

EAST ANGLIAN TRADITIONAL ART CENTRE

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INFLUENCE OR COINCIDENCE?

The Inspiration behind Two Hundred Years of East Anglian Art, 1750-1950

A Loan Exhibition of period Oil Paintings, Watercolours and Drawings

3rd to 10th June 2017, 11 am - 5 pm Monday to Saturday

Exhibition continues until end of July, open Thursday-Saturday 11 am - 4.30 pm

INTRODUCTION

The Art World often assesses the work of an artist and considers the circumstances that inspired and influenced it. The opening Exhibition at the East Anglian Traditional Art Centre aims to provoke thought on these influences and allow the visitor to form their own ideas and theories. Who influenced who? Or did circumstance and subject matter mean that these similarities were just a coincidence?

Experts have considered the plausibility of the argument that artistic methods, styles and techniques were handed-down from earlier masters. In many recorded cases it is undeniable that such transference took place, proved by artists' personal Collections which included books, prints and pictures by other painters. In the case of a Master/pupil relationship this transfer is accepted and has been a practice in studios since Renaissance times. Equally, it is obvious the products of a group or 'school' will bear a close relationship to each other, especially if there was a founding Master.

The 'Coincidences' argument is borne out by many creators achieving similar results, even when separated by continents and long periods of time. Centuries old African bronzes are recorded, which, solely by evolution and practical requirement, are remarkably similar to those produced in Europe, without any known connection. Consequently we must be aware that similar subject matters painted by different artists might be produce in a comparable style.

In common with most artists, East Anglia's painters looked at the works of earlier artists to study their styles and techniques. In the case of the region's landscape painters the results were blended with their own direct observations of nature to produce their individual painting characters. Many Norwich School artists were pupils of senior Masters, who had a strong influence on their painting methods until they developed their own individual techniques.

The late 18th and early 19th century witnessed a change in the status of landscape painting in Britain. Prior to this period landscape had usually been used a backdrop for a scenic view or topographical feature, but now it emerged as a distinct genre. There was a Continental precedent with numerous painters who had become proficient at capturing atmospheric and naturalistic effects, although most of these fell short of being pure landscape painters. Rubens and Rembrandt were admired by the pioneer British landscape artists, as were the works of Ruysdael, Hobbema, and other members of the 17th century Dutch landscape school. Claude Lorraine was championed by Constable although it may be observed that most pictures by this French artist utilised landscape to support a classical composition. Claude's drawings were often true observations of nature.

There were many pioneer landscape artists born in East Anglia. Thomas Gainsborough led the way in the mid 18th century but was tempted away to make his career in the more lucrative area of portrait painting. His early Suffolk views were based on observing nature, avoiding the contemporary monotonous norm by painting with fine detail and an exceptional use of light. There is little doubt he developed by looking at the Dutch 17th century landscape school, but preserved a recognisable style by staying true to nature. He later painted romantic landscapes with more fluent brushstrokes which are rather more idealised.

In the 1790's the Royal Academy in London was promoting the Grand Style with works by European Old Masters on view. Included within this group of pictures would have been a core of fine landscapes which influenced British Landscape Art as it launched into what may be regarded as a Golden Age for the new genre, lasting into Victoria's reign. By the 1850's many artists' styles had become highly finished and representational, with competent craftsmanship becoming more widely admired.

East Anglia played a significant part in the story of the British Landscape movement. By 1800 John Crome in Norwich had developed a landscape painting technique that was to become much admired and influential. John Sell Cotman, a fellow Norwich artist, was destined for great things especially in the field of watercolour painting. The establishment of the Norwich Society of Painters in the early years of the 19th century enabled artists to take advantage of the contemporary interest in Landscape painting, and these artists produced some of the significant works of the period. Many of their paintings display the strong influence of the works of Dutch 17th century painters, examples of which had made their way to East Anglia. Suffolk lost Gainsborough to London and Bath but locally his influence remained strong and thanks in part to the Ipswich-based amateur George Frost, was later handed on to John Constable and the Suffolk artists.

Constable developed landscape painting like no other artist before him, taking great pains to record nature accurately through a multitude of small sketches in notebooks which he later used as reference material for his major paintings. He was very aware of the great artists who went before him, making a point of studying and even accurately copying their works, thus passing on their influence those artists who in turn admired Constable. It is well recorded how the rising 'new style' French artists were great fans of Constable and in 1820's Paris his Exhibited works were said to be better received than in London. Although Constable struggled in his day to make a commercial success of his art there, is no doubt his fame as a 'local boy' gave the profession of 'Artist' an improved standing in Suffolk, where so many students took up the brush. Ipswich had become an artistic centre by the mid nineteenth century reflecting strongly the heritage of Gainsborough and Constable.

In Norfolk the Norwich Society had been disbanded by the time the Ipswich art scene was flourishing, but there still remained a considerable artistic output in the City. Several of the founding artists' families were still producing traditional landscapes, thus keeping alive the powerful influence of John Crome and interestingly his works had a renaissance in the 1860's to 1890's being highly sought after and making record prices. The artist Thomas Churchyard of Woodbridge was a celebrated collector of works by John Crome and earlier Old Masters.

In the late 19th century Norfolk and Suffolk artists were enjoying the thriving Victorian economic conditions due to the region exporting goods worldwide. Farming was receiving a shock regarding employment due to mechanisation, but landowners remained good patrons.

However, something was stirring over the channel which would affect the painting styles used by most of the region's traditional artists and change them radically within a generation. It is not fanciful to say that the influence of John Constable's 1820's exhibitions in Paris kindled the flames of the French Impressionist movement, which, by the 1860's, had taken hold in France. By the 1880's the plein air and sketchy style had spread to the lowland countries, and then to England as a result of the large number of British artists going to study in Paris and Holland.

Visitors to the Christchurch Mansion Art Gallery in Ipswich can witness the new British Impressionism by studying the work of Philip Wilson Steer who, with several other exponents of this new style and approach, painted around Walberswick from the 1880's in a style quite unlike any traditional Suffolk painters of the day. The new European-inspired twentieth century style swept to popularity for a variety of reasons and fortunately East Anglia was again blessed with plentiful local talent, with Sir Alfred Munnings leading the way. As the century progressed both Norwich and Ipswich could boast fine artists experimenting with the new ideas, many of whom had trained on the Continent or visited exhibitions there.

SUMMARY

Today we are all subject to the pressure of needing instant visual gratification, led by the internet and television, both of which can change images by the second, and subjects by the minute. This has had the effect that we are expected to view thousands of digital pictures in our daily lives and consequently expect to walk round an Exhibition, Art Show or Gallery and view hundreds of pictures in a day. The effect of this is that we are viewing Works of Art too quickly to observe any of their subtleties.

The best advice is to Slow Down and appreciate Art using the timescale in which much of it was produced. Imagine when walking or on horse-back - the scene changes slowly and is appreciated more deeply. By train or car at 30mph it is difficult to comprehend the landscape's changes, and at Eurostar's 180 mph it is beyond our brain's capacity to absorb anything but the basic subject matter, with no detail, of the passing landscape.

Literature and Music have the advantage they cannot be compressed (with the exception of ten minute Shakespeare) and we are happy to give the concert or play an evening of our time to enjoy the creator's production. If an artist took three months to produce an important painting we will benefit from spending more than a few moments looking at it, and more fully absorbing its feeling. It should also become apparent if you have previously noticed any similar features in other works, so you can then question if the artist arrived at the effect by himself, or was indeed working under the direct or indirect influence of another.

East Anglian Traditional Art Centre 2017

Please use the following chart to create your personal 'Influences' diagram. Pictures in the Exhibition have a few associated images as a guide to comparing works. It can be an interesting ongoing project to apply the principal to any Exhibition, or even to illustrations in art books.

EAST ANGLIAN INFLUENCES

Dutch 17th Century

Rembrandt
Ruisdael
Hobbema
Jan van Os
Rubens
Van de Neer
Van de Velde
Van Goyen

French Classical

Claude Lorraine
Gaspar Pousin

French Impressionists

Monet
Sisley
Renoir

THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH

George Morland
Richard Wilson
J.S. Cotman

JOHN CROME

J.W. Turner

JOHN CONSTABLE

Victorian Realism
Edwin Landseer
J.F. Herring

The Norwich School 1804 - c1835

John Crome
J.B. (Moonlight) Crome

W.H. Crome
James Stark
George Vincent
Ladbroke Family
Emily & E.H. Stannard

Suffolk Artists 1800 - 1900

George Frost
Thomas Churchyard
George Rowe
Smythe Brothers
George T Rope
George Rowe
John Moore

Norwich School Maritime painters

Joseph Stannard
Alfred Stannard
Joy Brothers
Alfred Priest

East Anglian Resident and visiting Artists 1880 – 1930

P.W. Steer
A. Brown
Sir A. Munnings
E. Seago