

Impressionism



Pierre-Auguste Renoir: *Dance at Le Moulin de la Galette*

Dance at Le Moulin de la Galette, oil on canvas by Pierre-Auguste Renoir, 1876; in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Impressionism, a broad term used to describe the work produced in the late 19th

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century, especially between about 1867 and 1886, by a group of artists who shared a set of related approaches and techniques.

The founding Impressionist artists included Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, Alfred Sisley, Edgar Degas, and Berthe Morisot. Other significant Impressionists, including Gustave Caillebotte, Mary Cassatt, Paul Gauguin, and Georges Seurat, joined the group later. Although these artists had stylistic differences, they had a shared interest in accurately and objectively recording contemporary life and the transient effects of light and color. These concerns may seem fairly banal in the 21st century, but in the 19th century—when historical, biblical, and allegorical subjects were favored, and painting was expected to have a high finish—they were revolutionary. The Impressionists helped liberate art from a focus on subject toward personal expression and the study of creating.

The artists who became the Impressionists

The artists who would later be called the Impressionists met in Paris in the early 1860s. Pissarro, Monet, and the artists Paul Cézanne and Armand Guillaumin became acquainted while they were studying at the Académie Suisse, an informal art school in Paris founded by Martin François Suisse. In 1862 Monet joined the atelier of the academician Charles Gleyre and became fast friends with fellow students Sisley, Renoir, and the artist Frédéric Bazille. The two groups met frequently, discussing their shared dissatisfaction with academic teaching's emphasis on depicting historical or mythological subject matter with literary or anecdotal overtones. They also rejected the conventional imaginative or idealizing treatments of academic painting.

Influences

Most of these artists were only in their 20s, except for Pissarro, who was in his 30s, and were just forming their styles. Monet was especially interested in the innovative painters Eugène Boudin and Johan Barthold Jongkind, who depicted fleeting effects of sea and sky by means of highly colored and texturally varied methods of paint application. With his Gleyre studio friends, Monet adopted Boudin's practice of painting entirely out-of-doors while looking at the actual scene, instead of finishing a painting from sketches in the



Eugène Boudin: *Beach Scene*

Beach Scene, oil on wood by Eugène Boudin, 1862; in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Johan Barthold Jongkind: *The Seine and Notre-Dame de Paris*

The Seine and Notre-Dame de Paris, oil on canvas by Johan Barthold Jongkind, 1864; in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris. 42 × 56.5 cm.



Théodore Rousseau: *Under the Birches, Evening*

Under the Birches, Evening, oil on wood panel by Théodore Rousseau, 1842–43; in the Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio.



Jean-François Millet: *The Angelus*

studio, as was the conventional practice. When Gleyre closed his studio in 1864, Monet, Renoir, Sisley, and Bazille moved temporarily to the forest of Fontainebleau, where they devoted themselves to painting directly from nature. The Fontainebleau forest had earlier attracted other artists, among them Théodore Rousseau and Jean-François Millet, who insisted that art represent the reality of everyday life.

The Gleyre studio and the Académie Suisse students were all inspired by the established artist Édouard Manet, who himself had followed the lead of Realist painter Gustave Courbet in objectively painting modern subjects. In Manet's art, the traditional subject matter was downgraded in favor of subjects from the events and circumstances of his own time, and attention was shifted to the artist's manipulation of color, tone, and texture as ends in themselves. The subject became a vehicle for the artful composition of areas of flat color and deliberate brushstrokes, while perspectival depth was minimized so that the viewer would look at the surface patterns and relationships of the picture rather than at the illusory three-dimensional space it created. Pissarro and the younger artists met Manet as well as Degas about 1866 at the Café Guerbois.

Beginnings of Impressionism

In the late 1860s Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, and others began painting landscapes and river scenes in which they tried to dispassionately record the colors and forms of objects as they appeared in natural light at a given time. These artists abandoned the traditional landscape palette of muted greens, browns, and grays and instead painted in a lighter, sunnier, more brilliant key. They began by painting the play of light upon water and the reflected colors of its ripples, trying to reproduce the manifold and animated effects of sunlight and shadow and of direct and reflected light that they observed. In their efforts to reproduce immediate visual impressions as registered on the retina, they abandoned the use of grays and blacks in shadows as inaccurate and used complementary colors instead. More important, they learned to build up objects out of discrete flecks and dabs of pure harmonizing or contrasting color, thus evoking the broken-hued brilliance and the variations of hue produced by sunlight and its reflections. Forms in their pictures lost their clear outlines and became dematerialized, shimmering and vibrating in a re-

The Angelus, by Jean-François Millet, 1857–59; in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



Édouard Manet: *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (*Luncheon on the Grass*)

Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe (*Luncheon on the Grass*), oil on canvas by Édouard Manet, 1863; in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



Gustave Courbet: *A Burial at Ornans*
A Burial at Ornans, oil on canvas by Gustave Courbet, 1849–50; in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



Claude Monet: *Impression, Sunrise*
A museum visitor viewing *Impression, Sunrise* (1872), oil on canvas by Claude Monet, during the exhibition “Impression(s): Sun” (2017) at the Museum of Modern Art André Malraux, La Havre, France.

creation of actual outdoor conditions. And finally, traditional formal compositions were abandoned in favor of a more casual and less contrived disposition of objects within the picture frame. The Impressionists extended their new techniques to depict landscapes, trees, houses, and even urban street scenes and railroad stations.

Impressionist exhibitions and influence

Throughout the 1860s most of these avant-garde artists had work accepted into the Salon, the annual state-sponsored public exhibition, but, by the end of the decade, they were being consistently rejected. They came increasingly to recognize the unfairness of the Salon's jury system as well as the disadvantages relatively small paintings such as their own had at Salon exhibitions. They considered staging an independent exhibition but were interrupted by the Franco-German War (1870–71). Bazille, who had been leading the efforts, was killed in battle. At the end of 1873 talks were renewed and the Société Anonyme Coopérative d'Artistes-Peintres, Sculpteurs, etc., was founded. Its members included Monet, Renoir, Sisley, Pissarro, Degas, and Morisot, another avant-garde artist who was introduced to the group through Manet. The collective aimed to organize exhibitions, sell art, and publish a journal.

The Société Anonyme specifically avoided choosing a name that suggested that they were part of a coherent school. So when the collective organized its first exhibition in 1874, the members invited a patchwork of artists in their network to show. Although Manet chose not to join, some 30 participants accepted the invitation, and the result was an exhibition of various styles and media. Some critics appreciated the group's effort to break from the establishment but most did not like the art and wrote blistering reviews. Monet's painting *Impression, Sunrise* (1872) earned the collective the initially derisive name “Impressionists” from the journalist Louis Leroy writing in the satirical magazine *Le Charivari* in 1874. The exhibition was a financial failure, and the Société Anonyme was soon dissolved.

In subsequent years, however, several of the artists who founded the Société Anonyme staged seven more exhibitions, between 1876 and 1886. Participation fluctuated, with some artists, including Cézanne and Guillaumin, wavering early on. Disagreements between factions about using the name “Impressionism” and its implication of stylistic unity occurred during the planning of each show, resulting in a few particularly

bitter abstentions during the last three exhibitions. During the exhibition years, participants continued to develop their own personal and individual styles, but they all were united in their work by the principles of freedom of technique, a personal rather than a conventional approach to subject matter, and the truthful reproduction of nature.

The Impressionist group had already begun to dissolve by the early 1880s as each painter increasingly pursued his or her own aesthetic interests and principles. In its short existence, however, it had accomplished a revolution in the history of art, providing a technical starting point for Cézanne, Gauguin, Georges Seurat, and Vincent van Gogh and the Post-Impressionist movement. Impressionism also opened a path for subsequent artists of Western painting to diverge from traditional techniques and approaches to subject matter. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica This article was most recently revised and updated by Rick Livingston.

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