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## Paris and the Painters of Modern Life

An influential essay published by poet and critic Charles Baudelaire in 1863, titled “The Painter of Modern Life,” exhorted artists to abandon the biblical figures and Roman heroes, the innumerable Venuses, who had long populated the walls of the Salon and instead to take their subjects from the life around them. Only in the contemporary world were authentic loci for real art to be found—and the epicenter of that world was Paris. Critic and historian Walter Benjamin called it “the capital of the nineteenth century.”



The city was much changed from what it had been in the early 1800s. Between about 1830 and 1890, the population of Paris increased fourfold, as people from rural areas moved to France's political, cultural, and economic center. In the early 1850s, Napoleon III appointed Baron Georges Haussmann to devise a master plan for the city, giving him a broad mandate and funds for its modernization and revitalization. Haussmann's plan called for the destruction of 30,000 dwellings and the displacement of 300,000 people to make way for new railway stations, bridges,

and public monuments. The cramped and irregular streets of the older city were replaced with the wide, tree-lined boulevards that we associate with Paris today.

The archetypal denizen of the new, modern boulevard was a *flâneur* (from *flâner*, to stroll), a man (always, a man) of sophistication and elegance who scanned the activity around him with detachment, even irony. Baudelaire cast the artist in the role of *flâneur*, a detective who could decipher the codes of a new urban experience.



CD 2

Maxime Lalanne  
French, 1827–1886

*Demolition for the Opening of the rue des Écoles*  
(*Démolitions pour le percement de la rue des Écoles*), unknown date  
Etching, plate: 9  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 12  $\frac{1}{2}$  in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington  
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1974.69.78



CD 3

Charles Marville  
French, 1816–c. 1879

*Rue Saint-Jacques* (detail), 1865/1869  
Albumen print from collodion negative,  
12 1/8 x 10 5/8 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington  
Anonymous Gift and Gift of Joyce and  
Robert Menschel 2003.17.1

This photograph, an albumen print made from a collodion glass negative, depicts an intersection near the Sorbonne university in the heart of the medieval Latin Quarter. Made for documentary purposes—Marville was hired by the government to record the old city—it not only captures the street's

architectural character and condition, but also sensitively describes the light flooding through the narrow passageway and lingers on the contrast between the bold lettering of advertisements and the damp, peeling walls that threaten to absorb them. While the photograph at first appears to be devoid

of human presence, a closer look reveals several figures—one standing under the street light and another leaning out a nearby balcony—who stood still long enough during the exposure to register on the negative.



## Background: Paris

### Setting

- Paris occupies a slight bowl along an arc of the Seine and includes two islands in the river: Île de la Cité and Île Saint-Louis.
- The river divides the city into the Left Bank and Right Bank.
- The commune of Paris is about 105 km<sup>2</sup> (about 40 sq. mi.) but the greater metropolitan area extends far beyond to roughly 14,500 km<sup>2</sup> (5,600 sq. mi.).
- The highest point, in Montmartre, is 130 m (425 ft.) above sea level.
- The city is divided into 20 numbered *arrondissements* (boroughs), which spiral clockwise from Île de la Cité.

### History

- When Julius Caesar conquered Paris in 52 BC, it was a small fishing village on the Île de la Cité; the name Paris comes from the Parisii, the local Gallic tribe.
- Under Charlemagne Paris became a major center of learning, but it was not until Hugh Capet, Count of Paris, became the first Capetian king that the city was firmly established as France's capital.
- As the power and reach of the French kings grew, so did the influence of Paris in French life.
- The heart of medieval Paris occupies the two islands and the Left Bank's Latin Quarter, where the university drew such scholars as Thomas Aquinas.
- In the 16th century, François I brought the Renaissance to the Louvre and the chateau at Fontainebleau.
- Louis XIV, distrustful of Paris, moved his court to Versailles, but the city played a central role in the Revolution.
- During the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871), France was defeated and Paris besieged; the Paris Commune, a bloody insurrection in the spring of 1871, left more than 20,000 dead.
- During the Third Republic, constituted in 1875, Paris was cemented as the administrative, cultural, and transportation center that it remains today.

### Today

- The metropolitan population of Paris in 2004 was approximately 11.5 million; this includes about 30 percent of all white-collar workers in France and more than 18 percent of the entire French population.
- The city is still symbolized by the Eiffel Tower, designed by Gustave Eiffel and built for the 1889 World's Fair, but new monuments have also become familiar worldwide, including the Centre Pompidou for contemporary art and the glass pyramids of the Grand Louvre.
- Paris' first skyscraper, the Tour Montparnasse, was begun in the late 1960s but since then most tall buildings have been restricted to La Défense, an area northwest of the city center.

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*Explore Paris when it was a Roman city:*  
[www.paris.culture.fr](http://www.paris.culture.fr) (in English and French)

# The Works

slide 1 CD 4	Édouard Manet French, 1832–1883	<i>The Old Musician</i> , 1862 Oil on canvas, 73 ¾ x 98 in.	National Gallery of Art, Washington Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.162
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“It was the homeland, at ten pence a night, of all the street organ players, of all the monkey tamers, of all the acrobats and of all the chimney sweeps that swarm the streets of the town.” Writing in 1860 novelist and commentator Albéric Second was describing the neighborhood of Petite Pologne, close to Édouard Manet’s studio. Balzac called it “sinister,” and Manet himself “a picturesque slum.” It was one of the many poor sections of Paris completely razed in Baron Haussmann’s renovations. By 1862, the date of Manet’s painting, the Petite Pologne had been cleared for construction of the boulevard Malesherbes. More than one hundred thousand people were officially listed as indigent in the city, and many more were uncounted.

Here Manet presents a visual catalogue of the Petite Pologne’s displaced. Most are real individuals. The seated musician is Jean Lagrène, leader of a local gypsy band who earned his living as an organ-grinder and artist’s model. The man in the top hat is Colardet, a rag-picker and ironmonger, whom Manet had earlier depicted drinking absinthe. At the right is a man named Guérout cast as the “wandering Jew,” the prototypical outsider. One of the boys is a street urchin named Alexandre, but the other is a member of Manet’s own household.

Manet presents them all with neutral detachment. Their emotional blankness felt “modern” to contemporary viewers. Impassive and silent, these people from the margins of Parisian life are restricted,

friezelike, to the narrow plane of the foreground. Behind them space opens with disquieting ambiguity. Almost rural, the setting also seems to have lost its identity, belonging to no particular city or time. The displaced people and transformed place are equally unrooted. But in Manet’s canvas the overlarge figures also assert an identity and dignity probably denied them in real life.

reproduction  
slide 2 | CD 5

Camille Pissarro  
French, 1830–1903

*Boulevard des Italiens, Morning,  
Sunlight*, 1897  
Oil on canvas, 28 7/8 x 36 1/4 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington  
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.198



Camille Pissarro, primarily a painter of rural life, produced very few city scenes before the 1890s, when he painted several series of streetscapes in Paris and elsewhere. He wrote his son Lucien in 1897: “I have engaged a large room at the Grand Hôtel de Russie, 1 rue Drouot, from which I can see the whole sweep of the boulevards.”<sup>1</sup> He could look left onto the boulevard Montmartre or turn right toward the boulevard des Italiens. The two streets were at the western end of Paris’ *grands boulevards*, a linked chain of avenues that arcs from La Madeleine along the line of the city’s medieval fortifications. In the late 1800s, the *grands boulevards* formed

the prosperous heart of Paris. According to a count taken in 1881, twenty thousand vehicles traveled the boulevard des Italiens each day, rolling past the Opéra, expensive shops, fine restaurants, and cafés like the celebrated Café Tortoni, which drew *le tout Paris* (the city’s elite) and was a favorite of Manet.

Between mid-February and mid-April, Pissarro painted two views of the boulevard des Italiens (he made far more of the boulevard Montmartre). He worked in the morning, as the sun just broke over buildings to fall on the pavement at the lower right. Working two hours at a

stretch, he seems to have been most intent on capturing the busy movement of urban life. His overhead view, angled perspective, and abrupt cropping on all four sides suggest an energy and ceaseless activity that extends beyond the frame. Rapid, abbreviated brushstrokes give the blurred effect of objects caught in motion.



## Consider this

Identify some characteristics of *Boulevard des Italiens* that were dictated by the artist's elevated position. Would you say that this unusual position was an advantage or disadvantage?

What modes of getting around Paris do you see represented?

- walking
- horse-drawn cab
- two-story omnibus

How would the street be different if viewed today?

How would the effect of the painting change if sky were visible above the buildings? Or if the buildings ended before the edge of the canvas, allowing you to see beyond them?

What is the main focus of the painting? Where does your eye rest—or does it? What is the effect of the scattered dots of red paint? Of the dark vertical trees placed at regular intervals and receding into space? Of the blurred brushstrokes?

- all contribute to the eye's busy movement around the canvas and to creating a sense of motion

This painting is one of two representing the same scene at different times of day. How would you expect *Boulevard des Italiens, Afternoon* to differ?

- lighting; color scheme
- longer shadows falling at different angles

## A modern city

Pissarro's crowded streetscape illustrates several familiar features of late nineteenth-century Paris. The large two-story omnibuses, pulled by two- or three-horse teams, seated up to forty passengers and were fixtures of the avenues after their introduction in 1855. Supplemented by trams and cabs for hire, they made it relatively easy for Parisians to travel across the city, even before the opening of the Métro in 1900. Omnibuses were one of the places where different levels of society mingled—though all riders were warned to guard against pickpockets.



Named after the advertising agency that had the exclusive contract for them, green-domed Morris columns were also ubiquitous. For viewers today these kiosks are instantly evocative of Paris. Plastered with posters for theatrical and other events, they were an important means of communication.



Also visible in Pissarro's painting are large plate-glass shop windows at street level. The technology to manufacture such large panes had not existed before 1850 or so. Now, with expanded gas and electric lighting, they produced glittering displays that were yet another attraction of the *grands boulevards*.





slide 3  
CD 6

Auguste Renoir  
French, 1841–1919

*Pont Neuf, Paris*, 1872  
Oil on canvas, 29 5/8 x 36 7/8 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington  
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.58



Auguste Renoir's originality as a landscape painter helped define impressionism. In paintings like this one, he transcribed immediate and ephemeral sensory effects. The pavement is yellow with light, brighter even than the sky. Its glare washes out incidental detail so that we almost squint at dark, backlit forms. Shadows fall in cool violet tones, complements of the yellow light.

Among the brisk crowd, one man, wearing a straw boater and carrying the cane of a fashionable *boulevardier*, appears twice: he is Renoir's younger brother Edmond, at the time an aspiring journalist. In the lower center, he angles toward us while consulting a book, and walks away at the far left. Many years later Edmond described how he and Renoir shared ten-centime coffees above a café on the

Right Bank, overlooking the bridge. As the artist painted the busy activity below, he would dispatch his brother to delay some figures with idle questions and chatter while he brushed in their forms.

When Renoir painted pont Neuf, life was just returning to normal in Paris. The city had been besieged and the country defeated in the Franco-Prussian War; war wounds and the ensuing violence of the Commune were still raw. Although many parts of the city remained devastated, Renoir emphasized a rebounding vitality. Crossing the bridge are soldiers and dandies, laborers and pampered young ladies: the renewed life of the city.

## A most modern old bridge

Which is the oldest of the thirty-plus bridges that cross the Seine in Paris? The “new bridge,” pont Neuf. Begun in 1578, it is also among the longest, spanning both flows of the river as it parts around the Île de la Cité. In 1607 it was officially christened by Henri IV with the name it still bears. (Henri’s equestrian statue can be seen in Renoir’s painting.)

What was new about pont Neuf was its style: instead of being lined with houses in typical medieval fashion, its open span allowed a view of the water. Pont Neuf attracted a lively commerce. On the feast of Corpus Christi, members of the painters’ guild sold their wares there. In 1985 pont Neuf entered the catalogue of contemporary art when it was wrapped in sandstone-

colored fabric by the artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude.

*Learn more about the wrapping of pont Neuf:*

[www.christojeanneclaude.net/pn.html](http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/pn.html)

## Gastronomie: haute cuisine

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the highly polished and refined look of Salon painting was matched by the food presented on the finest tables in Paris. *La grande cuisine* originated with the cooking style of Antonin Carême (1784–1833), who cooked for Talleyrand, Baron James de Rothschild, and Czar Alexander I. Carême made the cake for Napoleon Bonaparte’s wedding, and is often called the chef of kings and king of chefs. Known for elaborate constructions and complicated dishes, he was also among the first to begin the practice of serving courses individually and devised many of the tools that are a common part of cooking today. His five-volume *L’Art de la cuisine française* was published in 1833–1834.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, both food and its presentation became simpler. In large measure this change was due to Georges Auguste Escoffier (1846–1935). Escoffier had shown some promise as an artist but was already working in his father’s restaurant in Nice at age thirteen. He moved to Paris in 1865 and served as an army cook during the Franco-Prussian War. After meeting the hotelier César Ritz, Escoffier worked in Ritz restaurants in a number of cities before opening the most famous of them all, in Paris in 1889. His *Guide Culinaire*, published in 1902 with more than 5,000 recipes, remains a standard work on classic French cuisine. Escoffier is also credited with having elevated the status of chef to a profession.

*Read a biography of Antonin Carême:*

Ian Kelly, *Cooking for Kings: The Life of Antonin Carême, the First Celebrity Chef*. New York: Walker and Co., 2004.

*Visit the Escoffier Foundation online:*

[www.fondation-escoffier.org](http://www.fondation-escoffier.org) (in French)



*Au Buffet des Tuileries—Souvenir d'une Soirée de l'Année 1869*

After a watercolor by Édouard Detaille, in M. Armand Dayot, ed. *Le Second Empire (2 Décembre 1851–4 Septembre 1870)* (Paris, n.d.), 259

National Gallery of Art Library, Washington



slide 4  
CD 7Jean Béraud  
French, 1849 – 1936*Paris, rue du Havre*, c. 1882  
Oil on canvas, 13 7/8 x 10 3/4 in.National Gallery of Art, Washington  
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.2

Not all painters of modern life adopted the loose brushwork of impressionism. Jean Béraud, younger than either Monet or Renoir, painted the fast pace and isolation of contemporary Paris, but he typically employed the more refined style and finish of Salon painting.

Here, Béraud presents a view of the corner of rue du Havre and boulevard Haussmann. In the background is the facade of the Gare Saint-Lazare (see p. 24). On the right, tarpaulins and colorful posters enliven scaffolding that protects the damaged edifice of the department store, Le Printemps. Described by Émile Zola as a “*cathédrale du commerce*,” Le Printemps suffered a catastrophic fire in the early morning hours of March 9, 1881. Fortunately, the shopgirls living on upper floors escaped, and only one fatality was recorded. The store was rebuilt and remains, much expanded, at the same location today.

## Department stores

Le Printemps, which opened in 1865, is one of the world’s oldest department stores (Le Bon Marché, also in Paris, is usually credited with being the first). These new institutions offered women a new public space. They provided lower-class women with respectable

work and upper-class women with a socially acceptable destination outside the home. The bustling young woman with hatboxes who crosses Béraud’s picture from the 1880s would have found such an errand commonplace, but her mother probably experienced it as a newfound freedom.

*Read a nineteenth-century novel detailing the phantasmagoria of the modern department store:*  
Émile Zola, *Au bonheur des dames*  
(*The Ladies’ Paradise*), 1883.

reproduction  
slide 5 | CD 8

Edgar Degas  
French, 1834–1917

*The Dance Lesson*, c. 1879  
Oil on canvas, 14 15/16 x 34 5/8 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1995.47.6



Many of Edgar Degas' best-known paintings depict ballet dancers. Degas was drawn to athletes and performers of all kinds. With a practiced line he arrested their precise, controlled movements in a snapshot-like moment of time.

This work is probably the first of a group of forty distinctive ballet scenes with an unusual horizontal format. The wide view accommodated Degas' fascination with the unexpected views of photography and Japanese prints (see p. 132): figures are sharply cropped and placed off-center, while the floor, dominating the scene, seems tipped upward, an illusion accentuated by the format.

Ballet made hard demands, as Degas' picture suggests. Most dancers were from poor families. They began classes at age seven or eight and worked long hours. By the time she was a teenager, a girl who had advanced to become a member of the company was probably the top breadwinner in her family. Already in the later 1870s, when Degas' painting was made, ballet had begun to attract more middle-class girls, perhaps encouraged by the fame and aristocratic marriages achieved by some leading stars of the dance stage.

## Consider this

How does it feel to be in this room? What mood or emotions do the figures and setting convey? Can you suggest an alternative title?

Ballet dancers are known for the seemingly effortless perfection of their elegant stage performances. Does this behind-the-scenes view reinforce or contradict that view? Why do you think Degas chose to treat the subject in this way?

- *realist depiction of modern life*
- *variety of relaxed and tensed poses*
- *popularity of ballet*

Where are the brightest colors in the painting? Why do you think the painter accented those areas?

- *red wrap at lower left directs our eye to exhausted sitter, setting emotional tone of painting and also drawing eye to that starting point*
- *red bow causes eye to pan across canvas to upper right*

Is the composition balanced or asymmetrical? Try to locate the foreground, middle ground, and background—how do they change in different parts of the picture?

Cover up the brown wainscoting and see how the picture changes.

- *Dark shapes provide a central anchor for the dynamic composition*

If horizontal lines suggest restfulness and diagonal lines suggest dynamism, how would you characterize the composition?

Where do you see the influence of photography or Japanese prints?

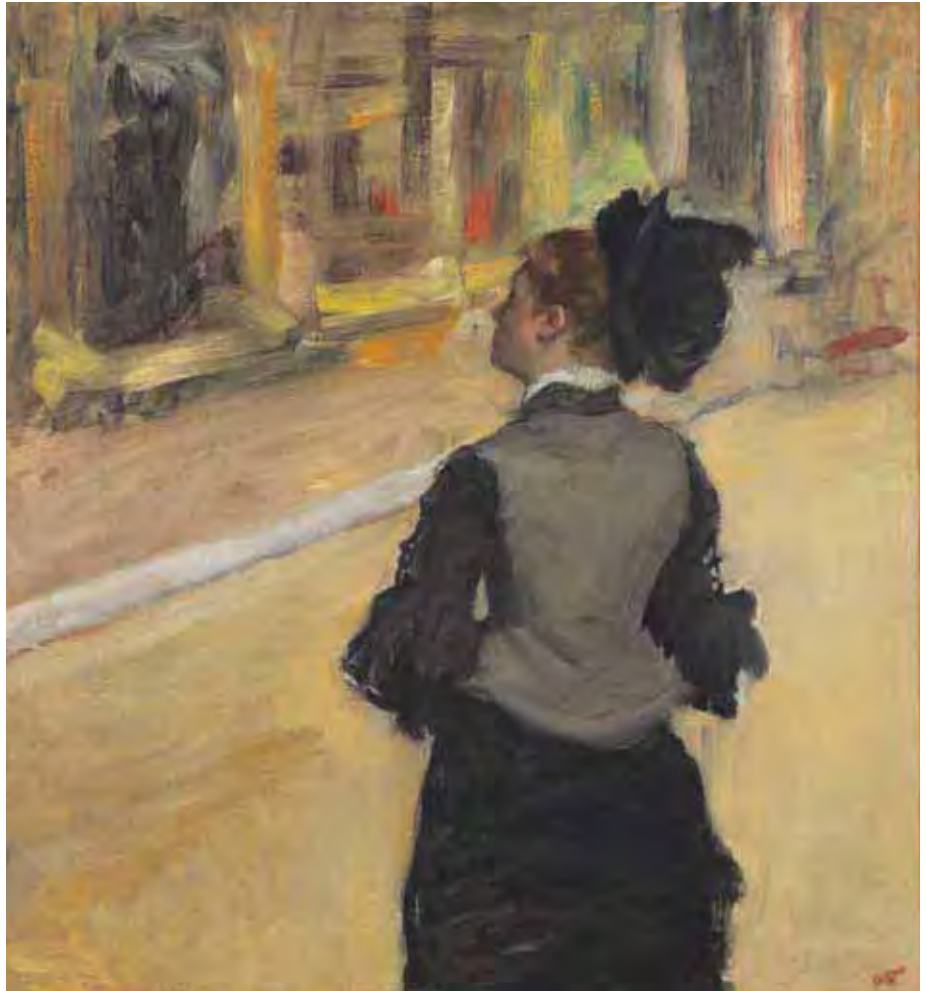
- *high, angled vantage point*
- *cropped figures*
- *awkward, seemingly unstaged poses*



CD 9	Edgar Degas French, 1834–1917	<i>Woman Viewed from Behind</i> , unknown date Oil on canvas, 32 x 29 ¾ in.	National Gallery of Art, Washington Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1985.64.11
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Long, sketchy brushstrokes suggest paintings in heavy gold frames, an expanse of parquet floor, and, at the right, a pair of rose-colored columns. The information from these brushy details is sufficient to place this woman in the Grande galerie of the Louvre (see p. 18). Although her form is more clearly defined than her setting, Edgar Degas withholds her full identity by showing us only her back and profile. Almost certainly, however, she is Mary Cassatt, whom Degas had met in the Louvre, where they studied old master paintings. Both artists emphasized careful composition and strong drawing, not the spontaneous transcriptions of classic impressionist style.

Degas made a number of prints and pastels of Cassatt and her sister on visits to the museum; in some she appears to wear the same dress and hat seen here. Perhaps even more telling is the woman's lively interest as she examines the art on the wall before her. Despite Degas' free brushwork elsewhere, an energetic line defines her posture and conveys her quick alertness. Her engaged silhouette—the very tilt of her chin—seems to belie a comment Degas is reported to have made about this painting: that he hoped it would “express the boredom, the overwhelmed respect and admiration, the total lack of sensation that women experience before paintings.”<sup>2</sup> Although Degas often aimed his sharply critical wit at colleagues (and at women generally), he was, in fact, impressed with the young American, saying of her, “there is someone who senses painting as I do.”<sup>3</sup>



CD 10 | Edgar Degas

*Mary Cassatt at the Louvre: The Paintings Gallery (Au Louvre: La Peinture)*,  
c. 1879/1880

Etching, aquatint, drypoint, and electric crayon  
on wove paper, plate: 11 7/8 x 4 15/16 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington  
Rosenwald Collection 1946.21.106



slide 6  
CD 11

Mary Cassatt  
American, 1844–1926

*The Loge*, 1882  
Oil on canvas, 31 3/8 x 25 1/8 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington  
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.96

While Degas took many of his subjects from the stage and orchestra pit, Cassatt focuses attention here on the audience. Behind these two young women are rings of theater seats and a massive crystal chandelier—reflections from the mirrored rear wall of their luxurious box. Ladies were not permitted to sit in orchestra seats. The women, like Cassatt herself, clearly belong to wealthy, proper families. Their careful posture is reserved, almost stiff with decorum.

Not all eyes were trained toward the stage, however, as the young women are equally on view. They sit forward in the loge to be seen (although social norms prevented proper unmarried young women from overtly looking at anyone themselves). The woman holding the fan is Mary Ellison, a friend of the artist visiting from Philadelphia. Even from behind this screen her shy gaze is cast modestly down. The other woman, projecting a more forthright confidence, is the daughter of poet Stéphane Mallarmé, Geneviève.





## The Louvre and Tuileries

It can be argued that the Louvre in Paris was the first true public museum. Although other institutions (including the British Museum [1759], the Ashmolean at Oxford University [1683], and collections in Dresden [1744], the Vatican [1784], and elsewhere) are older, they were not fully public in access or ownership. The idea of opening the French royal collections to the public had been considered in the waning years of the *ancien régime*—changes to the Grande galerie to accommodate public displays were even discussed—but nothing happened before the Revolution of 1789. When the Louvre opened on August 10, 1793 (first anniversary of the founding of the Republic), it was a true public institution, intended not only as a venue for the display of art but to play a role in the

formation and development of a new society. As artist (and revolutionary) Jacques-Louis David declared, “The museum is not supposed to be a vain assemblage of frivolous luxury objects that serve only to satisfy idle curiosity. What it must be is an imposing school.”<sup>4</sup> For many years the area under the Grande galerie served as artists’ studios and workshops.

The complex of buildings that makes up the Louvre today was built around the core of a twelfth-century fortress erected by Philippe Augustus (1165–1223); its moat walls can be toured in the Louvre basements. The palace was rebuilt and expanded over the centuries. The Grande galerie was completed in 1606 under Henri IV. The collection itself grew from a nucleus formed by François I (1494–1547), which

already included the Louvre’s most famous painting, Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*. By the time of Louis XIV (1639–1715), the royal collection included nearly 1,500 paintings. The military campaigns of Napoleon Bonaparte brought in new treasures from Europe and ancient Egypt. Today the Louvre houses more than 6,000 European paintings, dating from the Middle Ages to the mid-nineteenth century, as well as celebrated works from ancient and nonwestern civilizations.

*Visit the Louvre online:*

[www.louvre.fr](http://www.louvre.fr) (in French and English)



Painted shortly after the Louvre opened, Robert’s view of the Grande galerie shows it filled with visitors, sketching amateurs, and serious artists.

Hubert Robert | French, 1733–1808

*Project of the Disposition of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre, 1796*

Oil on canvas, 45 ¼ x 57 in.

Paris, Musée du Louvre/Scala/Art Resource, NY



CD 12

Camille Pissarro  
French, 1830–1903

*Place du Carrousel, Paris*, 1900  
Oil on canvas, 21  $\frac{5}{8}$  x 25  $\frac{3}{4}$  in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington  
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.55

Pissarro painted roughly twenty-eight scenes of the Tuileries gardens with the Louvre beyond, from a hotel room in the rue de Rivoli. In the sixteenth century, Catherine de Médicis (1519–1589) had

built the Tuileries palace here, on the site of a former tile (*tuile*) works. Burned and reconstructed after the revolutions in 1789 and 1848, the palace was not rebuilt when it was torched a third time during the

Commune. It became instead a royal park, and after Napoleon III opened it to the public, one of the city's most popular promenades.



CD 13

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec  
French, 1864–1901*Maxime Dethomas*, 1896  
Oil on cardboard, 26 7/16 x 20 7/8 in.National Gallery of Art, Washington  
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.219

Maxime Dethomas was an artist and a friend of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, who described him as “a charming lad and partner, who does not talk about his own painting, which is greatly to be admired.”<sup>5</sup> The two were frequent visitors to various Montmartre nightspots: brothels, dance halls, and café-concerts. They traveled to Spain and Holland together, too.

Yet, for all their closeness, Lautrec’s image of his friend seems almost anonymous. He is pressed close to us, his bulk dominating the front of the picture plane but locked into a narrow space. His figure is cut off at the bottom, increasing the sense that we are witnessing this scene in person. Lautrec painted Dethomas during a masked ball, possibly the one that was held each year during Lent at the Opéra (see opposite). Behind him are gaudily and scantily clad members of the demimonde. The contrast of their pink tights and ruffles with Dethomas’ dark form flattens space—compresses time. It was a boisterous crowd at the Opéra ball, but Lautrec’s picture suggests isolation within the throng and a hallucinatory silence.

Lautrec often painted *à l’essence*, in which oil paints are thinned with turpentine. Used on a cardboard support, like the one here, the technique leaves the pigments with a dry, sketchy quality after the solvent evaporates.

## Montmartre

The butte Montmartre was only incorporated into the city of Paris in 1860, and it kept some of its rural character long after other parts of the capital had been transformed by Haussmann’s renovations. Its streets

still followed their twisting medieval paths. Artists found it an inexpensive place to live and work, and it also became the heart of a racy entertainment district.

All levels of society mixed there: the most daring of Paris’ elites, working-class couples, men and women seeking drink or companionship, even the curious foreign tourist.

CD 14	Édouard Manet French, 1832–1883	<i>Masked Ball at the Opéra</i> , 1873 Oil on canvas, 23 ¼ x 28 ¾ in.	National Gallery of Art, Washington Gift of Mrs. Horace Havemeyer in memory of her mother-in-law, Louisine W. Havemeyer 1982.75.1
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Manet's canvas presents a wide view of the rowdy festivities at the annual Opéra ball. A leg dangles over a railing. A figure costumed as Polichinelle enters on the left. The ball was a place where upper classes and the demimonde met. "Imagine," suggested the newspaper *Figaro*, "the opera house packed to the rafters, the boxes furnished out with all the pretty showgirls of Paris..."<sup>6</sup> There is little doubt about the sexual nature of these encounters between wealthy men and young actresses and showgirls in daring dress. In the center a woman stands on the arm of an elegant man. Probably she is an upper-class woman who, by wearing a mask, is rendered anonymous.

Manet posed several of his friends for this painting—writers, artists, and musicians—and even included himself. He is the bearded blond man at right who looks out toward the viewer. A dance card at his feet bears his signature.



Polichinelle was a stock character in raucous and satiric productions performed by such popular theaters as the guignol and commedia dell'arte—and a popular costume choice at masked balls, as well. Manet's Polichinelle bears a striking resemblance to Marshall MacMahon, president of France between 1873 and 1879.

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CD 15 | Édouard Manet

*Polichinelle*, 1874

Lithograph in black hand-colored with gouache and watercolor on wove paper, 18 ¾ x 12 ¾ in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington  
Gift (Partial and Promised) of Malcolm Wiener, in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art 1990.65.1



reproduction  
slide 7 | CD 16

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec  
French, 1864–1901

*Quadrille at the Moulin Rouge*, 1892  
Oil on cardboard, 31 ¾ x 23 ¾ in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington  
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.221

This painting puts us inside one of Paris' most celebrated dance halls, the Moulin Rouge. It was opened in 1889 on the boulevard de Clichy, a frontier of sorts between low-rent Montmartre and more stylish areas. It was a perfect place to witness the spark produced by the collision of popular culture and upper-class society. The Moulin Rouge offered a range of attractions: there were singers and novelty music acts (including a famous “flatulist”), as well as donkey rides in the garden. Beginning around 9:30 in the evening, Paris' smart set arrived for the dancing, which was performed in the midst of the audience.

The woman, hands on hips, who stands squarely in front of a well-dressed couple is the popular danseuse Gabrielle. A high flounce of petticoats behind her shows the character of the dance that drew in the late-night clientele. It was an extreme, highly sexualized form of the cancan, known as the *chahut* or *quadrille naturaliste*. Mark Twain, in *Innocents Abroad* (1869), described the scene firsthand:

*Twenty sets formed, the music struck up, and then—I placed my hands before my face for very shame. But I looked through my fingers. They were dancing the renowned Can-can... The idea is to dance as wildly, as noisily, as furiously as you can; expose yourself as much as possible if you are a woman; and kick as high as you can no matter which sex you belong to. There is no word of exaggeration in this.*

The *chahut* (from *chahuter*, to create a disturbance) probably originated among the lower class but, like the street culture of hip-hop, was co-opted and marketed for commercial entertainment. Its performers attained celebrity status and helped



increase interest in the dance halls, which had existed since the mid-1800s but underwent a surge of popularity in the 1880s and 1890s.

## Consider this

In Lautrec's painting, why might the woman in the green dress be standing as she is, with her hands on her hips and her feet splayed out? How does she contrast with the woman opposite her?

- facing out/facing in
- alone/with companion
- warm colors/cool colors
- active pose/passive pose

Which other aspects of the painting convey an impression of lively movement? What adjectives would you use to describe the presence or absence of motion in the scene?

Lautrec also produced advertising posters, designed to attract the quick glance of an eye. What aspects of this painting would be effective in a poster?

- flat, shallow space allows image to be taken in at once
- simplified forms and lack of distracting details
- clear outlining of shapes
- large areas of color and simplified color scheme
- space at lower right for text

Compare the appearance of this picture, made using the technique of "*peinture à l'essence*" on cardboard, to conventional oils like Manet's *The Railway* (p. 24).



Jane Avril was a friend of Lautrec and a star of the cancan, celebrated for a dance style that was both sensual and ethereal. She had what one contemporary called an "air of depraved virginity."<sup>7</sup> This was the last poster she commissioned from Lautrec, in late 1899. Its bold design exemplifies his graphic work.

CD 17 | Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

*Jane Avril*, 1899

5-color lithograph (poster), image:  
22 1/16 x 14 15/16 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington  
Rosenwald Collection 1953.6.137



Although there were still a few functioning windmills in Montmartre, the "mill" of the Moulin Rouge was never more than part of its elaborate promotion. Important advertising also came by way of posters commissioned from some of the city's most daring artists. Lautrec's first poster was designed for the Moulin Rouge in December 1891, and it made him famous overnight when more than 3,000 copies were pasted on the walls of Paris.

The Moulin Rouge, before c. 1900

John Rewald Papers, National Gallery of Art,  
Washington, Gallery Archives



reproduction  
slide 8 | CD 18

Édouard Manet  
French, 1832–1883

*The Railway*, 1873  
Oil on canvas, 36 1/8 x 45 1/8 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington  
Gift of Horace Havemeyer in memory of his  
mother, Louise W. Havemeyer 1956.10.1



When Manet painted *The Railway*, the Gare Saint-Lazare was the busiest train station in Paris, gateway to points north and west, including the coast of Normandy and popular riverside resorts along the Seine (see sections 3 and 5). It handled some 40 percent of the city's rail traffic. The pont de l'Europe, a new trellised iron bridge, carried six roadways across its wide trainyard.

Manet titled this painting, which he showed at the Salon in 1874, *Chemin de fer* (railroad). The Gare Saint-Lazare is unseen, but the place was recognizable enough, identified by a small slice of pillar and distinctive grillwork of the new bridge, and by the masses of rising steam. Manet's intentions, however, were not clear to his audience, and they found the picture

difficult to understand. According to a contemporary, "the subject was pronounced to be unintelligible. Properly speaking, there was no subject at all."<sup>8</sup>

The figures are deliberately enigmatic. It seems a casual moment, but one without obvious narrative. The pair are opposites in blue and white, the woman facing out with a direct but undecipherable stare while the girl turns to face the tracks. The contrasts in color and tone neutralize any perception of space and flatten the composition.

## Consider this

Describe the setting of *The Railway*. Identify the foreground, middle ground, and background. Try to estimate the depth of each of these areas. How close are we to the figures? What is the visual effect of the railing?

Describe what you see behind the railing. Why might the artist have made it so difficult to identify exactly what is there?

- *not to distract attention from the foreground figures*
- *to convey the impression of a quick glance*
- *to create the bold visual contrast between white steam and black bars; etc.*

List some of the contrasts the artist makes between the two figures.

- *young/old*
- *seated/standing*
- *turned away/facing viewer*
- *body covered/skin exposed*
- *reversed distribution of blue and white*

How old is each figure? What is their relationship?

Why are they here? How long have they been here?

- *long enough for the puppy to fall asleep*

What were they doing before they arrived? What will they do next? What might the seated woman be reading? What is she thinking? Does she recognize us? What is the younger girl thinking?

Where are we now in relation to the scene?

# The Artists

## Mary Cassatt

American, 1844–1926



Edgar Degas

*Portrait of Mary Cassatt*, c. 1880–1884 | Oil on canvas, 28 1/8 x 23 1/8 in.

Washington, D.C., National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution | Gift of The Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation and the Regents Major Acquisitions Fund, Smithsonian Institution NPG.84.34/Art Resource, NY

Mary Cassatt was born in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania, now Pittsburgh. The daughter of a wealthy banker, she grew up in a cultivated environment and lived abroad for a number of years as a young girl. At age sixteen she enrolled in classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia; six years later she set sail for Europe to continue her study of painting. Over the next four years, she worked under several well-known painters in Paris and

Rome. During the Franco-Prussian War, she returned to the United States, but after sixteen months was back in Europe, painting and copying in museums in Italy, Spain, and Belgium. In 1874, the year of the first impressionist exhibition, she settled in Paris. Although she would return home with some regularity, Cassatt spent most of her remaining life in France. Her parents and sister joined her in 1877.

During her long career, an openness to experimentation and new ideas led Cassatt to work in various styles. Until about 1878, her paintings—many of them genre scenes and portraits—reflected the dark, rich colors of the old masters she admired. Several of her works were accepted at the Salon between 1868 and 1876. Through Degas, whom she met in the Louvre, she became part of the circle of impressionists, adopting a more pastel palette and quicker, freer brushwork. When her new work was rejected by the Salon, Degas persuaded Cassatt to join the 1879 impressionist exhibition. She participated in 1880, 1881, and 1886 as well. Degas and Cassatt remained close associates and collaborators. Working with Degas, she took up pastels and printmaking in the mid-1870s—and became one of the most innovative printmakers of the day. Both techniques reinforced her strong and original drawing. In the 1880s she developed a painting style that was more linear and abstract, often influenced by the strong design of Japanese art.

Also in the late 1880s, Cassatt began to devote increased attention to the subjects for which she is most known: intimate scenes of mothers and children. Like all women of her class, she was more limited in her access to subjects than male colleagues. Nevertheless, she enjoyed wide success in Europe and the United States—and advised wealthy American friends on their purchases, particularly of modern paintings, many of which have found their way onto the walls of the National Gallery and other museums in the United States.



## Jean Béraud

French, 1849–1936

Jean Béraud and his twin sister Mélanie were born in St. Petersburg, where their father, a French sculptor, was working. The family returned to France after the elder Béraud died, when Jean was four. He grew up in Paris, and read for the law until age twenty-four when he began to study painting. Initially Béraud concentrated on portraiture, but by the end of the 1870s he had turned his eye to subjects from modern life. Béraud admired Manet (and lived in a similar social milieu, once seconding for Marcel Proust in a duel). To accurately reflect a street scene and its rapidly shifting cast of Parisians, Béraud would spend hours sketching from a horse-drawn cab. It was joked that he was known to all of the taxi drivers in Paris—they appreciated a fare who made so little demand on their horses. Béraud worked most often in a detailed, realistic manner but also produced more impressionistic works, with quicker, more spontaneous brushwork and concern for light effects. Around 1890 he began to paint biblical scenes in realistic contemporary settings that his viewers found quite shocking; only in his last years did he return to the city-life scenes that had brought him popular success.

## Edgar Degas

French, 1834–1917



CD 77 | Edgar Degas

*Self-Portrait with White Collar*, c. 1857 | Oil on canvas, 8 1/16 x 5 7/8 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington | Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1995.47.7

Edgar Degas was born in Paris, the oldest son of a well-to-do banker and part of an extended aristocratic family with cousins in Italy and the United States. His mother had been the daughter of a cotton broker in New Orleans, and Degas spent some time there in the early 1870s.

Although Degas originally intended to study law, he enjoyed unusual parental support for his ultimate decision to become an artist. He began copying Renaissance works in the Louvre, and in 1854 entered the studio of an academic painter who had been a pupil of the neoclassical artist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. Degas was especially impressed by Ingres' disciplined style, and the older artist reportedly advised him, "Draw lines, young man, and still more lines, from life or from memory."<sup>9</sup> Throughout his career, Degas stressed careful composition and strong drawing.

In the Louvre Degas met Manet, and through him, future impressionists. Although Degas was an initial organizer of the first impressionist exhibition in 1874 and remained influential among the group, he never accepted the impressionist label to describe his own work. While artists like Monet or Renoir were attempting to transcribe, both directly and immediately, a brief sensory impression, Degas' approach was deliberate and controlled. Believing art to be a series of decisions, he painted in the studio using memory, notes, and preparatory drawings. Degas did, however, share the impressionists' interest in modern life. In the 1860s he started painting scenes at the racetracks around Paris and later in the city's ballet studios and stages, cabarets and dance halls. In all these places he was intrigued by the precise, disciplined movements of the performers—whether racehorses, dancers, singers, or acrobats. "You need natural life," he told landscape colleagues. "I need artificial life."<sup>10</sup>

Degas was one of many artists who admired the high viewpoints and looming perspectives of Japanese woodblock prints, which were hugely popular in late nineteenth-century Paris. His unexpected angles and cropped scenes also reflect the impact of photography. Often his work is described using the vocabulary of film: pans, tight close-ups, and freeze frames. These elements impart a momentary feel and enhance a sense that we are seeing a piece of modern life—factual but incomplete like a snapshot that holds only a fragment of reality. Though these compositions appear casual, they are the result of Degas' careful design. "No art is less spontaneous than mine," he said.

## Édouard Manet

French, 1832–1883



Henri Fantin-Latour | French, 1836–1904

*Édouard Manet*, c. 1867 | Oil on canvas,  
46 ¼ x 35 7/16 in.

Art Institute of Chicago/Bridgeman Art Library

“I saw coming toward me a man of youthful appearance, almost distinguished, turned out with elegant simplicity. Light hair, a fine, silky beard... gray eyes, nose straight with flaring nostrils; hands gloved, step quick and springy. It was Manet.”<sup>11</sup> These words describe a well-to-do *boulevardier*—an urbane and sophisticated member of Parisian society, a man of the boulevards. This was Édouard Manet’s milieu, the life he lived and painted.

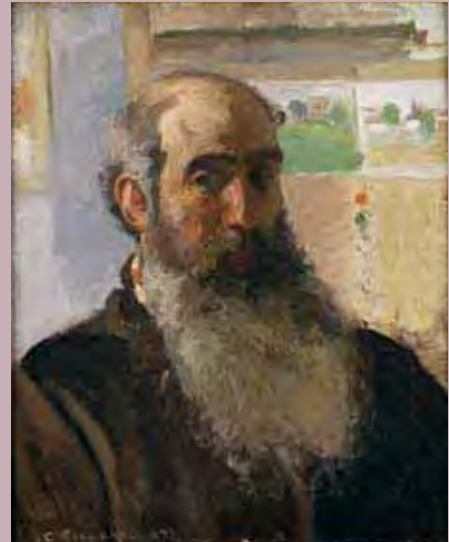
Manet was born in Paris and died there (he said he never truly felt comfortable anywhere else). He showed an early talent for drawing and caricature but tried, unsuccessfully, to enter the French naval college. Overcoming the initial opposition of his father, a high-ranking official at the Ministry of Justice, Manet entered the studio of a successful Salon painter; his most important lessons, however, were learned from old masters in

the Louvre. He was especially impressed with the vivid brushwork of Spanish painter Diego Velázquez and began to develop a free manner of painting that was quite different from the polished surfaces of the academic tradition. Manet created form, not through a gradual blending but with discrete “patches” (*taches*) of color placed side by side. He tended to omit transitional tones, which had the effect of flattening space. Rather than building up thin layers of glaze to slowly achieve his final color, he applied it directly, from the start. Though he often relied on old master paintings for compositional structure and even subject matter, Manet imparted a distinctly modern cast to his work—the cast of modern Paris detected by a *flâneur*.

Although Courbet and others had already challenged academic tradition, when Manet’s painting *Olympia* appeared at the Salon in 1865, no work had ever created such outrage. Its broad patches of color appeared unfinished, an affront to audiences. Even more shocking was its subject—a nude courtesan, one slipper dangling, who assessed viewers with unapologetic frankness. There was no way to escape her reality, to pretend she was cloaked in myth. The *succès du scandale* made Manet an instant leader of the avant-garde. His bold style and modern subjects were enormously influential on the younger artists who would be called impressionists. Although Manet painted some impressionist pictures in the 1870s, he never exhibited with the group and did not share their concern with spontaneity. He worked with models and from drawings, painting mostly in the studio.

## Camille Pissarro

French, 1830–1903



Camille Pissarro

*Self-Portrait*, 1873 | Oil on canvas, 21 ¾ x 18 ¾ in.  
Paris, Musée d’Orsay/Erich Lessing/  
Art Resource, NY

Camille Pissarro was born in Charlotte Amalie on the Caribbean island of St. Thomas, where his family (which was French, of Portuguese descent) owned a general store. Today St. Thomas is part of the U.S. Virgin Islands but was then a Danish dependency, and Pissarro remained a Danish citizen although he spent almost his entire adult life in France. After attending school outside Paris, where he developed an interest in drawing, Pissarro found little appeal in the family business back on St. Thomas—and the island offered limited opportunity to study art. After meeting a marine and landscape painter in 1852, Pissarro escaped family pressures and spent the next two years with the artist in the Caribbean, learning to paint.

Pissarro returned to France in time to see the 1855 universal exposition and was especially impressed by Corot’s paintings exhibited there. Years later he would still identify himself as Corot’s student. Pissarro



## Auguste Renoir

French, 1841–1919

took classes at the Académie Suisse, where he met Cézanne, Monet, and other younger painters. By about 1869 he had begun to paint in an impressionist style, with quick, unblended brushstrokes and a light palette. He was devoted to capturing sensations—not only an appearance of nature but his individual experience of it. Pissarro later advised a young artist, “Don’t work bit by bit... Keep everything going on an equal basis; use small brush strokes and try to put down your perceptions immediately. Do not proceed according to rules and principles, but paint what you observe and feel.”<sup>12</sup>

Pissarro moved his family to Pontoise and then Louveciennes, small towns outside Paris that were better suited to his temperament and struggling finances. There, he grew closer to Monet (living in Argenteuil) and Renoir (a frequent visitor). Pissarro was drawn to the rural life of the countryside. His politics—humane, secular, and socialist—grounded his art. He played a vital role in organizing the loosely defined group that participated in the first impressionist exhibition in 1874 and was, in fact, the only artist to participate in every one of the eight exhibitions mounted between 1874 and 1886.

Pissarro is best known for the impressionist landscapes he painted in the early 1870s, but already toward the end of the decade, he was working the canvas more heavily. He made a long study of optical effects and color theory, and in the mid-1880s briefly adopted a pointillist style. With a tolerant, generous nature, Pissarro was a natural mentor and teacher. He worked closely (and to mutual benefit) with Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Seurat. Cassatt was reported to have said that “he could have taught stones to draw correctly.”



Frédéric Bazille | French, 1841–1870

*Pierre Auguste Renoir, Painter*, c. 1867 | Oil on canvas, 24 ¾ x 20 in.

Paris, Musée d’Orsay/Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

Auguste Renoir was born in the porcelain center of Limoges. His father was a tailor of modest means, and the young painter would struggle financially. The family moved to Paris in 1844, and at age fifteen Renoir was apprenticed as a porcelain painter. In the evenings he studied drawing. By about 1860 he had determined to become a serious artist and began to study in the Louvre. He was drawn particularly to works by Peter Paul Rubens, François Boucher, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, and Eugène Delacroix—artists who delighted in exuberant color, the human figure, and social interaction. In 1862 Renoir was accepted at the École des Beaux-Arts, but his most fruitful exchanges were with the other young artists: Monet, Sisley, and Frédéric Bazille, whom he accompanied on painting expeditions to the nearby forest

of Fontainebleau. It was Renoir and Monet, working together, who created impressionism, developing its broken, sketchy brushwork and light-filled palette. From the late 1860s through the early years of the 1870s, the two often painted alongside each other, capturing the same outdoor scene. Even in his landscapes, however, Renoir’s real interest appears focused on people.

By the 1880s Renoir, like many of the impressionists, had become dissatisfied with the style’s reliance on visual effects, and sought—in his words—an art of more permanent qualities. Following a trip to Italy, where he found new inspiration in Raphael and other Renaissance painters, Renoir developed a harder, more linear manner. In 1890 he reverted to a softer style with scenes of women and children and female nudes.

A joie de vivre characterizes all Renoir’s work, whatever its style. We link his name almost automatically with images of young men and women enjoying each other and their leisure. Although his contribution to the development of impressionism was substantial, as Renoir himself recognized, “it is difficult for painting to be accepted as really great painting while remaining joyous... They don’t take seriously people who smile.”<sup>13</sup>

## Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

French, 1864–1901



Toulouse-Lautrec painting his portrait with himself as model, c. 1890

John Rewald Papers, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gallery Archives

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was born in Albi, in southwestern France. His family had ties to the counts of Toulouse, who had once ruled over large parts of the Languedoc. As was fairly common in aristocratic families anxious to preserve their lineage and reluctant to dilute landholdings, Lautrec's parents were cousins. In his case inbreeding resulted in abnormally weak bones. As a child he suffered multiple breaks that stunted his growth and caused lifelong problems with his legs. Shut out of most of the activities that occupied young men of his class, he became an observer instead of a participant, finely tuned to detect hypocrisy and sentimentality—which he often encountered personally. By the time he was seven or eight, Lautrec was sketching family members. After 1872 he spent much of each year in Paris, living with his mother. As his interest in drawing and painting continued, he undertook formal studies. In the early 1880s, Lautrec began to frequent Montmartre. In 1884 he rented a studio there and made the quarter his home. In the seedy, marginal district of Montmartre, he found the subjects

that would occupy the whole of his short career: singers, circus performers, dancers, and audiences from every level of Parisian society, whose complex psychologies he captured with insight and economy.

Lautrec's scandalously bohemian lifestyle (his father urged him to use a pseudonym) and constant drinking did not hinder his success. By the time he was twenty-one, he was selling drawings and prints to magazines and newspapers and was illustrating books, song lyrics, and theater programs. He was well regarded by the international avant-garde, exhibiting in Paris and Brussels, and he enjoyed popular success as well. In 1891 he produced the first of thirty posters that both made him famous and revolutionized the graphic arts. In 1899 alcoholism forced his institutionalization. He was released, in part because of a series of drawings he had made from memory to prove his soundness of mind, and returned to Montmartre, late nights, and heavy drinking. He died in 1901 at age thirty-six.