Case Study
***Charing Cross Bridge,* Andre Derain, 1906**

The early Fauvist works of Andre Derain had caught the eye of the art dealer Ambroise Vollard at the 1905 Salon d’automne. At his request Derain undertook a trip to London to paint the city’s river and cityscapes. It was Vollard's intention that Derain would return to Paris with a collection of paintings which would be a Fauvist vision of London, to counter the Impressionist version Claude Monet had made of London in 1903 and which had also been commissioned by Vollard.

Regarding Fauvism and his art, Derain stated *‘It is imperative we escape the circle in which the realists have trapped us’*. Derain’s means of ‘escape’ was in his use of colour.

This painting along with the others Derain completed in London contain a number of Fauvist characteristics. Planes of broad flat colour are juxtaposed with rapid brushwork, giving the painting a lively energised feeling. The colours are themselves bold and primary.

In his application of paint, Derain creates a sharp contrast between the smooth background skyline of London and the choppy horizontal slabs of colour which indicate light falling on the River Thames. Thick daubs of brilliant yellow are countered by a vibrant blue, these dots of pure colour are placed irregularly and the blank raw canvas underneath appears between them. This area of the painting is Pointillist in technique but lacks the accuracy and clarity of painting with which the Pointillists were renowned. However Derain’s method does suggest a sense of movement and urgency in the river which is echoed in the puffs of white smoke presumably emitted by the trains passing on the bridge overhead.

The bridge cleanly divides the picture plane in two, acting as a physical and visual barrier between the impasto effect of the water and the skyline which has been created in washes and blocks of colour. The brushstrokes in the upper half of the canvas are less discernible than in the lower half, however those that are visible are vertical, thus further opposing the visual effect of paint application in the lower half.

The bridge itself is shown as a solid mass of ultramarine blue. Its iron metalworking is picked out in the form of bright red bars which in a criss-cross design traverse the length of the bridge. These appear naively observed and rendered, paint has again been applied with speed and vigour, establishing Derain’s spontaneous approach to painting.

The composition and sense of perspective have likewise been simplified. The bridge acts as a horizon line while the Houses of Parliament silhouetted in bright green appear to lean dangerously to one side. There is no vanishing point and the upper half of the image appears flattened whereas below the bridge at ground level we see the river’s bank and boat houses. This confusing sense of spatial depth is a key characteristic of Fauvism and is a device observed previously with the Post Impressionists. However the advent of photography may also be a crucial key player in the development of unorthodox viewpoints and cropped images.

Despite the lack of realism evident in this painting in terms of colour and composition it is interesting to note that Derain actually painted this view outdoors. Derain had felt compelled to paint from life but allowed himself to be liberated from the constraints of traditional colouring and line.