Impressionism

Impressionism was a 19th-century art movement that began as a loose association of Paris-based artists whose independent exhibitions brought them to prominence in the 1870s and 1880s. The name of the movement is derived from the title of a Claude Monet work, *Impression, Sunrise (Impression, soleil levant)*, which provoked the critic Louis Leroy to coin the term in a satiric review published in *Le Charivari*.

Characteristics of Impressionist paintings include relatively small, thin, yet visible brush strokes, open composition, emphasis on the accurate depiction of light in its changing qualities (often accentuating the effects of the passage of time), ordinary subject matter, the inclusion of movement as a crucial element of human perception and experience, and unusual visual angles. The emergence of Impressionism in the visual arts was soon followed by analogous movements in other media which became known as Impressionist music and Impressionist literature.

Impressionism also describes art created in this style, but outside of the late 19th century time period.

Overview

Radicals in their time, early Impressionists broke the rules of academic painting. They began by giving colours and shades freely brushed, primacy over line, drawing inspiration from the work of painters such as Eugène Delacroix. They also took the act of painting out of the studio and into the modern world. Previously, still lifes and portraits as well as landscapes had usually been painted indoors.[1] The Impressionists found that they could capture the momentary and transient effects of sunlight by painting *en plein air*. Painting realistic scenes of modern life, they portrayed overall visual effects instead of details. They used short "broken" brush strokes of mixed and pure unmixed colour, not smoothly blended or shaded, as was customary, in order to achieve the effect of intense colour vibration.

Although the rise of Impressionism in France happened at a time when a number of other painters, including the Italian artists known as the Macchiaioli, and Winslow Homer in the United States, were also exploring *plein-air* painting, the Impressionists developed new techniques that were specific to the movement. Encompassing what its adherents argued was a different way of seeing, it was an art of immediacy and movement, of candid poses and compositions, of the play of light expressed in a bright and varied use of colour.

The public, at first hostile, gradually came to believe that the Impressionists had captured a fresh and original vision, even if it did not receive the approval of the art critics and establishment.

By re-creating the sensation in the eye that views the subject, rather than recreating the subject, and by creating a welter of techniques and forms, Impressionism became a precursor seminal to various movements in painting which would follow, including Neo-Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism.
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Beginnings

In an atmosphere of change as Emperor Napoleon III rebuilt Paris and waged war, the Académie des Beaux-Arts dominated the French art scene in the middle of the 19th century. The Académie was the upholder of traditional standards for French painting, both in content and style. Historical subjects, religious themes, and portraits were valued (landscape and still life were not), and the Académie preferred carefully finished images which mirrored reality when examined closely. Colour was somber and conservative, and the traces of brush strokes were suppressed, concealing the artist's personality, emotions, and working techniques.

The Académie held an annual, juried art show, the Salon de Paris, and artists whose work displayed in the show won prizes, garnered commissions, and enhanced their prestige. The standards of the juries reflected the values of the Académie, represented by the highly polished works of such artists as Jean-Léon Gérôme and Alexandre Cabanel. Some younger artists painted in a lighter and brighter manner than painters of the preceding generation, extending further the realism of Gustave Courbet and the Barbizon school. They were more interested in painting landscape and contemporary life than in recreating scenes from history. Each year, they submitted their art to the Salon, only to see the juries reject their best efforts in favour of trivial works by artists working in the approved style. A core group of young realists, Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Alfred Sisley, and Frédéric Bazille, who had studied under Charles Gleyre, became friends and often painted together. They soon were joined by Camille Pissarro, Paul Cézanne, and Armand Guillaumin.\(^2\)

In 1863, the jury rejected The Luncheon on the Grass (Le déjeuner sur l'herbe) by Édouard Manet primarily because it depicted a nude woman with two clothed men at a picnic. While nudes were routinely accepted by the Salon when featured in historical and allegorical paintings, the jury condemned Manet for placing a realistic nude in a contemporary setting.\(^3\) The jury's sharply worded rejection of Manet's painting, as well as the unusually large number of rejected works that year, set off a firestorm among French artists. Manet was admired by Monet and his friends, and led the discussions at Café Guerbois where the group of artists frequently met.

After seeing the rejected works in 1863, Emperor Napoleon III decreed that the public be allowed to judge the work themselves, and the Salon des Refusés (Salon of the Refused) was organized. While many viewers came only to laugh, the Salon des Refusés drew attention to the existence of a new tendency in art and attracted more visitors than the regular Salon.\(^4\)
Artists' petitions requesting a new Salon des Refusés in 1867, and again in 1872, were denied. In the latter part of 1873, Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, and Sisley organized the *Société Anonyme Coopérative des Artistes Peintres, Sculpteurs, Graveurs* ("Cooperative and Anonymous Association of Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers") for the purpose of exhibiting their artworks independently. Members of the association, which soon included Cézanne, Berthe Morisot, and Edgar Degas, were expected to forswear participation in the Salon. The organizers invited a number of other progressive artists to join them in their inaugural exhibition, including the older Eugène Boudin, whose example had first persuaded Monet to take up *plein air* painting years before. Another painter who greatly influenced Monet and his friends, Johan Jongkind, declined to participate, as did Manet. In total, thirty artists participated in their first exhibition, held in April 1874 at the studio of the photographer Nadar.

The critical response was mixed, with Monet and Cézanne bearing the harshest attacks. Critic and humorist Louis Leroy wrote a scathing review in the *Le Charivari* newspaper in which, making wordplay with the title of Claude Monet's *Impression, Sunrise* (*Impression, soleil levant*), he gave the artists the name by which they would become known. Derisively titling his article *The Exhibition of the Impressionists*, Leroy declared that Monet's painting was at most, a sketch, and could hardly be termed a finished work.

He wrote, in the form of a dialog between viewers,

*Impression—I was certain of it. I was just telling myself that, since I was impressed, there had to be some impression in it ... and what freedom, what ease of workmanship! Wallpaper in its embryonic state is more finished than that seascape.*

The term "Impressionists" quickly gained favour with the public. It was also accepted by the artists themselves, even though they were a diverse group in style and temperament, unified primarily by their spirit of independence and rebellion. They exhibited together—albeit with shifting membership—eight times between 1874 and 1886.

Monet, Sisley, Morisot, and Pissarro may be considered the "purest" Impressionists, in their consistent pursuit of an art of spontaneity, sunlight, and colour. Degas rejected much of this, as he believed in the primacy of drawing over colour and belittled the practice of painting outdoors. Renoir turned against Impressionism for a time in the 1880s, and never entirely regained his commitment to its ideas. Édouard Manet, despite his role as a leader to the group, never abandoned his liberal use of black as a colour, and never participated in the Impressionist exhibitions. He continued to submit his works to the Salon, where his *Spanish Singer* had won a 2nd class medal in 1861, and he urged the others to do likewise, arguing that "the Salon is the real field of battle" where a reputation could be made.
Among the artists of the core group (minus Bazille, who had died in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870), defections occurred as Cézanne, followed later by Renoir, Sisley, and Monet, abstained from the group exhibitions in order to submit their works to the Salon. Disagreements arose from issues such as Guillaumin's membership in the group, championed by Pissarro and Cézanne against opposition from Monet and Degas, who thought him unworthy.\(^9\) Degas invited Mary Cassatt to display her work in the 1879 exhibition, but he also caused dissension by insisting on the inclusion of Jean-François Raffaëlli, Ludovic Lepic, and other realists who did not represent Impressionist practices, leading Monet in 1880 to accuse the Impressionists of "opening doors to first-come daubers".\(^{10}\) The group divided over the invitation of Signac and Seurat to exhibit with them in 1886. Pissarro was the only artist to show at all eight Impressionist exhibitions.

The individual artists saw few financial rewards from the Impressionist exhibitions, but their art gradually won a degree of public acceptance and support. Their dealer, Durand-Ruel, played a major role in this as he kept their work before the public and arranged shows for them in London and New York. Although Sisley would die in poverty in 1899, Renoir had a great Salon success in 1879. Financial security came to Monet in the early 1880s and to Pissarro by the early 1890s. By this time the methods of Impressionist painting, in a diluted form, had become commonplace in Salon art.\(^{11}\)

**Impressionist techniques**

- Short, thick strokes of paint are used to quickly capture the essence of the subject, rather than its details. The paint is often applied impasto.
- Colours are applied side-by-side with as little mixing as possible, creating a vibrant surface. The optical mixing of colours occurs in the eye of the viewer.
- Grays and dark tones are produced by mixing complementary colours. In pure Impressionism the use of black paint is avoided.
- Wet paint is placed into wet paint without waiting for successive applications to dry, producing softer edges and an intermingling of colour.
- Painting in the evening to get *effets de soir* - the shadowy effects of the light in the evening or twilight.
- Impressionist paintings do not exploit the transparency of thin paint films (glazes) which earlier artists built up carefully to produce effects. The surface of an Impressionist painting is typically opaque.
- The play of natural light is emphasized. Close attention is paid to the reflection of colours from object to object.
- In paintings made *en plein air* (outdoors), shadows are boldly painted with the blue of the sky as it is reflected onto surfaces, giving a sense of freshness and openness that was not captured in painting previously. (Blue shadows on snow inspired the technique.)
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Mary Cassatt, *Lydia Leaning on Her Arms* (in a theatre box), 1879

Painters throughout history had occasionally used these methods, but Impressionists were the first to use all of them together, and with such boldness. Earlier artists whose works display these techniques include Frans Hals, Diego Velázquez, Peter Paul Rubens, John Constable, and J. M. W. Turner.

French painters who prepared the way for Impressionism include the Romantic colourist Eugène Delacroix, the leader of the realists Gustave Courbet, and painters of the Barbizon school such as Théodore Rousseau. The Impressionists learned much from the work of Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot and Eugène Boudin, who painted from nature in a style that was close to Impressionism, and who befriended and advised the younger artists.

Impressionists took advantage of the mid-century introduction of premixed paints in lead tubes (resembling modern toothpaste tubes) which allowed artists to work more spontaneously, both outdoors and indoors. Previously, painters made their own paints individually, by grinding and mixing dry pigment powders with linseed oil, which were then stored in animal bladders. [12]

**Content and composition**

Prior to the Impressionists, other painters, notably such 17th-century Dutch painters as Jan Steen, had focused on common subjects, but their approaches to composition were traditional. They arranged their compositions in such a way that the main subject commanded the viewer’s attention. The Impressionists relaxed the boundary between subject and background so that the effect of an Impressionist painting often resembles a snapshot, a part of a larger reality captured as if by chance. [13] Photography was gaining popularity, and as cameras became more portable, photographs became more candid. Photography inspired Impressionists to capture the moment, not only in the fleeting lights of a landscape, but in the day-to-day lives of people.

The rise of the impressionist movement can be seen in part as a reaction by artists to the newly established medium of photography. The taking of fixed or still images challenged painters by providing a new medium with which to capture reality. Initially photography's presence seemed to undermine the artist's depiction of nature and their ability to mirror reality. Both portrait and landscape paintings were deemed somewhat deficient and lacking in truth as photography "produced lifelike images much more efficiently and reliably." [14]
In spite of this, photography actually inspired artists to pursue other means of artistic expression, and rather than competing with photography to emulate reality, artists focused "on the one thing they could inevitably do better than the photograph — by further developing into an art form its very subjectivity in the conception of the image, the very subjectivity that photography eliminated".\[14\] The Impressionists sought to express their perceptions of nature, rather than create exacting reflections or mirror images of the world. This allowed artists to subjectively depict what they saw with their "tacit imperatives of taste and conscience".\[15\] Photography encouraged painters to exploit aspects of the painting medium, like colour, which photography then lacked; "the Impressionists were the first to consciously offer a subjective alternative to the photograph".\[14\]

Another major influence was Japanese art prints (Japonism), which had originally come into France as wrapping paper for imported goods. The art of these prints contributed significantly to the "snapshot" angles and unconventional compositions which would become characteristic of the movement.

Edgar Degas was both an avid photographer and a collector of Japanese prints.\[16\] His *The Dance Class (La classe de danse)* of 1874 shows both influences in its asymmetrical composition. The dancers are seemingly caught off guard in various awkward poses, leaving an expanse of empty floor space in the lower right quadrant. His dancers were also captured in sculpture such as *The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer*.

## Main Impressionists

The central figures in the development of Impressionism in France, listed alphabetically, were:

- Frédéric Bazille (1841–1870)
- Gustave Caillebotte (who, younger than the others, joined forces with them in the mid 1870s) (1848–1894)
- Mary Cassatt (American-born, she lived in Paris and participated in four Impressionist exhibitions) (1844–1926)
- Paul Cézanne (although he later broke away from the Impressionists) (1839–1906)
- Edgar Degas (a realist who despised the term *Impressionist*, but is considered one, due to his loyalty to the group) (1834–1917)
- Armand Guillaumin (1841–1927)
- Édouard Manet (who did not regard himself, nor is generally seen, as an Impressionist, but who exhibited his work with theirs and was a great influence on them), (1832–1883)
- Claude Monet (the most prolific of the Impressionists and the one who most clearly embodies their aesthetic)\[17\] (1840–1926)
- Berthe Morisot (1841–1895)
- Camille Pissarro (1830–1903)
- Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919)
- Alfred Sisley (1839–1899)
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Gallery

Edgar Degas (1834–1917), Dancer with a Bouquet of Flowers (Star of the Ballet), 1878

Edgar Degas, Stage Rehearsal, 1878–1879, The Metropolitan Museum of Art New York City


Edgar Degas, Woman in the Bath, 1886, Hill-Stead Museum, Farmington, Connecticut

Edgar Degas, L'Absinthe, 1876, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Édouard Manet (1832–1883), Plum, 1878, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Armand Guillaumin (1841–1927), Sunset at Ivry (Soleil couchant à Ivry), 1873, Musée d'Orsay

Gustave Caillebotte, (1848–1894), Paris Street, Rainy Day, 1877. Art Institute of Chicago

Frédéric Bazille (1841–1870), Paysage au bord du Lez, 1870, Minneapolis Institute of Art
Timeline: Lives of the Impressionists

The Impressionists

Associates and influenced artists

Among the close associates of the Impressionists were several painters who adopted their methods to some degree. These include Giuseppe De Nittis, an Italian artist living in Paris who participated in the first Impressionist exhibit at the invitation of Degas, although the other Impressionists disparaged his work. Federico Zandomeneghi was another Italian friend of Degas who showed with the Impressionists. Eva Gonzalès was a follower of Manet who did not exhibit with the group. James Abbott McNeill Whistler was an American-born painter who played a part in Impressionism although he did not join the group and preferred grayed colours. Walter Sickert, an English artist, was initially a follower of Whistler, and later an important disciple of Degas; he did not exhibit with the Impressionists. In 1904 the artist and writer Wynford Dewhurst wrote the first important study of the French painters to be published in English, *Impressionist Painting: its genesis and development*, which did much to popularize Impressionism in Great Britain.

By the early 1880s, Impressionist methods were affecting, at least superficially, the art of the Salon. Fashionable painters such as Jean Beraud and Henri Gervex found critical and financial success by brightening their palettes while retaining the smooth finish expected of Salon art. Works by these artists are sometimes casually referred to as Impressionism, despite their remoteness from Impressionist practice.

Beyond France

As the influence of Impressionism spread beyond France, artists, too numerous to list, became identified as practitioners of the new style. Some of the more important examples are:

- Anna Boch, Vincent van Gogh’s friend Eugène Boch, Georges Lemmen and Théo van Rysselberghe Impressionist painters from Belgium.
- Walter Richard Sickert and Philip Wilson Steer were well known Impressionist painters from the United Kingdom.
- The Australian Impressionists, including Frederick McCubbin and Tom Roberts who were prominent members of the Heidelberg School and John Peter Russell a friend of Van Gogh, Rodin, Monet and Matisse as well as Rupert Bunny, Agnes Goodsir and Hugh Ramsay.
- Lovis Corinth, Max Liebermann, and Max Slevogt in Germany
- László Mednyánszky in Hungary
• Roderic O’Conor, and Walter Osborne in Ireland
• Konstantin Korovin and Valentin Serov in Russia
• Francisco Oller y Cestero, a native of Puerto Rico and a friend of Pissarro and Cézanne
• William McTaggart in Scotland.
• Laura Muntz Lyall, a Canadian artist
• Władysław Podkowiński, a Polish Impressionist and symbolist
• Nazmi Ziya Güran, who brought Impressionism to Turkey
• Chafik Charobim in Egypt
• Eliseu Visconti in Brazil
• Mārtiņš Krūmiņš in Latvia, Germany and the United States.
• Joaquín Sorolla in Spain
• Fernando Fader, Martín Malharro, Ramón Silva in Argentina

Sculpture, photography and film

The sculptor Auguste Rodin is sometimes called an Impressionist for the way he used roughly modeled surfaces to suggest transient light effects.

Pictorialist photographers whose work is characterized by soft focus and atmospheric effects have also been called Impressionists.

French Impressionist Cinema is a term applied to a loosely defined group of films and filmmakers in France from 1919–1929, although these years are debatable. French Impressionist filmmakers include Abel Gance, Jean Epstein, Germaine Dulac, Marcel L’Herbier, Louis Delluc, and Dmitry Kirsanoff.

Music and literature

Musical Impressionism is the name given to a movement in European classical music that arose in the late 19th century and continued into the middle of the 20th century. Originating in France, musical Impressionism is characterized by suggestion and atmosphere, and eschews the emotional excesses of the Romantic era. Impressionist composers favoured short forms such as the nocturne, arabesque, and prelude, and often explored uncommon scales such as the whole tone scale. Perhaps the most notable innovations used by Impressionist composers were the first uses of major 7th chords and the extension of chord structures in 3rds to five and six part harmonies.

The influence of visual Impressionism on its musical counterpart is debatable. Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel are generally considered the greatest Impressionist composers, but Debussy disavowed the term, calling it the invention of critics. Erik Satie was also considered to be in this category although his approach was considered to be less serious, more of musical novelty in nature. Paul Dukas is another French composer sometimes considered to be an Impressionist but his style is perhaps more closely aligned to the late Romanticists. Musical Impressionism beyond France includes the work of such composers as Ralph Vaughan Williams, Ottorino Respighi (Italy) and Allan Willcocks, Cyril Scott and John Ireland (England).

The term Impressionism has also been used to describe works of literature in which a few select details suffice to convey the sensory impressions of an incident or scene. Impressionist literature is closely related to Symbolism, with its major exemplars being Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, and Verlaine. Authors such as Virginia Woolf and
Joseph Conrad have written works which are Impressionistic in the way that they describe, rather than interpret, the impressions, sensations and emotions that constitute a character's mental life.

**Post-Impressionism**

Post-Impressionism developed from Impressionism. From the 1880s several artists began to develop different precepts for the use of colour, pattern, form, and line, derived from the Impressionist example: Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Georges Seurat, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. These artists were slightly younger than the Impressionists, and their work is known as post-Impressionism. Some of the original Impressionist artists also ventured into this new territory; Camille Pissarro briefly painted in a pointillist manner, and even Monet abandoned strict *plein air* painting. Paul Cézanne, who participated in the first and third Impressionist exhibitions, developed a highly individual vision emphasizing pictorial structure, and he is more often called a post-Impressionist. Although these cases illustrate the difficulty of assigning labels, the work of the original Impressionist painters may, by definition, be categorised as Impressionism.

**Notes**

[1] Exceptions include Canaletto, who painted outside and may have used the camera obscura.


**References**


**External links**

• Hecht Museum (http://mushecht.haifa.ac.il/hecht/art/frenchart_eng.aspx)
• Mauclair, Camille (1903): *The French Impressionists (1860-1900)* (http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/14056) at Project Gutenberg
• Museumsportal Schleswig-Holstein (http://www.museen-sh.de/ml/digicult.php?digID=601.9&s=2)
• Suburban Pastoral (http://arts.guardian.co.uk/art/visualart/story/0,,2020144,00.html) The Guardian, 24 February 2007
• *Impressionism: Paintings collected by European Museums* (1999) was an art exhibition co-organized by the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, the Seattle Art Museum, and the Denver Art Museum, touring from May through December 1999. Online guided tour (http://www.impressionism.org)
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