

The Making of Impressionism

This visual display examines the era of Impressionism and places the artists' works into historical and cultural context. The selected reproductions explain what led a group of bohemian artists to develop a new way of painting. Controversial at first, the style became one of the most pleasing and influential of all times.

During the lives of the Impressionists, 19th century Paris became a modern metropolis. France experienced a variety of governments, major wars and civil disruptions. City planners redesigned and rebuilt Paris. The population grew and prospered. The art patrons changed from the wealthy to the bourgeois, from European to international. New technology inspired the artists to leave the studio. Scientific discoveries made light and color of prime importance for painters. The Impressionists captured the changing façade of the city and the spirit of the times: the bustling boulevards, the exciting nightlife, and the leisure pursuits of country living. The result was a casual, colorful style that reflected the look of Paris and the countryside.

In keeping with the times, their independent attitude unified the Impressionists. Never really agreeing on one style, the group lasted just over a decade, with numerous artists joining and leaving. Yet the Impressionist movement forever changed the concept of what an artist is and how he or she paints.

By the end of the century, the Impressionists and their works, once thought to be scandalous, won the respect of the public and critics. Their casual style of painting the scenes of everyday life was accepted and admired. The Impressionists launched the art world into a new age of freedom from the traditional art schools and policies. This allowed artists to paint whatever and however they wanted, paving the way to modern art.

The Traditional Styles of Painting

Before the Impressionists, artists painted in one of three academic styles: Neoclassicism, Romanticism or Realism.

Neoclassic painters, such as Jacques-Louis David depicted historical, biblical, mythological subjects or portraits of wealthy people in a clear, linear style with no evidence of brushstrokes.

Romantic painters such as Eugène Delacroix depicted exotic places and stories from literature or events from history in an emotional and turbulent style with splashes of color and looser brushstrokes.

Realist artist Jean-Francois Millet continued the classical style, but painted ordinary people in rural settings. Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot of the Barbizon School painted landscapes outside the studio.

The Impressionists turned away from the restraints of the Neoclassic subjects and style; they embraced the looser brushstrokes and dynamic colors of Romanticism and the Realists' views of landscape and ordinary people.

The Traditional Path of Study

The *Ecoles des Beaux-Arts* was the most respectable art school in Paris during the 19th century. Entrance was limited to artists who were nominated by wealthy art patrons or teachers and those who could pass the entrance exam. Art students also secured sponsorship to study and copy the classic masterpieces in the Louvre. Other artists learned by apprenticeship, or studied with an artist in a studio. A number of the future Impressionists met and studied at the studio of Charles Gleyre. Many met at the more informal *Academie Suisse*, an open facility for artists that provided live models and studio space to draw and paint for a small fee.

The Official Salon

The greatest annual cultural event in Paris was the opening of the Salon in the month of May. The show could draw an attendance of over a half million people. Founded in the 17th century, the Salon was a State-controlled exhibition in which a jury determined which paintings were accepted. The only way to exhibit art in Paris was in the Salon; private galleries did not exist. To please the jury meant working in the traditional styles of painting. Acceptance to the Salon established overnight fame and financial success. Rejection, with a red "R" stamped on the back of the canvas, might doom an artist to obscurity.

Although the Salon occasionally hung the Impressionist artists' paintings, most works by the new avant-garde failed to make the exhibition. Objecting to the jury process, the jury selection, and to the traditional painting styles necessary to exhibit at the Salon, the future Impressionists organized their own non-juried show. Here they hung whatever painting they pleased, paving the way for other salons, galleries and solo exhibitions.

Paris in Conflict

Paris was not a peaceful place as the Impressionists came of age. A mood of rebellion and independence followed France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. The Commune

boldly took over the government and then collapsed. These revolutionary times scattered the Impressionists from Paris. Edouard Manet and Edgar Degas joined the artillery, and Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro fled to London. For a short time under the Commune, Gustave Courbet took charge of the arts, abolishing the monetary prizes at the Salon. When the Commune fell, he went into exile for his part in taking down the Vendôme Column, a symbol of the Napoleonic Empire.

Independence from the Salon

Two events initiated an independent art movement in France. In 1863, after the Salon rejected over 3,000 paintings, the artists and the public were outraged. Napoleon III established a special exhibition called the Salon des Refusés to allow the public to view the rejected artwork. Large crowds and very harsh criticism resulted. The most controversial painting was Manet's *Picnic in the Grass*, a scene of contemporary Parisian gentlemen (with nude women) having a picnic in the park. The nudity was as shocking as the obvious brushstrokes and harsh contrasts.

Four years later, rather than show in another Refusés exhibition, Manet and Courbet opened separate one-man shows in two small buildings near the Salon. Courbet shocked the world with *The Painter's Studio*, showing his friends, contemporaries and a nude model gathered in his studio.

The Salon was no longer the only art event in Paris.

Photography and the Printed Word

The discovery of photography radically affected the role of painters. Artists left the task of reproducing reality to the camera and began to explore a more personal view in painting. Although Louis Daguerre popularized the photograph in 1839, the invention of the Kodak snapshot camera in the 1880s had the most dramatic effect on the Impressionists. Corot, Manet, Pissarro, Monet, Degas, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec all owned cameras and incorporated the casual look of the snapshot into their paintings.

Nadar the Great (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon), a portrait and landscape photographer, inspired the Impressionists to paint cityscapes and street scenes. He took new views of Paris from a hot air balloon. Nadar's studio was the site of their first exhibition.

Publications about the arts exploded after a new modern printing process was developed and censorship was relaxed in 1870. Well-published critics working for newspapers and journals guided public interest and taste in art with their significant coverage of the Salon and the new independent shows.

The Outdoor Studio

The Impressionists were interested in the color theories of chemist Eugène Chevreul. His theory stated that every color has an opposite and that they appear brighter or duller according to the adjacent color. To the Impressionists, color and light became the most important subject to paint. To emphasize color, they used white canvas without the traditional dark underlayers of paint; many Impressionists banned black and brown from their palettes. Monet painted one scene again and again to capture the changing light and color over the course of the day. New chemical colors helped intensify the palette range to more brilliant hues.

Painters once had to grind their pigments, mix the powder with a binder and store the paint in fragile pig bladders. When they could purchase lead tubes of paint after 1840, they were free to leave the studio to study the light and colors in the outdoors. Monet led his friends to Fontainebleau, home of the Barbizon school, after Gleyre's studio closed in 1864. Monet and Renoir painted together in the gardens of their country homes. As the artists worked quickly outdoors to capture the moment, a more informal, sketchy style, with a "broken brush" stroke resulted.

The Post-Impressionists, some closely associated with the Impressionists, carried these concepts of light and color even further. Georges Seurat developed a precise scientific style called pointillism, using dots of pure primary colors. Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh used colors as expressions of emotions or symbols.

Urban Expansion

In the late 19th century, the population of Paris grew to over two million people. Paris was bursting at the seams. Civil disruption took its toll on city streets and structures. Napoleon III contracted Baron Georges Eugène Haussmann to modernize Paris, making it one of the most exciting and beautiful cities in the world. There were over thirty miles of tree-lined boulevards, grand intersections, expansive iron bridges and spacious parks built. Modern new buildings, exhibition centers and concert halls built of glass and steel rather than wood or stone attracted world attention. Universal expositions brought international fame to Paris with many ambitious building projects: the world's tallest and widest structure (the Eiffel Tower and the Galerie des Machines). The first railroad station (Gare Saint-Lazare), built near the artist community, connected Parisians to over 8,000 miles of tracks and became of symbol of modern life. The new look of Paris inspired the avant-garde artists.

The Cafes and Cabarets

There were over 24,000 cafés and cabarets in Paris in the 19th century. A few were so popular with artists that they were called the birthplace of Impressionism. In the 1860's artists gathered on Thursday night at the Café Guerbois and in the 1870s they met at the Nouvelle-Athènes for lively discussions and camaraderie. The cabarets provided a new venue for painting. The Impressionists captured the colorful gatherings of their friends and ordinary working people dancing and talking in the sunlight or under the theatrical lights. Pierre-Auguste Renoir frequented the Moulin de la Galette, a popular, countrified, open-air dance hall where Parisians gathered on Sunday afternoons and evenings. He set up a canvas to paint the dappled sunlight right on the spot. Toulouse-Lautrec was a constant visitor at the Moulin Rouge, sketching the can-can dancers and patrons under the dramatic artificial lights.

The Theater

The new Paris Opera House provided a source of inspiration for many Impressionist artists. The dancers, the dramatic lighting and well-dressed theatergoers provided inspiration for endless compositions. Degas sketched the performers backstage, capturing the moving dancers as with a camera, in seemingly awkward poses. In his quest for speed, he combined media, thinning his oils with tempera and pastel for quick flashes of color and light.

The Countryside

The modernization of Paris encouraged people to get out and enjoy the new parks and boulevards. The railroads made more of the French countryside easily accessible and a visual playground for the artists. The Impressionists left the studio to paint landscape. They set their easels in the urban parks, private gardens, country villages and fields, along the rivers and the seashore. Many artists moved permanently to the countryside, such as Monet who settled in Giverny.

Parisians at Play

A popular new subject for the Impressionists was the middle class enjoying their leisure time activities, especially on a sunny weekend! The Impressionists were interested in painting modern life in the city parks, the countryside, restaurants, and inside the home.

Renoir painted his friends at the Fournaise Restaurant along the Seine, working with short brushstrokes and bright colors to suggest the lively movement of the group. Many artists went to the seaside to find people enjoying the sunshine and boating. Mary Cassatt, an American artist in Paris, focused on quiet indoor scenes with women and/or children.

La Japonisme

Japanese objects were popular in France after Commodore Matthew Perry signed a trading treaty with Japan in 1854. Shops opened in Paris selling fans, kimonos and wood block prints; the Universal Exposition of 1867 featured displays from Japan. Many called the future Impressionists "Les Japonais" because the artists were so intrigued by things Japanese. They copied Japanese prints in oil, or they incorporated Japanese objects into the background of their portrait paintings. The Impressionists also borrowed elements of Japanese painting styles that were different from the Western Academic traditions: bold blocks of flat color, patterns, black outlines, flattened perspective and a dramatic bird's eye view. French artists also created Japanese style wood block prints of the Paris landscape.

The Impressionists' Exhibitions

Following the second Salon des Refusés in 1873, a group of artists formed the Société Anonyme des Artistes. Their goal was to organize an exhibition where they could display and sell what they wanted without the judgment of a jury. As a group, they also agreed not to enter the Salon.

This first independent group exhibition featured thirty artists and one hundred and sixty paintings. It opened on the second floor of Nadar's Photography Studio. The attendance never reached that of the Salon, although 3,500 people paid one franc to enter. The annual Salon attendance often reached over a half million people. The first show was also a financial failure; few artists earned enough to pay the society dues of sixty francs or the expenses of the exhibition.

Unfortunately, the visitors and the critics hated what they saw. One critic in *Le Charivari* magazine said the paintings were just impressions, a term he took from Monet's painting **Impression, Sunrise** displayed on the right. The name "Impressionists" identified the group thereafter.

A few supported the Impressionists in spite of the criticism. Emile Zola, a literary writer and a regular at the Café Guerbois, defended them in print. Paul Durand-Ruel, an art dealer from London, invested his time and money. He organized and sponsored their

subsequent shows, held auctions in hotels to raise money, published catalogues, purchased their artwork with his own money when nothing sold, and expanded the market to all of Europe, London and New York.

The Impressionists held eight exhibitions that included over fifty different artists between 1874 and 1886. Only one artist, Pissarro, exhibited in all eight Impressionist shows. In keeping with their goal to be independent and avoid the Salon, the group had difficulty staying together. Although some remained true to Impressionism, others experimented with new styles that emerged into Post-Impressionism.