

Divisionists; an exhibition at the National Gallery, London

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A madwoman is screaming at the door, her silhouette contrasting with the light outside, her hair is up, her arms are flowing.

Outside in the clear countryside light, there is a child's funeral procession; there is no grief, just a sense of peace in the serene and bright surrounding light.

Where are we? At a psychiatric ward or in a country far away, with high child mortality?

No. We are at the National Gallery, in London, where an exhibition offers the chance to learn about the little known, yet important, art movement of Divisionism, the forerunner of Futurism. During a time of extraordinary social upheaval and political unrest, Italy's Divisionist painters developed a radical technique that revolutionised the way they depicted the world.

Contemporary with French pointillism, Divisionist artists applied paint in flickering lines and strokes, resulting in paintings of spectacular luminosity and brilliance. The exhibition, named *Radical Light*, features around 60 works by Italy's Divisionist Painters (1891-1910) including the main protagonists of Divisionism (Vittore Grubicy de Dragon, Giovanni Segantini, Gaetano Previati) and the futurist artists Giacomo Balla, Umberto Boccioni and Carlo Carrà, who followed.

The exhibition is really exciting from a GPs point of view as it depicts the situation of the low classes. For example, Angelo Morbelli's *For Eighty Cents!* (1895), shows bent-over mondine (the women who weeded the rice fields in notoriously awful conditions) in his native region of Piedmont. In another the adverse results of industrialisation in Northern Italy which created scenes of strikes shows desperate looking people on the front line exciting the crowd.

But there is more. From many of the paintings by Morbelli you can see how the old and the poor were assisted in Northern Italy by institutions created as early as 1771, at the time of the Illuministic era, and how the Socialist Party, just created in Italy, was supporting social and health improvements.

At the same time, Morbelli shows something unusual in his paintings: the old are shown desolate and alone, the significance of which is seen in the titles: "Christmas at the poor Institution" with three men sitting and just sleeping in a large bleak room filled with empty seats, and "I remember when I was a girl", where in a similar big room many old women sit at the table in front of a simple supper, all dressed the same, all with the same expression as they face each other, in silence; it gives you a sense of hopelessness and loss.

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