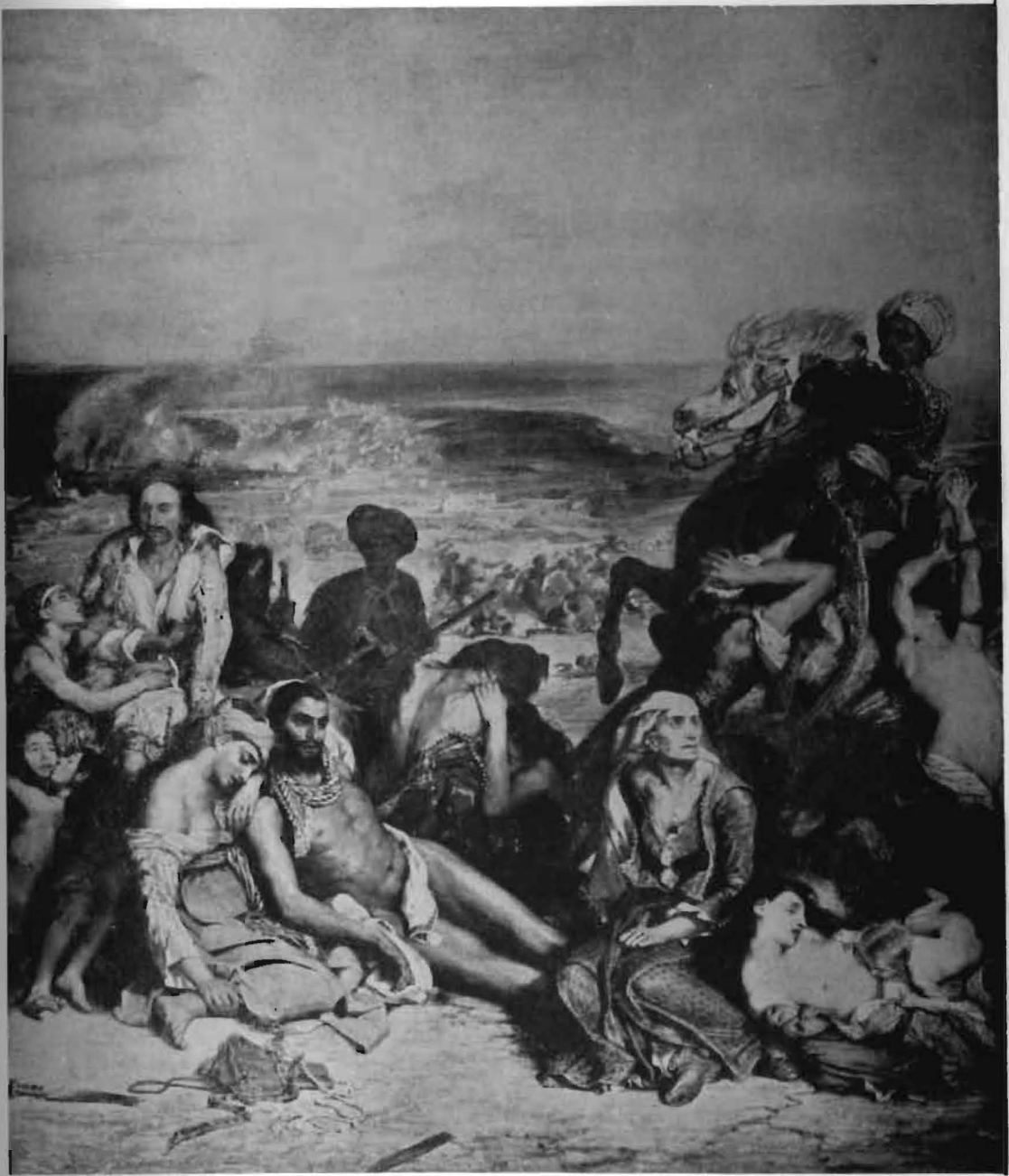


Fig. 4. Delacroix. Scenes of the Massacres of Scio. 1824.

own individual style.¹⁵

Primarily as a result of the influences of the romantic movement and the recent discovery of photography, a new group of artists gathered at the village of Barbizon, near Paris, to follow Constable's lead and take a fresh look at nature. They were, for the most part, landscape artists and went to Barbizon to paint in the forest of Fontainebleau. Due, possibly, to the influence of romanticism their paintings seemed more sentimental than truthful representations of nature, but their choice of subject matter and the manner in which it was painted was clearly realistic. These artists made detailed sketches on the spot and attempted to record nature with the exactitude of the camera. The painter that extended this revolution in subject matter and gave it a name was Gustave Courbet who opened a one man show in Paris in 1855 and called it "Le Realism, G. Courbet".¹⁶

Gustave Courbet (1819-1877). Courbet helped to

¹⁵Robb, op. cit., p. 695.

¹⁶E.H. Gombrich, The Story of Art (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1958), p. 374.

free painting from the tradition of picturesque subject matter. He called himself a realist and rejected both the idealization of classicism and the flamboyance of romanticism.

He chose, instead, to paint only what his eyes could see. His subject matter was the world of peasants about him. His Funeral at Ornans (Fig. 5), exhibited in the Salon of 1850, portrays his friends and associates at Ornans gathered around a grave where the final rites are being pronounced by a priest.¹⁷ The subject matter was revolutionary and shocked the Academy.¹⁸ He wanted to shock his contemporaries out of their acceptance of traditional clichés as subjects of painting.¹⁹

With the advent of realism, exemplified in the work of the Barbizon painters and Courbet, all of the groundwork has been laid for Impressionism. Constable and Turner in England, and Delacroix and Courbet in France had each helped in his own particular way to liberate painting from

¹⁷Robb, loc. cit.

¹⁸Gardner, op. cit., p. 677.

¹⁹Gombrich, op. cit., pp. 383-384.



Fig. 5. Courbet. Funeral at Ornans. 1850.

academy rule, and each made his own special contribution to Impressionism.

So, inevitably, as the nineteenth century progressed, the 'story' element, so prominent in historical and genre painting, lost its hold. Even the newly discovered realistic themes, . . . receded after playing their part in freeing art from the conventions of classicism and romanticism. Artists became increasingly concerned with painterly values, and themes were chosen as occasions for the artist to record his instantaneous sensuous impressions. The growing delight in 'pure' painting led to increasingly 'aesthetic' representations of sight sensations and pigmental effects. Art moved toward the ideal of 'la art pour la art.'²⁰

Edouard Manet (1832-1883). Edouard Manet was the

forerunner of the group known as the Impressionists.

Prior to 1863 he had exhibited some paintings of picturesque subject matter in a rather realistic style but now began to experiment with a new style and was refused entry into the Salon. In fact, that year, the jury of the Salon had been so severe that Napoleon III, to offset criticism, ordered an additional exhibition of the paintings that had been refused entry into the regular Salon.²¹ This was the first official recognition of opposition to the traditional taste

²⁰Zucker, op. cit., p. 323.

²¹Robb, op. cit., pp. 734-735.

which governed the Academy and the Salon of Paris. It was in this Salon des Refusés that Manet exhibited his Déjeuner sur l'Herbe (Fig. 6), which was attacked by critics and hailed by the young group of artists who were to make up the Impressionist's ranks. His subject matter was taken from life. Like Courbet, he painted from the everyday world about him; but, unlike Courbet, he was not concerned with subject matter itself except as it provided a vehicle for his technical experiments.²²

It was his pictorial methods that set him apart from other painters of his time. He abandoned mellow shading and chiaroscuro as taught by the Academy and chose instead to use bold brush strokes with strong contrasting planes meeting abruptly without transitional tones.²³ Manet modeled his forms by means of overlapping planes which eliminated shadows of grey tones and lifted the color key of his painting considerably.

Manet, like the other Impressionists, was a revolutionary seeking reforms in technical representation of

²²Gardner, op. cit., p. 678.

²³Gombrich, op. cit., p. 387.



Fig. 6. Manet. Déjeuner sur l'Herbe. 1863.

nature. True, he used realistic subject matter from everyday life, but his primary consideration was a formal one of representing forms in nature by means of interrelated planes of color rather than by carefully modeled shadows.²⁴ His disinterest in subject matter as a vehicle for interpretation and his obsession with formal considerations predicted the development of abstraction to follow with the Post-Impressionists.²⁵

Representative of his later work is the Bar at the Folies-Bergères (Fig. 7) which "reveals his method of analyzing visual experience by determining the structural planes of three-dimensional forms and his way of reconstructing those planes in color which functions directly, without values or chiaroscuro."²⁶

Claude Monet (1840-1926). Monet, who painted the picture that gave the Impressionists their name, probably best exemplified the techniques which characterize their

²⁴David M. Robb, The Harper History of Painting (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), p. 738.

²⁵Gardner, loc. cit.

²⁶Robb, op. cit., pp. 743-744.



Fig. 7. Manet. Bar at the Folies-Bergères. 1882.

work. To Monet the painting of light was the sole problem of painting. He painted not objects but the veil of light that clothed them.²⁷ He adapted the painting of light with bright color to the recording of effects of sunlight on objects at various hours of the day.²⁸ The primary feature of his technique was the use of pure contrasting colors in juxtaposition, applied in short brush strokes to achieve on his canvas a brilliant glistening surface of light. In order to observe and record the phenomena of light and color in nature more accurately Monet was prone to paint his landscapes directly in the open air.²⁹ He would paint the same object from the same point of view many times, each one a single impression of the scene under varying conditions of light. They were paintings of the light and air which surround objects. His paintings observed closely are incomprehensible, being composed of streaks and dabs of color; but observed at a little distance, the

²⁷Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., Modern Painting (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1927), p. 196.

²⁸Albert C. Barnes, The Art In Painting (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1928), p. 314.

²⁹Robb, op. cit., p. 746.

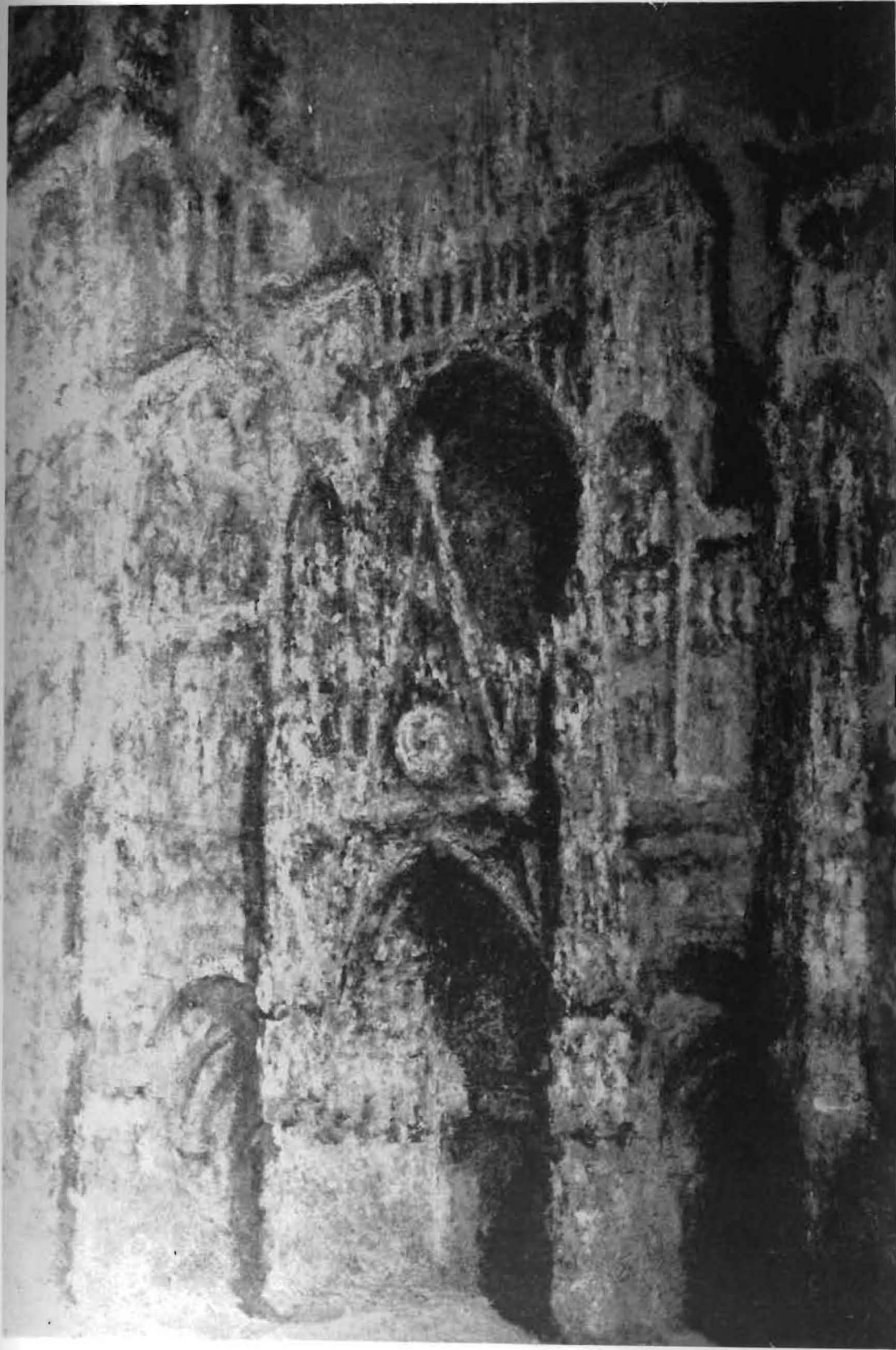


Fig. 8. Monet. Facade of Rouen Cathedral. 1894.

canvases.³² In the water-lily paintings (Fig. 9), which is his last work, the huge canvases were painted with large brush strokes and the forms can hardly be distinguished.

From impressionist beginnings when he painted instantaneous effects of light on surfaces, Monet's art gradually changed into one of abstraction where relationships of form and color existed for themselves alone.³³

Edgar Degas (1834-1917). Degas shared with the other Impressionists the conviction that the subject from contemporary life, presented with the quality of immediacy, was the proper field for painting in his time.³⁴ This was the tie that bound him to Impressionism because in other ways he was vastly different from Monet and impressionist technique. Degas' primary concern, unlike Monet's, was design and draughtmanship. Whatever he chose for his subject, from the world about him, he saw as clear line and pattern caught in some unposed, spontaneous moment. His predisposition

³²David M. Robb, The Harper History of Painting (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), p. 751.

³³Canaday, op. cit., p. 188.

³⁴Ibid., p. 204.



Fig. 9. Monet. Water Lilies. 1905.

with linear forms was due to his training in academic methods and his admiration for Ingres.³⁵

Another significant characteristic of Dégas' work was the casual arrangement of forms, often viewed from unexpected angles. He, more than the other Impressionists, revealed an influence of the Japanese color-print in his work. Japan had begun trade relations with Europe in the mid-nineteenth century and color woodcuts were often used as wrappings and paddings for trade goods and thus found their way to France. These prints often showed figures cut off by the margin and scenes were sometimes viewed from unexpected angles. Dégas transferred these characteristics to his work and did not always show the whole or even a relevant part of each figure in his compositions.

Dégas is probably best known for his many pastel renderings of ballet dancers (Fig. 10) caught in casual moments which afforded him the opportunity of studying human forms in all positions and from all points of view. The figures are often incomplete as they pass out of the picture frame.³⁶

³⁵Gardner, op. cit., p. 679.

³⁶E.H. Gombrich, The Story of Art (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1958), p. 398.



Fig. 10. Dégas. Prima Ballerina. 1876.

Dégas loved to render the interplay of light and shade on the human form. Looking down on the stage he could study the special effects of stage lighting on the forms of the dancers.

Because of his liking for linear forms as well as the rendering of light on objects he often resorted to the use of pastels instead of oils as a medium. These pastels, with their chalky texture, afforded him the means of retaining linear forms while still achieving the color patterns of his Impressionist associates.³⁷

Though Dégas, unlike Monet, never resorted to the destruction of form he was clearly in sympathy with the Impressionists. His interest in light reflected from objects and his unconventional choice of subject matter as well as the vibrating color effects he achieved through the use of pastels were evidence of this.

Auguste Renoir (1841-1919). Like Monet and Dégas, Renoir was another exhibitor in the First Impressionist Salon of 1874. Like Dégas, he was well grounded in the traditional disciplines. It was the Impressionist's use of color that attracted him to them, and his Moulin de la

³⁷Robb, op. cit., p. 755.

Galette of 1877 (Fig. 11) is a fine example of Impressionism.³⁸

In it he uses the technique of broken color to obtain an atmosphere of gaiety, of sunlight filtering through the trees and reflecting off the colorful costumes of dancers in the garden of a café.

Renoir had painted in the impressionist style for only a short time when he began to have doubts, to feel that in his quest for effects of light he had forgotten how to draw and compose a painting. These doubts led him to a combining of impressionist technique with formal values in painting--line, form, and composition. His paintings were to retain the color and light of Impressionism without the destruction of form characteristic of Monet's later work.³⁹

Compare his Moulin de la Galette of 1877 to the Luncheon of the Boating Party (Fig. 12) and this return to form becomes evident. The softer, sketchy outlines of the Moulin de la Galette, bathed in shimmering light, achieved through broken color, are replaced in the Luncheon of the Boating Party with solidly constructed figures organized

³⁸Ibid., p. 757.

³⁹Canaday, op. cit., pp. 216-221.



Fig. 11. Renoir. Moulin de la Galette. 1876.



Fig. 12. Renoir. Luncheon of the Boating Party. 1881.

in a deep space composition.⁴⁰ This is not to say that Renoir discarded the techniques of Impressionism. He retained, always, the technique of broken color and continued to bathe objects in shimmering light but without the destruction of form. The forms always retained the quality of softness but were never obscured in surface patterns of broken color which was the tendency evidenced in Moulin de la Galette.

Monet, Dégas, and Renoir exemplified the work of the entire group known as Impressionists. Many other painters could be discussed as representative of Impressionism, but this would involve only repetition as all of the major characteristics were present in the work of these three men.

"If Manet is an impressionist, what are we to call Renoir? If Renoir is an impressionist, where shall we place Dégas?"⁴¹ The Impressionists were divergent in their styles. Although each had his own style they were always united by their revolt against academic decree. They

⁴⁰Helen Gardner, Art Through the Ages (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), p. 682.

⁴¹Wylie Sypher, Rococo to Cubism In Art and Literature (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), p. 170.

asked that painting be freed from censorship and that each painter be permitted to develop his own style. It was a movement to free art from formula and to permit experimentation without censorship. It was a new art of an ever changing technical age. The new feeling of speed and change brought about by technical advancements of the nineteenth century found expression in Impressionism. It was an art of moments, nothing permanent or stable, but constantly changing. The elimination of detail, the sketchy outlines, "the dissolution of the evenly coloured surface into spots and dabs of colour, ". . . reflected a constantly changing world.⁴²

Collectively, the Impressionists brought to painting four major innovations in their revolt against the traditions of the academy painting of the nineteenth century. These innovations were in the areas of: (1) Subject matter, (2) Mellow shading or chiaroscuro, (3) Mechanical perspective, and (4) Color.

Subject matter. The subject matter of the traditional schools was picturesque, being taken from legendary

⁴²Arnold Hauser, The Social History of Art (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), IV, pp. 166-169.

material and historic events.

The Impressionists chose as their subject matter the world about them. They painted this world peopled with their contemporaries of nineteenth century Europe observed in everyday situations. The subject of their paintings was of secondary importance while their prime objective was a purely artistic one of technical methods of representation.

Mellow shading or chiaroscuro. Mellow shading or chiaroscuro was used by the classicists who dominated the academy as the only means of revealing form. This use of soft gradations from highlight to shadow was due, in part, to the practice of painting in a studio under an indirect light; and, in part, to the practice of building up the forms in the painting by beginning with the dark tones and working toward the lighter ones in overlapping layers blended together.

The Impressionists went out of the studio to paint only what they could see. They painted in the direct sunlight. They found that sunlight on objects revealed intense highlights and dark shadows in juxtaposition without gradations. Light in the open air became the unifying

medium of all impressionist art. Painting, for many Impressionists, became primarily a technical study of light changes on objects at various times under varying conditions.

Mechanical perspective. An intense study of mechanical perspective was taught in the Academies as the only means of piercing the picture plane and revealing depth.

The Impressionists subordinated linear perspective, as they did all line, to the surface treatment of color patterns. Depth was achieved through variations in color intensity and distant forms became less and less distinct as they receded into an atmosphere of light and air.

Color. In the academic tradition, colors were muted and sombre. This was due, at least in part, to the practice of beginning a painting with the dark areas and moving toward the light areas in gradations from the dark shadows; but, it was also due to admiration of the statuary of the Attic world and the attempt of the classicists to achieve this austere quality as the ideal.

The Impressionists saw color as it was in the open air, revealed in all its intensity by bright sunlight.

They began to see color in shadows as well. They discovered that sunlight was reflected from objects for the eye to interpret their form and color. They began to paint in dabs of color, relying upon the eye to mix the colors, instead of mixing them on the palette. For example, red and blue dabs would be placed in close proximity to each other and reveal a purple area to the eye viewing it at some distance and mixing the colors. This technique of applying dabs of colored pigment was called divisionism, or broken color, and gradually developed into the technique known as pointillism.

Though these were the identifiable characteristics of the impressionist paintings, it is paramount that we remember the one unifying characteristic of the painters and the entire movement. This was the opposition to tradition and formula, and the search for a new art through experimentation with technical processes of presentation.

CHAPTER III

IMPRESSIONISM--A PART OF THE NEW STAGECRAFT

Similar to the Baroque tradition that developed in painting of the seventeenth century to further glorify the courts of Europe, perspective scenery of great beauty was created to adorn the spectacular court masques. These extravagant displays were presented in the palaces and court theatres where royalty and courtiers would take part in them along with trained singers and dancers. The scenery for these court spectacles originated in Renaissance Italy, and consisted of wings and drops. Flat canvas wings at the sides of the stage with a backdrop to the rear were painted in perspective so that from the "Duke's box" (that box of seats reserved for royalty and centered in the auditorium for the best view of the stage) they all aligned to create one picture of great depth. Magnificent baroque settings were represented, and the audience marveled at the skill of the scene painter. Actors were lost in the immensity of the settings and the detail with which they were executed. The scene painter truly dominated the stage.

From the seventeenth century forward into the nineteenth, these same techniques of staging were used throughout Europe and America. Even when the nineteenth century began to develop

the box set for representing interiors, exteriors were still painted wings and drops. When viewed from the "Duke's box" they were marvelous to behold, so long as the actor did not go too near them and reveal by comparison their painted perspective and false highlight and shadow. From anywhere else in the auditorium the painted perspective on the separate wings did not align, and the setting was revealed as a series of canvases, placed parallel to one another in order to allow for exits and entrances of the actors. An art centuries old still dominated the nineteenth century stage. It was admirably adapted to the spectacle of court masques for which it was created but not so fitting for a new theatre of realism.

With the technical advances of the nineteenth century (the camera, the electric light) the stage like easel painting turned toward realism. New realistic dramas were written by such men as Strindberg, Ibsen, Hauptmann, and Gorky. These playwrights and those men of the theatre advocating realistic drama began to call for reforms in staging methods. Thus a realistic theatre developed with the work of Antoine and others in Europe and Belasco in America. This new theatre of realism helped to destroy the old stage convention of painted scenery and brought forth a new three-dimensional stage, just as Courbet's realism had helped to destroy many traditions in easel painting. The three-dimensional stage of realism was in keeping with the three-

dimensional nature of the actor but not so with the nature of the theatre art. Pure representation was no substitute for art, and the theatre began a search for new conventions. Much in the same way as the Impressionist easel painters turned to painterly values and formal considerations to the subordination of representative subject matter, the new theatre artist turned from representative scenery to theatrical means of heightening the dramatic action.

The nineteenth century had given the theatre realistic drama, and with it a representational style of production developed. The New Stagecraft, a movement that began about the turn of the century, was a conscious search for a new style in the theatre. The twentieth century, through the New Stagecraft movement, encouraged a more presentational theatre form. Instead of representing a locale in every detail, these new theatre artists presented to the actor an atmosphere appropriate to the drama and an acting area fitting to the action of the play. Playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill, Maxwell Anderson, and others wrote a new drama which could not have succeeded except for the new, expressive scenery of the twentieth century. Plays such as The Emperor Jones and Winterset demanded more than realism could provide; the New Stagecraft supplied the answer.

With the advent of the New Stagecraft much experimentation resulted. New machinery was developed to shift scenery, new lighting methods were derived to reinforce the action, all of the elements of visual design--line, form, color, mass, and texture--were employed to serve the play. A unity of production, heretofore unknown in the theatre, with each separate element combining to serve the whole, was achieved.

Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig were the chief exponents of theories which became the doctrine of the New Stagecraft. But we cannot consider them without first considering some representative leaders in the revolt against the old traditions of the theatre and the establishing of the realistic theatre. The realistic theatre, by attacking the old conventions, actually laid the groundwork for the development of the New Stagecraft.

André Antoine (1858-1943). The Théâtre Libre was an experimental theatre in Paris operated by the actor-director André Antoine. It was a showcase for the realistic dramas of Ibsen, Strindberg, Hauptmann, Zola and many others. From the beginning it was marked as a naturalistic (realistic) playhouse and made a valuable contribution in helping to free drama from tradition in France. It also made an honest contribution to the New Stagecraft in helping to destroy

the traditions of "wood wings" (flat painted wings of trees representing an exterior) and "backdrops with stairs painted on them." In their place, Antoine ". . . used solid mouldings, and doors and panels of wood instead of canvas."⁴³ The settings of the Théâtre Libre were as real as possible in accordance with realistic dramas presented. The traditional theatre of the time was a collection of conventions hundreds of years old. To bring a new theatre to the stage it was necessary to destroy many existing traditions, thus came the cry for a "slice of life". on the stage.⁴⁴ Antoine provided this "slice of life". He was known to have used as many as five-hundred extras in a mob scene on the stage. For one production of Les Bouches by Fernand Icre in 1888 he hung up on the stage real beef carcasses, and for another, Chevalerie Ristigue by Giovanni Verga, presented on the same bill, he displayed a fountain with real water.⁴⁵

⁴³Kenneth Macgowan, and William Melnitz, The Living Stage (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1955), pp. 401-402.

⁴⁴Mordecai Gorelik, New Theatres For Old (New York: Samuel French, 1957), p. 132.

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 142-143.

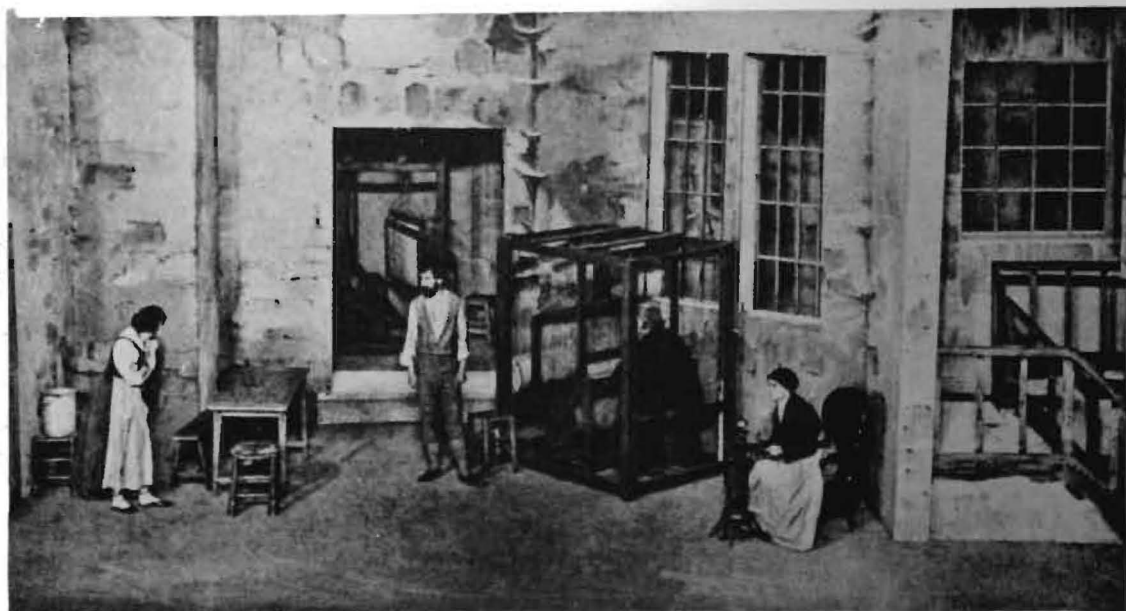


Fig. 13. Antoine. Production of Hauptmann's The Weavers.

Constantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938). The Moscow Art Theatre, with which Stanislavsky was associated, adhered to naturalistic exactness of detail in mounting many of its early productions. In this way it was very similar to the Théâtre Libre. Producing the new realistic dramas of such Russian playwrights as Chekov and Gorky demanded a new convention of realistic scenery. Settings for productions at the Moscow Art Theatre were historically documented with great care given to authenticity. Research was conducted in the libraries of Moscow and throughout Russia. For the very first production, Tsar Fyodor produced in 1898, Stanislavsky and members of his company traveled in a private railroad car throughout Russia buying authentic period costumes and properties. The production of Tolstoy's Power of Darkness (1902) resulted in a similar trip to the province of Tula, where scenic artists could study the local architecture, furnishings and costumes in preparation for that production.⁴⁶

Similar realistic theatres sprang up throughout Europe following Antoine's lead just as the Moscow Art

⁴⁶Ibid., pp. 144-145.

Theatre had done. The Freie Bühne, under the direction of Otto Brahm, brought realistic drama to Germany and encouraged such realistic playwrights as Gerhardt Hauptmann. The Independent Theatre of London directed by J.T. Grein produced George Bernard Shaw's first play in 1892 and in this way encouraged the man who was to become England's leading playwright.⁴⁷

Certain men of the realistic theatre, for example Strindberg and Belasco, actually went beyond authentic representation of locale in their stagecraft reforms and anticipated the development of the New Stagecraft that was to follow.

August Strindberg (1849-1912). A giant of the realistic theatre from 1887, when he wrote his first realistic play, The Father, until his death in 1912, Strindberg theorized radically on stage technique.⁴⁸

When his Miss Julie was first performed at the Théâtre Libre (January, 1893), the preface delivered before

⁴⁷Kenneth Macgowan, and William Melnitz, op. cit., pp. 403-410.

⁴⁸Kenneth Macgowan, and William Melnitz, op. cit., pp. 412-413.

the French audience was, in effect, a plea for a new stagecraft and foretold reforms to come. For the setting of Miss Julie, he claims to have borrowed from Impressionist painting both its asymmetrical composition and its "abruptness", which he felt strengthened the illusion.⁴⁹ He says that, "Because the whole room and all its contents are not shown, there is a chance to guess at things--that is, our imagination is stirred into complementing our vision."⁵⁰

After this statement in defense of the simplicity which must have been evident in the setting he goes on to attack painted detail,

. . . , but we might be done with the painting of shelves and kitchen utensils on the canvas. We have so much else on the stage that is conventional, and in which we are asked to believe, that we might at least be spared the too great effort of believing in painted pans and kettles.⁵¹

His next attack was on the conventional use of footlights on the nineteenth century stage when he says,

⁴⁹A.M. Nagler, "Strindberg's Naturalism," A Source Book in Theatrical History (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1952), p. 583.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 584.

". . . Another novelty well needed would be the abolition of footlights."⁵² Instead he would have us use sidelights, "Would it not be possible by the means of strong sidelights (obtained by the employment of reflectors, for instance) to add to the resources already possessed by the actor?"⁵³ Still another innovation Strindberg would have is a complete darkening of the auditorium during the performance.⁵⁴ As a playwright, Strindberg was calling for reforms in stagecraft which would better support his new realistic drama; and as a man of the theatre, in his plea for simplification of detail, he anticipated the New Stagecraft movement.

David Belasco (1854-1931). In America, David Belasco was considered the champion of realistic staging. By the turn of the century he was using solidly built box sets. In 1909, for his production of The Easiest Way, it was known that he literally transferred wallpaper, doors, and furniture from a dilapidated old rooming house to the

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid., p. 585.

⁵⁴Ibid.

stage. This was certainly the "slice of life" approach to stage setting.⁵⁵

But Belasco was more than a realist who sought only to reproduce life on the stage. In his intensive study of stage lighting techniques aimed at conveying the mood of the drama, he laid the groundwork for the development of expressive lighting effects by the New Stagecraft artists in America. A.M. Nagler, in his introduction to an article on staging by Belasco, has this to say of his contribution: "David Belasco gave the American Theatre the external brilliance of pictorial impressionism from which it has not yet recovered, . . ."⁵⁶ An innovator in stage lighting, he abolished footlights from his stage, as Strindberg had once suggested, and experimented a good deal at great expense to achieve special effects for his productions which have sometimes been called switchboard-melodramas.

⁵⁵Kenneth Macgowan, and William Melnitz, op. cit., p. 425.

⁵⁶A.M. Nagler, "Belasco's Direction," A Source Book in Theatrical History (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1952), p. 569.



Fig. 15. Belasco. The Girl of the Golden West. 1905.



Fig. 16. Belasco. The Governor's Lady. 1912.

In writing about his methods of staging he says, "Lights are to drama what music is to the lyrics of a song. No other factor that enters into the production of a play is so effective in conveying its moods and feeling."⁵⁷ He claimed to have always aimed at making his lighting effects aid the interpretation of the scenes. For The Darling of the Gods, in 1902, he created a scene using a thin gauze curtain, having the actors pass between the curtain and a light at the back to achieve a special effect.⁵⁸ Of his scenery he says, "I will allow nothing to be built out of canvas stretched on frames. Everything must be real."⁵⁹

The new revolt of artists like Appia and Craig was against both the traditions of the older theatre of the nineteenth century and the new theatre of realism (naturalism) advocated by Antoine and his followers. The aim of these revolutionary artists of the New Stagecraft was to bring the setting into harmony with the play. Suggestion was preferred to imitation. Atmosphere was of more importance than

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 571.

⁵⁸Ibid., pp. 573-574.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 575.

accurate reproduction of locale. Through simplification and elimination of detail, the settings were subordinated to the unity of impression. Settings and lighting were designed for artistic expression instead of for naturalness and likeness to reality.⁶⁰

Archaeological exactness appeals to the historical interest, whereas the new artists of the theatre are concerned only with dramatic interest. By imaginative and suggestive impressionism they create an atmosphere that merely intensifies the dramatic action.⁶¹

Such an artist concerned with reinforcing the dramatic action and creating the proper atmosphere for the drama was Adolphe Appia.

Adolphe Appia (1862-1928). It is universally agreed that Appia theorized brilliantly about scenic production in his books The Staging of Wagnerian Drama published in 1895, and Music and Stage Production published four years later. His theories formed a basis for the New Stagecraft. He was not only a theorist but a practical designer dedicated

⁶⁰Sheldon Cheney, The Art Theatre (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925), p. 190.

⁶¹Sheldon Cheney, The New Movement in the Theatre (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1924), p. 131.

to demonstrating his theory. His aim was to strengthen the dramatic action through the setting and lighting. He threw out painted perspective in favor of three-dimensional scenery because the actor was three-dimensional and could best be served with real "plastic" objects to work with and upon.⁶²

The human body makes painted forms and painted light irrelevant on the stage. . . . The body is not only mobile: it is plastic as well. This plasticity naturally gives it an immediate kinship with architecture and brings it close to sculptural form--without, however, fully identifying itself with sculpture, which is immobile. On the other hand it is alien to the nature of painting. . . . Forms expressed in painting are not plastic, but are two-dimensional, and the body is three-dimensional; their juxtaposition is out of the question.⁶³

Appia was an advocate of unity in production. He felt that all elements--play, setting, and action should be organized into a unified whole. Appia used the living and mobile body of the actor as his point of departure. For him the actor was the bearer of the text of the play and without the text the dramatic art could not exist. He would have the actor through movement complete the work of art

⁶²Lee Simonson, "Appia's Contribution to the Modern Stage," Theatre Arts Monthly, XVI (August, 1932), p. 635.

⁶³Adolphe Appia, "The Elements," The Work of Living Art trans. H.D. Albright (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1960), p. 9.

by uniting the text with the space arts of sculpture, architecture, and painting. He also realized the expressive qualities and unifying power of light. It was "living light" that denied the false, painted highlight and shadow of the wing and drop and demanded three-dimensional sculptural forms on the stage.⁶⁴ And it was "living light" that would reveal the actor and the setting united by movement, as it was reflected from the three-dimensional forms.

In 1923 he designed Tristan and Isolde by Richard Wagner at La Scala in Milan, Italy. Largely due to the simplicity of these designs, in contradiction to traditional opera design, they were not well received.⁶⁵ The sets are composed of simple steps, platforms, and walls reflecting "living light" and creating a pattern of highlight and shadow. His designs created an atmosphere through suggestion of locale but lack all the baroque tradition which dominated opera design of the times. His last staging projects for The Rhinegold and The Valkyrie

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 10.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. xvii.

were produced in 1924-25. The designs exhibit the same simplicity and elimination of detail as did Tristan and Isolde. For The Valkyrie (Figs. 17 and 18) Appia showed, in successive drawings, how the lighting would change throughout the same scene, in addition to showing each scene with the lighting played upon it to reveal the emphasis and expression he desired. He not only designed the settings but the lighting of each scene. The set pieces--the platforms, steps, ramps, columns, and walls--though they suggest locale and are beautiful in their simplicity, seem to exist primarily for the actor who will use them and the light and air that will envelop them.

For Appia the aesthetic problem of scene design was a plastic one. The stage was an enclosed three-dimensional space and required three-dimensional organization. The two-dimensional pictorial art with its painted illusion of the third dimension characteristic of the baroque wing and drop settings was incongruous when placed within the picture frame of the stage where the third dimension was real.

Appia's major contribution was his belief that the plastic elements of scene design--perpendicular scenery, the horizontal floor, the moving actor and the space that

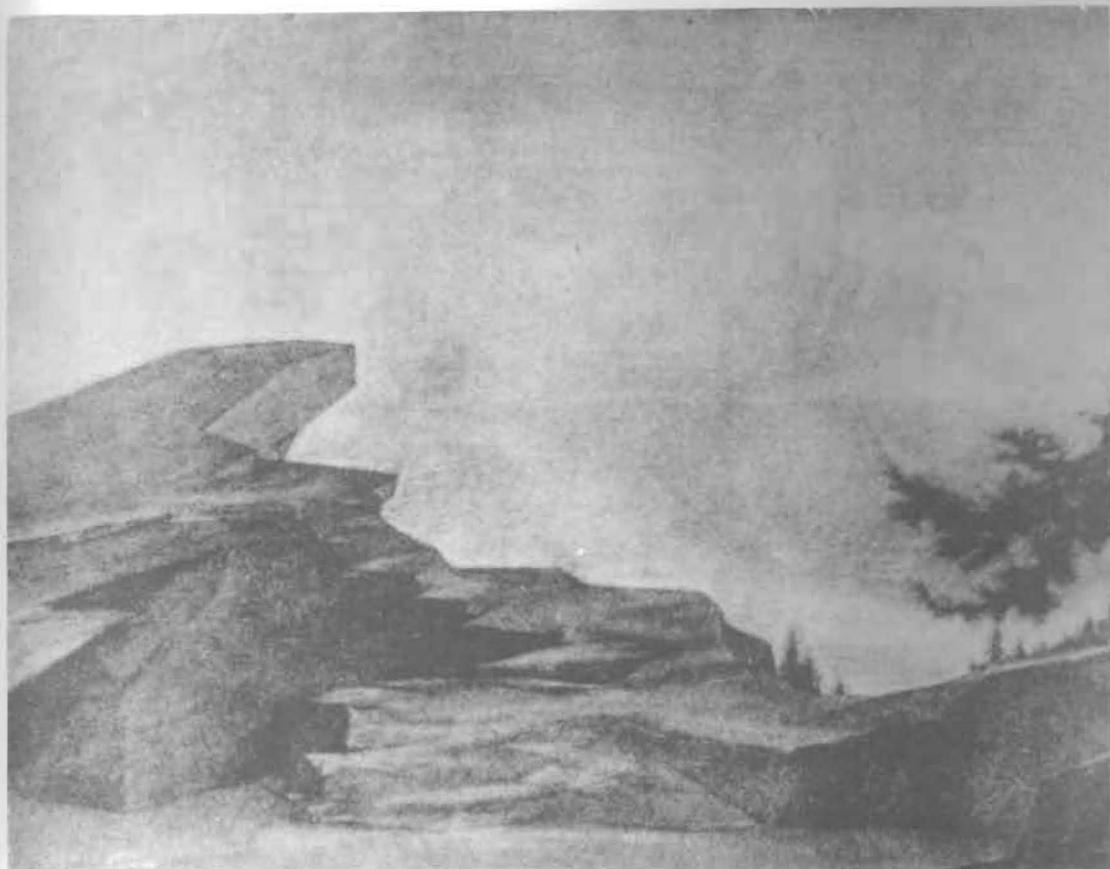


Fig. 17. Appia. The Rock of the Valkyrie. 1924.



Fig. 18. Appia. The Valkyrie. 1924.

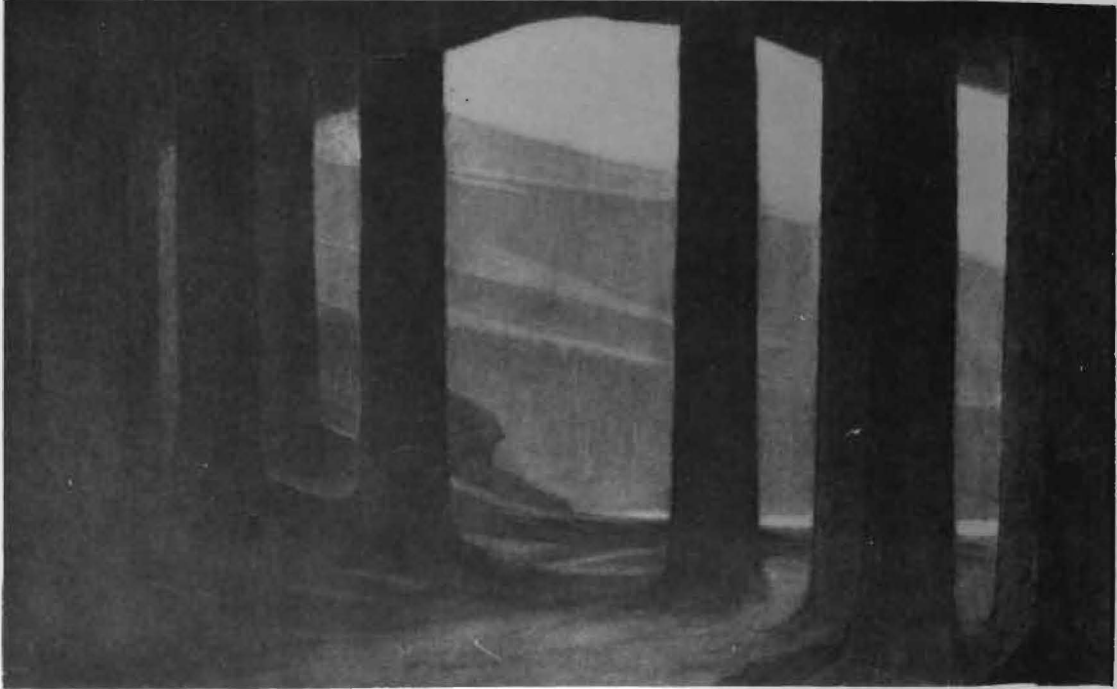


Fig. 19. Appia. Parsifal.

confines them--must be unified by "living light." Not a diffused light that simply illuminates, but a light that casts shadows, a light that defines and reveals. Appia felt that light has the power to unify the separate elements and fuse them into one.⁶⁶

Edward Gordon Craig (1872-____). Craig, like Appia, strongly believed in the unity of production. He believed that the theatre was a synthesis of many arts: acting, scenery, lights, and perhaps music and dance. Though some of his designs were larger than any proscenium arch ever built could hold, they always had a certain simplicity and grandeur which characterized his work as well as Appia's. Many of Craig's designs were published and some were exhibited throughout Europe and America, serving as an inspiration to students of the New Stagecraft. Craig's designs never represented a locale but always presented the suggestion of one. He worked to replace imitation of locale with suggestion, elaboration with simplicity, and

⁶⁶Lee Simonson, "Appia's Contribution to the Modern Stage," Theatre Arts Monthly, XVI (August, 1932), pp. 632-636.

showiness with expressiveness.⁶⁷ He sought a new theatre with an appeal frankly theatrical as well as emotional and mental. The one thought underlying all his writing was "theatre for the sake of theatre."⁶⁸

He realized that the stage must be three-dimensional and refuted the use of painted perspective on the stage.⁶⁹ He protested violently the permitting of easel painters in the theatre. ". . . and do they not also see that the peculiar merit of the studio painter is of no avail inside a theatre, and that to engage a man who paints the side of a house would be a shrewder act on their part?"⁷⁰

He was always an uncompromising critic of realism in the theatre and called for dramatic imaginativeness to replace it. Speaking of the realists he writes, "And what

⁶⁷Sheldon Cheney, The Art Theatre (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925), pp. 42-43.

⁶⁸Mordecai Gorelik, New Theatres For Old (New York: Samuel French, 1957), p. 196.

⁶⁹Kenneth Macgowan, and William Melnitz, The Living Stage (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1955), p. 439.

⁷⁰Edward Gordon Craig, On The Art Of The Theatre (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1960), p. 103.

is the good if you want the real article? Realism does want the real article, and art has nothing whatever to do with realism. . . . And so in time realism produces and ends in the comic--realism is caricature."⁷¹

Craig's primary concern was with the visual aspects of theatre. He makes this evident when he says in his book Towards A New Theatre, "THEATRE--According to Professor Skeat, a French word. . . Derived from the Latin theatrum, derived from the greek θεατρον, a place for seeing shows, derived from the Greek θεαομαι, I see. . ." And then in a footnote he comments, "Not a word about it being a place for hearing 30,000 words babbled out in two hours."⁷² Not that Craig would have done away with the written drama but he would emphasize the importance of the visual appeal of the production. He clearly states this when he says,

We are to accept it that the play still retains some value for us, and we are not going to waste that; our aim is to increase it. Therefore it is as I say, the production of general and broad effects appealing to the eye which will add a value to that which has already been made valuable by the great poet.⁷³

⁷¹Ibid., pp. 108-109.

⁷²Sheldon Cheney, Stage Decorations (New York: The John Day Company, 1928), p. 76.

⁷³Craig, op. cit., pp. 21-22.

Craig would create a stage setting which harmonized with the thoughts of the poet and which in itself was a beautiful design. He was a fine artist well grounded in the principles of design. For him each stage design had to be a thing of beauty, of art. All of his work attested to his skill as a fine artist as well as to his imaginative genius. His designs were always the product of images conjured up after reading the script of a play. He encouraged the use of the artist's imagination as superior to historical research in the production of art, and always strove for a pure theatrical theatre.

He probably did more than any other man to promote the New Stagecraft. Through his many publications, of which The Art of the Theatre (1905) was his first, and his designs, (few ever reached the stage but many were exhibited widely) he fought both the artificiality of the old traditional stage as well as the photographic appeal of the naturalistic method.

The New Stagecraft of the twentieth century revolted against certain traditions of nineteenth century stage decoration, and in its place substituted new conventions and new techniques. The traditions involved were: (1)

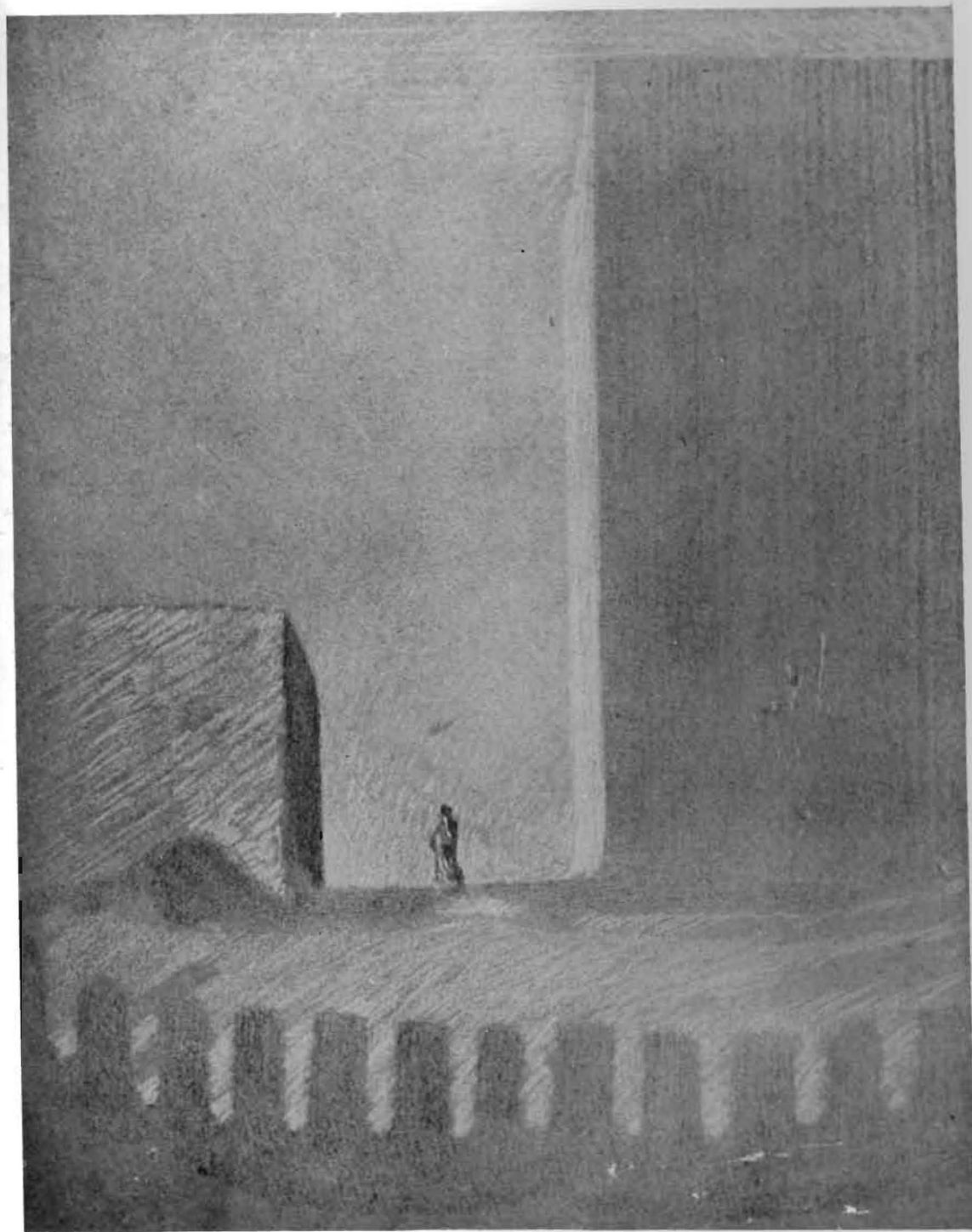


Fig. 20. Craig. Hamlet. 1907.

False, painted perspective on wings, borders and backdrops,
(2) False, painted highlight and shadow, (3) Muted, flat
colored surfaces, and (4) Lighting methods.

False, painted perspective on wings, border, and
backdrops. The tradition in stagecraft was to achieve
depth and space through carefully executed perspective on
flat wings, borders, and backdrops. This convention was
attacked because it was designed for only a small segment
of the audience and appeared ridiculously false to the
majority of the audience who viewed it from the wrong angle.

Three-dimensional scenery is brought into use
creating a more real world in which the actor can work
in relation to movement, and which can achieve some harmony
with the three-dimensional form of the actor. Depth is
attained through lighted sky drops and new projecting
techniques. The background becomes an intensely lighted
sky drop, which appears the same when viewed from any angle.

, False, painted highlight and shadow. The tradition
was to simulate roundness and the third-dimension through
painted chiaroscuro and painted highlight and shadow. A
great deal of painted detail was used, even furniture was
sometimes painted onto the flat wings.

Light is used on the new three-dimensional stage to create real highlights and shadows on set and actors alike. No highlight and shadow exist except what these new lighting techniques can achieve.

Muted, flat colored surfaces. Traditionally colors were soft and muted. This was unreal and denied drama an exciting visual means of interpretation.

The New Stagecraft becomes very much concerned with color, not only in pigment but also in light. The New Stagecraft is determined to reinforce the drama, and color is one of its best means of doing so.

Lighting methods. The nineteenth century tradition of using footlights was abolished because it cast unreal shadows on actors and scenery alike.

The New Stagecraft calls for light from above and the sides to make the stage picture more real.

All of these new conventions were aimed at achieving a unity of production. The setting was to be brought into harmony with the actor and the play. Every variable in staging practices was re-examined and redesigned to intensify the emotive appeal of the drama.

CHAPTER IV

IMPRESSIONISM--ITS DEVELOPMENT IN THE AMERICAN THEATRE

The nineteenth century had given to the stage the realistic play and its representational setting, the fourth wall removed so to speak. A peephole stage Jones calls it when he says, "We are all eavesdroppers, peering through a keyhole, minding other people's business."⁷⁴ The twentieth century was to return the stage to the artist. Theatre for the sake of theatre and art with a capital "A" were the cries of the new stagecraft. The New Stagecraft Movement replaced actuality with art and the natural with its theatrical counterpart.

Fifty years ago, Broadway audiences saw the first settings by native American designers executed in the manner of the New Stagecraft of Appia and Craig. In America there developed a new artist in the theatre--the designer. This new designer's aim was to achieve a unity of impression in the production. He used all of the elements

⁷⁴Robert Edmond Jones, The Dramatic Imagination (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1941), p. 62.

of design and all the tools of his craft toward these ends. New lighting and staging equipment was invented. There were such extensive reforms in production methods that the scenic artist threatened to dominate the stage at the expense of the playwright, the actor, and the director. Fortunately, because of the emphasis placed on the actor and the play by these scenic artists seeking a unity of theatrical production, this did not happen. Nevertheless, the New Stagecraft created settings with more beauty and expression than anything seen in the theatre before.

For a positive faith the new stagecraft put imagination before everything. To take a new view, an impassioned view, and to record it fearlessly, that was its first duty. Many qualities hitherto little appreciated in scenic design came to its aid. There was simplicity, for instance. The stage was not to be cluttered with meaningless detail. Every 'property' was to have its use. Each stretch of wall to express the one thing for which it stood. The results were productions of calm design and broad surfaces, stronger, sincerer more direct, and so more beautiful.⁷⁵

Joseph Urban (1872-1933). Joseph Urban's work at the Boston Opera House, beginning in 1912, was the first

⁷⁵Kenneth Macgowan, "Joseph Urban, Forerunner of the New Stagecraft," Scene Design for Stage and Screen, Orville K. Larson, editor (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1961), p. 5.

evidence of the New Stagecraft in America. Mr. Urban was first trained as an architect and received international recognition before coming to the theatre. He had designed the rooms for the display of Austrian Art at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904 and had decorated the interiors of other public buildings, including the Abdin Palace for the Khedive of Egypt. He was a successful architect of castles, gardens, parks, monuments, and bridges. He had won an international prize for his design of the Czar bridge across the Neva at St. Petersburg. It was due to his success as an architect and interior decorator that he was awarded commissions to design for the Imperial Burgtheatre in Vienna. Here he designed productions including Goethe's Faust and Maeterlinck's The Blue Bird. He worked at opera-houses and theatres throughout Germany and Austria before leaving his position with the Imperial Opera-House in Vienna to become stage director and designer for the Boston Opera-House.⁷⁶ Though his first work in this country was with the Opera, he had designed for the European theatre, and it was on the theatre that he would have the most lasting effect.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 4.

Probably due to his training as an architect, Joseph Urban's stage designs all have something of the solid, massive quality of architecture about them. His designs for L'Amore Dei Tre Re (Fig. 21) exemplify this architectural quality and make use of a solid and obvious skeleton set (unit set) which is employed in each of the three scenes.⁷⁷ The basic unit consists of a wall parallel to the front of the stage, placed halfway upstage and rising out of sight, into which is built a large architectural opening. By changing only portions of the setting to the sides and within the opening, allowing the basic unit to remain, the production retains a unity of design and long, cumbersome scene changes are avoided. In 1915 Urban again used a unit set with an inner proscenium and portals for a production of Shakespeare's Twelfth Night. With changes of background and properties the play could be presented without alteration, which had been necessary in the past to fit the realistic staging of the many scenes required.⁷⁸ In 1916,

⁷⁷Hiram Kelly Moderwell, The Theatre of Today (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1914), p. 140.

⁷⁸Kenneth Macgowan, and William Melnitz, The Living Stage (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1955), p. 485.



Fig. 21. Urban. L'Amore Dei Tre Re. 1913.

for a New York production of Percy MacKaye's Caliban of the Yellow Sands, Joseph Urban collaborated with Robert Edmond Jones, who was to make very effective use of the unit set in future productions of his own design.⁷⁹

A characteristic of Joseph Urban's work, sometimes considered an extreme mannerism, was his use of broken color which he termed "pointillage." He rarely used a flat surface of color but rather chose to lay the color on in obvious points or dabs. These dabs of color were bound together into a single hue by the lights. For Joseph Urban, two factors were to be considered when using color on the stage--pigment and light. A color does not exist on the stage until called forth by a light having an element of the same color. For instance, a red surface on the stage appears black under a green light and does not appear red until a red light or some other color having the element of red in its mixture is played upon the surface. Urban developed a complex system of coloring in which the canvas was painted with points of all of the colors intended to be brought out in that scene. From a distance the points

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 487.

were not visible as such but gave the effect of a textured surface. When a colored light was thrown on the scene only those colored dabs having the ability to reflect that light became visible, and the others retired into darkness, giving the surface the appearance of one color at a time.⁸⁰ An example of this technique is found in the settings for a production of Charpentier's Louise (1913), which Kenneth Macgowan claims were "the first truly impressionistic settings shown in America."⁸¹ So vivid is the color that he goes on to say that Monet might have painted them.

But it is the secret of his effective, living colors that makes his walls look like something besides flapping canvas. He applies his color by the method known as "pointillage"--a method known to all artists and used more or less by the majority. Unlike the conventional scene-painter, he does not try to make a coating of glutinous paint and some shreds of canvas look like rock or air. He follows the modern artist, daubs a fleck of color here, another there, and achieves a total effect that is as suggestive of reality as is any painting by Monet, and hence the same degree of beauty. And the many flecks of mingled color carry all the prismatic glory of natural light.⁸²

⁸⁰Moderwell, op. cit., pp. 102-103.

⁸¹Macgowan, Larsen, editor, op. cit., p. 4.

⁸²Ibid., p. 8.

Writing in 1914, Hiram Kelly Moderwell says of Urban, "He has given the Boston Opera House several seasons more brilliant by far, in all that concerned the stage, than any other American theatre could boast of. . . Mr. Urban's settings are invariably of fine and dignified beauty, and there is more to be learned from them than from all other American settings put together."⁸³

After several successful seasons with the Boston Opera Company, Joseph Urban went on to design in New York. He designed for the Metropolitan Opera and created many beautiful settings for the Ziegfeld Follies. All of the elements of the New Stagecraft were evident in Mr. Urban's American work--simplicity of form and elimination of detail the creation of an atmosphere of reality and not reality itself, the use of broken color bathed in colored light for heightened dramatic effect. These were the characteristics of an impressionist in the theatre as seen in Urban's work.

Samuel Hume (1885-1962). Though he is best known for his work with amateur producing groups and the art

⁸³Moderwell, op. cit., pp. 140-141

theatre movement, Samuel Hume was a promoter of the New Stagecraft, and it should be noted that his staging methods were similar to Mr. Urban's.

Hume, an American designer, studied in Europe with Edward Gordon Craig among others, before 1913 when he returned to America and began work designing at Harvard University with the encouragement of Professor George Pierce Baker. While at Cambridge, Massachusetts, Hume designed scenery for many productions in keeping with the principles of the New Stagecraft. Characteristic of his work was its stark simplicity and his use of three-dimensional forms coupled with plain draperies. He worked always with the play as his prime consideration and succeeded in giving each production a flavor of its own. Moreover he used color freely in the manner of the impressionist easel painters and adapted it well to the stage.⁸⁴

Of his designs produced at Harvard (Figs. 22 and 23), Sheldon Cheney has this to say, "They are typical of the most advanced staging being done in the American theatre, and of the valuable experimental work being accomplished

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 144.

Hume. Two Scenes for a Poetic Play. 1913.



Fig. 22. The Duchesses Bedroom.

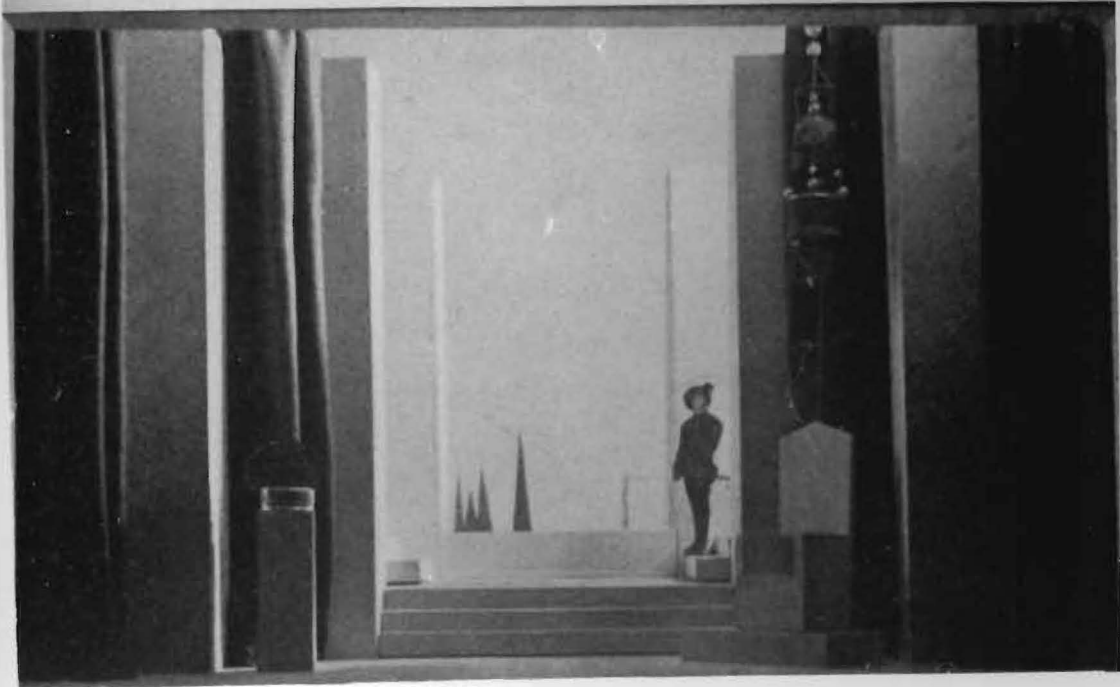


Fig. 23. A Reception Hall.

at the universities."⁸⁵

In 1914, in Cambridge, Sam Hume opened the first exhibition of European stage design, a design already steeped in the principles of the New Stagecraft.⁸⁶ In 1916 he organized and became director of the Arts and Crafts Theatre in Detroit and for two seasons managed it as a successful art theatre.⁸⁷ His experiments there were noteworthy examples of the New Stagecraft influenced directly by Edward Gordon Craig.

Samuel Hume designed an adaptable setting at the Arts and Crafts Theatre, based on the same theory as Craig's screen settings designed for a frankly theatrical and formal stage. Since Hume had studied with Craig and gained inspiration from him, he had full knowledge of the earlier invention. With his adaptable screen setting Hume gained

⁸⁵Sheldon Cheney, The New Movement in the Theatre (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1924), p. 144.

⁸⁶Kenneth Macgowan, and William Melnitz, The Living Stage (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1955), p. 452.

⁸⁷Sheldon Cheney, The Art Theatre (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925), p. 122.

artistically superior results for eleven different productions including: The Intruder, The Wonder Hat, Tents of the Arabs, Helena's Husband, Romance of the Rose, and The Glittering Gate.⁸⁸

The permanent setting included the following units: four pylons, constructed of canvas on wooden frames, each of the three covered faces measuring two and one-half by eighteen feet; two canvas flats, each three by eighteen feet; two sections of stairs three feet long, and one section eight feet long, of uniform eighteen-inch height; three platforms of the same height, respectively six, eight, and twelve feet long; dark green hangings as long as the pylons; two folding screens for masking, covered with the same cloth as that used in the hangings, and as high as the pylons; and two irregular tree-forms in silhouette. An arch and a large window piece were added later.⁸⁹

The simple three-dimensional units: pylons, flats, stairs, arch, and window were all painted in broken color, after the manner introduced to American scenic design by Joseph Urban, so that under differing colors of light the surfaces could take on any desired color and in this way further adapt to the requirements of each individual production.⁹⁰

⁸⁸Ibid., pp. 204-205.

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Ibid.

The two irregular tree forms were used in atmospheric lighting to give the impression of trees without attempting a literal representation of them. In every way his settings were a part of the New Stagecraft. Like Urban its characteristics were evident in his work and like Urban he employed the use of broken color as did the Impressionist painters.

J. Monroe Hewlett (1868-____). Mr. Hewlett, associated with Thomas Wood Stevens, director of the school of dramatic art at the Carnegie School of Applied Design in Pittsburg, created one of the most successful impressionistic settings seen in America for Maude Adams' production of Chanticleer (Fig. 24). In this impressionistic production he makes extensive use of the gauze drop lighted from behind.⁹¹ Mr. Samuel Howe writes of the forest scenes for Chanticleer in The International Studio, October 1912.

Extreme judgment is shown in the selection of the points to be accented that dramatic strength be given to the scene. The silhouette outline is the thing of great moment. Balance, centre, proportion, scale, qualities dear to the heart of every architect, pay homage to the scheme, entering into it. The stern rule of rhythm and balance is here, appearing, however, in so new a guise as to escape notice. There is about

⁹¹Hiram Kelly Moderwell, The Theatre of Today (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1914), p. 141.



Fig. 24. Hewlett. Chanticleer. 1912.

it great depth and richness, great transparency of shadows and shades, great repose, strange absence of irrelevant and disturbing detail; there is also the remarkable characteristic known in the vocabulary of the artist as--quality. It does not force itself upon the theatrical world with the startling note and wild abandon which has so often momentarily electrified the audience. It pleases because of the far-reaching influence--the infinite tenderness of its illusion, the irresistible winsomness of its portrayal. This gauze, this weaving of a madcap midget, the caprice of a wildly fascinating charmer, is a challenge alike to the imagination, at times revealing all phases of the landscape and again concealing them. It is a mysterious backing to a living theme in which the actor plays the salient part.⁹²

Mr. Hewlett's setting for Chanticleer was described as being clearly impressionistic because of its suggestive outlines and elimination of detail, which serve to point up the action of the play.

Robert Edmond Jones (1887-1954). Called the Dean of American Scene Design and one of the first generation of American designers, along with Joseph Urban, Robert Edmond Jones' work should be considered for evidence of impressionist techniques. In 1915 Jones' design for The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife (Fig. 25) appeared on Broadway. This marked the beginning of a career that made him the leading stage designer in America.⁹³ Also in the 1915-

⁹²Ibid., pp. 141-142.

⁹³Macgowan, and Melnitz, op. cit., p. 453.

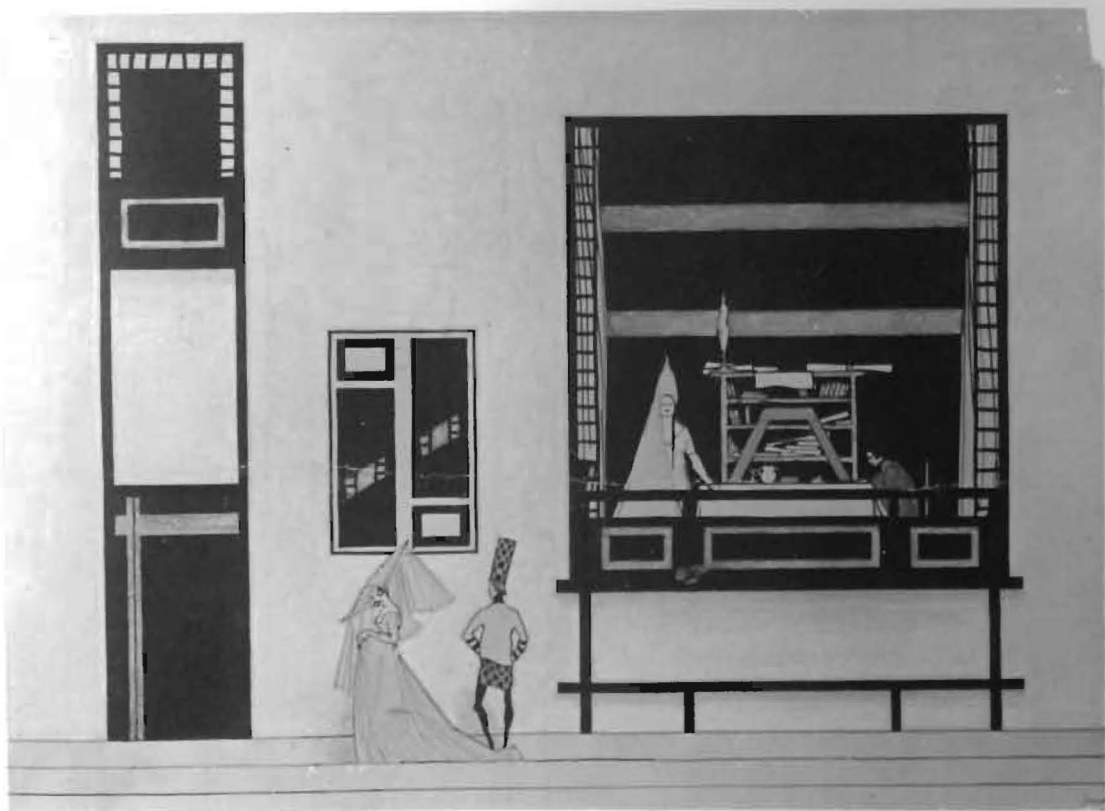


Fig. 25. Jones. The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife. 1915.

1916 season, Jones began his work with Arthur Hopkins, for whom he produced some of the outstanding designs of his career, including: Redemption by Leo Tolstoy (1918), Richard III by Shakespeare (1921), Hamlet by Shakespeare (1922), Anna Christie by Eugene O'Neill (1921), and many, many others. The designs for these few productions, executed over a period of only five years, are vastly different; and not only do they differ one from the other, but they in no way resemble his first success (The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife) of 1915. The one unifying factor in these and all his work is best described by Jones himself, in speaking of his approach to his work during an interview with Norris Houghton in 1936. He says that he seeks to avoid in his work the idea behind type casting-- that is, representation as opposed to presentation. His settings are not representational but instead are presentational--suggestive rather than literal. He states, "A setting should say nothing but give everything. Scenery as a rule seems to me to be too definite. It should possess powerful atmosphere but with little detail. It must be important but unobtrusive. Above all else I seek to avoid doing

a Jones' setting."⁹⁴ In this way all Jones' settings are similar: suggestive rather than literal, with powerful atmosphere but with little detail, important but unobtrusive, and always presentational.

Jones worked in the manner outlined by Appia and Craig.⁹⁵ His was a theatrical theatre, a theatre of the imagination. He was considered a visionary by many and even termed a mystic by some. His writings and lectures on the theatre, now published in The Dramatic Imagination, have served as an inspiration to many students of stagecraft. His outstanding ability to organize any production into a unified whole was his contribution to the American theatre; however, unity of production was not in itself his goal. His search was for a new theatre, a theatre of dramatic images to replace the peephole theatre of realism.

Upon his stage he would put, "the light that never was on sea or land." He writes, ". . . the subject which

⁹⁴Norris Houghton, "The Designer Sets the Stage," Theatre Arts Monthly, XX (December, 1936), p. 970.

⁹⁵Kenneth Macgowan, and William Melnitz, The Living Stage (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1955), p. 452.

is lighted is the drama itself. We light the actors and the setting, it is true, but we illuminate the drama. We reveal the drama. We use light as we use words, to elucidate ideas and emotions."⁹⁶ For Jones, the theatre was not a representation of life but an intensification of life, not a mechanical reproduction but an artistic creation.

He used all the means at his disposal to reinforce the dramatic action. A sensitive artistic line and vivid emotive color were his to command. Color was more important to him than its use in realistic application. For he says, "Color is emotion."⁹⁷ He used color to heighten the emotion of a scene and raise the theatre above the realm of realism. When describing a scene for The Merchant of Venice he writes

Immediately after the close of the trial scene the curtain rises on this picture: the silhouette of a great bridge along which Shylock passes from right to left, black against a dull red sky, till he is lost to sight in the tangle of masts and ropes. I want this scene to hit your eye, bang! like an enormous poster, and to last but a moment.⁹⁸

⁹⁶Robert Edmond Jones, The Dramatic Imagination (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1941), pp. 118-119.

⁹⁷Houghton, op. cit., p. 968.

⁹⁸Moderwell, op. cit., p. 143.

The scene is entirely in red and black. Jones' sense of the dramatic, evident in this scene description, was present in all of his work, from the abstract Man Who Married a Dumb Wife through the many unit settings for such plays as Hamlet (Fig. 26) and King Richard III (Fig. 27) and including his seemingly realistic settings for Desire Under the Elms and The Iceman Cometh (Fig. 28). Even though in all his designs his use of simplified scenery, vivid intense color, special lighting effects--the practical application of the new stagecraft doctrines--is evident, his art was never reduced to formula, as each production held a special significance for him and was approached in an individual manner.

Donald Oenslager, who began his work in stage design as an apprentice to Jones, says of his design for the Lute Song (Fig. 29), ". . . Jones central intention was to achieve . . . a progression of impressionistic scenes."⁹⁹ Perhaps all of Jones' settings were impressionistic. They were at least his own impressions of the scene. Norris Houghton

⁹⁹Ralph Pendleton, The Theatre of Robert Edmond Jones (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1958), p. 135.



Fig. 26. Jones. Hamlet. 1922.

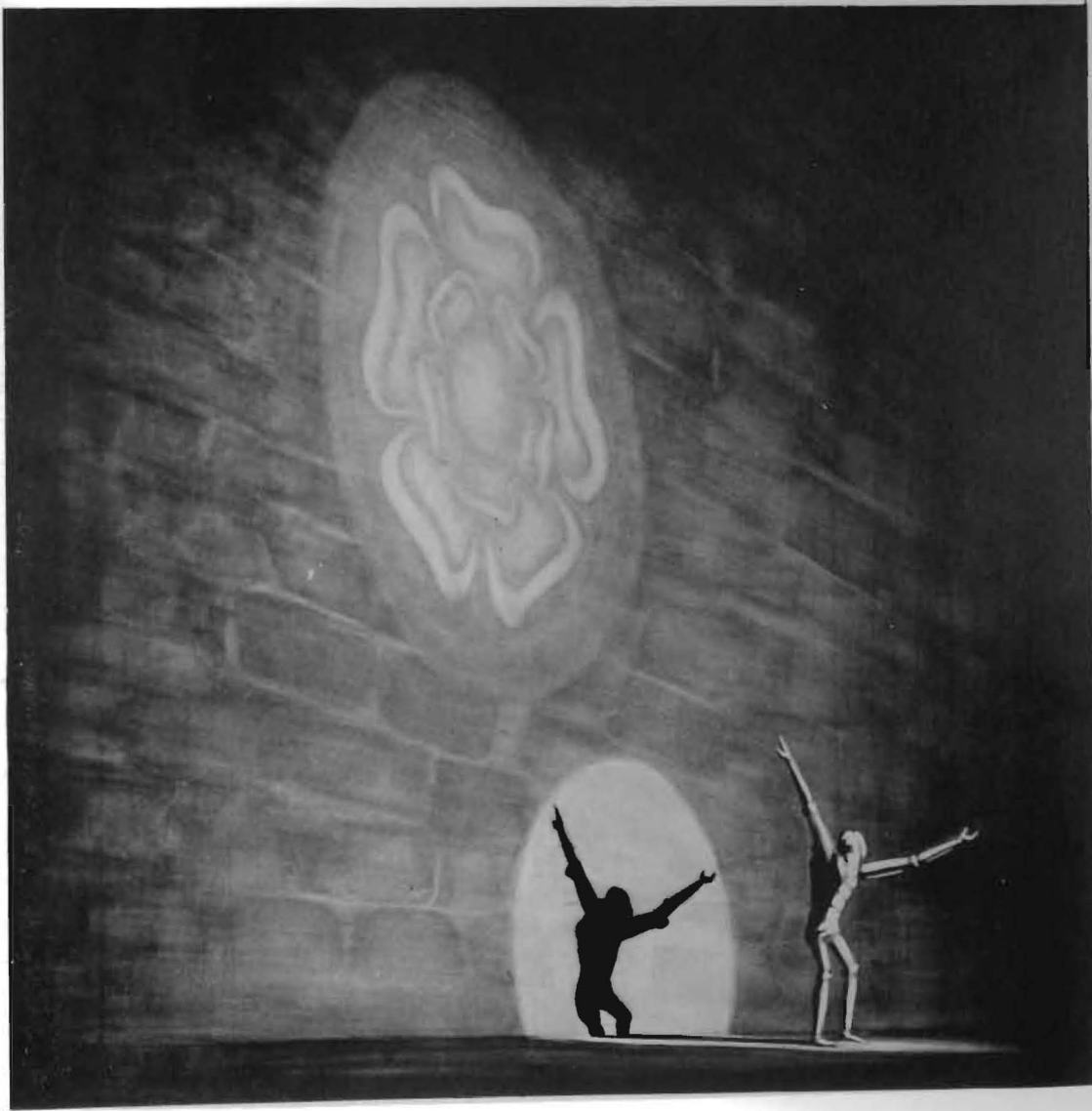


Fig. 27. Jones. King Richard III. 1941.



Fig. 28. Jones. The Iceman Cometh. 1946.



Fig. 29. Jones. Lute Song. 1945.

writes of an interview with Jones, "Thus, reading, he envisions the play as though it were being acted out before him. It then but remains to make drawings of these picturings of his imagination which he will take to the producer."¹⁰⁰ Perhaps Jones himself best summed up his work when he said, "The artist should omit the details, the prose of nature and give us only the spirit and splendor."¹⁰¹

Robert Edmond Jones has had a lasting influence on the theatre of twentieth century America, not only through his own work but the work of other designers. One such designer is Jo Mielziner, apprenticed to Jones in the early days of his career, whose work is often referred to as impressionistic.

Jo Mielziner (1901-____). In a survey of American scene designers, conducted by the Saturday Review (1964), Mielziner's well known setting for Maxwell Anderson's Winterset (1935) (Fig. 30) was recognized by them as the

¹⁰⁰Norris Houghton, "The Designer Sets the Stage," Theatre Arts Monthly, XX (December, 1936), p. 969.

¹⁰¹Jones, op. cit., p. 82.



Fig. 30. Mielziner. Winterset. 1935.

outstanding setting in our theatre's history. It is interesting to note that the same survey, conducted ten years after his death, ranked Jones' Lute Song and his Iceman Cometh second and fourth respectively.¹⁰² Winterset is a poetic, atmospheric setting, suggesting an impression of locale rather than either a realistic representation of the scene or an abstract stylization of it. "Mr. Mielziner's somewhat representative scenery in Winterset was also impressionistic in feeling since we were here presented with impressions of recognizable places--not with actual location."¹⁰³ In an interview conducted the year following his success with Winterset, Mielziner says of theatre design,

So, on the stage as well as in every other field of art, people are coming more and more to realize that simplification of design and execution is far more telling than any amount of elaboration and ornament. The stage is becoming as stream-line-minded as architecture, or interior decoration, or sculpture. We are rediscovering the limitless power of suggestion and illusion. After all, there's no use spending,

¹⁰²Henry Hewes, "Scene Designers: Their Art and Their Impact," Saturday Review, (December, 1964), pp. 26-31.

¹⁰³Herbert Philippi, Stagecraft and Scene Design (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1953), p. 171.

in this breathless world, a lot of time, energy, and agony fussing with details and superfluties that will, in the end, only serve to confuse and obstruct.¹⁰⁴

The simplification of design he speaks of is present in all his work.

Since World War II, Mielziner has remained the top Broadway designer with such successes as The Glass Menagerie (Fig. 31), A Streetcar Named Desire (Fig. 32), Summer and Smoke, all by Tennessee Williams, and Death of a Salesman (Fig. 33) by Arthur Miller. With these productions Mielziner developed his own personal style. All of these settings make use of profile scenery in a simultaneous or multiple set. Walls are often made of scrim so that additional scenes may be played behind or to the side of the principal setting.¹⁰⁵ Due to the publication of photographs of these sets, the profile set has become very popular when multiple sets are required. Its use provides for the

¹⁰⁴Anne Caparn, "Stream-Line in the Theatre (Stage Decoration Follows the Current World Wide Trend Toward Simplification From a Talk with Jo Mielziner)," Arts and Decoration, (March, 1936), pp. 16-17

¹⁰⁵Wendell Cole, "A Chronicle of Recent American Scene Design," Educational Theatre Journal, VIII (December, 1956), p. 285.



Fig. 31. Mielziner. The Glass Menagerie. 1945.

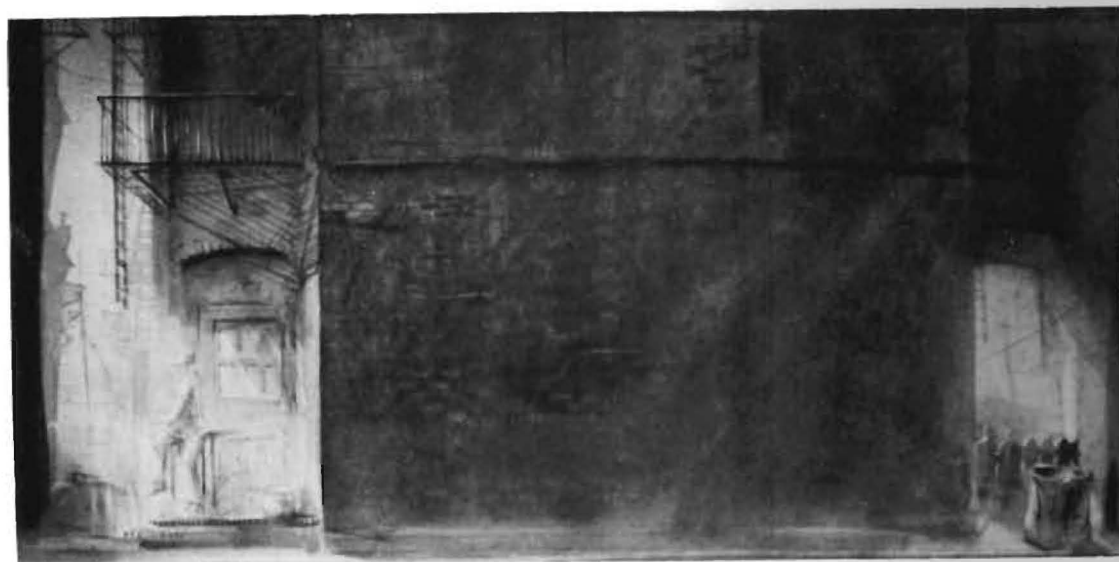


Fig. 3. Mielziner. The Glass Menagerie. 1945.

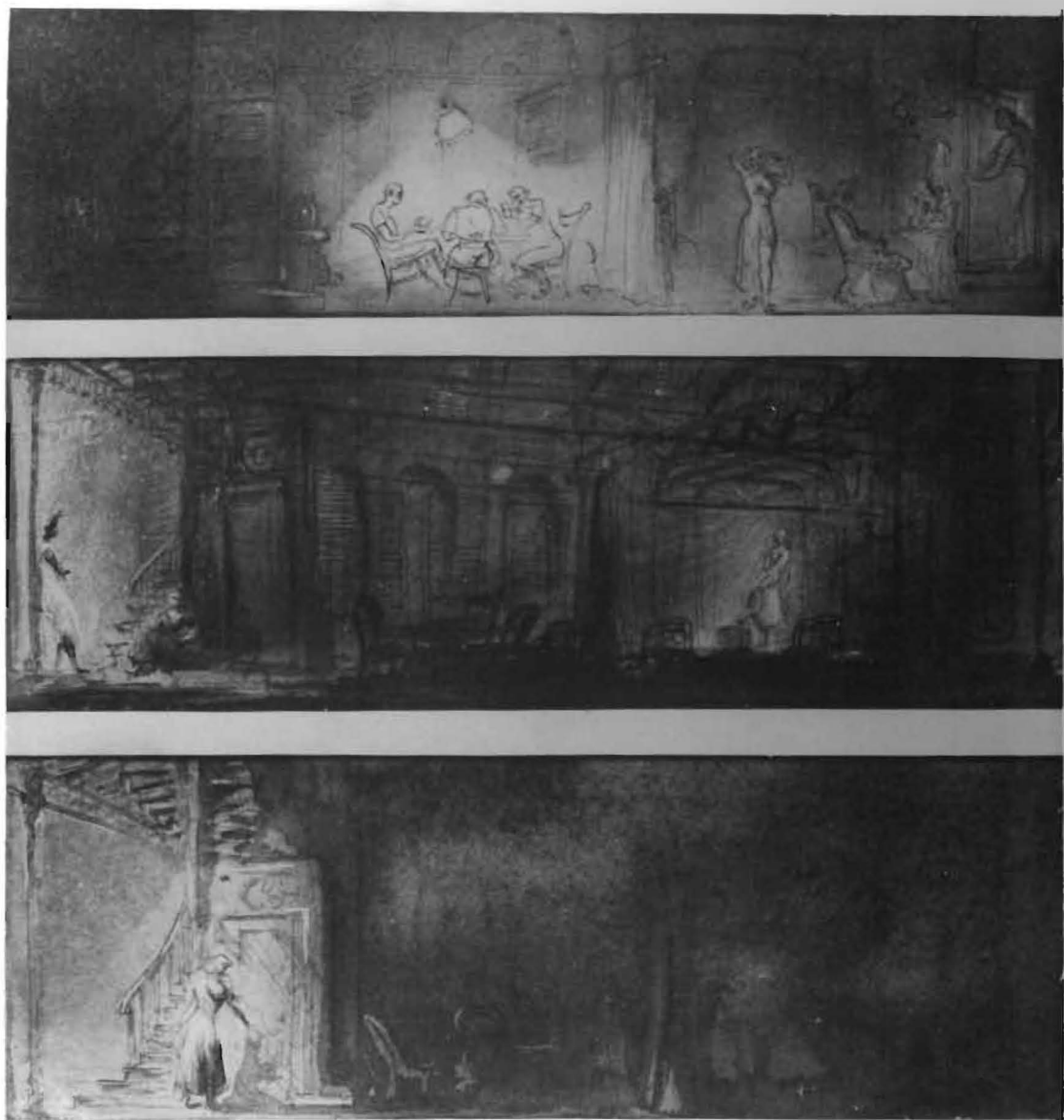


Fig. 32. Mielziner. A Streetcar Named Desire. 1947.

representation of both interior and exterior areas simultaneously or separately and facilitates instantaneous shift of locale. "Mielziner's use of scrim in A Streetcar Named Desire was impressionistically realistic in intent and his sparse use of detail was noteworthy; the location was recognizable, yet the transparent walls and sketchy trim were atmospheric rather than literal."¹⁰⁶

Mielziner has proved an ingeniously creative and versatile designer. In a more realistic vein he has designed settings for such productions as The Wisteria Trees (1950), and Picnic (1953). His more realistic settings always maintain an artistic mood and atmosphere. Settings for such Broadway musicals as Annie Get Your Gun (1946), Guys and Dolls (1950), The King and I (1951) and many others demonstrate further his versatility in design.¹⁰⁷

For Mielziner the single most indispensable tool of the scenic artist is light. Using it he can establish mood, define form, create distance, effect the passage of time, interpret character, reinforce a playwright's lines

¹⁰⁶Philippi, op. cit., p. 171.

¹⁰⁷Cole, op. cit., p. 288.

and completely change locale before the eyes of the audience.¹⁰⁸

Oliver Smith, a leading Broadway designer, says of his use of light, "Jo Mielziner works with light as if he were a sculptor."¹⁰⁹

Coming to the stage trained as an easel artist, Mielziner adapted his training and talents well to the-
atrical production. Probably the most successful and
influential scenic artist still designing in the American
theatre, he has many times had his designs identified with
impressionism.

All of the aforementioned designers have at one
time or another, in one way or another been termed impress-
ionists. Upon examination there are many similarities in
their work. These similarities may be discussed under the
following headings: (1) Broken color, (2) Unit setting,
(3) Elimination of detail and simplification of form, (4)
Expressive lighting techniques, (5) Mood and atmosphere.

¹⁰⁸Emily Genauer, "Mielziner," Theatre Arts, XXXV
(September, 1951), p. 86.

¹⁰⁹Emily Genaur, "Oliver Smith on Scenic Design:
More than Interior Decoration," Theatre Arts, XLII (June,
1958), pp. 19-20.

Broken color. Joseph Urban and Samuel Hume, at least, made extensive use of the technique known as "pointillage", which had been used first by the impressionist easel painters. Kenneth Macgowan calls "broken color" an interesting by-product of the New Stagecraft and comments, "The artist gave up flat tones as well as painted shadows, and he dotted, mottled, and streaked the surface of his sets in a number of hues. Under proper lighting, this disguised the canvas, and gave walls a quality that was more lifelike as well as more beautiful."¹¹⁰

Unit setting. Almost all of these artists made use of the unit setting, though some more extensively than others. Joseph Urban used it for L'Amore Dei Tre Re and Twelfth Night to name only two. Samuel Hume not only built a unit set for one production but made it serve eleven different productions in all. Robert Edmond Jones was well known for his unit sets for such productions as Hamlet and Richard III as well as Lute Song. Mielziner went one step further in seeking unity of setting with

¹¹⁰Kenneth Macgowan, and William Melnitz, The Living Stage (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1955), p. 443.

his simultaneous or multiple settings for Glass Menagerie, A Streetcar Named Desire, and Death of A Salesman among others.

Elimination of detail and simplification of form.

All of these artists were concerned with the elimination of detail and the simplification of form. Their settings were suggestive rather than literal, presentational rather than representational. They were all experimenting with new techniques of staging that would reinforce the emotional content of the drama.

Expressive lighting techniques. Furthermore they

all experimented extensively with stage lighting techniques. Joseph Urban and Samuel Hume were concerned with revealing their architectural forms as well as with the color dotted upon their surfaces. Monroe Hewlett relied to a great extent upon lighting effects in his forest scenes for Chanticleer. Robert Edmond Jones used special projected lighting effects in Richard III and Macbeth and bathed all of his productions with the "light that never was on sea or land." Jo Mielziner's use of scrim in many productions demanded a great deal of experimentation and a fine under-

standing of lighting practice in order that they might successfully serve the play.

Mood and Atmosphere. All of the New Stagecraft artists, like Appia and Craig, sought to reinforce the action by creating a mood and an atmosphere appropriate to the drama. It was toward this end that they experimented extensively with new staging methods. The visual aspects of production were brought into harmony with the play, as every means at the designers disposal was subjected to this aim.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

What is Impressionism in scenic design? Is it appropriate to apply the term Impressionism to contemporary scenic design? What correlations exist between Impressionism as it is applied to both easel painting and scenic design? These are the questions this study attempts to answer.

The term Impressionism is often loosely used in connection with scene design and needs to be defined. Since Impressionism originated in easel painting, it seemed appropriate to study that phase of the painter's art in order to understand the term better as it is applied to the art of setting the stage. This is not to say, necessarily, that this style was lifted from painting and transferred to the stage. However, certain similarities may exist in the term as it is applied to these two separate art forms.

What is Impressionism in scenic design? The beginnings of Impressionism in scenic design seem to be rooted in the work of Appia and Craig, founders of the New Stagecraft. In their revolt against established traditions

they sought certain reforms which characterize Impressionism as it appears in contemporary scenic design. According to Richard Corson, "Impressionism may be defined as the elimination of nonessentials with the intent of intensifying mood and developing an emotional response, lighting is invariably an important factor and is often the sole means of creating the required atmosphere."¹¹³

Sheldon Cheney in describing the New Stagecraft states, . . .the new craftsmen employ only the indispensable things. . . .They believe that the setting should be the result of an artist's spiritual impression of a time and place, and not the labored result of a teacher's scholarly knowledge. Archaeological exactness appeals to the historical interest, whereas the new artists of the theatre are concerned only with dramatic interest. By imaginative and suggestive impressionism they create an atmosphere that merely intensifies the dramatic action.¹¹⁴

He further states, "By the lighting, too, they suggest the mood of the production."¹¹⁵

They were both describing the same characteristics, but Richard Corson was discussing a contemporary style of

¹¹³Richard Corson, "A Garland of 'Isms'", Theatre Arts XXIX (December, 1945), pp. 729-730.

¹¹⁴Sheldon Cheney, The New Movement in the Theatre (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), p. 131.

¹¹⁵Ibid., p. 130.

scenic design in 1945, whereas Sheldon Cheney was describing the new stagecraft in 1914 and its revolt against realism and the archaeological exactness with which it reproduced a locale.

The point to be made here is that Impressionism in scenic design was the New Stagecraft. As the New Stagecraft developed prior to 1914 so did Impressionism in stage design. By 1945, and even today, Impressionism in scenic design is still identified by those characteristics which identified the New Stagecraft movement. Impressionism as practiced by the New Stagecraft artists was a revolt against the traditions of realism as employed by Antoine and Belasco and sought a simplification and an elimination of detail in the setting as well as an intensification of mood and atmosphere through the use of lighting effects.

As Corson himself says, "The majority of settings by Appia and Craig are clearly impressionistic, sometimes representative but more often not."¹¹⁶

If the work of Appia and Craig was impressionistic, the entire New Stagecraft movement was impressionistic, since they were its founders and its prophets.

¹¹⁶Corson, loc. cit.

Impressionism should be considered, then, as the style of the New Stagecraft artists.

Not only are the elements of Impressionism evident in the work of Appia, Craig, Urban, Hume, and other artists of the New Stagecraft prior to 1914 but also these same elements are present in the work of such men as Jones and Mielziner well into the middle of the twentieth century.

The work of Appia and Craig was a revolt against realism and advocated an elimination of detail. For the most part they retained recognizable locale, though more suggestive than literal in presentation. They reduced the essential elements of every setting to the simplest forms without completely destroying realism, and by destroying realism achieving total abstraction. These forms were not distorted or tortured in any way to become symbolic or expressionistic but were merely simplified to the exclusion of unnecessary detail. Both men advocated the careful execution of stage lighting as an important part of their designs and an expressive media for aiding the presentation of the drama. Theirs was an art of simple masses relying extensively upon light to create the mood and atmosphere of the drama.

Urban can also be termed an Impressionist designer. With his work at the Boston Opera-House beginning in 1912, he was a forerunner of the New Stagecraft in America, and he worked with simplified scenery and controlled atmospheric lighting. He also worked with the unit setting, which was still a further simplification of the essential elements needed for the setting. This unit setting with changeable backgrounds and properties to effect a change of locale seems also to have been a characteristic of many settings termed impressionistic, and a major innovation of the New Stagecraft.

Samuel Hume used the unit setting extensively in his work in Cambridge as well as in the Arts and Crafts Theatre in Detroit (1916-1918). It is also apparent that Hume's unit setting had its origin in the screen settings of Gordon Craig, whom Hume had studied with in Europe. This unit setting was an attempt to unify the many diverse settings within a particular drama and in so doing to give a unity to the production. With the use of the unit setting the designer was forced to design the lighting of each separate scene more and more carefully to demonstrate a change of locale.

Robert Edmond Jones seems to have relied almost (1915), exclusively on stage lights to effect a change of locale in his unit sets for Hamlet (1922) and King Richard III (1920). Both designs made use of very few alterations in the basic unit and only an occasional set piece in the foreground. The rest of the setting was created with light and the audience's imagination. With another design for King Richard III, created in 1941, he relied still further upon stage lighting with a unit setting and made use of many projected effects which in themselves became the setting to the exclusion of any three dimensional forms on the stage. This was the logical extension of the unit setting, the elimination of all constructed scenery and in its place complete reliance upon projected lighting effects.

Though Jones' work with simplification of realistic detail and special lighting effects ties him to the impressionist designers, as does the unit setting, he was more than a disciple of the New Stagecraft. His work was not limited to the New Stagecraft techniques. He never felt that he had found the answer, and he spent his life experimenting and searching for a new form of theatre. The diverse character of his many designs demonstrates this.

His setting for The Man Who Married A Dumb Wife (1915), which was always his favorite, and the later production design for Lute Song (1945), demonstrate his affinity for pure design tending toward a formal abstraction of realistic elements. The setting for The Man Who Married A Dumb Wife, the scene of which is set "Before the House of Judge Leonard Botal in Paris," in no way resembles any Parisian residence history can account for. Instead it is formal design of great beauty, supporting the action by providing the needed acting areas with no indication of time or place. It is purely a formal design and purely theatrical in presentation as is his setting for Lute Song.

Surely Jones would have relished a new drama which would have permitted more designs of this character on the stage. Being confined to a written drama that was still basically realistic, many of his settings were impressionistic instead of realistic but fall short of the pure art form he experimented with in The Man Who Married A Dumb Wife and Lute Song. Instead of calling him an impressionist designer, it is better to say that he carried Impressionism to its ultimate conclusion but was still a visionary seeking to be free of realism in the theatre and searching for a new theatrical theatre, a theatre for the sake of theatre. Just

as certain Impressionist painters became increasingly concerned with formal design elements to the exclusion of subject matter, Jones would completely destroy the locale and render a purely formal design when the play permitted.

Likewise, Mielziner extended impressionism into a new form of stage setting. His unit setting evolved into a multiple setting using scrims to effect the change of locale. All of the settings are on the stage at the same time, beautifully designed into one complete stage picture or separated one at a time by light to emphasize a single locale within the whole picture. For Mielziner's new multiple set it is not necessary to change panels or screens or even set pieces. Only the lights change to reveal a different portion of the setting where the action is taking place. Winterset is obviously an impressionistic design, but Death of a Salesman and Streetcar Named Desire are more than the New Stagecraft had dreamed of. He is not the visionary that Jones was but a very practical theatre designer, and his identification is not so much with art in the theatre as with solutions to vast technical problems imposed by modern dramatists. This is not to say that Mielziner is not a fine artist, he is one of extraordinary talent, but his contribution has been more a technical one

of solving practical problems of scene changing. He is not envisioning a new theatre but a new means of staging realistic plays. Mielziner is an impressionistic designer only in that his work represents an extension of the New Stagecraft's demands for simplified realism and reliance upon lighting techniques to establish mood and atmosphere.

Impressionism in scenic design, then, is a movement in theatre design which grew out of the work of Appia and Craig, in their revolt against both the old false wing and drop settings of the eighteenth century and the new realism of the late nineteenth century. More than a revolt, it was a movement toward simplified realism and atmospheric lighting in the era of the New Stagecraft and has been extended on into the last half of the twentieth century as the logical means of presenting realistic dramas.

The movement was characterized by: (1) atmospheric lighting, (2) vivid emotive color, (3) simplification of form, (4) emphasis of mood, and (5) unity of production.

It is appropriate to apply the term Impressionism to contemporary scenic design? Impressionism does not exist in the theatre today as something which resembles an impressionistic easel painting. Easel artists enter the theatre from time to time

and enlarge their canvases to be exhibited within the enormous frame of the proscenium, but this does not constitute style in scenic design. In the first place it rarely approaches design for the theatre but instead constitutes only a novel exhibition of the easel artist's style. In order for style to exist in the theatre it must have grown out of a need in production techniques and have been developed to serve the presentation of the written drama.

The camera rendered false the mellow shading and chiaroscuro of classicist painting and focused attention upon realism. This encouraged easel artists to paint realistically with more real highlight and shadow in juxtaposition and to eventually paint instantaneous moments in time, similar to the camera's recording of fleeting moments. In this way the camera influenced the development of Impressionist easel painting. Similarly the electric light influenced the development of Impressionism in scene design. The electric light falsified the painted highlights and shadows of wing and drop scenery and so the setting became three-dimensional with real highlights and shadows, and gradually was simplified to the emphasis of lighting effects changing from moment to moment throughout the scene.

The theatre of realism was not truly theatre if one accepts the idea that the theatre is a thing of conventions. The need for new conventions and a return to the theatrical called forth Impressionism on the stage.

Thus Impressionism came to the theatre as a style of production, and there it existed as selective realism, simplified, suggestive, achieving an emotional response with the aid of atmospheric lighting aimed at intensifying mood. The essentially realistic drama seemed to thrive on it as a form of production.

Impressionism was an important style in the early part of this century and still has its place in the theatre of today. As long as realistic drama is written its place in the theatre is probably secure.

What correlations exist between Impressionism in easel painting and scenic design? The correlations between Impressionism in easel painting and scenic design fall into the following categories: (1) broken color, (2) elimination of detail and simplification of form, (3) emphasis of mood, (4) vivid emotive color, and (5) atmospheric lighting.

Broken color. The most obvious similarity between Impressionism in easel painting and its application to

scenic design is, of course, the use of broken color or pointillage, as Joseph Urban called it. This technique of painting the surface of a setting in points or dabs of various colors in juxtaposition may have been borrowed directly from the easel artists, as it was a technique well established in painting prior to its first appearance on the stage. However, it was used in a very different manner permitted by the nature of the theatrical medium.

The easel artists employed broken color to better represent light reflected from objects. Surfaces obtained a certain vibrant quality when painted in short strokes of pure color, allowing the eye to mix the colors when viewing the canvas. The Impressionists found it exciting to watch objects change color in differing light, and as a result they produced many paintings of the same scene under differing light at different times.

The Impressionist scene designer spotted his canvas in broken color, using all of the hues he wanted to become visible during the course of the play, and then by varying the combinations of colored lights upon the setting he was able to vary the color of the setting as the audience viewed it. This technique of pointillage was developed by Joseph Urban, who used it extensively in many productions. Samuel

Hume employed the same technique for his basic setting used in eleven different productions at the Arts and Crafts Theatre in Detroit.

Both the easel artist and the scenic designer achieved a rich textured surface, but the scenic artist went one step further and played colored light on the surface to intensify the color he chose to reveal at any given moment.

Elimination of detail and simplification of form.

The elimination of detail and simplification of form is another characteristic of Impressionist painting as well as of Impressionist scene design. Probably due as much to the use of broken color as anything else, detail in Impressionist painting is eliminated. This broad, almost sketchy technique of painting made the reproduction of realistic detail all but impossible. Since the artist's primary consideration was not the reproduction of the object in all its realistic detail, but the light reflected from the object in a fleeting moment, the painting technique employed was appropriate. After all, the Impressionist was more often concerned with painting the light and air that enveloped objects than with the subject with which he worked.

We also find that the Impressionist scene designer eliminated the detail of realism and salvaged only the elements necessary to the drama. He further simplified these elements because he felt that excessive detail only served to distract and confuse the viewer.

Emphasis of mood. Both the scenic artist and the easel painter were seeking an emotional response with their work. The painter wanted to give his impression of a fleeting moment in time. He created a mood, an atmosphere, as did the scenic artist who sought a unity of production by reinforcing the dramatic action. The set designer geared his work to a particular drama and to the emotional response that drama desired of its audiences. The artist in the theatre was fully aware of the impact that visual presentation would have on an audience. Stage settings were no longer documentary representations of locale but artistic creations aimed at achieving an emotional response from the audience. Similarly painting left to the camera the representation of actuality and turned to art for the sake of art.

Vivid emotive color. The use of vivid, intense color was another characteristic of Impressionism in both easel

painting and theatre design. This was vital to the exhortation of emotional response and played an important role in the New Stagecraft.

Atmospheric lighting. Atmospheric lighting provides still another correlation between these two separate art movements. The Impressionist painter's true subject matter was light. He painted light reflected from objects under all imaginable atmospheric conditions. The Impressionist designer placed on the stage "the light that never was on sea or land." Light was used to create atmosphere and mood, and oftentimes the reliance upon lighting effects was so complete as to be the only form of setting used. Robert Edmond Jones' projected effects for his design of King Richard III is an example. Mielziner considers light the single most indispensable tool of the scenic artist. New advancements in theatre lighting equipment made the development of new lighting techniques possible, and the scenic artist took full advantage of the opportunities to control light on his stage and relied more and more upon it as a means of further serving the play.

These correlations in the two art movements, Impressionist easel painting of the late nineteenth century

and scene design of the early twentieth century, demonstrate decisively their parallelism. In addition to their similar employment of atmospheric light, simplified forms, vivid emotive color, mood, and broken color or pointillage, there is another correlation which encompasses and precedes these, "l'art pour l'art." Art for the sake of art was the theme underlying both movements. They both revolted against similar traditions. They both sought a new form and new conventions rooted in technical methods. They were not so concerned with what they represented as how they were representing it.

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