

Post-Impressionism

The Post-Impressionists consider the Impressionists too naturalistic.

ROGER FRY, MANET AND THE POST-IMPRESSIONISTS, EXHIBITION CATALOGUE, 1910

The term Post-Impressionism was coined by the English critic and painter Roger Fry (1866–1934), whose exhibition 'Manet and the Post-Impressionists' showed at the Grafton Galleries in London from November 1910 to January 1911, marking the first attempt to introduce the British public to the works of the generation that came after the *Impressionists. It contained around 150 works, including pieces by Gauguin, Van Gogh, Cézanne, Denis, Derain, Manet, Matisse, Picasso, Redon, Rouault, Sérusier, Seurat, Signac, Vallotton and Vlaminck, artists also variously called *Neo-Impressionists, *Synthetists, *Nabis, *Symbolists and *Fauves. In fact, Post-Impressionism was never a coherent movement, but a broad term applied retrospectively to cover art that Fry saw as either coming out of Impressionism or reacting against it. Following his lead, critics have subsequently used the term to cover the diversity of styles between c. 1880 (the final phase of Impressionism) and c. 1905 (the emergence of the Fauves), and to loosely describe artists not otherwise easily categorized, such as Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), Vincent van Gogh (1853–90) and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901). Some of the key features of Post-Impressionist art are best seen in the work of these three painters. Two other major figures, Paul Gauguin and Georges Seurat, both claimed for Post-Impressionism in Fry's epoch-making show, are in this book considered under Synthetism and Neo-Impressionism respectively, movements with which they explicitly identified themselves.

Cézanne, the eldest of the three, studied for two years with the Impressionist Camille Pissarro, and participated in the first and third Impressionist exhibitions in 1874 and 1877. From Pissarro he learned the value of direct observation and an appreciation of the effects of light and colour. Unlike the Impressionists, however, Cézanne's interest was not in the ephemeral qualities of light and the fleeting moment, but in the structure of nature. He realized that the eye takes in a scene both consecutively and simultaneously, and in his work the single perspective gives way to a shifting view, acknowledging that perspective changes as the eyes

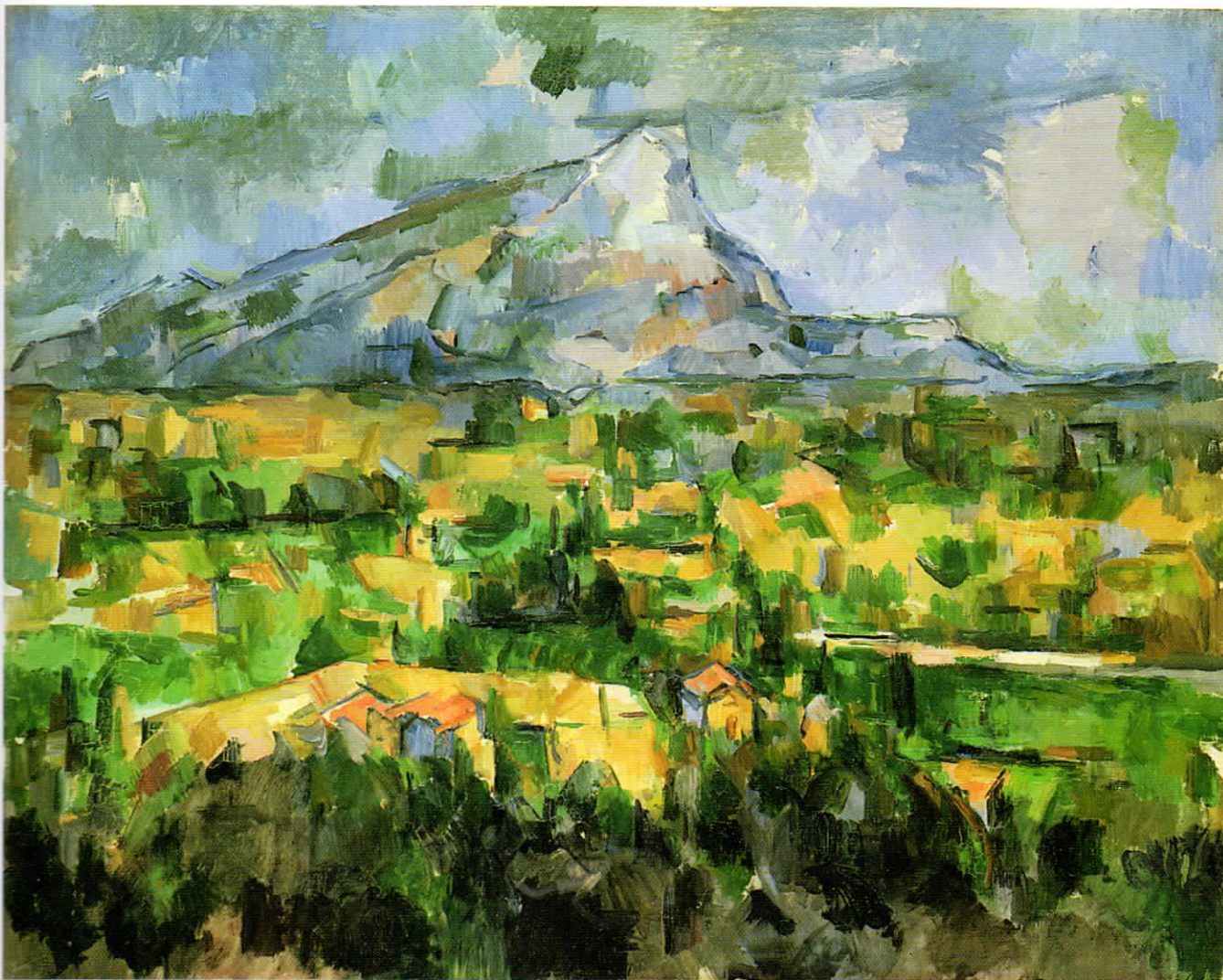


Above: **Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Divan Japonais*, 1893**

Like Art Nouveau designers, Toulouse-Lautrec was happy to turn his hand to advertisements, theatre programmes, posters and prints; his bold designs quickly caught on, and he produced some of his most famous posters in a productive period between 1891 and 1893.

and head move, and that objects seen together participate in each other's existence. In pictures of his favourite subjects – his wife and friends, the still life and the landscape of Provence – he translates the forms of nature into the 'plastic equivalents and colours' of painting. In *Still Life with a Plaster Cupid* (c. 1895), for instance, the cupid is presented both frontally and from above: the third dimension is not created by traditional means of perspective and foreshortening but by changes in colour, which both unify the surface and signal depth, a radical shift in pictorial technique.

Cézanne's mature work was not known to many until his first one-man show in 1895 at the gallery of Ambroise Vollard in Paris. The exhibition included 150 works, shown in rotation, fifty pictures at a time, and was enthusiastically received by the younger generation of artists and critics, as well as by the Impressionists Monet, Renoir, Degas and Pissarro, who all bought work from the show. Emile Bernard (see *Cloisonnism), Denis and the Nabis became admirers,



as would the Fauves and the *Cubists later. Many abstractionists would also claim Cézanne as a progenitor, based on the abstract quality of some of his work and a famous statement made in conversation with Bernard in 1904: 'Treat nature in terms of its geometrical shapes of the sphere, the cylinder, and the cone'. Cézanne himself, however, thought of geometric shapes not as ends in themselves, but as ways to construct nature into a parallel world of art. Of his influence, the English art critic Clive Bell wrote in 1914: 'He was the Christopher Columbus of a new continent of form.'

Above: **Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire* 1902-4**

After 1877 Cézanne rarely left Provence, preferring to work in isolation, painstakingly developing an art that combined classical structure with contemporary naturalism, an art which he believed would appeal to the mind as well as the eye.

Opposite: **Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait*, 1889** Van Gogh's self-portraits, painted during periods of lucidity, but while he was fully aware of his recurrent bouts of insanity, convey a terrifying and terrified awareness of his condition. Such self-awareness would be a key influence on a new generation of artists.

Like Cézanne, the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh was influenced by the Impressionists when he was a young man. After his move to Paris in February 1886 he met Pissarro, Degas, Gauguin, Seurat and Toulouse-Lautrec, and began to study Japanese woodcuts and recent Cloisonnist work. Themes of social realism disappeared from his work, and his palette brightened to produce a mature style characterized by vibrant colour savoured for its symbolic and expressive possibilities. 'Instead of trying to reproduce exactly what I have before my eyes,' he wrote, 'I use colour more arbitrarily so as to express myself more forcibly.' After a brief experiment with work in the manner of Seurat's divisionism, he soon developed the style of broad, vigorous and swirling brushstrokes for which he is known. 'In a picture', he wrote to his brother Theo, 'I want to say something as comforting as music. I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to give by the actual radiance and vibration of our colourings.'

Van Gogh studied nature intensely, as Cézanne did before him. Unlike Cézanne, however, whose working method was always slow, Van Gogh produced enormous numbers of pictures in flurries of activity between bouts of mental illness. After moving to Arles in February 1888 he painted more than 200 canvases in fifteen months. But his mental health deteriorated rapidly, and in 1889 a quarrel with Gauguin provoked a fit of despair in which he severed his left ear. In May of that year he entered the asylum at St Rémy. The self-expressive quality of his mature works makes them records of his life and emotions, almost self-portraits. The impact of these pictures would have to wait, however. *Red Vineyards at Arles*, bought by Belgian painter Anna Boch after being exhibited at the 1890 *Les Vingt exhibition in Brussels, was the only painting sold during his lifetime. It would be the later exhibitions – in Paris (1901); Amsterdam (1905); London (1910); Cologne (1912); New York (1913) and Berlin (1914) – that would turn him into such an enormously influential figure for the Fauves, *Expressionists and early abstractionists. Today, few artists can match his popular appeal.

Toulouse-Lautrec, in contrast, was widely celebrated in his day. He first became acquainted with Van Gogh (and painted his portrait) in 1886, when they studied in the Parisian studio of Fernand Cormon, together with the founders of Cloisonnism, Louis Anquetin and Bernard. He was interested in the Impressionists, particularly Degas, and also came into contact with Gauguin in 1888. Japanese prints influenced him strongly, and his developing style soon began to show its distinctive flat, bold patterns and calligraphic line. Pierre Bonnard, the Nabi painter whose champagne poster had just appeared, gave him advice on lithograph techniques, soon to be put to good use. Around 1888, Toulouse-Lautrec began painting the themes for which he is best known – theatres, music-halls (particularly the Moulin Rouge), cafés, circuses and brothels. Although the subject matter and interest in figures in motion is similar to Degas's own, Toulouse-Lautrec's figures are not representative types, but identifiable people, mostly his friends, painted or drawn from direct observation.

Fame came with his first poster for the Moulin Rouge in 1891. Like *Art Nouveau designers, Toulouse-Lautrec was happy to turn his hand to advertisements, theatre programmes, posters and prints. His paintings and graphic work were shown regularly in Paris, Brussels and London during the 1890s, when he was at the height of his fame. Although not affiliated with any particular group or movement, his style displays affinities with contemporaneous Art Nouveau work, and the aura of exoticism and hedonism of his work links him with the *Decadent Movement. In 1894 he painted Oscar Wilde's portrait during a trip to London.

One of the most important American painters to be considered Post-Impressionist is Maurice Prendergast (1859–1924). During the 1890s he lived in Paris, where he absorbed the lessons of Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism and Symbolism, while evolving a highly personal style of his own. A work such as *On the Beach, No. 3* (c. 1915) exemplifies this synthesis. Prendergast was responsible for introducing Post-Impressionist ideas into America, not only in his own work, but also through his activities as a member of The Eight (see *Ashcan School). In 1913 he helped to organize the Armory Show which presented numerous developments in European modernism to the American public for the first time.

Post-Impressionism was introduced in Russia at the turn of the century by the activities of the *World of Art group and in two important exhibitions in 1908 and 1909 sponsored by its successor, the Golden Fleece. In England, Roger Fry followed his first show with the 'Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition' (October–December, 1912), which concentrated on the younger avant-garde working in a more abstract mode. It included new Russian work by Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova (see *Jack of Diamonds and *Rayonism), and also a British section, with work by Vanessa Bell (1879–1961), Spencer Gore (1878–1914), Duncan Grant (1885–1978), Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957, see *Vorticism) and Fry himself, most associated with the Bloomsbury Group, which also included writers, such as Vanessa's sister, Virginia Woolf.

The Post-Impressionist artists worked in a broad range of styles, and held differing ideas about the role of art. However, they were all revolutionaries who sought to create an art that was other than descriptive realism, an art of ideas and emotions. The extraordinary diversity found in this period would provide much food for thought for the artists of the twentieth century.

Key Collections

Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pennsylvania
 Courtauld Gallery, London
 Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan
 Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
 National Gallery, London
 Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Key Books

J. Rewald (ed.), *The Letters of Cézanne* (1984)
 G. Cogeval, *The Post-Impressionists* (1988)
 B. Denvir, *Toulouse-Lautrec* (1991)
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 G. S. Keyes, et al., *Van Gogh Face to Face* (2000)