

# “Impressionism”

In April 1874 a group of artists, calling themselves “Société Anonyme des Artistes, Peintres, Sculpteurs, Graveurs” —roughly “Artists, Painters, Sculptors, Engravers, Inc.” —opened an exhibition independent of the official Salon. Conspicuously absent was Edouard Manet, recognized leader of the avant-garde. Though he never participated in any of their eight exhibitions, Manet’s bold style and modern subjects inspired these younger artists, who came to be known as “impressionists.”

The name is usually attributed to a disparaging critic who seized on the title of Claude Monet’s *Impression, Sunrise*. Accustomed to the more polished works of the Salon, the critic compared—unfavorably—Monet’s sketchy harbor view to wallpaper. He expected more of a painting than a mere “impression.” But what had Monet meant when *he* used the word? Though he would say later that he had called his painting an impression because it “could not pass for a view of Le Havre,” the word was already in common use to describe rapidly executed sketches and the visual impact a scene first made on an artist. Another commentator on the 1874 exhibition noted, “They are impressionists in the sense that they render, not the landscape, but the sensation produced by the landscape....” Artists like Monet, he realized, wanted to paint not simply *what* they saw but the *way* they saw it.

“Impressionism” entered the lexicon of painting at a time when French positivist philosophers and scientists were studying perception and color theory. Artists accepted on principle that Manet’s style, which juxtaposed discrete brushstrokes of color rather than blending them, most perfectly transcribed their raw sensation. The impressionists used color, not modeling from dark to light, to create form, recording with quick brushwork a fleeting effect of changing seasons, weather, and times of day.



**Edouard Manet**  
French, 1832–1883  
*Gare Saint-Lazare, 1873*

While the impressionists were preparing for their first exhibition, Manet was completing his submissions to the 1874 Salon, which included this painting. At that time the Gare Saint-Lazare, where the bourgeoisie embarked for popular recreation spots like Chatou and Argenteuil, was the busiest train station in Paris. The station’s ambitious bridge, which carried six streets across the rail yard, was a familiar landmark, but for Manet it is an almost invisible background. Only the iron fences and the steam billowing from an unseen engine locate his enigmatic figures.

Opposites in blue and white, the woman faces us with a direct but indecipherable stare, while the child turns away.

The painting’s title—Manet called it simply “Railroad”—disturbed Salon audiences. They had trouble matching it with the subject, which itself was hard to define. The woman, close to the front of the picture plane, seems to engage us. Her expression, though, provides no hint of her story, only detachment and ambiguity. It did not help that for many contemporaries, Manet’s style—with its broad, flat areas of color juxtaposed without transitional tones—appeared unfinished.

Oil on canvas, .933 x 1.115 m (36 3/4 x 43 7/8 in.).  
Gift of Horace Havemeyer in memory of his mother,  
Louisine W. Havemeyer 1956.10.1



**Edouard Manet**  
*The Plum, about 1877*

What is the situation of this young woman? Her cigarette suggests a certain impropriety—perhaps she is a prostitute waiting for a customer. Or, more likely, given her modest dress, she is only a shop girl hoping for company. Manet’s composition underscores her isolation. Our vantage point is close, as if we stand above her, but she is blind to our presence, lost in a pensive mood. The hard marble table acts as a bar between us. And her head is set off, framed by the grille behind her. The grille suggests that the setting may be the Café de la Nouvelle-Athènes, where Manet gathered often with other members of the avant-garde, including writer Émile Zola and younger painters Monet, Renoir, and others.

It was Zola who drew attention to what is often called the “painted patch” style of Manet’s work. Writing in 1867, he described it as “an ensemble of delicate, accurate *taches* [“touches” or “patches”] which, from a few steps back, give a striking relief to the picture.” Notice how individual dabs of color create the plum in its glass and the fingers of the woman’s left hand. These broad strokes, accepted by many younger artists as a badge of modernity, could only have been made with the sort of flat-tipped brushes familiar today—and these first became available in the nineteenth century.

Oil on canvas, .736 x .502 m (29 x 19 3/4 in.).  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1971.85.1



**Auguste Renoir**  
French, 1841–1919  
*Pont Neuf, Paris, 1872*

Although he is best known for his figures, especially nudes, Renoir’s originality as a landscape painter was instrumental in the formation of impressionism. In paintings like this he transcribed the immediate and fleeting effects of light on the senses. We almost squint at these backlit forms. Figures are defined by a few quick strokes, and incidental details disappear in the glare of bright sun. The pavement is yellow with this light, brighter even than the sun-drenched sky. Shadows fall, not black or gray but in cool blue tones.

Among the energetic crowd crossing the Pont Neuf, the oldest bridge in Paris, one man appears twice. Sporting a straw boater and carrying the boulevardier’s cane, this is Renoir’s brother Edmond, dispatched by the artist to delay people on the street. Edmond later explained that while passersby paused to answer his idle questions, Renoir was able to capture their appearance from his window above a nearby Right Bank café.

Oil on canvas, .753 x .937 m (29 5/8 x 36 7/8 in.).  
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.58



Claude Monet  
French, 1840–1926

*The Cradle—Camille with the Artist's Son Jean,*  
1867

Monet was one of the young artists in Paris during the 1860s who was strongly influenced by Manet, becoming a part of his avant-garde circle at the Café de la Nouvelle-Athènes. The broad strokes of color and abrupt juxtapositions here are reminiscent of Manet's bold, innovative manner of the 1860s, which can be seen in adjacent galleries. In this early work, Monet uses blacks and grays to create shadows, but soon black will all but disappear from his palette.

In 1867, when this was painted, the World's Fair in Paris introduced Japanese woodblock prints to a wide audience. They had first appeared in France in the 1850s, packed around imported porcelains, and now enjoyed a huge vogue. Monet himself became an avid collector. Many years later, after he moved to his last home at Giverny, he hung the yellow walls of his dining room with them. Their distinctive style was an important influence on many impressionist painters. Here that influence is evident in the unusual angle Monet has chosen—as if we peer down into the cradle—and in the abruptly cropped figure of the woman. Bold areas of pattern, in the bedclothes and canopy, for example, divide the composition and seem to flatten the space. Monet abandoned this painting before finishing it, however; in the lower right,

Oil on canvas, 1.168 x .889 m (46 x 35 in.).  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1983.1.25



Claude Monet

*The Bridge at Argenteuil,* 1874

From a distance of ten feet or so, Monet's brushstrokes blend to yield a convincing view of the Seine and the pleasure boats that drew tourists to Argenteuil. Up close, however, each dab of paint is distinct, and the scene dissolves into a mosaic of paint—brilliant, unblended tones of blue, red, green, yellow. In the water, quick, fluid skips of the brush mimic the lapping surface. In the trees, thicker paint is applied with denser, stubbier strokes. The figure in the sailboat is only a ghostly wash of dusty blue, the women rowing nearby are indicated by mere shorthand.

In the early years of impressionism, Monet, Renoir, and others strove to capture the fleeting effects of light and atmosphere on the landscape and to transcribe directly and quickly their sensory experience of it. Monet advised the American artist Lilla Cabot Perry, "When you go out to paint, try to forget what objects you have before you, a tree, a house, a field or whatever. Merely think here is a little square of blue, here an oblong of pink, here a streak of yellow, and paint it just as it looks to you, the exact color and shape, until it gives your own naive impression of the scene before you."

Oil on canvas, .600 x .797 m (25 5/8 x 31 3/8 in.).  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1983.1.24



Auguste Renoir

*Oarsmen at Chatou,* 1879

Rowing was the foremost attraction at Chatou, while only a few kilometers upstream Argenteuil's more reliable winds attracted sailors. Here a man brings a pleasure gig to shore. These two-person boats were designed for more relaxed recreation than the sculls we see in the distance. The rower sat facing his companion, who controlled the rudder by means of ropes. The man in this gig—wearing the boater's typical costume of short jacket and straw hat—may be the artist's brother Edmond. The man standing on the bank, similarly attired, is probably the painter Gustave Caillebotte, a devoted rowing enthusiast. The woman may be Aline Charigot, who would become Renoir's wife and was a favorite model.

The painting captures the brilliance of sun and water, summer and youth. In the water, skips of strong blues and white alternate. Their shimmering intensity is enhanced by the equally strong presence of orange in the boat's reflection and the scarlet accent of Aline's bow. Renoir has put into practice aspects of contemporary color theory. The principle of simultaneous contrast suggested that colors were perceived more strongly when juxtaposed with their opposites—orange with blue, for example, or green with red. The silky texture of Renoir's feathery brushstrokes mirror the languid and leisurely scenes.

Oil on canvas, .813 x 1.003 m (32 x 39 1/2 in.).  
Gift of Sam A. Lewinsohn 1951.5.2



Claude Monet

*The Artist's Garden at Vétheuil,* 1880

Monet planted gardens wherever he lived. When he rented this house at Vétheuil, he made arrangements with the owner to landscape the terraces, which lead down to the Seine. The boy with the wagon is Monet's young son, and on the steps behind him are other members of his extended household.

On the path, the brilliant sunlight is dappled with shade that falls in blues, plums, and various greens. Figures and faces are defined—briefly—with color. The large flowerpots were Monet's, and he took them with him each time he moved, using them in other gardens. They are "blue and white" only in our understanding; examined up close they are blue and green where they reflect the grass behind them, elsewhere tinged with gold or pink.

By the early 1880s, when this work was painted, Monet had become increasingly interested in the painted surface itself and less concerned with capturing a spontaneous effect of light and atmosphere. The very composition of this painting, with its high horizon, traps our eye in the canvas—even the path is blocked in the distance by the rising steps. We are forced back to the surface, where the paint is textured and heavily layered. At close range, these brushstrokes, though still derived from nature, seem less descriptive than decorative.

Oil on canvas, 1.514 x 1.210 m (59 5/8 x 47 5/8 in.).  
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.45