The Beginnings of Impressionist Landscape

In 1841 an American artist invented collapsible metal tubes for oil paints. For impressionists, who often painted out-of-doors, this new convenience was indispensable. About the same time, railway expansion was making the countryside more accessible: new lines connected Paris with Normandy and with towns along the Seine that became home—and subject—for many impressionist painters. Our strongest image of these artists is out-of-doors, hats shading their eyes, easels alongside a riverbank, as they transcribed fleeting effects of light and atmosphere on the landscape.

By the mid-1800s open-air painting was an established tradition, though most artists maintained the distinction between oil sketches made outdoors and finished works painted in the studio. Now, however, bolder painting styles were starting to blur these differences, and realism, which emphasized "truth," prompted many artists to paint nature with unembellished directness instead of "enhancing" raw sensation through representations of myth or allegory. Landscape artists Corot and Boudin (whose works are seen in this room) were strong influences on young impressionist painters. Corot made many oil sketches from nature, outdoors, but there was no market for them in his lifetime. The paintings he exhibited and sold were painted in the studio. Boudin, however, began to paint his landscapes entirely *en plein air*—in the open air.

By about 1870 impressionists Pissarro, Sisley, Monet, and Renoir had made a touchstone of open-air painting. Asked by an interviewer about his studio, Monet flung his arms open before the Seine and its buttercup-covered banks, saying "That's my studio." This vision of impressionism was part myth—in fact, many pictures show signs of studio work—but it underscores the importance these artists placed on direct observation, speed, and spontaneity as they tried to capture the look of changing weather, seasons, and times of day.

Eugène Boudin
French, 1824–1898
Bathing Time at Deauville, 1865

Boudin, twenty years older than most of the impressionists, was among the few artists of his generation to insist on painting in the open air, declaring three brushstrokes done outdoors to be of greater value than days spent working in the studio. Grains of sand from the beaches where Boudin painted still adhere to some of his pictures. At times he was accompanied by the young Claude Monet. "Suddenly a veil was torn away," Monet said of Boudin's influence, "my destiny as a painter opened up to me." Boudin acknowledged the debt of Monet and other impressionists with characteristic modesty: "I may well have had some small measure of influence on the movement that led painters to study actual daylight and express the changing aspects of the sky with the utmost sincerity." He exhibited with them at the first impressionist exhibition in 1874.

Though Boudin believed sincerity was achieved by painting directly from nature, he still made adjustments to his paintings in the studio. "An impression is gained in an instant," he advised a student, "but it then has to be condensed following the rules of art or rather your own feeling and that is the most difficult thing—to finish a painting without spoiling anything."

Oil on wood, .345 x .579 m (13 5/8 x 22 3/4 in.).
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1983.1.8

Eugène Boudin

Beach Scene at Trouville, 1863

When Boudin began to paint holidaymakers on the beaches of Normandy, his subject was unconventional. Seascapes, often populated with small peasant figures or fishermen, still attracted French painters in the mid-1800s. But Boudin's images, unlike those of other rustic genre scenes, recorded a new phenomenon—the tourist with money and leisure time. His subjects were also his buyers, and he satisfied them by producing more than four thousand paintings like this one.

Boudin's beach scenes, though crowded, lack obvious narrative or anecdote. He characterized not individuals, but the bourgeoisie and their postures and fashions—including the huge crinolines that in high winds occasionally sent women over cliffs or into carriage wheels. Like the plume of smoke issuing from a steamer, the anonymity of the figures imparts a sense of modern life. Boudin seems to have been a bit ambivalent about his subjects—at times he defended them, but he also dismissed them as "gilded parasites" to insist that his true subjects were light and color.

Oil on wood, .349 x .578 m (13 3/4 x 22 3/4 in.).
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1983.1.14

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot
French, 1796–1875
Beach near Etretat, 1872

This painting, like the view by Lépine nearby, is an oil sketch. Painted outdoors within a few hours, it was meant to record Corot's direct impression of the landscape. Its long, sweeping brushstrokes capture in shorthand the look and "feel" of light and weather. Such small works, never intended as finished paintings, were part of the normal practice of landscape artists. By referring to them later, a painter could re-create in his more elaborate studio paintings the freshness and immediacy of his initial observation. The outdoor sketch was like notes taken from nature, data to be transformed through the artist's imagination in the studio into finished, saleable works. (Compare this sketch with Corot's studio work in galleries nearby.)

Corot and fellow landscape artists working in the forest of Fontainebleau were important influences on the impressionists, not only in their commitment to plein-air painting, but also in their adoption of a brighter palette. Corot, using a light-colored ground, suffused his paintings with a silvery light and poetic feel. Pissarro (see subsequent entries), in particular, identified himself as Corot's student, and in the horizontal layering of his landscapes is a legacy of Corot's classical training and careful compositions.

Oil on canvas, .125 x .255 m (4 7/8 x 10 1/16 in.).
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.117

Alfred Sisley
French, 1839–1899
The Flood at Port-Marly, 1872

In December 1872, the Seine overflowed its banks at the small village of Port-Marly. The opportunity to paint the watery reflections of a rain-heavy sky lured both Alfred Sisley and Claude Monet. Sisley painted several flood views in 1872, and others a few years later.

Traditionally artists depicted flood scenes to communicate the drama and destructive power of nature. Sisley, however, who has been called the "purest" of the impressionists, was interested in visual effects only. He painted this picture on the spot, probably in a single session. The colors are the muted and nuanced tones Sisley preferred, and the shapes of his brushstrokes change in response to the different textures of light and the landscape: gliding ripples in the watery reflections, broad square blocks of pigment in the window panes. Sisley chose his vantage points carefully, to frame and compose his views. Notice how he uses the trees and pylon at the right to balance the tall mass of the restaurant à St Nicolas on the left, and how the dark figures who pole small boats help our eye mark the distance into the background.

Oil on canvas, .464 x .610 m (18 1/4 x 24 in.).
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1985.64.38

Alfred Sisley
Boulevard Héloïse, Argenteuil, 1872

The town of Argenteuil on the Seine was less than a thirty-minute train ride from Paris' Gare Saint-Lazare. The river widened there, and it became a popular spot for boating and water sports, attracting industry as well. After Monet moved to Argenteuil in 1871, he often hosted colleagues like Sisley. Sometimes the two friends set up their easels side by side—as they seem to have done on the Boulevard Héloïse. Argenteuil attracted well-to-do yachtsmen, but here it is the working town Sisley records. He seems most concerned with its shapes and textures, and the delicate colors of the pale winter sky. A softening of detail conveys the chill of a damp day. Of all the impressionists, Sisley was the one most committed to landscape and to the impressionist style in its most pure form, never abandoning, even temporarily, impressionism's goal of capturing the transient effects of light and atmosphere.

Monet and Sisley met while students of academic painter Charles Gleyre. With Renoir and Frédéric Bazille—also studying in Gleyre's studio—and with Camille Pissarro (next entries) they formulated the essential goals of impressionism.

Oil on canvas, .395 x .596 m (15 1/2 x 23 1/2 in.).
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.82

Camille Pissarro
French, 1830–1903
Orchard in Bloom, Louveciennes, 1872

When the idea arose for a group exhibition of work by the artists who would come to be called impressionists, Pissarro and Sisley were among the earliest and most enthusiastic supporters. Pissarro drafted the group's written statement of purpose and would be the only artist to participate in all eight impressionist exhibitions. This painting was one of five he showed at the first exhibition in 1874.

It was made shortly after Pissarro had returned to his home in Louveciennes after fleeing France during the Franco-Prussian War and Paris Commune. (Born in the Virgin Islands, then a possession of Denmark, Pissarro was a Danish citizen.) During the war his house had been used by Prussian troops, and many of the canvases he left there destroyed. He must have viewed the freshly plowed earth, like the spring blossoms that bring life to the dormant landscape, a signal of renewed hope for his adopted country—and for his career. Pissarro's work was then beginning to attract buyers. This painting, for example, was one of the first impressionist works purchased by Paul Durand-Ruel, a dealer whose support was to become critical to the young artists.

Oil on canvas, .451 x .549 m (17 3/4 x 21 5/8 in.).
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.51

Camille Pissarro
The Fence, 1872

Pissarro, who was committed to socialist principles, identified strongly with the land and with the peasant farmers who worked it. He moved with his family from Paris in the 1860s to a number of small villages like Louveciennes. While many of his fellow impressionists chose subjects from modern life and leisure, sophisticated even if their settings were in the countryside, Pissarro preferred scenes of an older, more rural way of life—like this garden fence and the small figures who pause in their work. Some contemporaries criticized Pissarro for his unadorned rusticity. About *Orchard in Bloom, Louveciennes* (previous entry) one wrote, "He has a deplorable predilection for market-gardens and does not hesitate to paint cabbages…."

It was in the early 1870s that Pissarro made his most purely impressionist pictures—painted, as this one probably was, in a single session on the spot. The paint here is quickly applied, thick in some areas, much thinner in others. We can see, in the trees for example, where one brushstroke has been pulled through an earlier one that still lay wet on the canvas.

Oil on canvas, .378 x .457 m (14 7/8 x 18 in.).
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1985.64.31

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June 1995 (1 ed.)