

The Essential Encyclopaedic Guide to **Modern Art**

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STYLES, SCHOOLS AND MOVEMENTS



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Impressionism

Wallpaper in its embryonic state is more finished than that seascape.

LOUIS LEROY, 1874

Impressionism was born in April 1874 when a group of young artists in Paris, frustrated with the continual exclusion of their works from the official Salons, joined together to hold their own exhibition in the studio of the photographer Félix Nadar. Claude Monet (1840–1926); Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919); Edgar Degas (1834–1917); Camille Pissarro (1830–1903); Alfred Sisley (1839–99); Berthe Morisot (1841–95) and Paul Cézanne (1839–1906, see also *Post-Impressionism) were among the thirty painters who exhibited as the Société Anonyme des Artistes Peintres, Sculpteurs, Graveurs, etc. Other important French Impressionists exhibiting later included Jean-Frédéric Bazille (1841–70), Gustave Caillebotte (1848–94), and the American Mary Cassatt (1844–1926).

The 1874 exhibition was greeted with curiosity and confusion by the public, and derision from the popular press, and the title of Monet's *Impression, Sunrise* (c. 1872), provided the scornful critic, Louis Leroy, with the name for the group, 'Impressionists'. Years later Monet recounted the story behind the naming of the picture, and the fuss that ensued from it:

They wanted to know its title for the catalogue; [because] it couldn't really pass for a view of Le Havre. I replied, 'Use Impression.' Someone derived 'Impressionism' from it and that's when the fun began.

The sketch-like quality and apparent lack of finish to their work, to which many early critics objected, were exactly the qualities that more sympathetic critics would later identify as their strength.

What united this group of diverse artists was their rejection of the art establishment and its monopoly on what could be exhibited. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Academy was still promoting the ideals of the Renaissance: namely that the subject of art must be noble or



Above: **Auguste Rodin, *Crouching Woman*, 1880–82**

Like the Impressionists, Rodin avoided an appearance of finish in his work, preferring to leave something to the imagination. Monet's first success came after a joint exhibition with Rodin in 1889, and Rodin's fame contributed to the acceptance of Impressionism outside France.

Opposite: **Claude Monet, *Impression, Sunrise*, c. 1872–73**

Exhibited in 1874, the title of this view of Le Havre harbour in the morning mist provided the critic, Louis Leroy, with a name for the group, 'Impressionists'. The sketchiness and apparent lack of finish were scorned by contemporary critics.

instructive and that the value of a work of art could be judged by its descriptive 'likeness' to natural objects. The Impressionists' action – contesting the conventions and power of the traditional cultural gatekeepers by holding an independent exhibition – was a model for innovators of the following century. Likewise, the coining of an 'ism' by a sarcastic or scandalized critic to describe a radical new form of art would become standard procedure.

Since the mid-nineteenth century Paris had become the first truly modern metropolis, both physically and socially, and many Impressionist works captured this new Parisian cityscape. The role of art in a changed society was the subject of artistic, literary and social debates of the day, and the Impressionists were self-consciously modern in encompassing new techniques, theories, practices and variety in subject matter. Their interest in capturing the visual impression of

a scene, to paint what the eye saw rather than what the artist knew, was as revolutionary as their practice of working outdoors (instead of solely in the studio) to observe the play of light and colours. Their avoidance of historical or allegorical subjects, and their insistence on the fleeting moments of modern life – to create what Monet called ‘a spontaneous work rather than a calculated one’ – marked a definitive break with accepted subject matter and practice.

The work of Edouard Manet (1832–83) was an important influence on the Impressionists. Manet rejected the single vanishing point in favour of ‘natural perspective’ and his apparently illegible or incomplete subjects deliberately subverted classical ideals. He also transgressed the hierarchy of genres with his large-scale portrayal of ‘insignificant’ subject matter, and, above all, he insisted on portraying contemporary experience. When *Olympia* (1863) was exhibited in 1865, conservative critics were outraged by his treatment of traditional subject matter (the female nude).

The works of others, such as Camille Corot (1796–1875) and the Barbizon School, Gustave Courbet

(1819–77) and the English painters of a previous generation, J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851) and John Constable (1776–1837), demonstrated to the Impressionists ways in which the visual effects of light and weather could be explored in paint. The contrast, blurring and fragmentation caused by cropping in contemporary photography also made a strong impact on them, as did Japanese prints, displaying non-Western composition, perspective, and flat areas of colour.

Throughout the 1860s, the Impressionists absorbed these lessons and developed their styles, often painting together, or meeting (at the Café Guerbois in Montmartre, for instance) to discuss their work and share their ideas. Between 1874 and 1886 the eight now famous independent shows of their work took place, at once drawing the public’s attention. Critical reaction was often hostile, especially at first, but the Impressionists had influential champions, some of whom, like the writers Emile Zola and J. K. Huysmans, were also friends. They also attracted important private patrons and dealers, such as Dr Paul Gachet (later to





be Vincent van Gogh's physician at Auvers, see Post-Impressionism) and Paul Durand-Ruel.

It is not an exaggeration to say that throughout the 1870s most Impressionist works were concerned with the effects of light on landscapes. But a change occurred in the early 1880s, usually referred to as the 'Impressionist crisis'. Many of the artists began to feel that in trying to capture light and the ephemeral quality of atmosphere they had eroded the figure too far, and from this moment on, the movement became more diverse. Renoir, for example, turned to a more classical style of figure painting; Monet made his figures more solid, then adopted a more analytical approach to visual perception. The group began to portray a broader range of subject matter. The crisis, which also affected the younger generation exhibiting alongside the Impressionists, would later result in radical departures from the Impressionists' original ideas. Artists such as Paul Gauguin (see *Synthetism), Paul Cézanne (see Post-Impressionism), Georges Seurat and Paul Signac (see *Neo-Impressionism) eventually created their own styles.

The developments that affected the Impressionists are best seen in the work of a few leading individuals. For many, Claude Monet remains the Impressionist par excellence; his paintings of the railway station, *Gare Saint-Lazare* (1876–77), which combine and contrast the modern architecture of the station with the new, amorphous modernist



atmosphere (of steam), have been called the most representative Impressionist paintings. Monet's interest in atmosphere would become more prominent in other series which portray the same subject at different times of the day, year and climate, such as *Haystacks* (1890–92) and *Poplars* (1890–92). In the *Poplars* sequence the curvilinear arrangement of shapes simultaneously signals both depth and the flatness of the surface; the use of the S-curve suggests links with *Art Nouveau work of the same period. Towards the end of his life, from 1914 to 1923, Monet devoted himself to eight huge water lily canvases for a designated room at the Orangerie in the Tuileries, Paris. Together, they create an environment which entirely surrounds the viewer, a sense of

Above left: **Edgar Degas, *Woman Having Her Hair Combed*, c. 1886**

Degas's interest in the play of light and shade on the human form is evident in this pastel drawing. The nude made up at least a fifth of Degas's vast output.

Above right: **Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Mme Portalis*, 1890**

Declaring that painting 'should be something pleasant, cheerful and pretty, yes pretty!', Renoir delighted in delicate, colourful representations of sumptuous materials and flesh. His later works, however, are more strongly coloured with warm reds and oranges, and more solidly sculpted.

Opposite: **Berthe Morisot, *Boats Under Construction*, 1874**

In the same year as painting this picture, Morisot married the brother of Edouard Manet. She was a deeply committed member of the Impressionist group, contributing to every Impressionist exhibition, except in 1879, the year following the birth of her daughter.

infinity – or, as Monet put it, the ‘instability of the universe transforming itself under our eyes’. The brushstrokes, which must be connected in order to ‘read’ the works, induces the viewer to participate in creating meaning, a crucial concept for other artistic practices of the twentieth century. The abstract quality of the water lilies anticipates *Abstract Expressionist work of the 1940s and 1950s.

Although Renoir painted landscapes with Monet in the late 1860s, his primary interest was always the human figure, and his greatest contribution to Impressionism was to apply Impressionist treatment of light, colour and movement to subjects such as the crowd scene in *Dancing at the Moulin de la Galette* (1876). Declaring that painting ‘should be something pleasant, cheerful and pretty, yes pretty!’, Renoir returned again and again to scenes of Parisians at play, delighting in delicate, colourful representations of sumptuous materials and flesh. Around 1883 he broke definitively with pure Impressionism and began painting classical nudes in a dryer, less sensuous manner. Although

this phase was short-lived, he later combined his interest in classicism with the lessons of Impressionism. His brushstrokes became looser and more gestural, and some critics have seen Renoir’s late works, as well as Monet’s, as precursors of *Abstract Expressionism.

Edgar Degas’s work was shown in seven of the eight Impressionist group exhibitions, but he always considered himself a realist, proclaiming:

No art was ever less spontaneous than mine. What I do is the result of reflection and study of the great masters; of inspiration, spontaneity, temperament, I know nothing.

An accomplished draughtsman, he learned from Impressionist practice how to use light to convey a sense of volume and movement in his work. Like most of his colleagues, Degas would sketch in front of a scene, but preferred to continue work in the studio, for he felt that it was ‘much better to draw what you see only in your mind. During such transformation the imagination collaborates



with the memory.... Then, your memory and your imagination are freed from the tyranny imposed by nature.' Degas went to cafés, theatres, circuses, racetracks and the ballet in search of his subject matter. Of all the Impressionists, Degas was the most affected by photography, with its typical shattering of the focus of the pictorial field, the sense of the fleeting moment, the fragmentation of bodies and space and the cropping of the image. In the late 1880s he began to use pastels and a 'keyhole aesthetic' to portray women in natural, intimate poses, a development which was unprecedented in the history of art. As art historian George Heard Hamilton noted in reference to these late works: 'His colours were, indeed, his last and greatest gift to modern art. Even as blindness descended, his palette passed to the *Fauves.'

Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt were the two most prominent women who exhibited with the Impressionists. Their use of line and painterly freedom, and their choice of intimate scenes as subject matter, display affinities with the work of Manet and Degas. Cassatt's work seems to draw on many sources – the love of line seen in Japanese prints, the bright colours of the Impressionists and the skewed perspectives and photographic cropping of Degas – to create a unique style capable of rendering her typically tender, intimate views of domestic life.

Another American expatriate, James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903, see also *Decadent Movement), was the central figure in the development of Impressionism, and of modernism in general, in Britain. Even more than the French Impressionists, Whistler advocated that, far from being descriptive, a painting was purely an arrangement of colour, form and line on a canvas. His *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* (c. 1874), which the English art critic John Ruskin famously dismissed as 'a pot of paint flung in the public's face', fuses Impressionist ideas of colour and atmosphere with the flat decorative quality of Japanese prints, creating an original and memorable image of mood and atmosphere twenty years before Monet's cathedrals. The leading British Impressionist, Walter Sickert (1860–1942), absorbed the lessons of both Whistler and Degas, and in his work the darker palette of the British landscape tradition is transformed into something more contemporary.

By the late 1880s and 1890s Impressionism was accepted as a valid artistic style, and spread throughout Europe and the USA. Around the turn of the century, Germany was particularly receptive to outside influences, and the new French techniques were grafted onto the prevailing native naturalism. Max Liebermann (1847–1935), Max Slevogt (1868–1932) and Lovis Corinth (1858–1925) remain the most famous German Impressionists. In the USA, Impressionism was enthusiastically received by the press, the

public, artists and collectors, and some of the most extensive collections of Impressionism can be found today in the USA. The major practitioners of Impressionism in the USA were William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), Childe Hassam (1859–1935), Julian Alden Weir (1852–1919) and John Twachtman (1853–1902).

Despite the existence of sculpted works by Degas and Renoir, there were no sculptors directly affiliated with the movement. However, as the term came to refer to a general style, and not to the paintings of the original group, work by both the French sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) and the Italian Medardo Rosso (1858–1928) were termed Impressionist. Their sculptures take the interest in light, movement, spontaneity, fragmentation and disintegration of form by light and shadow into the third dimension. Similarly, work in other fields which seeks to capture transitory impressions is often called 'impressionist' (with more or less justification), such as the music of Ravel and Debussy or even the novels of Virginia Woolf.

The impact of Impressionism cannot be overestimated. Their actions and experiments symbolized the rejection of artistic traditions and the value judgements of criticism, and future avant-garde movements would follow their example and take a stand for artistic freedom and innovation. By painting 'vision' – not what one sees, but what seeing is – they heralded the beginning of Modernism, initiating a process that would revolutionize the conception and perception of the artistic object. Impressionism represents the beginning of the twentieth century's exploration of the expressive properties of colour, light, line and form, a particularly strong theme in modern art. Perhaps most important of all, Impressionism can be seen as the start of the struggle to free painting and sculpture from its solely descriptive duty in order to create a new language and role akin to other art forms such as music and poetry.

Key Collections

Courtauld Gallery, London
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Musée d'Orsay, Paris
Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Key Books

D. Kelder, *The Great Book of French Impressionism* (1980)
T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (Princeton, NJ, 1984)
B. Denvir, *The Impressionists at First Hand* (1987)
R. Herbert, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure and Parisian Society* (1988)
B. Denvir, *Chronicle of Impressionism* (1993)
B. Thomson, *Impressionism* (2000)