

Anne Pritchard - Pierre-Auguste Renoir, La Parisienne

ANNE PRITCHARD: Hello. My name's Anne Pritchard. I'm senior curator of historic art here at Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales. Most of my research is based on a fantastic collection of 19th-century French and impressionist art.

Today, I'm going to talk about a painting called La Parisienne by the important Impressionist artist Pierre-Auguste Renoir, which was painted in 1874 for the very first Impressionist exhibition. The painting is a full-length portrait of a young woman. She's slightly smaller than life size. But it's still on quite a grand scale for an impressionist work.

It's a really vivid example of early Impressionist techniques. They placed a priority on painting quickly and capturing a specific moment in time. That was in complete contrast to French academic ideals, which really demanded a very deliberate and well-finished approach.

The work is painted in very quickly executed brush strokes. In some areas, there's very little paint on the surface. Whereas in others, it's slightly impasto and more thick. The thinness of the paint layers is nonetheless contradicted by this incredibly rich blue and the sense of the texture of the drapery.

The depiction of drapery had long been a test of an artist's skill, but usually in the context of a classical or historical subject. Here, Renoir puts it very much in the modern context in this beautiful, fashionable dress. His mother was a seamstress and his father was a tailor. And we get the sense that Renoir really understood the structure of this elaborate garment.

The blue itself was also incredibly fashionable. There was a pigment called 'bleu de lyon', which appeared in many of the fashion magazines of the time. Amongst all this blue, the pale pink rose, her collar, the white cuff, and this little toe peeping out from under her dress all serve as essential punctuation marks in the composition.

Scientific analysis has shown that the background was once more pink. But over time, the pigments have faded. But against that pinker background, the blue of this dress would have been all the more vibrant. But to have nothing in the background was very unusual for a portrait. And Renoir himself once inserted a curtain, which he later painted over. It's known as pentimento. In the end, his decision to paint this empty background is sometimes compared with a fashion plate from a fashion magazine similar to the ones that a tailor might have used to show his clients.

The effect that it also has is to take out the sitter from any context or setting which detracts, in a way, from her individuality as a person. Like those fashion plates, her pose is in profile, slightly turned towards us. And so we see the beautiful curve of her bustle dress and the outline of her corseted figure.

Essentially, she is depicted as an aesthetic object and not a thinking individual. In fact, we could really say that it's not a portrait at all but a painting of a specific modern Parisian type, la Parisienne. Even today, that word has certain connotations.

We can imagine what her character is. Perhaps she is young, fashionable, coquettish, independent even. In the context of Paris at the end of the 19th century, this might have been perceived as slightly threatening in what was really a male-dominated society.

Although we do know who the sitter was. Her name was Henriette Henriot. And she was an actress who, at that time, would have been about 17 years old.

This work is important as it was displayed in the very first Impressionist Exhibition in 1874. That was when a group of young artists, that we are now very familiar with, decided to take a stand against the official Paris art world and exhibit their own works on their own terms. Their techniques they displayed were completely contrary to the accepted academic ideals.

They painted very quickly of the moment. And they included so much colour and light in their work. They were also making a political statement by taking subjects from their own Parisian contemporary environment.

La Parisienne almost personifies the Impressionist cause. This young, confident, controversial figure who fixes us with her gaze in a slightly challenging manner. Initially at the exhibition, the painting failed to sell. But it was later purchased by Henri Rouart, who was an Impressionist collector.

After his death, it came to Britain. And it was bought by Gwendoline Davies who is one of two sisters, heiresses to a great industrial fortune. It's thanks to them that we have our Impressionist collection here at Amgueddfa Cymru which includes this wonderful painting, one of our most popular exhibits.

To many of our visitors, she's affectionately known as the Blue Lady. And it's undoubtedly this fabulous outfit which captures people's attention. The dominance of the dress over the person, though, is indicative of the role of women in Parisian society at that time. They were often considered as ornaments for men to look at, constrained by their corsets, engineered to be graceful.

But many of our visitors are also captured by her enigmatic gaze and, I think, identify with the person behind the dress. She still has a lot of relevance in today's society. There are many parallels with the importance that we place on fashion today. What does the way we dress say about our identity? Does it express it, or do we hide behind it? Whereas the phenomenon of the 'Parisienne' has endured into the modern day, has society really changed?