

Impressionism: A Momentous Phenomena in Modern Art

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A movement in painting originating in 1860s in France and regarded as one of the most momentous phenomena in 19th-century art. The impressionists were not a formal group with clearly defined principles and aims; rather they were a loose association of artists linked by some community of outlook who banded together for the purpose of exhibiting. The central figures involved in the movement were (in alphabetical order) Cezanne, Degas, Manet, Monet, Camille Pissarro, Renoir, and Sisley. Monet, Renoir, and Sisley met as students, and the others people came into contact with them through the artistic cafe society of Paris. There were more friendly ties of varied degrees of intimacy linking each of them to most of the others, but Degas and even more Manet were set somewhat apart because they came from a higher stratum of a society than the others, and the artists commitment to impressionism varied considerably (Manet was much respected as a senior figure, but he never exhibited with the group). The impressionists reacted against academic teaching and conventions and also were in revolt from the basic principle of Romanticism that art should convey intense personal emotion. They repudiated imaginative art, including a historical subjects, and were interested rather in the objective recording of contemporary life. They trying to capture an 'impression' of what the eyes sees at one particular moment. Landscape is considered the theme of most typical of the Impressionists, but they painted

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many other subjects. Degas for example, had little interest in landscape and made subjects such as horse races, dancers, and laundresses his own, and Renoir is famous for his pictures of pretty women and children.

The Impressionists' desire to look at the world with a new freshness and immediacy was encouraged by photography and by scientific research into colour and light. In trying to capture the effects of light on varied surfaces, particularly in open-air settings, they transformed painting, using bright colours and sketchy brush work that seemed bewildering or shocking to traditionalists. The name 'Impressionism', in fact, was coined derisively, when it was applied to a picture by Monet, *Impression: Sunrise* (Musée Marmottan, Paris, 1872), which was first shown at the first Impressionist exhibition, held in Paris in 1874. There were seven more Impressionist exhibitions (1876, 1877, 1879, 1880, 1881, 1882, and 1886) and after, the final one the group broke up, only Monet continuing to pursue Impressionist ideals rigorously. Although Impressionism was at first greeted with great hostility and many of its practitioners had to endure great financial hardship early in their careers, it began to win critical acceptance in the 1880s and its influence was enormous- much of the history of late 19th cent. and early 20th cent. painting is the story of developments from it or reactions against it. The Neo-Impressionists, for example, tried to give the optical principles of Impressionism a scientific basis, and the Post Impressionists began a long series of a movements that attempted to be free colour and line from purely representational functions and return to the emotional and

symbolic values that the Impressionists had sacrificed in their concentration on the fleeting and the casual.

Claude Monet (1840-1926) French Impressionist painter. He is regarded as the archetypal Impressionist in that of his devotion to the ideals of the movement was unwavering throughout his long career, and it is fitting that one of his pictures-

Impression: Sunrise (Musee Marmottan, Paris, 1872)- gave group its name. His youth was spent in Le Havre, where he first excelled as the caricaturist but was then converted to landscape painting by his early mentor Boudin, from whom he derived his firm predilection for painting out of the doors. In 1859 he studied in Paris at the Atelier Suisse and formed friendship with Pissarro. After two years' of tough military service in Algiers he returned to Le Havre and met Jongkind, to whom he said, he owed 'the definitive education of my eye'. He then, in 1862, entered the studio of Gleyre in Paris and there met Renoir, Sisley, and Bazille, with whom he was to form the nucleus of the Impressionist group. Monet's devotion to painting out of doors is illustrated by a famous story concerning one of his most ambitious early works, *Women in the Garden* (Musee d'Orsay, Paris, 1866-7). The picture is about 2.5 m. high and to enable him to paint all of its outside he had a trench dug in the garden, so the canvas could be raised or lowered by pulleys to the height he required. Courbet visited him when he was working on it and said Monet would not paint even on the leaves in the background unless the lighting conditions were exactly right.

During the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1) he took refuge in England with Pissarro: he studied the work of Constable and Turner, painted

the Thames and London parks, and met the dealer Durand-Ruel, who was going to become one of the great champions of the Impressionists. From 1871 to 1878 Monet lived at Argenteuil, a village on the Seine near Paris, and where were painted some of the most joyous and famous works of the Impressionist movement, not only by Monet, but by his all visitors Manet, Renoir, and Sisley. In 1878 he moved to Vetheuil and in 1883 he settled at Giverny, also on the Seine, which were about 40 miles from Paris. But, After having experienced extreme poverty, Monet began to prosper. By 1890 he was successful enough to buy a house at Giverny he had previously rented and in 1892 he married his mistress, with whom he had begun an affair in 1876, which were three years before the death of his first wife. From 1890 he concentrated on series of pictures in which he painted the same subject at different times of the day in different lights- Haystacks or Grainstacks (1890-I) and Rouen Cathedral (1891-5) are the best known. He continued to travel the world, like visiting London and Venice several times (and also Norway as a guest of Queen Christiana), but increasingly his attention was focused on the celebrated water-garden he created at Giverny, which served as the theme for the series of paintings on a Water –Lilies that began in 1899 and grew to dominate his work completely (in 1914 he had a special studio built in grounds of his house so he could work on the huge canvases) . In his final years of life he was troubled by failing eyesight, but he painted until the end. He was enormously prolific, and many of major galleries have examples of his work.

Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919) French Impressionist painter, born at Limoges. In 1854 he began work as a painter in a porcelain factory in Paris,

gaining experience with the light, fresh colours that were to distinguish his Impressionist work and also learning the importance of good craftsmanship. His predilection towards light-hearted themes was also influenced by the great Rococo masters, whose work he studied in the Louvre. In 1862 he entered the studio of Gleyre and then there formed a lasting friendship with Monet, Sisley, and Bazille. He painted with them in the Barbizon district and became a leading member of the group of Impressionists, all of whom met at the Cafe Guerbois. His relationship with Monet was particularly close at this time, and their paintings of the beauty spot called La Grenouilliere done in 1869 (an example by Renoir is in the National museum, Stockholm) is regarded as the classic early statements of the Impressionist style. Like Monet, Renoir endured much hardship early in his career, but he began to achieve success as a portraitist in the late 1870s and was freed from financial worries after the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel began buying some of his work regularly in 1881. By this time Renoir had 'travelled as far as Impressionism could take me', and had a visit to Italy in 1881-2 inspired him to seek a greater sense of solidity in his work. The change in attitude is seen in *The Umbrellas* (NG London), which was evidently begun before his visit to Italy and finished afterwards; the two little girls on the right are painted with the feathery brushstrokes which are characteristic of his Impressionist manner, but the figures on the left are done in a crisper and drier style, with duller colouring. After the period of experimentation with what he called his *maniere aigre* (harsh or sour manner) in the mid 1880s, he developed a softer and more supple kind of handling. At the same time, he turned from contemporary themes to more timeless subjects which were, particularly nudes, but also pictures of young

girls in unspecific settings. As his style became grander and simpler, he also took up mythological subjects ('The judgement of Paris, Hiroshima Museum of Art, c. 1913-14), and the type of female he preferred became more mature and ample. In the 1890s Renoir began to suffer from rheumatism, and from 1903 (by which time he was world- famous) he started live in the warmth of the south of France. The rheumatism eventually crippled him (by 1912 he was confined to a wheelchair), but he continued to the painting until the end of his life, and in his last years he also took up the sculpture, directing assistants (usually Richard Guino, a pupil of Maillol) to act as his hands (Venus Victorious, Tate, London, 1914).

Renoir is perhaps the best-loved of all the Impressionists, for his subjects-pretty children, flowers, beautiful scenes, above all lovely women-have instant appeal, and he communicated the joy that he took in them with great directness. 'Why shouldn't art be pretty?', he said, 'There are enough unpleasant things in this world' He was one of the great worshippers of the female form, and he said, 'I never think I have finished a nude until I think I could pinch it.' One of his sons was the celebrated film director Jean Renoir (1894-1979), who wrote a lively and touching biography which was published both in French and English (Renoir My Father) in 1962.