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Representations of Leisure 1800-1920

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In contemporary discourse, leisure has a positive value. We often think of it in terms of 'leisure activities': the things we really enjoy doing when we are freed from what we have to do. In particular, leisure is what we occupy ourselves with when we are not working. Our leisure can be extremely energetic, encompassing all kinds of sport and exercise, or it can involve creative and cultural pursuits such as art and music. In the eighteenth century, however, Hogarth's popular series of prints, *Industry and Idleness* (1747), set up a binary distinction between work and the absence of activity.¹ These prints summed up the pre-modern, predominantly Protestant attitude to leisure, at least for those at a lower social level. It was seen to lead to drunkenness, debauchery and crime, for, as the popular proverb says, 'the devil finds work for idle hands to do.' Leisure, as we think of it now, was reserved for those of the 'leisured class': the workers were given a respite from work only to rest, and their designated day of rest, Sunday, was mostly taken up with church-going. Even in the nineteenth century, paintings typically showed them taking a lunch break, relaxing at home with their families in the evening, going to church or reading the Bible. Or they might be portrayed taking part in popular festivities such as weddings and fairs, which also had religious connotations since they often occurred on feasts in the church calendar.

The nineteenth century was the era when leisure began to be seen in a more positive light. As the industrial revolution progressed, a new middle class emerged, with the time to travel for pleasure, to patronize theatres and cafés, to go to horse races and dances. The idea of 'recreation', of leisure time as a chance to recharge the batteries, became current. Thanks partly to the Romantic poets, recreation in Nature was becoming increasingly important, and people sought renewal of the spirit in wild places, woods and mountains. A connection was recognized between leisure and health, and attempts were made to increase leisure time for workers by cutting working hours.

Prominent artists and artistic groups capitalized on this new taste for leisure and its expansion into the lower levels of society. Genre painters across America and Europe produced scenes of rural festivities, rest after labour, and reactions to music. From the mid-century they moved on to modern, middle-class leisure. William Powell Frith's crowd scenes were followed by the Impressionists' urban and suburban scenes, so striking that their whole art can be characterized as the

art of leisure. By the late nineteenth century, in the Aesthetic Movement even idleness had been repackaged as the exotic 'dolce far niente', the art of doing nothing. Painting itself had become part of a 'leisure industry', a concept that was no longer seen as a contradiction in terms. As museums and galleries proliferated and expanded, annual exhibitions attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors, and the idea of 'rational recreation' – a use of leisure that would educate and improve the population – gained strength.

Leisure for the Workers

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the working class had little time for what we now think of as leisure. Paintings of their lives tended to follow precedents established in seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish genre painting, and there were certain persistent categories: the tavern scene, the peasant wedding, the mid-day meal, the rest after labour, Sunday Bible-reading or churchgoing, the 'kermesse' or rural feast. Many of these scenes, in seventeenth-century art, had some allegorical meaning or were warnings against idleness. Often, they represented peasants as stupid and comical, particularly in tavern scenes. This tradition was transformed in the early nineteenth century by the Scottish artist David Wilkie (1785-1841). His paintings created a sensation in the annual exhibitions of the Royal Academy in London, from 1805 up to his death in 1841. They were bought by wealthy buyers in Britain, the United States and Germany, but they also reached a far wider market in the form of prints.²

In his first great success, *The Village Politicians* (1805), Wilkie updated the traditional subject of the tavern scene.³ A group of labourers sits round a table: an older man, with a newspaper on his lap, listens thoughtfully to a younger man who makes his points forcefully, leaning forward in his seat and jabbing his forefinger into his palm. Other listeners at the table, and other figures in the painting, continue the stereotypical dumb labourer look of Dutch and Flemish painting. Whether Wilkie realized this or not, his picture was prescient of an emerging democratic shift that would eventually lead to a widening of the suffrage. It was particularly influential in America, where the theme of ordinary citizens discussing politics was taken up without its connotations of rural stupidity. In Richard Caton Woodville's *Politics in an Oyster House* (1848) there are only two protagonists, and they look much more prosperous, but Wilkie's basic pairing of a young hothead and a thoughtful older man is repeated.⁴ A copy of Woodville's painting was exhibited in London in 1852 with the rather surprising title of 'A New York Communist Advancing an Argument.'⁵ Both pictures were bought by wealthy buyers who probably took them as satire on the pretensions of the uneducated masses, but many of those who bought the prints would have seen them differently.⁶

Wilkie's painting of 1806, *The Blind Fiddler*, also gained resonance with American artists celebrating a youthful democracy.⁷ Like his *Village Politicians*, it attributes sensitive feelings to those from the lower levels of society. A fiddler plays in a humble interior, and a family listens attentively. Children, who perhaps have never heard music before, look on in rapt attention, the grandfather's thoughtful expression implies that the tune takes him back to early memories;

even the dog is listening. In America, the German immigrant painter John Lewis Krimmel (1786-1821) acknowledged the precedent of Wilkie's painting in his picture, *The Quilting Frolic* (1813), which shows a family group gathered around a fireplace.⁸ In Krimmel's painting, however, there are many signs of prosperity, including china laid out on a tablecloth, paintings on the wall and even a grandfather clock in the corner. Krimmel wanted his debt to Wilkie to be recognized: he painted a copy of *The Blind Fiddler* and submitted it to the Pennsylvania Academy as a companion to *The Quilting Frolic*.⁹ The juxtaposition of the two paintings emphasized the contrast between the poverty of Europe and the good life that could be enjoyed by those who made it across the Atlantic. In Krimmel's painting, the fiddler is not blind, but he is black, an early indication of the association, in American art, of African Americans with musical talent. William Sidney Mount (1807-1868) took up the theme again in *The Power of Music* (1847, FIG 1). Here, an African American stands outside a barn door, his hat in his hand, listening to fiddle music being played inside the barn by a white man, and enjoyed by his two white companions. Although the model for the African American was a landowner, Robin Mills, Mount depicts him in patched labourer's clothing. Thus the painting both reflects the situation pertaining in Mount's home district of Stony Brook, New York, where African Americans had lived and worked alongside their European neighbours for many years, and acknowledges the injustice of slavery. The expressions on the faces of the figures clearly demonstrate the artist's view that they share a common humanity: all four men are equally attentive to the melody, all are equally sensitive to its power.¹⁰

Music also features in paintings of rural weddings and dances. In Christian Friedrich Mayr's *Kitchen Ball at White Sulphur Springs* (1838), the dancing is vigorous but decorous.¹¹ The painting is based on a kitchen ball for African-American slaves that the artist (another German immigrant to the United States) had witnessed at a resort in what was then Virginia.¹² William Sidney Mount's painting, *The Dance of the Haymakers* (1845) transfers the theme to a working context: two men dance in a barn, accompanied by a man playing a violin, while outside an African-American child beats time with two sticks and a dog listens attentively, in another reference to Wilkie's *Blind Fiddler*.¹³ The combination of work and music is found yet again in George Caleb Bingham's celebrated painting of American frontier life, *The Jolly Flatboatmen* (1846).¹⁴ In this work, a central figure dances while his fellow boatmen play instruments, and lounge on the deck, against the backdrop of a serene river landscape. In all these paintings, leisure is depicted as the reward for labour, a temporary respite from a hardworking life. Music is an ingredient of leisure also in Eastman Johnson's depiction of slaves in their living quarters, in his painting, *Negro Life at the South* (soon renamed *The Old Kentucky Home*) (1859).¹⁵ Such paintings, like the pictures of village politicians, were open to conflicting interpretations. Slave owners saw Johnson's picture as an indication of the relaxed happiness and good humour of slaves content with their lot, while abolitionists took the dilapidated condition of the slave quarters, and the differing skin colours of the slaves, as indications of the inefficiency of slavery and the abuse of power that led to slave owners sleeping with their female slaves.

In Britain, depictions of workers enjoying leisure time were generally reassuring in tone, implying that rural poverty went hand-in-hand with contentment. Early in the century, George Morland's paintings popularized the theme of the 'cottage door': farm labourers and their families were shown relaxing outside their ramshackle homes, often accompanied by pigs and ducks. Reproduced as prints, they had a wide international circulation, with the ideological implications of the subject often made explicit in titles such as 'The Happy Cottagers'.¹⁶ Later in the century, the Cranbrook Colony of artists, who took their name from the village of Cranbrook in Kent, produced many paintings of labourers inside their cottages, with a particular focus on the games of children. Families might be shown gathered around the table for a birthday tea, listening to a Bible reading on a Sunday evening, or welcoming their father as he comes home from work. Interiors were rustic, with brick floors and wooden beams, but they were always neat and clean, showing that these moments of leisure were part of a life that was predominantly industrious.¹⁷ As one critic wrote in 1860, in cottage scenes British artists made their characters 'thrifty, tidy people, who work hard during the week and go to church on Sundays.'¹⁸

Another popular theme was the mid-day break. Taken in the fields, it might look like a picnic. In Thomas Uwins's exhibition watercolour, *Haymakers at Dinner* (1812), for example, three young couples take the opportunity for some serious courting, while an older couple sit benignly by and a girl plays with a dog.¹⁹ However, a prominent figure in a smock (perhaps the farmer or overseer) stands beside the group, his hand resting on a hayfork, to indicate that their respite from labour is only temporary. In France, Jean-François Millet (1814-75) tackled the same topic in *Harvesters Resting (Ruth and Boaz)* (1851-3).²⁰ In this case the harvesters are shown in front of corn stacks and they are sitting amongst, and even literally sitting or lying on wheat sheaves, so there can be no doubt that their work will reclaim them soon. Once again, a managerial figure is present in the shape of Boaz, who introduces Ruth to the group: the subject is biblical but it is expressed in contemporary terms, with all the figures in nineteenth-century labourers' clothes. William Sidney Mount's *Farmers Noonning* (1836) is an American painting of a similar subject, showing a group of five male farm workers.²¹ Three of them are resting in the shade of a chestnut tree; but the fourth adult, an African American, lies on a hayrick in an attitude of complete relaxation, while a young boy tickles his ear with a straw. The painting creates the impression of a community of independent equals, in contrast to the European examples.

Later in the century, the theme of the lunch break was adapted to industrial workers. Eyre Crowe's painting, *The Dinner Hour, Wigan* (1874, FIG 2) was an astonishingly original depiction of young women factory workers enjoying their break, against the grim backdrop of the high walls and smoking chimneys of the Victoria Cotton Mill in the Lancashire town of Wigan. Observers have pointed out that the scene is idealized, because the women look robust and healthy, but what is also clear from the painting is that they have no proper facilities for their mid-day meal, having to perch on a low wall in a yard patrolled by a policeman. An American, and this time exclusively male, counterpart of Crowe's painting is Thomas Anshutz's *The Ironworkers' Noontime* (1880), in which young men and

boys, most of them stripped to the waist, wash or flex their muscles in a similarly grim setting.²² As in Eyre Crowe's painting, the workers look healthy but it does not look like leisure: most of them are standing and there is little refreshment in sight. Their 'Academy' poses give the ironworkers a heroic air: they have been described as 'a doughty and highly skilled embodiment of the American work ethic.'²³ It is noticeable that American paintings of workers at leisure very often show only male figures. In a European context, they are nearly always accompanied by women and perhaps children as well, probably because working men on their own would present too threatening an image, reminding viewers of strikes, riots and revolutions. It is noticeable, too, that the American images are generally more positive, propagating the idea of the New World as a place of easy relationships between equals, even though the thorny issue of slavery is never far from the surface.

Leisure and Modernity

From the 1850s, artists start to produce large paintings of modern, urban, predominantly middle-class leisure. These themes had already been treated in newspaper and magazine illustration, but the paintings of William Powell Frith (1819-1909) took them into the realm of high art – or at least, the art of the Royal Academy in London, of which he was a member. Beginning in 1854 with *Ramsgate Sands (Life at the Seaside)* (FIG 3), Frith depicted a wide range of social classes in panoramic, multi-figure compositions, with great success. *Ramsgate Sands* was bought by Queen Victoria, and both this painting and its sequel, *Derby Day* (1856-8)²⁴ were so popular that a rail had to be placed in front of them at the Royal Academy exhibition, to protect them from the crowds who wanted to examine them. Both the themes represented – visiting the seaside and attending horse races – were burgeoning areas of leisure in the mid-nineteenth century, moving from elitist beginnings to activities that attracted all the social classes.²⁵

Frith's painting is remarkable to our eyes, as it is so different from the modern idea of a seaside holiday. It is not unusual now to find people closely packed together on a sandy beach, but the composition of the painting implies that this is a deliberate choice. The heavy, fashionable clothes that are worn, even by the children, and the parasols held by several women in the painting, testify to the fact that exposure of the skin to the sun was not regarded as at all desirable. Frith's paintings enabled viewers to pick out the different types of people. In *Ramsgate Sands*, a group of elegantly-dressed young women sit near their newspaper-reading father, the bright sunshine lighting up the fine fabrics they wear. Behind them, to the right and in a softer light, are a family of poor people, those who have come on the day trips from London that were newly available by train from the 1840s. Similarly, in *Derby Day* we see both rich and poor – the top-hatted aristocrats by the carriages, with their womenfolk wearing dresses in the height of fashion, and, on the extreme left, a man in a smock who has brought his wife up from the country.

In the paintings of the French Impressionists, too, all levels of society are shown at leisure. Indeed, new forms of leisure are so prevalent in their work that

modern books on the group are structured according to these categories, with chapters on the seaside, theatre and opera, cafés, parks and racetracks.²⁶ Even their mode of working suggested a new leisure-oriented society, with sketchy brushwork replacing the detailed finish of traditional academic painting, with its overtones of the Protestant work ethic. Many of their paintings suggest the viewpoint of the flâneur, or observant male stroller, a new figure first identified as a feature of modern urban life in the 1830s. From 1853, the development of the boulevards and open spaces in Paris under the reforms of Baron Haussmann created a new kind of urban social life, much of it lived in the open air. The new boulevards created space for pavement cafés; gas lighting extended the hours available for socializing. Edouard Manet (1832-1883) depicted upper-class life in his painting of an open-air concert, *Music in the Tuileries Gardens* (1862): top hats are prominent in the crowd, especially in the foreground, and the two women who look out at the onlooker are expensively and respectably dressed.²⁷ Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919), on the other hand, was drawn to an earthier, working-class culture in such paintings as *The Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1881).²⁸

In his important book, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure and Parisian Society* (1988) Robert Herbert claims that 'Impressionism's place as the foundation of early modern art is closely allied to the significance in modern urban culture of cafés, outdoor concerts, theater, vaudeville, dance, picnics, swimming, boating, suburban outings, and seashore vacations.'²⁹ This list of activities and locations does, indeed, cover many of the best-known paintings by members of the group. Renoir's *Dance at the Moulin de la Galette* (FIG 4) brings together male writers and artists with working-class women, in the informal setting of a dancing area set up in an enclosed courtyard between two mills in Montmartre.³⁰ In contrast to many depictions of leisure in this period, the figures really do look as if they are enjoying themselves. The dancers move easily together, the group at the table have expressions that suggest animation and engagement with one another, and the presence of a little girl on the left shows that it is the kind of occasion where families can feel at ease. Most of the men wear straw boaters, and the relatively simple dresses of the women shimmer under the lights, the overall effect enhanced by Renoir's loose and sketchy brushwork.

Taking subjects from a higher social level, artists focused on the audiences of the theatre or opera. In Renoir's *The Loge (The Theatre Box)* (1874) an overdressed woman looks uneasy as her male companion uses his opera glasses to survey other women in the boxes.³¹ Mary Cassatt's painting with the same title (c. 1878-80) is very different in its approach.³² Two young women are shown sitting with their eyes downcast, perhaps because they are concentrating on the performance, but more probably because they feel self-conscious. As a woman of high social standing, Cassatt would have been very well aware of the way that women who were wealthy enough to sit in the boxes at the opera or theatre became objects to be looked at themselves. Griselda Pollock has described how the two young women are 'both tensely aware of the desire to appear adult and lady-like despite any excitement inherent in the novelty of theatre-going', demonstrating 'the subjective consciousness of etiquette and social convention that Cassatt alone of the Impressionists perceived and portrayed in young

womanhood.’³³ At the other end of the social spectrum, a less attractive side of the new culture is provided by Edgar Degas’s *L’Absinthe (The Absinthe Drinker)* (1876): in this painting a dishevelled woman, ignored by her male companion, stares vacantly across a café table, a picture of degradation and hopelessness.³⁴ All three paintings expose the restrictions and pitfalls experienced by women in urban leisure, whether they are rich or poor.

Outdoor settings were common in Impressionist depictions of leisure. Under the rule of Napoleon III (1852-70) the total area of parks and gardens available to Parisians expanded exponentially, rising from 47 acres in 1848 to 4,500 by 1870.³⁵ One of the largest of these new areas for recreation was the Bois de Boulogne, the location for the races at Longchamp. Both Manet and Degas found subjects here. Manet’s watercolour, *The Races at Longchamp* (1864) shows both horses and racegoers: the speed of the horses thundering towards us is balanced by a sedate group of onlookers, mainly in carriages.³⁶ The Impressionists also depicted Parisians enjoying leisure activities in suburban locations that could be reached from the city by train. In 1865 Claude Monet (1840-1926) planned a monumental canvas, *Le Dejeuner sur L’Herbe (Luncheon on the Grass)*, which he never completed: the sketch for it depicts men and women in smart clothes around a magnificent picnic, spread out on a white cloth under trees.³⁷ This was painted in Chailly, a village on the edge of the forest of Fontainebleau, a well-established destination for Parisian excursions since the 1820s. It was the era of the crinoline, and the full skirts of the women dominate the composition, spreading out over the tablecloth, their light colours competing for attention with the golden light filtering through the leaves.

Boating, swimming, and relaxing on riverbanks were other popular features of suburban leisure in this period. La Grenouillère, a bathing place on an island near Bougival on the River Seine, provided subject matter for several paintings by Monet and Renoir. In Monet’s *Bathers at La Grenouillère* (1869), empty rowing boats fill the foreground, swimmers in bathing costumes stand on a bridge, while the heads and upper bodies of further bathers merge with the bright reflected sunshine on the river.³⁸ The loose brushwork and the play of light upon the water combine to create a calm, informal effect. Renoir’s painting, *The Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1881) is set in the nearby location of Chatou, its railway bridge (which brought the visitors from Paris) just visible in the distance.³⁹ Here, again, the gathering shows the social classes mingling, apparently seamlessly. The muscular man in the left foreground, in a sleeveless shirt and jockey cap, is the son of the proprietor, while the top-hatted man in the background is Charles Ephrussi, the wealthy art collector, but they look equally at home in this convivial group.

The Neo-Impressionist style of Georges Seurat (1859-1891) has a very different effect, but much of his subject matter is similar to that of the Impressionists. In *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (FIG 5) he strove to give a permanent, frieze-like form to the recreational activities of his day, like the figures in a fresco by Piero Della Francesca. Men, women and children sit, stand and lounge on the island in the river Seine between Asnières and Neuilly. The group in the left foreground - a manual worker with his pipe, a lady with novels

and a fan, a very proper office worker with jacket, stick and top hat - are from different social levels. They sit close together, yet they ignore one another. The wealthy couple on the right, with their little dog and incongruous pet monkey, stand stiffly side by side, staring straight ahead. A contemporary critic wrote that Seurat 'wished to show the tedious to-and-fro of the banal promenade of these people in their Sunday best, who take a walk, without pleasure, in the places one is supposed to walk on Sundays.'⁴⁰ There is, indeed, little sense of fun in this painting: the hieratic rigidity of the figures suggests a social chore rather than relaxed enjoyment.

Recreation in Nature: Woods, Mountains, Seaside

The natural environment shown in Impressionist paintings is almost an aspect of the city. Another strand of thought in nineteenth-century culture put a premium on 'real' nature, untouched by modern developments such as factories and railways. In America, the pristine wilderness that predated even settlement and agriculture was seen as an essential aid to human recreation. Thomas Cole (1801-1848), the British-born American painter, declared in his *Essay on American Scenery* (1836) that 'there are those who regret that with the improvements of cultivation the sublimity of the wilderness should pass away: for those scenes of solitude from which the hand of nature has never been lifted, affect the mind with a more deep toned emotion than aught which the hand of man has touched. ... [in the wilderness] the mind is cast into the contemplation of eternal things.'⁴¹ His approach to the wilderness was moulded by his reading of the Romantic poets. Lord Byron, for example, had written of how

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
There is society where none intrudes,
By the deep Sea, and music in its roar:
I love not Man the less, but Nature more.⁴²

German Romantic poetry, too, had extolled the virtues of solitary walks to facilitate the contemplation of nature. We know that this was one way that the German painter, Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), employed his leisure time. In notable paintings he represented the solitary human observer face to face with nature. In *The Monk by the Sea* (1808-10)⁴³ the figure contemplates the infinity of the sea; in *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (c. 1818, FIG 6) he looks out over a vast panorama of mountain peaks in the mist. The painting reflects the growing popularity of walking in the hills and scaling mountain peaks, but also the practice of simply contemplating the natural world. Mists swirl around the rocks on which the wanderer stands, but his position is secure as he watches the lower peaks and the trees gradually emerging into sight. His feelings on surveying the prospect before him may be assumed to be similar to those of the British poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who describes looking out over a fine view

Struck with deep joy ...

Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
Less gross than bodily; and of such hues
As veil the Almighty Spirit ...⁴⁴

With his friend William Wordsworth, Coleridge often composed poetry while walking in the landscape near their homes, either in the Lake District or, as in this case, the Quantock Hills in Somerset.

Reading poetry and enjoying the natural environment could also be a sociable activity for artists. In Bristol in the 1820s, Francis Danby and his friends used to go across the River Avon to Leigh Woods, a semi-wild area of woodland, taking with them books, sketching materials, picnics, and musical instruments. An exquisite pair of small paintings, *A Scene in Leigh Woods* and *View of the Avon Gorge* (1822), probably painted for a private collector, records these excursions.⁴⁵ In the first painting, a well-dressed couple converse in a clearing, their positions suggestive of relaxation, between lounging and sitting. In the other, there is a family group in a similar configuration. In both cases, further couples can be glimpsed strolling through the trees in the background.⁴⁶ The woods were seen as a welcome escape from the summer heat of the city: many other writers and artists of the time extolled the benefits of shady glades, particularly in June, July and August. In contrast to Danby, Thomas Cole's paintings of the American wilderness generally include few figures, often woodcutters or Native Americans. An important exception to this is his painting, *The Pic-Nic* (FIG 7) in which a group similar to the inhabitants of Danby's pictures occupies a clearing next to a lake. The picnic is spread out on the white tablecloth, the musician strums on his guitar; both couples and family groups enjoy the informality, the fresh air, and the view of the still wild trees and rocks in the background. The dress of the participants is fashionable enough to show that they are from the middle class, but it is relatively simple and practical.

Later in the century, American landscape continued to be appreciated for its wildness and ruggedness. Jerome Thompson (1814-1886) painted several scenes of groups enjoying themselves in natural surroundings. In *The Belated Party on Mansfield Mountain* (1858) he depicts a group of young men and women near the summit of Mount Mansfield, Vermont's highest peak.⁴⁷ Three of the party (two men and a woman) are entranced by the view and the impending sunset, but a weary-looking group in the foreground (one man and two women) look anxiously at a watch. Their modest picnic basket indicates that they have not prepared to camp out overnight. A similar subject is found in Winslow Homer's *The Bridle Path, White Mountains* (1868).⁴⁸ Here, a young woman rides side-saddle on a rocky path, drenched in sunlight. The location is the path to the summit of Mount Washington in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, the highest peak in the eastern part of the United States. Contemporary critics praised Homer's work as expressive of the superior health and energy of free Americans in contrast to their degraded cousins on the other side of the Atlantic. One wrote of this picture: 'Here is no faded, flavourless figure, as if from English illustrated magazines; but an American girl out-of-doors'.⁴⁹ Homer's paintings of children, similarly, suggest health and freedom, giving the American public

reasons for optimism in the years after the Civil War. His large painting of barefooted boys playing outside a little red country schoolroom, *Snap the Whip* (1872) was among the most celebrated paintings at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition, held in Philadelphia, which marked the anniversary of the Revolution of 1776 and was widely seen as an occasion to reunite and heal the country.⁵⁰

Homer's paintings fed into a discourse of mental, as well as physical health and wellbeing. In 1870 he painted *An Adirondack Lake*, a view of an idyllic unspoiled landscape in the morning sunlight, occupied only by a man with a canoe.⁵¹ In the same year a periodical described the Adirondacks, an area of wilderness in the north of New York state, as 'a vast play-ground for all tired Americans, and ... a limitless hospital with the most potent medicaments of air, water and forest for the reinvigoration of nearly all classes of individuals.'⁵² The Adirondacks was a very male environment – vacations there usually involved camping in shelters open to the elements, shooting and skinning deer, carrying canoes overhead on passages between its many lakes – and Homer's paintings of the area have a similar bias. However, other paintings by him promote the new freedom enjoyed by women in healthy outdoor pursuits. A series of paintings on the theme of croquet focused on a game that had been imported from England to the United States in the 1860s and quickly became popular: it was seen as particularly important for promoting women's health and beauty. In Homer's *Croquet Scene* (1866) three women and one man are shown.⁵³ The women stand while the man kneels down between them, suggesting that this is a game in which women can compete equally with men, or can even have the upper hand.

Women are shown as actively engaged in an outdoor pursuit, too, in Homer's beach scene, *Eagle Head, Manchester, Massachusetts (High Tide)* (1870, FIG 8). Sea-bathing was one of the most important of the new forms of recreation in nature in the nineteenth century. The landscape painter John Constable complained in 1824 that Brighton Beach was 'only Piccadilly ... by the seaside,' and, as we have seen with Frith's *Ramsgate Sands* (Fig 3), many representations of people on the beach look as if an urban scene has simply been transported to the seaside.⁵⁴ This is also the case with the many beach scenes by Eugène Boudin (1824-1898), who is well known as a forerunner of the Impressionists. In the mid-nineteenth century, sea-bathing still maintained traces of its origins as a health cure in the previous century. People dressed up for the beach, where they sat in close proximity to others, very much as if they were in a city park. Swimming was often a duty rather than a pleasure, undertaken from bathing machines, far from prying eyes, in voluminous costumes. Homer's three young women are on a deserted beach, and, although they wear standard costumes, they look vigorous and healthy. The woman with the fair hair, in particular, is modern in her attitude, squeezing the water out of her costume, letting her long hair run free, and exposing her knees in a way that some critics found lacking in decorum. The contrasts between the women are enigmatic, suggesting a comment on increasing emancipation.

Coastal Colonies and Leisure

Artists, too, were drawn to the coast as a place where life could be freer and less formal. Artists' colonies sprang up all over Europe in the later nineteenth century. The colony at Newlyn, near Penzance in the south of Cornwall, was particularly well-established. Its self-appointed leader, Alexander Stanhope Forbes (1857-1947), painted the working activities of the fishing village, as well as the community events that took place on the days when work was suspended. His painting, *Gala Day at Newlyn* (1907) shows one of the regular Sunday processions organised by the Methodist temperance societies, when children in white pinafores paraded through the streets of the village, accompanied by brass bands.⁵⁵ However, Forbes, who had no particular sympathy either for Methodism or for temperance, has suppressed the evidence of its origins, substituting union flags for the 'Band of Hope' banners that would have decorated the procession.⁵⁶ Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes (1859-1912), the Canadian painter who became his wife, chose for her main subject matter scenes of outdoor leisure activities, often including children. A fine example of this is a large painting, *Blackberry Gatherers* (1912).⁵⁷ A bare-headed, bare-armed woman with a tin bucket and two children in bonnets attack a blackberry bush on a hill in the right-hand corner of the scene. Behind and below them, a magnificent panorama of small hedged fields stretches out to the horizon. The figures are lit up by sunshine, contrasting with the cloud shadows below. Apart from the bonnets and the old-fashioned tin bucket, the scene is precociously modern: it could be 2012 rather than 1912.

The paintings executed by the Danish painter Peder Severin Krøyer at the artists' colony of Skagen, at the northern end of the Jutland peninsula, also suggest a new informality in coastal locations. Krøyer first went to Skagen in 1882. He was entranced by the subtle colours of the northern summer nights, producing several paintings in which brightly-lit figures in pale clothing are almost enveloped in a luminous infinity of intensely blue sea and sky. *Summer Evening on Skagen's Southern Beach* (1893) shows his wife, the painter Marie Krøyer, promenading arm in arm with the painter Anne Ancher, at twilight, by the edge of the shore.⁵⁸ The landscape is almost featureless, with only a strip of low grassy hills and buildings on the extreme right. In the foreground there is a wide expanse of sand, relieved only by countless footprints. The painting itself evokes the kind of calm contemplation that such a walk along the seashore at evening was meant to provide. Another idyllic series of paintings takes the subject of children swimming. *Boys bathing in the Sea on Summer's Evening* (1899) shows three boys in a calm sea.⁵⁹ All are completely naked: one sits on a towel on the sand, a second is walking out of the sea, a third is far out in the water, near two sailing boats on the horizon. Once again, it is the 'blue hour' when sea and sky become one, but this time there is a full moon, casting a meandering line of delicate light along the glassy water. The sense of space and freedom is palpable.

In Britain, late nineteenth-century paintings of young people enjoying the sunshine and freedom of the seaside have been linked to a concern with the unhealthy living conditions of children in the cities.⁶⁰ Cornwall seemed particularly far removed from these problems. Henry Scott Tuke's paintings of naked boys bathing in the sea, such as *August Blue* (1893) celebrated the physical health produced by fresh air and exercise, and helped to neutralise fears

of national degeneration.⁶¹ Laura Knight's scene of children playing on the sand in *The Beach* (1909) is a similarly sun-drenched painting.⁶² Compared to the children in Frith's *Ramsgate Sands*, encumbered by excessive layers of clothing and tightly controlled by their nursemaids and mothers, Knight's children are free to paddle and to romp in the sand. Their pinafores and straw hats catch the sunlight and add to the relaxed effect. However, as they are girls, they are still well covered up. Paintings of naked boys bathing were painted across the western world – other examples are *The Swimming Hole* (1884-5) by the Philadelphia artist Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) and John Singer Sargent's studies of Neapolitan boys on the beach in Capri – but restrictions remained for the representation of female children, whether or not this reflected actual practices.⁶³

The Aesthetic Movement and the Theory of the Leisure Class

In British art of the 1860s onwards, there is a growing concern with 'Art for Art's Sake' – the idea that art should be exquisite in itself, not reflecting social life or illustrating a narrative, but simply producing beauty. A painting, therefore, could be like a beautiful piece of china or a textile, with harmonies of shape, texture and colour. While it did not primarily aim to reflect contemporary life, the movement is nevertheless relevant to the topic of leisure, because the subject matter of these paintings often consisted of women and girls in languid poses, rather ostentatiously doing nothing. Some paintings made this clear in their titles: William Holman Hunt's *Il Dolce far Niente (Sweet Idleness)* (1866) shows a lavishly-dressed woman staring dreamily into a fireplace.⁶⁴ The same title was used by John William Godward in 1897: his version of the theme has a woman in classical dress lying on bearskins in front of a lily pool, looking soulfully at the spectator.⁶⁵ In addition, many of the classicising paintings produced by Albert Moore (1841-1893) have the same basic theme, depicting women in languorous poses who have nothing to do except to look beautiful. A typical painting by him, *Reading Aloud* (1883-4) shows three young women, all in vaguely classical dress.⁶⁶ One lies on a couch, reading, a second woman sits on the floor, apparently listening intently, while the third leans back against the couch, resting her head on her arm. Silk draperies in harmonious colours complement their robes in a restful colour scheme of peach, pink and grey. The painting both illustrates leisure and encourages a relaxed, leisurely way of looking.

A painting by John Everett Millais (1829-1896), *Leisure Hours* (1864, FIG 9) also calls attention to leisure in its title. It is a portrait of two young girls, the daughters of John Pender, a Scottish businessman. They sit or lounge on a carpet in front of an ornate screen, wearing elaborate velvet dresses, with their hair newly washed and brushed. They have nothing but posies of flowers to occupy their minds and hands: it seems that their only purpose in life is to be exquisitely beautiful, like the goldfish in the bowl in front of them, in which they show little interest. To modern eyes this painting looks like a critical commentary on the confined lives of wealthy girls, with as little chance of escaping to a satisfying life as the unfortunate goldfish. It is unlikely that the Penders would have seen it in this way, however. They obviously liked the picture, as they displayed it over the fireplace in the dining room of the family's London home.⁶⁷ Similarly, the artist

probably thought that the inclusion of the goldfish simply enhanced the beauty of the girls, perhaps referring to the environment in which they were growing up in a positive way, as protective rather than restrictive.

A comment made about a painting by the London-based Belgian artist James Tissot (1836-1902) might equally have applied to Millais's picture. Looking at Tissot's *Young Women looking at Japanese Objects* (1869), a critic remarked that 'we seem to see two beautiful birds in their gilded cage.'⁶⁸ In an exquisite Aesthetic interior, which, with its latticed walls, does look rather like a cage, a young woman in a white peignoir and her fashionably and fussily-dressed friend examine a ship model resting on a piece of elaborate brocade. Tissot took a keen interest in fashion, and his female figures wear dresses with elaborate bustles, flounces and petticoats, set off by fur muffs and cuffs in contrasting shades, their different textures lovingly evoked on the canvas. Very often, their expressions have an air of languid boredom. We know from some of the titles he gave to his paintings that Tissot's work has a satirical edge to it, and this is something that modern art historians have noted. Malcolm Warner, for example, writes of Tissot's *The Ball on Shipboard* (c. 1874): 'there are no smiles or laughter, nor even much conversation ... the positions and gestures of the guests suggest disconnectedness rather than togetherness ... Tissot surely intended his scene as a reflection on social life in general.'⁶⁹ Too much leisure, especially when reinforced by strict rules of etiquette, could leave women feeling imprisoned and reduced to objets d'art themselves.

In 1899, the American sociologist Thorstein Veblen published *The Theory of the Leisure Class: an Economic Study of Institutions*, which introduced the phrase 'conspicuous consumption' to indicate the obsession of the wealthy with showing off their wealth. In Veblen's analysis, women were status symbols for their fathers and husbands, doomed to wear impractical clothes and spend their days engaged in useless activities. Their very inactivity testified to the wealth of their husbands. The paintings of the American artist William McGregor Paxton (1869-1941), such as *Tea Leaves* (1909, FIG 10) might seem to be a deliberate illustration of Veblen's thesis. These two young women have nothing to do but take tea. They wear exquisite clothes and live in exquisite surroundings, but their lives look empty. They do not even engage in conversation: while the standing woman pours the tea her companion (who has not even taken off her hat) studies a milk jug. However, as with Millais's portrait, it is very unlikely that the people who bought Paxton's paintings would have seen them as a form of social critique. Veblen, doubtless, would have said that commissioning or buying a painting of this kind was just another manifestation of conspicuous consumption.

Conclusion

Images of leisure proliferated in both America and Europe in the long nineteenth century, especially in the latter half of the period. This essay has only considered paintings, but similar imagery was to be found in prints, illustrated newspapers and magazines, and later on in photographs and films. To some extent this simply reflected changing practices in society. Urban and suburban leisure

activities were expanding, the growth of tourism took more people out into the countryside to commune with Nature, and, by the closing decades of the century, workers began to be entitled to regular holidays.

Paintings also record changing attitudes to leisure. Images of the working class resting temporarily from their labours were bought by members of a different class, who had a vested interest in the maintenance of the social structure. It is not surprising, therefore, that they are often prescriptive or reassuring in tone. Yet, stemming from the example of David Wilkie, there is a new sense of a common humanity in these scenes, especially in those that focus on music. Paintings, and the critical commentary on them, emphasized the contrast between America and Europe, propagating the ideal of a youthful democracy in the New World, where citizens could enjoy more equality and prosperity than in the Old. In America, exclusively male images of workers were more acceptable than they would have been in Europe.

In the second half of the century, the depiction of urban scenes was dominated by the French Impressionists: as the middle class grew and developed new forms of amusement, artists found themselves, to some extent, selling to the kind of people they represented on their canvases. The Impressionists were very successful in producing images of relaxed enjoyment, helped by their sketchy brushwork. Other new strategies for making paintings an aid to leisure included the harmonious colours of the Aesthetic Movement, and the suggestion of wide open space in the seaside scenes of Peder Severin Krøyer. Such techniques encouraged a leisurely way of appreciating art that matched the subject matter.

Memorable images were created by the passion for nature, as people took to the woods, the mountains and the seaside. Here again, we noted a contrast between the Old World and the New, with a greater emphasis on the wilderness, and on informality and health, in America. The Aesthetic Movement, however, produced similar results in both Britain and the United States. Paintings of women in interiors were popular in both countries, and to modern eyes the figures look all too much like 'beautiful birds in their gilded cages.' There was recognized to be a downside to leisure: at the upper levels of society, it could lead to vapidness and boredom, especially for women. There is no doubt, however, that the paintings are extremely beautiful to look at. They too were, and remain, part of the leisure industry, there for us to contemplate when we need to find physical rest and spiritual refreshment.

Illustrations reproduced below.

- 1) [William Sidney Mount The Power of Music 1847](#)
- 2) [Eyre Crowe The Dinner Hour, Wigan 1874](#)
- 3) [William Powell Frith Ramsgate Sands 1854](#)
- 4) [Pierre Renoir Dance at Bougival 1883](#)
- 5) [Georges Seurat A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte 1884](#)
- 6) [Caspar David Friedrich Wanderer above a Sea of Fog c. 1818](#)

- 7) [Thomas Cole The Pic-nic 1846](#)
- 8) [Winslow Homer Eagle Head, Manchester, Mass 1870](#)
- 9) [John Everett Millais Leisure Hours 1864](#)
- 10) [William McGregor Paxton Tea Leaves 1909](#)

¹ See Christiana Payne, 'Picturing Work' in Deborah Simonton and Anne Montenach, *A Cultural History of Work in the Age of Enlightenment* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 44.

² One of Wilkie's paintings, *Reading the Will* (1820), was bought by King Ludwig of Bavaria and is now in the Neue Pinakothek, Munich; another, *Grace Before Meat*, was sold to Glendy Burk, of New Orleans.

³ For *The Village Politicians*, see David Solkin, *Painting out of the Ordinary: Modernity and the Art of Everyday Life in Nineteenth-century Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008, 7-35. The painting is in the collection of the Earl of Mansfield.

⁴ Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.

⁵ See the entry on the painting on the Walters Art Museum website, <https://art.thewalters.org/detail/28889/politics-in-an-oyster-house/>

⁶ *The Village Politicians* was bought by the 3rd Earl of Mansfield, *Politics in an Oyster House* by John H. B. Latrobe, a wealthy Baltimore citizen.

⁷ Tate, London.

⁸ Winterthur Museum, Delaware.

⁹ H. Barbara Weinberg and Carrie Rebora Barratt, *American Stories: Paintings of Everyday Life 1765-1915* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art and New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 24.

¹⁰ Ibid, 68-9.

¹¹ North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh.

¹² Weinberg and Barratt, *American Stories*, 69.

¹³ Long Island Museum, Stony Brook, New York.

¹⁴ National Gallery of Art, Washington.

¹⁵ New-York Historical Society, New York.

¹⁶ For this print, see Christiana Payne, *Silent Witnesses: Trees in British Art, 1769-1870* (Bristol: Sansom and Company, 2017), 59.

¹⁷ For the Cranbrook Colony, see Wolverhampton Art Gallery, *The Cranbrook Colony: Fresh Perspectives* (Wolverhampton: Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 2010).

¹⁸ Anon., 'The Royal Academy and other Exhibitions', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, July 1860, 70. For the complete passage, see Christiana Payne, *Rustic Simplicity: Scenes of Cottage Life in Nineteenth-Century British Art* (Nottingham: Djanogly Art Gallery, 1998), 11.

¹⁹ Victoria and Albert Museum, London. On this painting, see Christiana Payne, *Toil and Plenty: Images of the Agricultural Landscape in England, 1780-1890* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 152-3.

²⁰ Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

²¹ Long Island Museum, Stony Brook, New York.

²² De Young Museum, San Francisco..

²³ Randall C. Griffin, 'Thomas Anshutz's "The Ironworkers' Noontime": Remythologizing the Industrial Worker', *Smithsonian Studies in American Art*, 4:3/4 (Summer-Autumn 1990), 142.

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- ²⁴ Tate , London.
- ²⁵ For paintings of the seaside in nineteenth-century Britain, see Christiana Payne, *Where the Sea meets the Land: Artists on the Coast in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Bristol: Sansom and Company, 2007), 86-111.
- ²⁶ For example, Pamela Todd, *The Impressionists at Leisure* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007).
- ²⁷ National Gallery, London (ownership shared with the Hugh Lane, Dublin).
- ²⁸ The Phillips Collection, Washington.
- ²⁹ Robert L. Herbert, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure and Parisian Society* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), xv.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*, 133.
- ³¹ Courtauld Institute, London.
- ³² Chester Dale Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington.
- ³³ Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt* (London: Chaucer Press, 2003), 21-22.
- ³⁴ Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
- ³⁵ Herbert, *Impressionism*, 142.
- ³⁶ Art Institute of Chicago.
- ³⁷ The sketch is in the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow. Surviving fragments of the painting are in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
- ³⁸ National Gallery, London.
- ³⁹ The Phillips Collection, Washington.
- ⁴⁰ Alfred Paulet in *Paris*, 5 June 1886, cited in T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 264.
- ⁴¹ Thomas Cole, 'Proceedings of the American Lyceum: Essay on American Scenery', *The American Monthly Magazine* (January 1836), 5.
- ⁴² George Gordon Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, 1812, Canto 4, Stanza 178.
- ⁴³ Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.
- ⁴⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'This Lime-tree Bower my Prison' (1797), ll. 38-42.
- ⁴⁵ Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, Bristol.
- ⁴⁶ On Danby and his friends, see Payne, *Silent Witnesses*, 114-23.
- ⁴⁷ Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
- ⁴⁸ Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.
- ⁴⁹ Cited in Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr, and Franklin Kelly, *Winslow Homer* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 76.
- ⁵⁰ Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio.
- ⁵¹ Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle.
- ⁵² Cited in Cikovsky and Kelly, *Winslow Homer*, 127.
- ⁵³ Art Institute of Chicago. On the croquet paintings, see Cikovsky and Kelly, *Winslow Homer*, 70.
- ⁵⁴ R. B. Beckett, ed., *John Constable's Correspondence* (Ipswich: Suffolk Records Society, 1962-8), vol. VI, 171.
- ⁵⁵ Hartlepool Museums and Heritage Service, Cleveland.
- ⁵⁶ Mary O'Neill, *Cornwall's 'Fisherfolk': Art and Artifice*, (Bristol: Sansom and Company, 2014), 128-34.
- ⁵⁷ Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.
- ⁵⁸ The Hirschsprung Collection, Copenhagen.
- ⁵⁹ Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen.

⁶⁰ See Ysanne Holt, *British Artists and the Modernist Landscape* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 95-111.

⁶¹ Tate, London.

⁶² Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne.

⁶³ *The Swimming Hole* is in the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth. For Sargent's studies of boys on the beach, see Marc Simpson, 'Bladders and Blue Shadows: "Neapolitan Children Bathing"', in Sarah Cash, ed., *Sargent and the Sea* (Washington: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 2009), 119-143.

⁶⁴ Private Collection.

⁶⁵ Private Collection.

⁶⁶ Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow.

⁶⁷ Jason Rosenfeld and Alison Smith, *Millais* (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), 144.

⁶⁸ Elia Roy, *L'Artiste*, 1 July 1869, 81, cited in Nancy Rose Marshall and Malcolm Warner, *James Tissot: Victorian Life/Modern Love* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 44. The painting is in the Cincinnati Art Museum.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 13. The painting is in the Tate, London.



William Sidney Mount *The Power of Music* 1847



Eyre Crowe The Dinner Hour, Wigan 1874



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Georges Seurat A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte 1884



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