

IMPRESSIONISM



MASTERS OF ART

IMPRESSIONISM

Florian Heine

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Front Cover: Claude Monet, The Poppy Field near Argenteuil, 1873, Musée d'Orsay, Paris (detail; see page 56)

Frontispiece: Claude Monet, La Rue Saint Denis, 30 June 1878, 1878 (detail; see page 81)

pages 8/9: Claude Monet, Impression: Sunrise, 1872 (detail; see page 11)

pages 38/39: Paul Cézanne, Mont Sainte-Victoire, 1902–1906 (detail, see page 109)

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INTRODUCTION

Today we find Impressionist motifs on all sorts of products: bags and mugs, notebooks and shirts, caps and mouse pads—everywhere lovely flowers, sun-filled meadows, ballet dancers and lightly clad young women. Are we doing an injustice to Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, and Auguste Renoir with this kind of merchandise? Would they have approved of it if it had been around in their own time? Probably yes, for what they wanted was success with their art—and for that they needed the recognition of institutions and society. And as this had so often been denied them in the beginning, they sought new forms of marketing that were by no means welcomed by the establishment and were met with malicious scorn from critics. What made this so heterogeneous group successful was their mutual support and their solidarity to the end, despite all their disagreements. Together they had taken a path that none of them could have managed alone.

Émile Zola defined art as “nature seen through a temperament”, and as different as the temperaments of these painters were, so is their art. Our view of Impressionism is dominated by the sketch-like painting style of Claude Monet and Auguste Renoir, but there is so much more: extraordinary portraits, radiant snowy landscapes, modern architecture and astonishingly composed moments that make one think of twentieth-century photographs.

The Impressionists made use of all the new developments available to them, from paint in tubes—without which Renoir insisted there would have been no Impressionism—to chemically derived pigments, the Japanese colour prints in vogue in Paris at the time, and trains. Also new were their motifs: the modern life of the city and the previously unavailable leisure-time activities of city folk in the countryside. There was also the new international art trade, which their industrious gallerist Paul Durand-Ruel had in fact helped to create. In addition to all this, photography played a defining role, not because the artists took photographs and then copied them (though this would later become common), but because the invention of photography marks a certain end point in painting, which had previously sought to reproduce nature as faithfully as possible. That goal was now achieved with photography. Given the new medium, in 1839 the painter Paul Delaroche already feared the worst: “As of today painting is dead.” He could not have been more mistaken, for precisely the opposite was the case: painting was now free of the obligation to be true to nature and could look in new directions, both in its use of colour and in its way of depicting motifs.

All this took place in a city that was undergoing unprecedented, radical changes at the time. In the second half of the nineteenth century Paris became the world's most important centre of art and science.

The Impressionists were riding the crest of their time. But society had not caught up. There had been too many radical and swift changes and perhaps people found a certain tower of strength in art, a certain sense of support and stability. Now, however, that support seemed also to be weakening. The Impressionists were by no means social revolutionaries or subversives of any kind. They were simply painters promoting a modern view in an art world dominated by tradition. The major Impressionists came from either the bourgeoisie or the upper class. And this was their dilemma: they belonged to these classes and were at the same time being rejected by them.

In their works the Impressionists were even ahead of their time. But art and society would finally catch up with them; their ideas became accepted and adopted and developed even further. By the turn of the century art, and the perception of it, was changing, however the surviving Impressionists continued to inhabit their own artistic world. Innovation was no longer theirs and they did not go along with it.

Renoir, Degas and Monet continued to produce their art, now highly sought after, as before. But developments were swiftly passing them by. Paul Cézanne's questions about the essential structure of painting as a "harmony parallel to nature" led art in a new direction. Based on these principles, Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso developed Cubism in 1908, radically questioning the traditional notion of painting as a "view through a window". Wassily Kandinsky did so even more radically; in Monet's haystacks he saw no motif at all and by 1910 the artistic shock had ultimately led him to the idea of abstract painting. Previously, inspired by Neo-Impressionism, Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin had experimented with painting to the point that they questioned the need to picture objects in their natural colours. They became the precursors of Expressionism. When at the end of his life Claude Monet surrendered his now famous *Water Lilies* to the French state for the Orangerie, virtually no one was interested any longer—it was 1926 and the Impressionists had long since been forgotten. Only in the 1950s would art historians begin to rediscover them.

This book presents an overview of Parisian Impressionism from its beginnings to its culmination at the end of the nineteenth century.



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