Nineteenth-Century Impressionism

The Impressionist style evolved in Paris in the 1860s and continued into the early 20th century. Unlike Realism, Impressionism rarely responded to political events. The devastating effects of France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, for example, had no impact on Impressionist imagery. Impressionists preferred genre subjects, especially leisure activities, entertainment, landscape, and cityscape. Impressionism was also more influenced by Japanese prints and new developments in photography than by politics.

Urban Renewal during the Second Empire

By 1853, Napoleon Bonaparte’s nephew, Napoleon III, had been the self-proclaimed ruler of the Second Empire for two years. For political as well as aesthetic reasons, he decided to modernize Paris and adapt industrial developments to improve the lifestyle of the general population. New housing would eliminate slums, and wide boulevards would replace the old, narrow streets left over from the Middle Ages. Modern amenities such as drainage and sewer systems, clean water supplies, bridges, lamplighting along the streets, outdoor fountains, and public parks would give the citizens of Paris a renewed sense of civic pride. The emperor also believed that these renovations would discourage revolutionary activity and prevent uprisings of the kind that had swept Europe in 1848. With this in mind, he commissioned Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann (1809-91) to plan and supervise the new urban design.

Haussmann was inspired by the Baroque grandeur of Bernini’s Square of St. Peter’s and the layout of Versailles. His plan was to focus on important buildings or monuments, on which the boulevards converged (or from which they radiated). From the point of view of the emperor there were political advantages to Haussmann’s renovations. Wide boulevards discouraged barricades and made it easier for troops to suppress uprisings. Slums were razed in the process, and this drove the potentially subversive lower classes out of the enter of Paris and into the suburbs.

Despite the changing focus of its content, Impressionism was in some ways a logical development of Realism. But Impressionists were more concerned with optical realism and the natural properties of light. They studied changes in light and color caused by weather conditions, times of day, and seasons, making shadows and reflections important features of their iconography. Impressionists also studied the effects of artificial interior lighting, such as theater spotlights and café lanterns. Nevertheless, these formal concerns did not entirely eliminate the interest in observing society and the changes brought about by growing industrialization; subject matter included canals and barges, factories with smoking chimneys, and railway stations. Although many Impressionists were from bourgeois families, they liked to exchange ideas in more bohemian surroundings. They gathered at the Café Guerbois in the Montmartre district of Paris, and because their paintings were initially, and vociferously, rejected by the French Academy, as well as by the French public, the Impressionists became a group apart. They held eight exhibitions of their own work between 1874 and 1886. Ironically, despite the contemporary rejection of Impressionism, it had a greater international impact in the long run than previous styles that France had readily accepted.

Painting in France

Edouard Manet: 1880s

At first Manet remained separate from the core of Impressionist painters who were his contemporaries. He did not adopt their interest in bright color and the study of light until the 1870s. His Bar at the Folies-Bergère (fig. 149) of 1881-82 depicts the figure close to the picture plane as in his Olympia, but he adopts Impressionist color, light, and brushwork. By the device of the mirror in the background, Manet simultaneously maintains a narrow space and expands it. The mirror reflects the back of the barmaid, her customer, and the interior of the music hall, which is in front of her and behind the viewer. The bright oranges in the reflective glass bowl are the strongest color accent in the picture. Daubs of white paint create an impression of sparkling light. In contrast, the round light bulbs on the pilasters seem flat because there is no tonal variation. Absorbing the light, on the other hand, is the smoke that rises from the audience, blocking out part of the pilaster’s edge and obstructing our view. This detail exemplifies the Impressionist observation of the effect of atmospheric pollution—a feature of the industrial era-on light, color, and form. A third kind of light can be seen in the chandeliers, whose blurred outlines create a sense of movement. The depiction of blurring is one aspect of Impressionism that can be related to photography, as well as to the ways in which we see. When a photographic subject moves, a blur results. In Manet’s painting, the figures reflected in the mirror are blurred, indicating that the members of the audience are milling around.

The formal opposite of blurred edges—the silhouettes also an important feature of the Impressionist style. In its purest form, a silhouette is a flat, precisely outlined image, black on white or vice versa, as in the black ribbon, around the barmaid’s neck. Other, more muted silhouettes occur in the contrast of the round light bulbs and the brown pilasters, the gold champagne foil against the dark green bottles, or the woman with the white blouse and yellow gloves in the audience on the left. Such juxtapositions, whether of pure black and white or of less contrasting lights and darks, also occur in certain Realist pictures, notably those by Daumier. They reflect the contrasts that are possible in black-and-white photography.

The impression that an image is one section of a larger scene—a “slice of life,” or
cropped view—is another characteristic of Impressionism that can be related to photography. Manet’s customer is cut by the frame, as is the trapeze artist, whose legs and feet are visible in the upper left corner. The marble surface of the bar is also cut; it appears to continue indefinitely to the right and left of the observer.

In addition to the many formal innovations of Impressionism in Manet’s Bar, the imagery of the painting is also significant. The structural fragmentation of the picture corresponds to the mood of the barmaid. In contrast to the energy and motion in the audience, the members of which interact with each other— or the gazes of which are riveted on the trapeze artist—the barmaid stares dully into space. Her immobility is accentuated by the clarity and sharp focus of her edges compared with those of the audience. Nor does she seem interested in her customer; the viewpoint shifts, and the customer is seen as if from an angle, whereas the barmaid and the mirror are seen from the front.

\[149.\] Edouard Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergere*, 1881–82, oil on canvas, 0.95 X 1.3 m, Courtauld Institute Galleries, London. The Folies-Bergere is a Paris music hall, which opened in 1869; today it is a tourist attraction offering lavish spectacles. In Manet’s day its program consisted of light opera, pantomime, and similar forms of entertainment.

This image has evoked art historical interpretation from several methodological viewpoints. As a social comment, Manet makes a distinction between the monotony of serving at a bar and the bourgeoisie enjoying leisure time. This effect continues the concerns of Courbet and the Realists.

Another way of reading this image is through its sexual subtext. When seen from the back, the girl seems engaged in conversation with the man. But from the front she is alienated— bored and vacant— and aligned with the objects on the bar. She herself becomes an object to be consumed, along with the fruit and the alcoholic beverages. The flowers on her lace collar, like those on the counter, may be read as *vanitas* symbols. Her corsage is roughly triangular, and is echoed by the more precise gray triangle below her jacket. The sexual connotations of this triangle are fairly straightforward, and they reinforce the implication that the customer is propositioning the barmaid.

\[150.\] Pierre-Auguste Renoir’s *Moulin de la Galette* (fig. 150) depicts a “slice of life,” a scene of leisure that is set outdoors in the courtyard of a Montmartre dance hall. In the foreground, a group of men and women gather around a table where their half-filled glasses reflect light. They are separated from the dancers by the strong diagonal of the bench, which blocks off a triangular space at the lower right. The dancers make up the background, along with the lamps and the architecture of the Moulin. Animating the scene are shifting shadows that create patterns of lights and darks. Characteristic of Renoir, even in this relatively early picture, is the soft, velvety texture of his brushstroke.

\[151.\] Edgar Degas’s *Absinthe* (fig. 151), also represents a “slice of life,” the boundaries of which are determined by the seemingly arbitrary placement of the frame. The zigzag construction of the composition creates a slanted viewpoint, rather like that of a candid photograph. It is as if the photographer had taken the picture without aligning the camera with the space being photographed. The two figures are “stoned”— the white liqueur in the woman’s glass is absinthe— and, like Manet’s barmaid stare fixedly at nothing in particular. The poses and gestures convey psychological isolation and physical inertia.

By contrast, in his ballet pictures Degas expresses a wide range of movement. His dancers rest, stretch, exercise, and perform. Like in *Absinthe*, Degas prefers oblique angles, interiors and back-lighting mainly from the outdoor. The repetition of colors throughout the compositions creates a chromatic unity that is a characteristic innovation of the Impressionist style. It also reflects the flat color patterns that are typical Japanese woodblock prints [see Box].
Degas was a devoted amateur photographer, and his passion for depicting forms moving through space can be related to his interest in photography. Other 19th-century photographers also explored the nature of motion. In 1878, for example, the American photographer Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904) recorded for the first time the actual movements of a galloping horse (fig. 152). To do so, he set up along the side of a racetrack twelve cameras, the shutters of which were triggered as the horses passed. Muybridge discovered that all four feet are off the ground only when they are directly underneath the horse (as in the second and third frames), and not when they are extended.

In *The Boating Party* (fig. 153) of 1893-94, Mary Cassatt (1845-1926) uses the Impressionist “close-up,” another pictorial device inspired by photography. She combines it with a slanting viewpoint to emphasize the intimacy between mother and child. The rower, on the other hand, is depicted in back view as a strong silhouette. More individualized are the mother and child, who gaze at the rower and are contrasted with his anonymity. Cassatt intensifies the tension among the three figures by flattening the space and foreshortening both child and rower. The compact forms create an image of powerful monumentality. Cassatt’s bold planes of color, sharp outlines, and compressed spaces, as well as the obi (wide sash) worn by the rower exemplify the influence of Japanese woodblocks on the Impressionist painters.

**Beyond the West**

**Japanese Woodblock Prints**

From 1853 to 1854 the United States led an expedition that forced Japan to end its isolation. This opened up trade with the Far East and set the stage for cultural exchange. In the *Paris Universal Exposition* of 1867, many Japanese woodblock prints were on view. As a result, so-called japonisme, the French term for the Japanese aesthetic, became popular in fashionable Parisian circles. Japanese prints exerted considerable influence on Impressionist painters in France, the United States, and elsewhere.

Woodblock printing had begun in China in the 4th century. In the 6th century, Buddhist missionaries brought the technique to Japan. First used for printing words, only in the 16th century did artists begin to make woodblock images to illustrate texts. Originally the images were black and white, but in the 17th century color was introduced. In order to create a print in color, the artist makes a separate block for each color and prints each block separately. The raised portions differ in each block and correspond to a different color in the final print. It is important, therefore, that the outlines of each block correspond exactly, so that there is no unplanned overlapping or empty space between forms.

The most influential prints for the Impressionists were made during the Edo period (1600-1868), when Edo (the former name of Tokyo) became an urban center of feudalism in Japan. It was also the primary residence of the emperor. Nevertheless, a merchant class developed, which produced the main patrons of literature and the visual arts. Woodblock prints provided multiple images, which could be sold to a wide audience.

Japanese art students were apprenticed to master artists. The signatures on the prints reflect this system, for the artist had a chosen name (or go) as well as an apprentice name. The former was framed by a cartouche, while the latter was usually unframed and placed at the bottom of the page. A publisher’s mark might also be stamped on the print. At the top of the page are the titles of the individual texts, or series of texts, that are illustrated. If the subject is an actor, his name or role is sometimes added.
Claude Monet, *Impression-Sunrise*, 1873 (dated 1872), Musée Marmottan, Paris. Shown at the first exhibition of the Impressionism in 1874 that launched the Impressionist movement. In his youth Monet lived at Le Havre, a port town on the Normandy coast. It was here that he first became familiar with rapid changes in light and weather. Until the 1880s his work was poorly received and he lived in extreme poverty.

The work of Claude Monet (1840-1926), more than any other nineteenth-century artist, embodied the technical principles of Impressionism. He was above all a painter of landscape who studied light and color with great intensity. In contrast to the Academic artists, Monet did much of his painting outdoors. As a result, he and the Impressionists were sometimes called *plein air*, or “open air,” painters.

From the 1860s, early in his career, Monet worked with a wide range of color. A comparison of an early and a late work by Monet illustrates the development of the Impressionist style. Monet’s pictures concern with the direct observation of nature, and are the result of his habit of painting outdoors with nature itself as his “model.” The Impressionist technique of “broken color” breaks up color into light and dark and creates the illusion that the water is moving.

In the years Monet’s brushstrokes and the paint begin to assume an unprecedented prominence. As a result, instead of accepting a canvas as a convincing representation of reality, the viewer is forced to take account of the technique and medium in experiencing the picture. This is consistent with Monet’s recommendation that artists focus on the color, form, and light of an object rather than its iconography. In that suggestion, Monet emphasized the essence of a painted object as an abstract form, not as a replica of the thing itself. In other words, a painted “tree” is not a tree at all but a vertical accent on a flat surface.

In studying the natural effects of light and color on surfaces, Monet painted several series of pictures representing one locale under different atmospheric conditions. In 1895 he exhibited eighteen canvases of *Rouen Cathedral*. The Golden Age of Japanese woodblock is identified with the *Ukiyo-e* school of painting. It was founded around the mid-17th century and lasted until the end of the Edo period in 1868. *Ukiyo-e* means “floating world” and refers to the transience of material existence. The most popular subjects were theater, dance, and various kinds of female services ranging from outright erotica to the high-class courtesan. Respectable middle-class women performing daily tasks were also depicted, but mythological and historical scenes were less popular, and landscape was used only as background until the 19th century. Both the stylistic techniques used in woodblock prints and their subject matter—leisure genre scenes, entertainment, courtesans, landscape and cityscape, aerial views, and so forth—have close affinities with French Impressionism.

*Utagawa Hiroshige*’s (1797-1858) last and most famous series of woodblock prints was entitled *One Hundred Views of Edo*. The *Saruwaka-cho Theater* of 1856 (fig. 154) shows a busy theater street at night. It is rendered in linear perspective, with the moon causing the figures to cast gray shadows. At the left, theater touts are trying to lure customers. The sense of a busy street, seen from an elevated vantage point, appeals to the same aesthetic as *Renoir’s Pont-Neuf* (see fig. 24.13) and *Pissarro’s Place du Carrousel* (see fig. 24.14). The *Almost Blossom* (fig. 155) by Van Gogh is another painting clearly inspired to the fresh vision of nature of the Japanese art. They thus reflect cross-cultural influences between Western Europe and the Far East.

*Hokusai, Cherry branch*  
*Vincent Van Gogh, Almond Blossom, 1890, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam*  
*Hiroshige, Soruwoko-cho Theater, 1856. Woodblock print, 35.9 X 24.8 cm. Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester*
Facade, Sunlight of 1894 (fig. 158) shows the myriad details of a Gothic cathedral dissolving into light and shadow, which are indicated by individual patches of color. The blue sky creates a cream-colored facade, the dark areas of which repeat the sky-blue combined with yellows and oranges. Here, as in the Water Lily Pond, viewers are made aware of the medium as much as of the subject matter. They are also reminded that our normal vision lacks sharp focus.

158. Claude Monet, Rouen Cathedral. Rouen Cathedral, West Facade, Sunlight, 1894, Oil on canvas, 1.00 X 0.66 m. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. (Chester Dale Collection).


Views of Paris: Renoir and Pissarro
In Renoir’s Pont-Neuf (fig. 159) of 1872, the influence of photography can be seen in the somewhat elevated vantage point. The rhythms of the city, which became a favorite Impressionist subject, are indicated by the variety of human activity. The scene is a “slice” of a city street, but Renoir also presents a condensed panorama of different, social classes. Mothers stroll with children, youths lean against the side of the bridge, some people carry bundles and push carts, and others walk their dogs or ride in carriages. Soldiers and policemen are among the crowd. At the far side of the bridge the familiar buildings of the Left Bank are visible. Because the sky is blue, the forms -like the day- are relatively clear, and figures cast dark shadows on the pavement. Their patterns, as well as the general view of a busy street, are reminiscent of Hiroshige’s Saruwaka-cho Theater (see fig. 154). Hiroshige’s print, in turn, reflects the influence of Western one-point perspective. The viewpoint of Camille Pissarro’s (1830-1903) Place du Carrousel, of 1900 (fig. 160) is higher than that of Renoir’s Pont-Neuf. In comparison to the Renoir,’s the figures are in softer focus, which blurs their forms. Also blurred is the facades of the Louvre, and the Arch de Triumph at the end of the long boulevard. Both are rendered as patches of color. At the same time, the street’s surface is enlivened by visible brushstrokes and reflective shadows. Impressionist cityscapes offered artists an opportunity to explore the effects of outdoor light on the color and textures of the city. They also record the momentary and fugitive aspects of Haussmann’s boulevards in ways that even photographs could not.


French Sculpture: Auguste Rodin
The acknowledged giant of 19th-century sculptor was Auguste Rodin (1840-1917). Rodin’s influence on 20th-century art parallels that of the Impressionist painters. Like Degas, Rodin built up forms in clay or wax before casting them. His characteristic medium was bronze, but he also made casts of plaster. In 1891 Zola asked Rodin to take over a commission from the French Society of Men of Letters for a monumental statue of the French novelist Honore de Balzac. Rodin spent the last seven years of his life on the work, which was not cast until after his death. He called it the sum of his whole life. A comparison of the plaster and bronze versions of Rodin’s Balzac (fig. 161) demonstrates his interest in conveying
the dynamic, experimental process of sculpture, rather than in the finished work. In the plaster statue, the great novelist looms upward like a ghostly specter wrapped in a white robe. The bronze is less spectral but more reflective. In both versions the nature of the medium defines the texture of the work. In the bronze, the reflecting light activates the surface and energizes it.

Rodin’s revolutionary methods of working included the use of nonprofessional models in nontraditional poses. A part from portrait busts, Rodin was the first major sculptor create work consisting of less than the whole body -a headless torso, for example. In 1898, when the plaster version of Balzac was first exhibited, the public disliked it, and so did the Society of Men of Letters, which had commissioned it, Rodin himself never cast the work in bronze, and it is not known whether he ever intended to do so.

Both statues have the Impressionist quality of accentuating the surface texture of the medium and also convey an impression of raw power and primal thrust that is characteristic of Rodin. Their surface motion creates a blurred effect similar to the prominence of Impressionist brushwork and mirrors Balzac’s own dynamic spirit. The figure also seems to be in an unfinished state of being-a not quite-human character in transition between unformed and formed. Since Balzac’s literary output was prodigious, his representation as a monumental creative power evokes the timeless energy of his work.


“Art for Art’s Sake”

In Paris, widespread condemnation made it difficult for the Impressionists to sell their work. In London as well, there were aesthetic quarrels. One of these erupted into the celebrated libel trial between the American painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) and the reigning English art critic John Ruskin. In 1877 Ruskin published a scathing review of Whistler’s Nocturne in Black and Gold (The Falling Rocket) (fig. 162), painted about two years earlier. The picture was on view at London’s Grosvenor Gallery, and it threw Ruskin into a rage. He accused Whistler of flinging “a pot of paint ... in the public’s face” Whistler himself, Ruskin added, was a “coxcomb,” guilty of “Cockney impudence” and “willful imposture.”

162. James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Nocturne in Black and Gold (The Falling Rocket), c. 1875, Oil on oak panel, 60 x 47 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts (Gift of Dexter M. Ferry, Jr.), Whistler, born in Lowell, Massachusetts, moved with his family to Russia, where his father designed the Moscow-St Petersburg railroad. He set up art studios in Paris and London, finally settling in Chelsea, The author of The Gentle Art of Making Enemies, Whistler was known for his distinctive personality and biting wit. He dressed as a dandy, wearing pink ribbons on his tight patent leather shoes and carrying two umbrellas as a precaution against the inclement London weather.

Whistler sued Ruskin for libel, and the case went to trial in November 1878. Ruskin, who was in the throes of a psychotic breakdown, could not appear in court, but his views were presented by his attorney. According to Ruskin, Whistler’s picture was outrageously overpriced at 200 guineas, quickly and sloppily executed, technically “unfinished,” and devoid of recognizable form. Several of Whistler’s other paintings were introduced as exhibits and declared equally “unfinished.” In particular, the opposing side pointed out, Whistler did not paint like Titian, whose works were “finished.” Ruskin also objected to Whistler’s
musical titles (in this case "Nocturne") as pandering to the contemporary fad for the incomprehensible. The paintings themselves were not, he insisted, serious works of art. In his opening statement, the attorney general, acting for Ruskin, had this to say about musical titles:

In the present mania for art it had become a kind of fashion among some people to admire the incomprehensible, to look upon the fantastic conceits of an artist like Mr. Whistler, his "nocturnes," "symphonies," "arrangements," and "harmonies," with delight and admiration; but the fact was that such productions were not worthy of the name of great works of art. This was not a mania that should be encouraged; and if that was the view of Mr. Ruskin, he had a right as an art critic to fearlessly express it to the public.

On cross-examination, Whistler was questioned about his subject matter:

"What is the subject of the Nocturne in Black and Gold?" "It is a night piece," Whistler replied, "and represents the fireworks at Cremorne."

"Not a view of Cremorne?"

"If it were a view of Cremorne, it would certainly bring about nothing but disappointment on the part of the beholders. It is an artistic arrangement .... It is as impossible for me to explain to you the beauty of that picture as it would be for a musician to explain to you the beauty of a harmony in a particular piece of music if you have no ear for music."

Ironically, Ruskin had once used his critical genius to further the public reception of Turner, himself a rather "Impressionistic" artist. Equally ironic, Whistler was quite capable of producing clear and precise images as he did in his etchings, as well as in some of his portraits. Whistler countered Ruskin's position by stating what was essentially the formalist "art for art's sake" view of art: that did not necessarily serve a utilitarian purpose. Whistler's Nocturne was a study in light, color, and form. The atmospheric effects of the cloudy night sky are contrasted with gold spots of light from the exploded rocket. When questioned about the identity of the black patch in the lower right corner, Whistler replied that it was a vertical, placed there for purely formal reasons. In that response, he echoed Monet's view that a painted "tree" is not a tree but a vertical daub of paint. On the subject of money, Whistler testified that he had spent only a day and a half painting Nocturne, but was charging for a lifetime of experience.

The jury followed the judge's instructions and decided in Whistler's favor but awarded him only a farthing in damages. When it was over, the trial was extensively ridiculed in the English and American press. A New York Times critic complained (December 15, 1878) that "the world has been much afflicted of late with these slapdash productions of the paint-pot." In his view, musical titles were "exasperating nomenclature," and the "shadowy and unseen presences" of modern art were confusing. "Ordinary men and women in a state of health," he concluded, "prefer to have their pictures made for them." The London Times suggested that Whistler take his "brush" to Ruskin's "pen" and paint a caricature of Ruskin as an "arrangement in black and white."

Nearly seventy years later, Art Digest reported that the Detroit Institute of Arts paid $12,000 for the infamous "pot of paint."

The significance of this absurd trial is its function as a window on aesthetic conflict in the late nineteenth century. It also proves the adage that one cannot legislate taste. Whistler later called the trial a conflict between the "brush" and the "pen." It exemplified the rise of the critic as a potent force in the nineteenth-century art world.

We have seen that the history of Western art is fraught with aesthetic quarrels, but passions rose to new heights during the latter half of the nineteenth century. For the first time, the material of art became a subject of art, and content yielded to style. More than anything else, it was the dissolution of form that seems to have caused the intense critical outrage. But this was the very development that would prove to have the most lasting impact on the development of Western art.