

# Impressionism and Post-Impressionism

The label “post-impressionist” was unknown to most of the artists to whom we apply it today. When the term was coined by English critic Roger Fry in 1910, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Seurat, and Cézanne were all dead. It does not describe a single style, or even one approach. The bold, intense colors of Gauguin and Van Gogh are highly expressive—even emotional—while Seurat’s systematic color dots and Cézanne’s concern with structure seem more cerebral. In a sense, post-impressionist describes only what these artists were not—no longer satisfied to transcribe primarily visual effects. Like many artists in the 1880s they looked for ways to express meaning beyond surface appearances, to paint with the emotions and the intellect as well as the eye. The term post-impressionist does, however, acknowledge that impressionism had shaped these artists.

## Pissarro and Van Gogh

In this room, works by Pissarro can be seen alongside paintings by Cézanne and Van Gogh. Pissarro, apart from a brief defection, remained committed to impressionism’s “fresh sensation.” One of the earliest supporters of the first exhibition in 1874, he was the only artist to participate in all eight impressionist shows. A bit older and, by all accounts, a generous and sympathetic man, Pissarro was an important influence on many younger artists, including Van Gogh and Cézanne.

Van Gogh had been painting for only a few years when he moved to Paris in 1886. Through his brother Theo, an art dealer, he met Pissarro and other avant-garde artists. Pissarro encouraged Van Gogh to brighten his palette and to juxtapose complementary colors for luminous effect. Van Gogh wrote his sister that he had spent the first summer in France painting nothing but flowers “to get accustomed to using a scale of colors other than gray.” He soon began to use colors symbolically, and was at great pains to explain their meanings in his voluminous correspondence. His intense colors and rhythmic brushstrokes were not, however, divorced from nature. Instead, he used them to communicate the spiritual power he believed molded nature’s expressive forms.



**Camille Pissarro**  
French, 1830–1903

*Peasant Girl with a Straw Hat*, 1881

While many impressionists painted middle-class Parisians enjoying country outings, Pissarro staffed his landscapes with peasants at work on the land. He painted rustic men and women, not to sentimentalize them, as some had done, but because he saw in their labors an honest life, free of the artificial strictures of the urban bourgeoisie. In Pissarro’s early landscapes, these peasants are usually small, anonymous figures, but in the 1880s they become larger and individualized—no longer at work but pensive and meditative.

In places the heavily worked surface seems almost stuccoed with paint. Though some of Pissarro’s early landscapes were worked quickly on the spot, later he worked more slowly, with painstaking work in the studio. Pissarro was interested in optics. His understanding of local color and how it is modified by reflected light can be seen in the shadows—cast green under her chin, purple by the cord of her hat. This interest led him to experiment briefly with pointillism, but he soon rejected its contrived formulas, preferring the freedom and freshness of impressionism.

Oil on canvas, .734 x .596 m (28 7/8 x 23 1/2 in.)  
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.52



**Camille Pissarro**

*Place du Carrousel, Paris*, 1900

Better known for rural subjects, Pissarro came to paint urban scenes only late in his career after eye problems prevented him from working outdoors. He rented rooms that afforded him views into the streets of Rouen, Paris, and other cities. Probably influenced by Monet’s series paintings (see Gallery 85), he set up a number of easels to work simultaneously on different canvases as light and weather conditions changed. This is one of twenty-eight views he painted of the Tuileries from a hotel room in the Rue de Rivoli. The buildings depicted are part of the Louvre.

With this sidelong view, dappled with shade and interrupted on all sides of the picture frame, Pissarro’s composition captures the restless activity of the busy city. His quick brushwork seems to mimic the action it depicts. Notice the wheels of the carriages and buggies, where scoured circles of paint trace motion. With the movement of his brush, Pissarro does not simply paint but reenacts their rolling progress. This painting, done more than a quarter century after the first impressionist exhibition, still has the same fresh energy of those early impressionist pictures.

Oil on canvas, .549 x .654 m (21 5/8 x 25 3/4 in.)  
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.55



**Vincent van Gogh**  
Dutch, 1853–1890

*Farmhouse in Provence*, 1888

Van Gogh arrived in Arles in 1888, to a landscape covered with snow. But it was sun that he sought, a brilliance that would wash out detail and simplify forms, reducing the world around him to the flat patterns he admired in Japanese woodblocks. Arles, he said, was “the Japan of the South.” His time there was amazingly productive. In just 444 days he completed more than two hundred paintings and about one hundred drawings, and wrote more than two hundred letters.

He described seven studies of wheat fields, “...landscapes, yellow—old gold—done quickly, quickly, quickly, and in a hurry just like the harvester who is silent under the blazing sun, intent only on the reaping.” Yet he was also at pains to point out that these should not be “criticized as hasty” since they were “calculated *long beforehand*.” A pen and ink drawing of this scene exists, apparently done first.

Pairs of complementary colors—red and green plants, woven highlights of oranges and blue in the fence, even the pink clouds that enliven the turquoise sky—seem almost to vibrate. This technique, based on the work of color theorists, was used by impressionists to enhance the luminosity of their pictures.

Oil on canvas, .461 x .609 m (18 1/8 x 24 in.)  
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.34



Vincent van Gogh

*La Mousmé*, 1888

The sensational aspects of Van Gogh's life and suicide often cloud the intention and deliberation behind his highly charged and expressive style. In a letter to his brother Theo he described how this painting consumed his attention: "It took me a whole week ...but I had to reserve my mental energy to do the mousmé well." The title, he explained, came from a character in a popular novel set in Japan. "A mousmé is a Japanese girl—Provençal in this case—twelve to fourteen years old."

The girl's costume is a contrast of patterns and complementary shades of blue and orange. The paint in these bold stripes and irregular dots stands out against the pale green lattice of vertical and horizontal brushstrokes in the background. The vigorous patterns express Van Gogh's sympathetic response to his young sitter, whose face is carefully modeled and finished to a greater degree than other parts of his picture. Compare her hands, for example, which are more sketchily painted.

*La Mousmé* is one of a series of portraits that Van Gogh painted while living in Arles. They were, he wrote, "the only thing in painting that excites me to the depths of my soul, and which made me feel that infinite more than anything else." The flowering branch the girl holds is probably related to Van Gogh's pantheistic faith in the power of nature's cycles of life and renewal.

Oil on canvas, .733 x .603 m (28 7/8 x 23 3/4 in.)  
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.151



Vincent van Gogh

*The Olive Orchard*, 1889

During the last six or seven months of 1889, Van Gogh painted at least fifteen scenes of olive trees—a subject he found both demanding and compelling. He wrote to his brother Theo that he was "struggling to catch [the olive trees]. They are old silver, sometimes with more blue in them, sometimes greenish, bronzed, fading white above a soil which is yellow, pink, violet tinted orange...very difficult." He found that the "rustle of the olive grove has something very secret in it, and immensely old. It is too beautiful for us to dare to paint it or to be able to imagine it."

In the olive trees—in the expressive power of their ancient and gnarled forms—Van Gogh found a manifestation of the spiritual force he believed resided in all of nature. His brushstrokes make the soil and even the sky seem alive with the same rustling motion as the leaves, stirred to a shimmer by the Mediterranean wind. These strong individual dashes do not seem painted so much as drawn onto the canvas with a heavily loaded brush. The energy in their continuous rhythm communicates, in an almost physical way, the living force that Van Gogh found within the trees themselves, the very spiritual force that he believed had shaped them.

Oil on canvas, .730 x .921 m (28 3/4 x 36 1/4 in.)  
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.152



Paul Cézanne

French, 1839–1906

*House of Père Lacroix*, 1873

When Cézanne first arrived in Paris, his pigments were dark and heavy, often applied with a palette knife. In later years he remembered that it was Pissarro who had brightened his palette and told him "Never paint except with the three primary colors..." The bright hues and quickly worked brushstrokes reveal the effect of Pissarro's influence. Greens and yellows contrast in the foreground, and multihued vertical drags of the brush recreate watery reflections. Cool shadows contrast with the orange of a tiled roof. Light emphasizes the blond planes of the building, which is shaded with blues, greens, and mauves, and where broad strokes and heavier paint convey texture.

The elaborate signature and date is unusual in Cézanne's work. Perhaps he intended it for public exhibition—at the urging of Pissarro, three of his works were included in the first impressionist show—or for a patron. In 1873 Cézanne moved to the village of Auvers, where this was painted. It was near Pissarro's home, and the two of them often painted side by side during 1873 and 1874. Auvers was also home to Dr. Gachet, a collector who would later care for the despairing Van Gogh. Cézanne may have hoped Gachet would purchase his work, which was ignored by the public. Cézanne returned to Provence, and after inheriting his father's large estate in 1886, largely abandoned efforts to promote his work. He did not realize commercial success until he was in his fifties.

Oil on canvas, .613 x .506 m (24 1/8 x 20 in.)  
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.102



Paul Cézanne

*Still Life*, about 1900

Impressionism not only encouraged Cézanne to adopt a brighter palette but gave him a way of expressing form. Rather than model three-dimensional shapes by gradually blending shades from dark to light, Cézanne, like the impressionists, gave them form by juxtaposing colors. "There is neither line nor modeling," he said, "there is only contrast."

The tipped plate is molded by individual arcs of peachy ivory and cooler blue tones. The shadow that falls below it does not deepen continuously but is a patchwork of blues and complementary rust-colored browns. Rounded fruits, like the flat surfaces of the table, are built up of what Cézanne called "little planes" of color, applied in brushstrokes that echo the faceted sides of the pitcher.

Cézanne painted this same pitcher and table in other canvases. His constant rearranging of these and other props was a way to understand, and create, structure. The very selection of objects—combining, for example, the roundness of fruits and bowls and the angles of furniture—reflects careful decisions about order and composition. This analytical way of seeing the world, whether the countryside of Provence or the man-made landscape of a still life, had great impact on the next generation of artists. For Picasso, Cézanne was a "mother"; for Matisse, "father to us all." Yet Cézanne himself stressed that he painted—as Pissarro and the impressionists had taught him—from nature and according to his sensations.

Oil on canvas, .458 x .549 m (18 x 21 5/8 in.)  
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