

Myopic artists

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Could myopia be advantageous to a painter?

It has often been said that it is advantageous to be near-sighted (myopic) if one is a painter and, indeed, research has found that myopia and errors of refraction are common in artists.

In addition — and I have experienced this personally — myopic painters often have their myopia undercorrected. They want to see the entire picture, not to see too many details in long-range landscapes. Interestingly, many of the impressionists were myopic and did not wear glasses. We can speculate about the possible effect of myopia on this artistic school in particular. The impressionists wanted to convey subjective sensory impressions, attempting, as they put it themselves, to 'capture a retinal image in flight'.

Blurry long-range pictures by impressionists

Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) was myopic and also suffered from diabetes. Cézanne's close-range still lives (Fig. 1) are distinct, while his long-range landscape paintings (Fig. 2) are less clear and more distorted. A person with normal vision would be able to see nature in the same way if he were to look through a positive lens — or, in other words, if he were to make himself myopic.

With and without glasses

According to reports Cézanne never wore glasses. Neither did August Renoir (1841–1919), despite his mild myopia. His close-range paintings are distinct, while his long-range paintings are impressionistically blurred, as if a person



Fig. 1. Paul Cézanne. Still life: Apples and a pot of primroses. Oil on canvas, circa 1890. Reproduced with permission of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Sam A Lewisohn, 1951. (51.112.1) Photograph © 1991 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

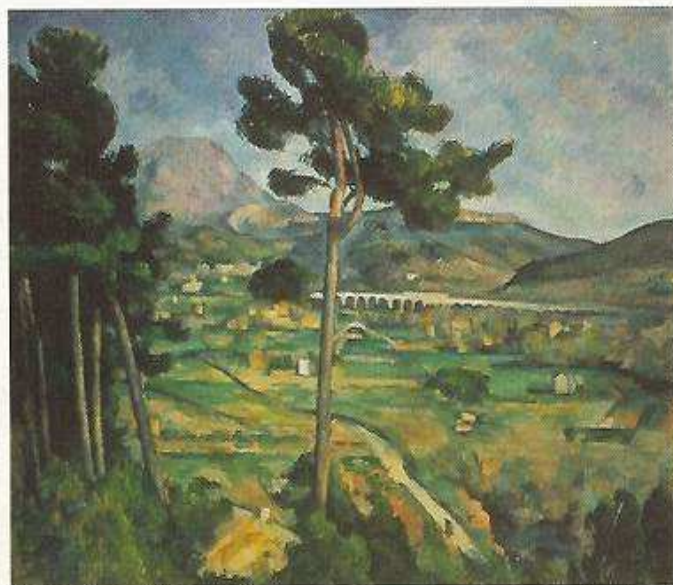


Fig. 2. Paul Cézanne. Mont Sainte-Victoire and the viaduct of the arc river valley. Oil on canvas. Reproduced with permission of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, H O Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs H O Havemeyer, 1929. (29.100.64) Photograph © 1979 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 3. Ivan Aguéli. View of Stockholm. Oil; circa 1892. Private owner.

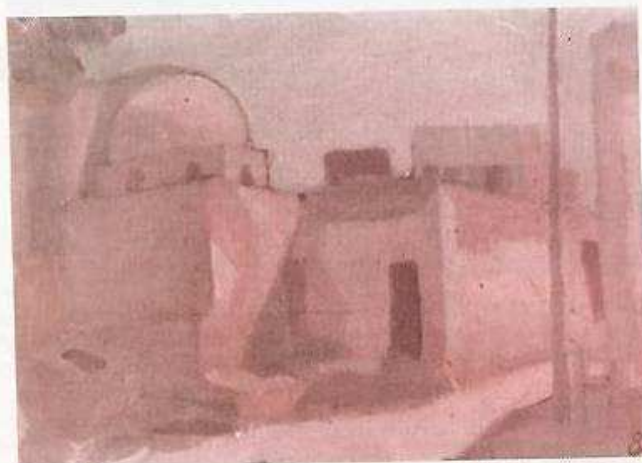


Fig. 4. Ivan Aguéli. Egyptian cupolhouse. Oil on canvas, circa 1904. Reproduced with permission of The Modern Museum of Stockholm.

with normal vision were looking through a positive lens at a distant view.

Many impressionists were myopic

Claude Monet (1820–1926), who developed cataract at the age of 60 years, has also been assumed to be myopic, but this is more uncertain. Other artists who were myopic include Camillo Pissaro (1830–1903), who also suffered

from corneal scarring following cervical tuberculosis lymphadenitis, and Edgard Degas (1834–1917). Degas often painted after photographs and for this reason his myopia probably played less of a role in his work. As he aged he also suffered increasing loss of vision due to macula degeneration. The fact that so many impressionists were myopic may be a coincidence. I am by no means claiming that impressionism developed simply because there was a group of myopic painters at work in France at

the same time. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that myopia has facilitated impressionist painting.

Ivan Aguéli sought medical help for his visual defect

Among the Swedish painters, I would like to mention Ivan Aguéli (1869–1917) in this connection. Aguéli, who was one of our greatest landscape painters, was also myopic (Fig. 3). He was a unique person with a remarkable life story. His painting career began on the island of Gotland and in Stockholm, but he soon went to Paris. There he met and lived with the author Marie Huot, a well known animal rights activist. He also went to Egypt for several years and converted to Islam (Fig. 4).

Aguéli went as far as seeking medical help for his refractive error because he was concerned that it was preventing him from properly transferring reality to the canvas. Aguéli wanted to have an operation and, if he had lived in modern times, this would have been possible by means of excimer laser. We can only speculate as to how his painting, form and use of colour would have developed after such an operation. In the few existing photographs of Aguéli he is not always shown wearing glasses and it may be that his myopia affected his painting. Aguéli's fellow painters at the Artist's Association School often remarked that Aguéli's studies appeared as if they were being viewed through crown glass. We can assume that they meant a positive crown glass, that the paintings looked as they would if viewed by a myopic person.

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