Welcome to Impressionism

Impressionism in the Visual Arts

**What is Impressionism**

Impressionism is a 19th century artistic movement that swept much of the painting and sculpture styles of the period. It was not just a passing trend, but has defined an entirely modern way of expressing one's artistry that eventually rubbed off in other art forms like literature and photography.

**Impressionist Art Roots**

The impressionist artistic style had its formal launching in 1874, when a group of Parisian artists from the Cooperative and Anonymous Society of Painters, Sculptures and Engravers mounted an exhibit at the studio of photographer/journalist Felix Nadar. A group of artists composed of Claude Monet (history), Edgar Degas, Camille Pissarro, and a few others organised the group during the latter part of 1873 and were subsequently joined by Paul Cezanne, Auguste Renoir, Alfred Sisley and Berthe Morisot among the noted artists of the time. A total of 30 artists participated in the exhibition. They exhibited together eight times between 1874 and 1886.

The exhibition actually marked a rebellion against the established artistic standards of the Academie des Beaux-Arts, which was considered to be the authority in the realist styles of French painting that had characterised the country's accepted painting styles of the period.

The Academie held annual art exhibitions called *Salon de Paris* that featured juried works conforming to its standards. For struggling artists, getting their works exhibited in the Salon gave them their break, winning prizes and opening up opportunities for commissions, receiving reviews and the right exposure to patrons of the art and eventually carving a reputation in the arts community.

It was not long before a new generation of artist using lighter brush strokes and brighter colours, with lesser attention to detail and more bias to landscapes and mundane, less noble aspects of life started getting their works rejected by the established Salon. The works of Renoir, Sisley, Monet, Pissarro, Cezanne Guillaumin and Bazille were rejected year after year. In 1863, the Academie rejected Manet's Luncheon of the Grass for depicting a realistic nude lady posed with a couple of clothed men in a contemporary picnic setting. The jury's rejection appalled Manet's admirers even among traditional arts patrons. That year alone saw an unusually large body of artworks rejected, prompting the then Emperor Napoleon III to decree the creation of the Salon of the Refused, an exhibition of works rejected by the Academie.

**Origin of the Word**

The first exhibition elicited highly critical reviews which could be expected from arts reviewers in the established traditions. Cezanne and Monet received the harshest critique by reviewer-humourist Louis Leroy whose criticism appeared in the Le Charivari newspaper and used the word "Impressionist" from Claude Monet's painting entitled Impression Sunrise (Impression, Soleil Levant) to derisively describe the artists whose works he considered as being no more than unfinished sketches. He scathingly wrote:

*Impression – I was certain of it. I was just telling myself that, since I was impressed, there had to be some impression in it ... and what freedom, what ease of workmanship! Wallpaper in its embryonic state is more finished than that scene.*

In a short time, the term "Impressionists" achieved wide public acceptance, including the artists themselves, despite the fact that the avant garde painting style had more stylistic colours and temperamental diversity than the word suggests.

Impressionism gave birth to other art forms:

Themes of Impressionism

The Impressionists shared some major themes that united their work. Look at two of the paintings below. At first glance they seem quite different from one another, but in their own way each one is typical of Impressionism.

Figure 1 : La Pont de L'Europe





**The Radical Nature of Impressionism**

Although it may seem different to imagine now, Impressionism (a departure from the traditional paintings of its day) was considered radical and even offensive at first site by some people.

Academic paintings tended to glorify human actions by dramatising figures in historical, religions or mythical theme. In Caillebotte's painting, a bridge and some anonymous strollers form the focus of the work. There is no obvious moral lesson or story being told in this image.

Nature was included in traditional paintings, but largely as a dramatic background for allegorical themes. Sisley considered nature to be worthy subject matter in its own right.

**The Painting of Modern Life**

The Impressionists liked to paint scenes of everyday life, of contemporary people at work and play. Caillebotte has painted a moment of everyday life from the world he knew. A middle class man and woman stroll along the bridge, and working class man pauses to gaze onto the train tracks. A dog trots by as if by accident.



Here a group of people seem to be enjoying the spring in groves of trees. The Impressionists shared a fascination with the countryside as a result of the growth of a Parisian middle-class, with leisure time and the arrival of the railroad system giving them access to travel outside the confines of the city.

**Busy City and Quiet Countryside**

The Impressionist world was a contrast of city and country, and these were the locales they painted.

Here you see elements of the dynamic, modern Paris the Impressionists loved to paint. The focus is the famous bridge of Europe – built in 1865 to 1868 – a technological wonder of its day. Other elements of the new city include a wide boulevard and the steam of a train from the tracks below the bridge.

Sisley focused on the riverside villages outside Paris, painting landscape to explore nature’s colours and the effects of sunlight in the outdoor environment.

**En Plein Air – The Passing Moment**

Many Impressionists chose to work spontaneously and quickly, more concerned with capturing a passing moment than with accurate brushwork.

Although Caillebotte often chose outdoors subjects and made preliminary studies outside, he finished his paintings in the studio. Caillebotte’s idea of capturing the moment was by freezing it in a camera frame, a composition calculated and studied to create the illusion of the passing moment.



Sisley’s painting demonstrated the exuberant brushwork that is a hallmark of *plein air* painting. His work is much smaller than Caillebotte’s – roughly two-and-a-half feet wide. Sisley captured the passing moment almost literally by completing his work in in the setting.

**Optical Innovations**

The influence of photography is apparent in the steep perspective and seemingly casual placement of figures in this composition. In fact, Caillebotte carefully planned the painting to illustrate how people were dwarfed or surrounded by the cities industrial features. He made many preparatory studies of the figures and the bridge.



Here you can see the way some of the Impressionists built a painting by placing daubs of bright color side by side. The golden leaves in the tree on the left stand out more vividly for being painted next to the blue sky.

Composition and Content

Mundane subjects have been depicted in paintings before the impressionists came, notable from 17th century Dutch painters like Rembrandt and Jan Steen. But they were composed in the classical compositional style where the main subject was the focus, often in contrived positions to command attention. On the other hand, impressionists throw out this artificiality between subject and background, often depicting something like a photographic stolen shot that creates a more relaxed and natural contextual positioning of the main subject.

To a large extent, impressionist styles can be viewed more as a reaction to the emerging visual realism offered by the emerging photographic works that devalued the need for realistic paintings.

In short, impressionism is a depiction of an artist's impression. It does not aim to be accurate in detail, which one finds in the realist and neo-realist style. But the impression often elicits a stronger emotional appeal which is variously triggered in the beholder. Many impressionist paintings have a soft nebulous rendering of its subject, almost dream-like. Rules about perspective, clean definite lines and interplay of light and shadows no longer apply. It is a spontaneous expression, often discarding the basic ability to draw correctly and becomes more an interplay of colours. Because it is an impression, every impressionist painting becomes more an expression of the heart.

Top Impressionist Artists

**Claude Monet**

Figure 2: The Bridge at Argenteuil

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Claude Monet (14 November 1840 – 5 December 1926) was considered the founding father of the impressionist painting style that started in Paris and was the most prolific in the genre. To talk about impressionism is to talk about his body of work. It all started in 1872, when his *Impression Sunrise*, exhibited in the landmark 1874 anti-establishment show spawned the word Impressionist from an artist critic. That same painting is now displayed in the Musee Marmotan Monet in Paris.

Monet showed early talent as a painter and went on to study at the Ecole de Beaux-Arts where he showed his rejection of traditional art values. He left for the Academie Suisse where his met fellow independently-minded artists Pissarro and Courbet. It was in Paris where he met with other artists who would soon form the impressionist core. Among them was Edouard Manet who had a profound influence on him. In 1862, Monet became a student of Charles Gleyre where he met Pierre-August Renoir, Alfred Sisley and Frederic Bazille and shared the same impressionist tendencies with raw brushstrokes and broken colours. It was Monet's *Women in the Green Grass or Camille* he painted in 1866 that started his road to fame and with a work that featured his future wife Camille.

During his later years, his work showed a more reddish overall tone resulting from his cataracts but it never diminished the value of his works that remained one of the pillars in impressionist art.

Today, one of the highest prices paid in art auction was for his Nympheas, Water Lilies sold for more than $71 million.

[**Pierre-Auguste Renoir**](http://www.impressionism.org/paintings/pierre-auguste-renoir.htm)

Figure 3: A Girl with a Watering Can



Pierrre-Auguste Renoir (25 February 1841 – 3 December 1919) was among the leading French painters in the impressionist style which a distinctly emphatic focus on feminine beauty. His impressionist nudes were his signature subjects with details that are freely suggested in brushed colours, allowing the subject to blend with the surroundings. The single largest archive of his work is at the Barnes foundation in Philadelphia.

Noted for their vibrant saturated colours with people as subjects in candid positions, Renoir earned initial recognition when six of his works were exhibited in the first formal impressionist show of 1874, along with his friends Monet and Degas. But his *en plein air* (in the open air) landscapes were just as impressionistic in its interplay light and water.

One of his best impressionist paintings is the 1876 *Dance at Le Moulin de la Galette* depicting an open air scene, culminating in his superbly executed 1881 *On The Terrace* now exhibited in the Art Institute of Chicago.

For a short time in the mid-1880s, Renoir broke off with the impressionist movement for a more disciplined formal technique in portraits after getting impressed with the works of Raphael and other renaissance artists when he visited Italy in 1881. The decade produced such masterpieces as *The Bathers*. The decade of the 1890s saw him returning to the impressionist mold with more nudes like the *Girls at the Piano* in 1892. His preoccupation with nudes created a wealth of eroticism that generally describes his lasting legacy to the impressionist artistic style.

**Edgar Degas**

Figure 4: The Races



Edgar Degas (19 July 1834 – 27 September 1917) was born Hilaire-Germain-Edgar De Gas and was regarded as among the Parisian artists who founded impressionism, though he rejected the term and preferred to be called a realist. He was famous for his printmaking and drawing, aside from sculpture and painting, all making a significant body of work that added weight to the impressionist movement of his time.

Unlike many of his impressionist contemporaries in Paris, Degas started out as a realist with many of his paintings depicting historical subjects and won jury nods to exhibit in the Salon for 5 consecutive years starting in 1865 with is historical painting Scene of War in the Middle Ages. But the latter years saw him shift his attention towards the impressionist school with a preference to observed contemporary life, particularly with women at work and dance. His Salon exhibit in 1868 defined him as a master in depicting ballet dancers in rehearsals. As his subjects changed, so did his technique that progressively embraced the impressionist movement and influenced by spontaneity of photographic works.

**Vincent van Gogh**

Figure 5: Flower Beds in Hollard



Vincent van Gogh (30 March 1853 – 29 July 1890) was a Dutch painter who work was more characteristically post-impressionist. Heexuded raw intensity and emotional honesty using bold colours and searing brush strokes that laid much of the foundation of modern 20th century arts. While his artistic talent showed up as missionary pastor which was to be his vocation, it was not until the 1880s when his interest in the arts finally blossomed when he attended the Academie Royale des Beauxs-Arts in Brussels where he aspired to become an artist in the service of God.

During his stay in Nuenen and Antwerp his creative works started to gather interest in Paris. His studies of peasant characters paid off with his first major work *The Potato Eaters*. By August 1885, exhibitions of his works were held through the arts dealer Leurs in the Hague.

His two years in Nuenen produced almost 200 oil paintings that had sombre subjects in earth colours with none of the bright colours that characterised his later works. When he entered the Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp in 1886 he was already plagued with poor diet, overwork and excessive smoking.

Van Gogh reached the pinnacle of his creative artistry during the last 4 years of his life, starting with a neo-impressionist style of the period along with Paul Signac and Georges Seurat. His fame had been steadily growing since his exhibitions in the late 1880s. Hiss suicide in 1890 launched memorial exhibits in Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris, The Hague, Cologne, Antwerp and New York that only cemented his place in neo-impressionism alongside Pablo Picasso. Van Gogh's works are among the most expensive paintings ever auctioned.

**Paul Cezanne**

Figure 6: Still Life Pears



Paul Cezanne (19 January 1839 – 22 October 1906) was a French artist whose works laid the foundation for a smooth transition between late 19th century impressionist style and the early post-impressionist cubism. In 1852, he entered the College of Bourbon (today the Mignet Collet) and then entered law school at the University of Aix while getting drawing lessons. He eventually gave up his law education to pursue his artistic development. In Paris, he met with impressionist Pissarro who exerted significant formative influence over him that led to a few collaborative works.

It was natural for Cezanne to adapt the impressionist style when his artistry started to ripen in Paris and Provence between 1870 and 1878, reaching maturity from 1878 to 1890. But it was not until after his death in 1906 that a series of large-scale posthumous exhibits in Paris in 1907 made a significant dent on the avant-garde Parisian arts that made him one of the most influential 19th century artists, leading up to Cubism.

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