'Significant form'

The Doctor (Plate 144) is a painting by the English artist Luke Fildes. It was exhibited in the Royal Academy in 1891. This is what one notable critic had to say about the painting. He has just finished denigrating another English painting, William Powell Frith’s immensely popular Paddington Station (Plate 145), which he regarded as an example of a kind of anecdotal and documentary painting now ‘grown superfluous’ in face of the rise of photography:

Still [such pictures] are not unpleasant, which is more than can be said for the kind of descriptive painting of which The Doctor is the most flagrant example. Of course, The Doctor is not a work of art. In it form is not used as an object of emotion, but as a means of suggesting emotions. This alone suffices to make it nugatory; it is worse than nugatory because the emotion it suggests is false. What it suggests is not pity and admiration but a sense of complacency in our own pitifulness and generosity. It is sentimental. Art is above morals, or rather all art is moral because works of art are immediate means to good. Once we have judged a thing a work of art, we have judged it ethically of the first importance and put it beyond reach of the moralist. Not being a work of art, The Doctor has none of the immense ethical value possessed by all objects that provoke aesthetic ecstasy; and the state of mind to which it is a means, as illustration, appears to me undesirable.

(Bell, Art, pp.19–20)

The writer is Clive Bell. The passage quoted is taken from his book Art, published in London in 1914. I want to explore the reasons for the evident strength of Bell’s feelings. Apparently, the matter turns upon the question of form – the artist’s use of it and the spectator’s response to it. Bell employs the concept of ‘form’ in a special way. In fact his theory

Plate 144  Luke Fildes, The Doctor, exhibited 1891, oil on canvas, 166 x 242 cm. Tate Gallery, London.
of art rests on a distinction between two kinds of form. There is form which is descriptive and which imitates the appearance of things in the world, and there is what he elsewhere calls ‘significant form’ – ‘lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms [which] stir our aesthetic emotions’ (Art, p.15). Clearly, all works of art, except those we call abstract, derive their formal characteristics to some extent from the appearance of things in the world. But Bell wants to distinguish between works which use these appearances persuasively, to ‘suggest emotion’ (Art, p.8), and those which use them ‘aesthetically’ – by which he means in a disinterested fashion:

Let no one imagine that representation is bad in itself; a realistic form may be as significant, in its place as part of the design, as an abstract. But if a representative [or illustrative] form has value, it is as form, not as representation. The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant. For, to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. Art transports us from the world of man’s activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation.

(Art, p.25)

Bell overstates his case. There cannot be appreciation without some form of knowledge, nor can it be entirely irrelevant that a picture of a tree is a picture of a tree and not of a steam-engine. Furthermore we would now be far less inclined to collapse together ‘representative’ or representational form and realistic form (to put it crudely, form may represent without being realistic) and then to contrast both with the abstract. But one important point may be extracted from Bell’s admonitions: neither the meaning nor the value of a work of art can simply or safely be identified with what it depicts or with the story it tells. All things being equal, a picture of the decline of the Roman Empire is not necessarily better or more meaningful – as a work of art – than a picture of a pair of boots. Beneath the surface of Bell’s argument there lies a quarrel with the kinds of priorities observed in both the French Salon and the English Academy. He is attacking the idea that a fixed hierarchy of genres can plausibly be established on the basis of subject-matter, with moralizing history painting accorded the highest status. The skills that matter, he is saying, are not those involved in the production of recognizable likenesses, the elaboration of
intriguing narratives or the interpretation of moral themes. These lead all too often, he implies, to the mere prompting of such emotions and prejudices as are already present in our social and psychological make-up. In Bell’s view the important achievements of art are those which present us with something other, something which stands outside ourselves by virtue of the self-sufficiency of its form, which is original in the sense that it is the origin – the primary cause – of our responsive emotion (hence his belief that we need bring no prior knowledge of ‘life’ to our experience of art). For Bell, it is in this sense that works of art are ‘means to good’: they require of us that we recognize that which is other than ourselves; or, to put it another way, they require that we do not take them as confirmation of the rightness of our beliefs and attitudes, or as evidence of the unquestionable validity of our experience, but that we respond to them aesthetically.

Bell’s is a partisan form of criticism. He clearly saw the issues as substantial and he invited the reader to take sides. He and his friend Roger Fry were largely responsible for propagandizing the modern movement in art to an English audience (and to an American audience, via those authors like Sheldon Cheney who read their books and who absorbed their ideas). Bell’s Art was to stay in print throughout the 1920s and 1930s. A new edition was issued in 1949 and a paperback edition was published in 1987. Its easy progress from manifesto of avant-garde opinion to acknowledged art-historical document tells us something about its place within a tradition.

Art is one of a distinct group of publications produced over a period of some twenty-five years in France, Germany, England and America, the common aim of which was to characterize and to proselytize a modern movement in art. The writings of the French painter-critic Maurice Denis were an important source for the critical protocols of early Modernism, as we can now label the tendency to which these various publications belonged and which they helped to form. Denis’s essay on Cézanne, first printed in 1907, was translated into English by Roger Fry and was published in the Burlington Magazine in 1910. His collected essays were published as Théories 1890–1910 in 1912. The first substantial book claiming to survey modern art as a whole was published by the German writer Julius Meier-Graefe in 1904 (first English translation as Modern Art, in 1908). Other relevant publications include Fry’s own collected essays Vision and Design (published in London in 1920, it was continuously in print throughout the 1920s and 1930s; a Pelican edition was printed 1937, reprinted 1961, and a new edition was published in 1981). Cheney’s Primer has already been cited; R. H. Wilenski’s The Modern Movement in Art was first published in London in 1927 (revised edition 1935) and Amédée Ozenfant’s Foundations of Modern Art appeared in Paris in 1928, in London in 1931, and in New York in 1952. Each of these publications was concerned to propagandize a break with the past, each represented the distinctive character of modern art as the sign and the qualitative measure of an epochal change, each associated that character with an abandonment of naturalistic description and anecdote, each drew attention to the virtues of the ‘primitive’, and each accorded Cézanne a pivotal role.

Such works both testified and contributed to the development of a relatively specific system of beliefs about modernism in art during the first three decades of the twentieth century. With the benefit of hindsight we can say that they represent a specific phase in the development of an ideology of Modernism. If the tradition of critical priorities did not emerge coincidentally with the art of Manet and the Impressionists (and various cases have been made for tracing it back further, in some instances well into the eighteenth century), the authority of that tradition during the twentieth century was certainly associated with the international success of modern French art. The success of the art appeared to be both an achievement and a validation of the critical tradition. The status of Cézanne’s work in particular is central to Modernist accounts of the nature of quality in art and of virtue in artistic practice. In addition to the publications cited above, Fry published a
monograph on Cézanne in 1927. Five years earlier Bell had issued his collected essays on recent art under the title *Since Cézanne*. Here is Bell on Cézanne:

In so far as one man can be said to inspire a whole age, Cézanne inspires the contemporary movement ... Cézanne is the Christopher Columbus of a new continent of form ... The period in which we find ourselves in the year 1913 begins with the maturity of Cézanne (about 1885) ...

(*Art*, p.207)

And here is Cheney:

... Cézanne is really the first epochal figure since El Greco ... of this much I am sure: some rewriting of history is becoming necessary as the world gradually accepts Cézanne's achievement as a turning point in art development, as it becomes apparent that for hundreds of years photography\(^2\) has been a false god among painters and sculptors.

(*A Primer of Modern Art*, p.30)

We may note that when Cézanne was featured in the first of Fry's two 'Post-Impressionist' exhibitions in 1910, three years after his death, the great majority in the English art world treated his supporters as if they had taken leave of their senses. It was to be over twenty years before any work by Cézanne was displayed in an English public collection. If we allow for the fact that *Art* was written in the grip of an enthusiasm for Cézanne's work (Plate 146), it may be easier to understand the vehemence of Bell's condemnation of *The

\(^2\) Cheney means a 'photographic' criterion of likeness.
Doctor. The requirement that the Modernist makes of art is that instead of illustrating moral themes it should be pursued as a form of sceptical and self-questioning activity in itself, without the aid of narrative. Writing at a much later stage in the development of the Modernist tradition, in 1965, the American critic Michael Fried claimed that modern art has ‘taken on more and more of the denseness, structure and complexity of moral experience – that is, of life itself, but life lived as few are inclined to live it: in a state of continuous intellectual and moral alertness’ (‘Three American Painters’, pp. 9–10). This is the form of (ideal) life and these the values that the likes of Bell saw half a century earlier as exemplified in the carefully worked surfaces of Cézanne’s paintings. In the view of the Modernist, the process of painting involves an exemplary struggle to maintain quality in experience. The ethical obligation on the artist is to examine what he or she has done and to do whatever is needed to improve its formal quality – which is to say, the quality of its effect on the spectator. The measure of success in this struggle is aesthetic: the achievement of a work of art which is both original and formally self-sufficient.

On the question of this self-sufficiency – or autonomy – one important distinction needs to be made. The tendency of Modernist criticism is to treat the experience of art as an experience of value in and for itself – an experience independent of the ‘emotions of life’. That it offers the opportunity for such independent experience is seen as the sign of quality in the individual work of art. It does not follow, however, that critics of a Modernist persuasion have seen the making of art as an activity independent of social or historical life. To say that one finds meaning or value in the form of any artefact – considered as a human artefact – is to imply that its production has involved some ordering of experience.

Plate 147  Gustave Caillebotte, Le Pont de l’Europe, 1876, oil on canvas, 125 x 181 cm. Petit Palais, Geneva. (Exhibited in the third Impressionist exhibition, 1877.)
It is to presuppose some relatively normal background of existence from which this particular object of attention has been detached. Indeed, I suggest that in noticing form in art, it is this very ordering of experience – this detachment – that we are really responding to. It is this response that connects judgements of formal integrity in works of art – aesthetic judgements – to those kinds of judgement about human experience and action which we call ethical. Of course, to say that there must be some such connection is to leave open the question of how the ordering of people’s experience takes form as art.

**Depth, flatness and self-criticism**

The concepts of ‘depth’, ‘flatness’ and ‘self-criticism’ are central to Modernist criticism. I’d like to use a comparison in order to connect these critical concepts to developments in the Modernist tradition associated with the writings of Clement Greenberg. Caillebotte’s *Le Pont de l’Europe* and Monet’s painting of the same title (Plates 147 and 148) were both

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**Plate 148** Claude Monet, *Le Pont de l’Europe, Gare Saint-Lazare* (sometimes known as *Le Pont de Rome*), 1877, oil on canvas, 64 x 81 cm. Musée Marmottan, Paris; bequest of Madame Donop de Monchy. Photo: Routhier/Studio Lourmel. (Exhibited in the third Impressionist exhibition, 1877.)
Plate 149  Camille Pissarro, La Côte des boeufs à l’Hermitage, près de Pontoise (The Côte des boeufs at l’Hermitage near Pontoise), 1877, oil on canvas, 115 x 87 cm. The National Gallery London. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees. (Exhibited in the Third Impressionist exhibition.)

shown in the third exhibition of the Impressionist group in 1877. This was the first exhibition in which the members of the group identified themselves as ‘Impressionist painters’ and, with the total number of exhibitors reduced to eighteen, it provided the most coherent display of work by the principal contributors to the movement: Gustave Caillebotte, Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Berthe Morisot, Camille Pissarro (Plate 149), Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Alfred Sisley.

Caillebotte showed only five works, but two of them, Paris Street: A Rainy Day (Plate 150), and Le Pont de l’Europe (Plate 147), were large paintings of urban ‘modern-life’ subjects set on intersections close to the Gare St-Lazare, in an area of Paris which had been partially affected by Haussmann’s reorganization of the city. Thirty works by Monet were listed in the catalogue, including six scenes of the Gare St-Lazare, together with his Pont de l’Europe, which shows a view from the end of one of the station platforms where the bridge crosses the railway tracks. (The bridge is a complex structure built in 1868 over the tracks where three streets intersect. The small engine at the extreme right of Caillebotte’s painting coincides approximately with the viewpoint of Monet’s.) Caillebotte’s Pont de l’Europe attracted considerable comment. One reviewer noted that ‘his figures are firmly set down; the perspective is good; and his paintings have space, a great deal of it’ (quoted in The New Painting, p.208). Its apparent spatial depth is indeed a remarkable feature of the painting. It is of a kind which invites the spectator to enter it, to engage in appropriate imaginative activity and perhaps to accord a fictional life to the represented figures it contains – as with Filides’ painting, though in a very different kind of context. This was an invitation to which contemporary commentators were quick to respond:

A young dandy walks past an elegant woman, exquisite beneath her flecked veil, a common little vignette that we have all observed with a discreet and benevolent smile ... (L’Homme libre, 12 April 1877, quoted in The New Painting, p.210)
The main figure is the painter himself, chatting with a very pretty woman close at hand (another portrait no doubt). Our compliments, Caillebotte ... you must have had some very happy impressions that day.

(L’Événement, 6 April 1877, quoted in The New Painting, p.210)

Clearly the reviewers were at home with this painting. They were able to demonstrate the relevant accomplishments by playing the game of ‘reading-in’ and they could be both knowing and condescending about the supposed pleasures of the flâneur – pleasures which they associated with the distinctive character of ‘modern life’ (if not with Modernism as later critics were to define it). Another writer paid the artist a doubtful compliment:

Caillebotte is an Impressionist only in name. He knows how to draw and paints more seriously than his friends. Le pont de l’Europe and Une rue de Paris, par un jour de pluie ... deserve all possible critical praises.

(La Petite République française, 10 April 1877, quoted in The New Painting, p.209)

Despite this implied slur, Monet’s painting was also accorded its share of praise. In fact, by 1877 the more representative work of the Impressionist group was receiving a measure of relatively informed and sympathetic attention. The most revealing comment, however, was a pejorative one made by a reviewer writing in Le Gaulois under the name Léon de Lora. Monet’s Pont de l’Europe, he wrote, ‘is not without merit but utterly lacks any attraction’ (quoted in The New Painting, p.224). What this reviewer meant, I suspect, was

(Exhibited in the third Impressionist exhibition, 1877.)
that the painting failed to attract the attention of the writer as a writer. In front of Monet’s painting the usual game could not be played to advantage. Many of the reviewers did try. Writing of Monet’s Interior of the Gare Saint-Lazare (Plate 151), Renoir’s friend Georges Rivière, writing in L’Impressioniste on 6 April 1877, claimed with a proto-Futurist enthusiasm: ‘We hear the shouts of the workers, the sharp whistles of the engines blasting their cry of alarm, the incessant noise of scrap-iron, and the formidable painting of the steam’ (quoted in The New Painting, p.223). But the average reviewer’s customary skills were not so easily deployed in the construction of a literary equivalent – a kind of story. In place of the expected invitation to ‘read-in’, what they encountered was a surface, palpably covered with swirls and touches of paint. What was required if Monet’s painting was to be written about sensibly was not an arch display of familiarity with the manners of the street, as offered by the critics of Caillebotte’s painting, but rather an account of what it looked like as a painting. The problem was that the construction of such an account would require different competences from those with which the typical writer was equipped in 1877. For instance it would require a different understanding of the relationship between painting and language – an understanding which acknowledged the limits of language as a means of representation of visual experience. To put the matter bluntly, an encounter of the kind Caillebotte represents in his picture would be a technical anomaly in the context of Monet’s, just as Jacques’s ‘discreet and benevolent smile’ would clearly be inappropriate as a form of response on the part of the spectator. Rivière’s sympathetic imaginings were intended to persuade readers of the virtues of Monet’s work, but even his prose stood, as it were, some distance to the side of the painting. It is in the nature of the surface of Monet’s painting that it acts as a form of barrier, tending to exclude both the anecdotal subject and the practised literary response.

For Clive Bell and the other Modernist critics of the early twentieth century, this double exclusion was a symptom of the relative virtue of the art:

... if in the artist an inclination to play upon the emotions of life is often the sign of a flickering inspiration, in the spectator a tendency to seek, behind form, the emotions of life is a sign of defective sensibility always. It means that his aesthetic emotions are weak or, at any rate, imperfect.

(Art, pp. 28–9)

In fact Bell, like Cheney, regarded Monet’s Impressionism as still too naturalistic to be aesthetically ‘perfect’. He saw it as too closely tied to the actual appearance of things in the world and to the impression made by such things upon the senses, and not sufficiently independent in its pursuit of that formal integrity and richness which he found so amply exemplified in Cézanne’s painting. We can see clearly enough, however, that the kinds of ‘emotions of life’ attributed to Caillebotte’s painting are very much harder to associate with Monet’s (compare Plates 152 and 153).

The relevant technical difference can be thought of in terms of a contrast defined by Clement Greenberg, writing in 1961 at a much later stage in the development of the Modernist critical tradition, by which time Impressionism had been accorded its current status as a crucial stage in the development of modern art.

The Old Masters had sensed that it was necessary to preserve what is called the integrity of the picture plane; that is, to signify the enduring presence of flatness under the most vivid illusion of three-dimensional space. The apparent contradiction involved – the dialectical tension, to use a fashionable but apt phase – was essential to the success of their art, as it is indeed to the success of all pictorial art. The Modernists have neither avoided nor resolved this contradiction; rather they have reversed its terms. One is made aware of the flatness of their pictures before, instead of after, being made aware of what that flatness contains. Whereas one tends to see what is in an Old Master before seeing it as a picture, one sees a Modernist painting as a picture first. This is, of course, the best way of
seeing any kind of picture, Old Master or Modernist, but Modernism imposes it as the only and necessary way, and Modernism’s success in doing so is a success of self-criticism.

('Modernist Painting', p.6)

Greenberg’s concept of ‘self-criticism’ is crucial to his account of how and why painting changes. The concept as he employs it refers to the ability of a discipline or practice to acknowledge its own proper limits, and to proceed within them. To apply his distinction to our two paintings, we might say that we are aware of the pictured scene Caillebotte’s painting presents before we are aware of the means by which that scene has been painted, whereas we confront Monet’s surface immediately as the surface of a painting – as something made. Of course it is not only as a surface that we see it. The point is that what Greenberg calls the ‘dialectical tension’ – the tension between seeing a literal surface and seeing something in that surface – is the more vivid in Monet’s painting precisely because the surface is not just ‘seen through’. The decorative swirls and touches of paint make some kind of impression upon our senses independently of (or at least concurrently with) their role in forming an image. Applying Bell’s terms we might say that the forms of the painting are ‘used’ to an aesthetic end and are not simply treated as cues to a suggestive scenario. Even Rivière noted ‘that skill in arrangement, that organization of the canvas, that is one of the main qualities of Monet’s work’ (quoted in The New Painting, p.223).
For Greenberg, Manet’s paintings became the first Modernist ones by virtue of the frankness with which they declared the surfaces on which they were painted, while, in Manet’s wake, the Impressionists left the eye ‘under no doubt as to the fact that the colours used were made of real paint that came from pots or tubes’, in other words these colours had a ‘presence’ of their own, and were not merely a subterfuge to the construction of an image. In ‘Modernist Painting’, from which these further quotations are taken, Greenberg claims that the self-critical tendency of Modernism is its motivating force. It is through the process of self-criticism, he believes, that painting becomes ‘modern’. The essence of Modernism lies in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. He sees this self-critical tendency both as historically specific and as
specific to the medium of each form of art. Those forms of high culture which were under threat during the nineteenth century ‘could save themselves from levelling down [to the status of ‘entertainment pure and simple’] only by demonstrating that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity’ (such as reading a book or watching a play). The means to this demonstration was for each art to isolate ‘the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself’, effects which would clearly be proper to the specific nature of the medium:

The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thereby each art would be rendered ‘pure’, and in its ‘purity’ find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence.

('Modernist Painting', pp.5–6)
In Greenberg’s terms, the kinds of anecdotal effect found in Caillebotte’s Pont de l’Europe are also discoverable in literature; they would thus count as ‘impure’ effects in painting. According to Greenberg, one property which painting as a medium shares with no other art form is flatness, two-dimensionality, and so: ‘Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else’. On grounds such as these, the relative technical modernism of Monet’s painting is taken as the sign of a more acute self-criticism, that is to say of a more advanced grasp of the character and demands of painting as a medium.

Modernism and its priorities

It is important to recognize certain characteristics of the theory which is here being represented. Firstly, it is a theory of high art, and of the modern grounds of high art’s distinctness (for example its distinctness from ‘mere entertainment’). Secondly, it assumes that the definite function of high art is to maintain ‘standards of quality’ (whatever these may be). Thirdly, it purports to explain changes in high art in terms of a retrospectively perceived and specialized logic of development (for example the ‘orientation to flatness’). And fourthly, it argues that there is an inextricable connection, in Modernist art at least, between quality and ‘self-definition’ or independence (independence, for instance, from the requirements of ‘mere entertainment’ or of story-telling).

Clearly, there are likely to be sociological implications to a theory which conceives of high art and standards of quality in terms of logical development and independence from the ends of entertainment. It should be noted that both the early version of Modernist theory, represented by Bell, and the more developed (and more sophisticated) form advanced by Greenberg represent attempts to rationalize preferences — or, as the writers themselves would have put it, to justify the findings of taste. The question which both writers asked themselves was: what is it that connects those works of art which I find good? Bell’s answer was that all successful works of art stir the emotions of the viewer, not by appealing to ‘the emotions of life’, but through their independent possession of the property of ‘significant form’ (whatever that might be). Greenberg’s answer was that all successful works of modern art are linked as stages in the working out of a specialized and ‘self-critical’ tendency.

In all phases of its development Modernist theory rests upon three crucial assumptions; firstly, that nothing about art matters so much as its quality; secondly, that for the purposes of criticism the important historical development is the one that connects works of the highest quality; and thirdly, that where judgements of quality appear to be in conflict with considerations of relevance or with moral judgements, what should be re-examined first is not the aesthetic judgement (which is supposed to be involuntary and thus not open to revision) but the particular criteria of relevance being applied and the grounds of the moral judgement. Relevance, in Greenberg’s view, must mean ‘relevance to the quality of the effect’ of the work of art (‘Complaints of an art critic’, p.8), and no moralizing judgement will be considered pertinent if it simply addresses what the work of art shows rather than the form in which the showing is done. In the view of the Modernist critic, this stricture on relevance applies not only to works with overt figurative subject-matter, such as The Doctor. It is equally applicable to abstract paintings. In the eyes of the Modernist, if we are to see the work of art for what it is, we should not allow what it happens to look like to distract us from the particular quality of its effect. (We shall return to the concept of ‘effect’ in a subsequent section.)
Questions to the Modernist

There are three important and interrelated questions with which these assumptions need to be confronted. The first is: how do we know that the effect which the critic claims to perceive is actually produced by the painting and is not simply a product of the critic’s own psychology and self-interest? Another way to put this is to ask: is the judgement of quality backed up by anything other than personal preference? (Because if not, no more authority can be attached to that judgement than we are prepared to accord to the person making the judgement.)

The second question is: what kind of evidence is offered to connect the judgements of quality to the account of art’s historical development? If only certain works are allowed to count as components of art history, and if all that seems to connect them is that they confirm the findings of the critic’s taste, then we shall have a strong reason to suspect a lack of objectivity in the historical account. Of course, all interpretation of history is done in furtherance of some interest or other, and some of the most instructive history is written explicitly to make a case. But we need to be alert to the dangers of what the philosopher Karl Popper has called ‘historicism’ – the perception of rhythms and patterns in history and their use as evidence for the purposes of prediction and prescription. As defined by Popper, historicism is associated with neglect or even suppression of evidence.

Plate 154  Auguste Renoir, Étude (Study), now known as Torse de femme au soleil (Tors of a Woman in Sunlight), c.1876, oil on canvas, 81 x 65 cm. Musée d’Orsay, Paris RF 2740. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique. (Exhibited in the second Impressionist exhibition, 1876.)
inconsistent with the writer’s own interests and ends. The accusation of historicism is one that has frequently been levelled at the Greenberg of ‘Modernist Painting’ – this is to impute that, despite the claim to an empirical response, he organizes his retrospective evidence in accordance with his theoretical forecasts.

The third question is: on what grounds are decisions made about what is and is not relevant to the business of judging works of art? If it turns out that the only information allowed to be relevant is information that supports a judgement already made – if, for example, evidence having been offered of the chauvinistic character of Renoir’s sexual politics, this evidence is ruled out by an admirer on the grounds that it is rendered irrelevant by the ‘beautiful effects’ of his paintings (see Plates 154 and 183), and if that admirer claims that the beauty of those effects is beyond argument – then we will be justified in returning to our first question and in insisting on an adequate answer to one or both of its versions before we give heed to the criteria of relevance being applied. It is a form of idealism to claim that art can have meaning independently of what it is made of. One way or another, the question of the character of the product is implicated in the question of the character of the product.

In the next section I aim to bring together and to pursue what have so far been two separate strands in our discussion; on the one hand the relationship between Modernism

Plate 155 Claude Monet, Les Bains de la Grenouillère, (Bathing at la Grenouillère), 1869, oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm. National Gallery, London. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the National Gallery.
and modernity, on the other the relationship between quality and 'independence'. We shall next be considering a group of paintings which have conventionally been seen as marking the beginnings of the Impressionist project.

Monet at La Grenouillère

Look at the six paintings by Monet and Renoir which show scenes of bathing at La Grenouillère (Plates 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160). La Grenouillère was a boating and bathing place on the Seine, about a mile from the nearest station, to which trains ran from the Gare Saint-Lazare. It was located on the island of Croissy, close to Bougival in the spreading western suburbs of Paris and within walking-distance of the village to which Monet moved in the summer of 1869. In the words of Robert Herbert, the Impressionist painters ‘participated in the suburbanization of the area, and they brought back their produce to the Paris market; images of harmonious and productive villages, and of receptive landscapes’ (Impressionism, p.196). By the 1860s Bougival itself had grown into a popular centre for boating, bathing and fishing. Besides the facilities for bathing and for boat hire, the establishment at La Grenouillère included a floating restaurant and dance-hall and riverside tables for eating and drinking. It could be said that it presented a

Plate 156 Claude Monet, La Grenouillère, 1869, oil on canvas, 74 x 100 cm. All Rights Reserved. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The H.O. Havemeyer Collection, bequest of Mrs H.O. Havemeyer, 1929.