

Stylistic Analysis of *The Alaska Trail* and
Portrait of Mademoiselle Suzette Lemair, in Profile

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Two paintings were analyzed for this paper and each depicts styles of the artists that were consistent with the time and place in which they were created. They are *The Alaska Trail*, a 20-inch by 16-inch oil and canvas by Sydney Mortimer Laurence from circa 1920, and *Portrait of Mademoiselle Suzette Lemair, in Profile*, by Édouard Manet, a pastel on paper, from 1880, and with dimensions of 21.5 inches by 17.75 inches.

Édouard Manet was a nineteenth-century French Impressionist painter. Like many Impressionist painters, he utilized loose brushwork and a lightened color palette. His style was distinctly personal and grounded in his immediate environment. His *Portrait of Mademoiselle Suzette Lemair in Profile* (Fig. 1) is a representational piece of a young lady, probably between the age of 15 and 20 (Tinterow 28). As its title indicates, it is a profile drawing.

The subject occupies a narrow space and is close to the picture plane. She wears a dark dress and complimentary tipped hat, and these items contrast to enhance the light-colored face by making it appear more illuminated. A light grey or very faint blue fills the background.

Portrait of Mademoiselle Suzette Lemair, in Profile is painterly in that there is a blurring of edges, especially with regards to her attire. It is plane in that it is parallel to the picture plane. It is considered *closed form* because one can clearly see that the space is identifiable. It is considered *unity*



Fig. 1. Édouard Manet, *Portrait of Mademoiselle Suzette Lemair, in Profile*.

because each detail is an independent element that is easily recognizable, yet a part of a larger whole. Her ear, for example, is clearly a recognizable ear, yet it helps to enhance the proportional head. Her hat is a beautiful piece of clothing in and of itself, yet it enhances her head and face. Light helps define the form. There is *relative clarity* in that the light appears to come in from a left front angle causing some areas to be shadowed. The visible front portions of the left side of her face are clearly lit up, whereas the back of her neck and the rear hair area are shadowed and detail is therein minimized.

The pre-iconographic consideration of the iconographic approach is represented in the precision of the title. It is a profile painting of a young lady. The second level of iconography, that of convention and precedent, shows that it is an attractive, young, unmarried lady named Suzette Lemair who is dressed very smartly.

At the third level of iconography, that of intrinsic meaning, the fancy style of dress must be considered, the demure and relaxed mood of the subject, and also what Mrs. Madeleine Lemair, the client and mother of Suzette Lemair, wanted from Manet. Madeleine Lemair was a minor French artist herself and had already painted an impressive full body portrait of Suzette. Madeleine eventually sold the profile pastel in 1908 to the Durand-Ruel Gallery in Paris, which sold it the same day to Louisine and H. O. Haremeyer, two New York collectors of French *avante-garde* art. Mrs. Lemair was quite pleased with Manet's finished product of her daughter.

As with Manet's painting, the title of Sydney Laurence's *The Alaska Trail* (Fig. 2) is descriptive. It is easy to see that it is a trail in the snow in Alaska. Laurence was one of the premier painters of northern landscapes, especially those of Alaska, and he often created works that showed the smallness of the human in contrast to the grandness of nature. Its *painterly* brush strokes are loose. It is *recession* because we can clearly see that the spatial sequence of the

scene goes back at a diagonal from the picture plane leading into very deep space. But in contrast to Manet's work, the human subject is far from the picture plane. Laurence's human subjects, when he included them in landscape paintings, are usually small in comparison to the scenery since he "... was not a great figure painter, and figures are usually incidental to the landscape" (Braarud).

The Alaska Trail is *closed form* as we can clearly see the boundaries of the scene. It is quite clear what we'd see if we were able to extend our vision beyond any of the four sides. In contrast, we are only able to imagine what would extend beyond only one side (down) of Manet's painting, and that downward view would provide more of the attire of Miss Lemair.



Fig. 2. Sidney Laurence, *The Alaska Trail*.

Laurence's painting is considered *unity* in that light compliments and allows the form rather than defines the form. Like Manet's work, it is representational, but Manet's work is representational only for the subject of Miss Lemair, since it lacks an identifiable background. Laurence's painting has a background that is full of recognizable objects.

The Alaska Trail by Sydney Laurence has *relative clarity*, as can be determined by the nature of the light source. Some items are highlighted while other areas are in darkness. Whites, blues and greens are the dominant colors. The sun's position realistically appears to be up and to the right, and back behind the first mountain. The painting is a linear perspective in that the trees in the distance are smaller in size, and less sharply defined than those positioned closer. The ambiguous location of some figures (e.g., trees in the far background) blurs their spatial relationship to one another.

The first level of iconographic understanding is that the painting is of a trail of some sort in Alaska. The title alone is not entirely descriptive since we need to view the painting to see that it is of a cold time of year, with snow abounding. At the second level of iconographic understanding we can observe that the human subject is tending to a sled. At this level, we can imagine the story of the painting. In the winter in Alaska, darkness predominates due to the Northern Hemisphere being pointed away from the sun as the earth rotates on its axis. The sun is up only a few hours at a time in many places. The sharpness of the mountains in the background would have us believe that they are part of one of the two large mountain ranges in Alaska—the northern Brooks Range, or the southern Alaska Range. Due to the position of the light from the sun, we'd expect that the time is either mid-morning or mid-afternoon, since earlier or later would have offered much less sunlight.

At the third level of iconography, that of intrinsic meaning, we get an understanding that work in the wilderness in Alaska must be very difficult, especially during the cold months. The attire and shelter must be enough to protect one from the harsh elements. We also understand that some individuals make a choice to assume labors in unforgiving environments such as this.

Édouard Manet and Sidney Laurence were both very prominent artists in their respective eras. Whereas Laurence's popularity is greatest in and around the Pacific Northwest, Manet and his works are much more recognized on a worldwide scale.

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