

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
WASHINGTON

French Art

SELECTED WORKS OF ART FROM THE TOUR



The Repentant Magdalen

c. 1640

by Georges de La Tour
(pronounced: duh La Tur)
(French, 1593–1652)

■ According to Catholic tradition, Mary Magdalen was consumed with worldly desires before her sister Martha persuaded her to listen to Jesus Christ. Won over by Christ's teachings, Mary Magdalen renounced the trappings of her previous life and became one of Christ's most devoted followers.

In this painting, Georges de La Tour shows Mary Magdalen seated at a table and deep in thought. Although the painting has a naturalistic appearance, it is deeply symbolic. Its message held particular importance for the seventeenth-century Catholic church, still struggling to combat the Protestant Reformation. As a repentant sinner, Mary Magdalen's image referred to the Catholic sacrament of penance, or confession, not recognized by the Protestants, but deemed essential by the Catholic church to receiving divine grace. The candle flame at the center of the composition provides a source of illumination, while also representing divine presence. The skull that Mary Magdalen touches and the mirror that reflects it are *vanitas* (Latin for "emptiness") emblems signifying the brief nature of earthly life. The book on which the skull rests may suggest the importance of the Bible as a source of spiritual guidance. Dressed in simple garb and without a halo, Mary Magdalen could be any woman, making her example powerful and immediate.

The dramatic interplay of light and dark, the subdued palette, and simplified, balanced forms reveals La Tour's own distinctive style.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Are there any causes that you would be willing to give up material comforts to pursue?
- 2 If you were to make a painting of a particular individual, how might you use light and shade? Could you use it to communicate a message?
- 3 What mood does La Tour's painting convey? Explain.

Napoleon in his Study

1812

by Jacques-Louis David
(pronounced: Dah-veed)
(French, 1748–1825)

■ Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821), or Napoleon I, ruled France from late 1799 until 1814. In 1804, he declared himself emperor. Napoleon's success as a ruler was due to his military skill and his administrative genius. In battle, Napoleon led France to dominate Europe until his defeat in 1814. At home, Napoleon reformed financial, educational, judicial, and religious institutions. A key component of these improvements was his establishment of the Napoleonic Code, a collection of laws that provided religious tolerance, the emancipation of land, civil equality, public trial, and the jury system in France.

David, who had accepted royal commissions prior to the French Revolution, secured for himself the position of First Painter to the emperor. This portrait, executed in a realistic style, is loaded with symbols. We witness Napoleon concluding a long night of legislative work. The candle to the emperor's right (our left) is burned down to its holder. The tall clock in the background shows the time: 4:13. On his desk lie numerous documents, including one displaying the word "Code"—a reference to the Napoleonic Code.

Despite his weariness, Napoleon stands poised to resume his military command. He wears the uniform of a branch of the Imperial Guard. His epaulettes (shoulder decorations) signify his rank of general, his sword is at hand ready to be grasped. Medals on his chest point to multiple military honors. Having worked on behalf of the French political system, David implies, Napoleon now stands ready to fight for the nation's glory.

QUESTIONS

- 1 If you were commissioned to paint a portrait of the President of the United States, how would you portray this world leader? Would it be important to include certain details?
- 2 Would you like to be a military and/or political leader? Why or why not?
- 3 Do you ever wear a uniform? What do the clothes we wear say about us?

The Railway

1873

(detail, cover)

by Edouard Manet

(pronounced: Ay-dwahr Mah-nay)

(French, 1832–1883)

■ In his painting of *The Railway*, Manet refers to the Gare Saint-Lazare, the largest and busiest train station in Paris at the time. However, while the painting's title draws our attention to the railroad, it is largely hidden from view. Rather than trains we see steam from their engines, and we must peer closely through the iron grill to see railroad tracks.

In the foreground Manet has positioned two people, a young woman who gazes at us and a little girl who looks at the train station. A tall black iron fence separates them from the railway. Although placed next to one another, the figures are a study in opposites. One is seated while the other stands; one faces us while the other shows us her back. Even the colors of their dresses are switched: the dress at left is dark blue trimmed with white, the dress at right is white with a blue bow.

Manet's painting tells no obvious story. Instead, the artist offers a quick impression of modern life in Paris. His use of broad brushstrokes contributes to this sense of spontaneity and connects Manet to the French impressionists, a group of painters more interested in capturing a sudden impression of a scene than a labored, minutely detailed representation.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Why do you think Manet chose to put the railway mentioned in the title in the background of this painting?
- 2 If you were going to paint a typical urban scene, what would it be?
- 3 What do you think is the most important recent innovation in travel? If you were an artist how would you depict it? What materials would you use?

Boulevard des Italiens, Morning, Sunlight

1897

by Camille Pissarro

(pronounced: Cah-mee-yuh Pee-sar-o)

(French, 1830–1903)

■ From an elevated viewpoint, *Boulevard des Italiens, Morning, Sunlight* presents a fleeting glimpse of early morning on one of Paris' busiest streets. The avenues of Paris had been considerably widened in the middle of the nineteenth century, in large part to accommodate the growing population of the French capital. The Boulevard des Italiens is packed with traffic. The strong diagonals of the street and the rows of trees emphasize the rapid movement of vehicles and pedestrians.

Pissarro made this painting from a hotel room that overlooked the boulevard. The tall building from which he surveyed the scene is echoed by the tall buildings that form the painting's background. The early hour is suggested not only by the rush-hour activity, but also through the sense of delicate light and deep shadows created by the painter.

As though echoing the energy and rhythm of a Parisian morning, the picture appears to have been painted rapidly. Pissarro used broad brushstrokes. His pedestrians materialize through the use of a few dabs of paint. Some of the brush marks are slightly unclear. Do strokes around the branches of the tree depict foliage or part of an omnibus (horse-drawn precursor of today's buses)? Pissarro's painting is typically impressionist. He rendered a slice of contemporary life, free of particular narrative, as though seen in an instant—a fleeting impression of the ever-changing modern world.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Have city streets changed significantly since Pissarro painted this impression of Paris? How or how not?
- 2 Would this painting feel the same if it were painted in the realist style of David (see *Napoleon in His Study*)?
- 3 What do you consider a typically modern subject today?

Information

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