

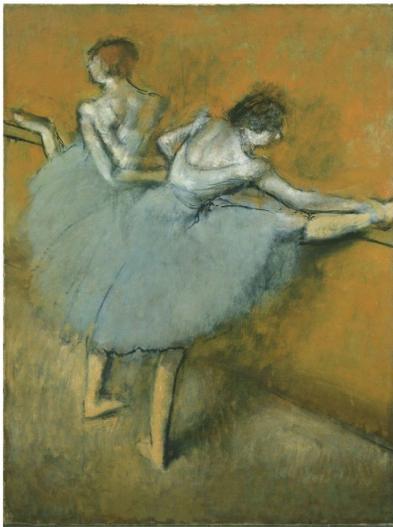
How Monet and the Impressionists Paved the Way for Modern Art

• Alison Chang Dec 12, 2017 7:15 pm



In 1874, a group of artists known as the Anonymous Society of Painters, Sculptors, Engravers, etc. mounted an exhibition in Paris that would bring about a radical break from artistic conventions and launch one of the most popular movements in art history.

Displaying their work in a vacant former artist's studio, outside the confines of the famous Salon, the annual, state-sponsored exhibition juried by members of the Académie des Beaux-Arts (the art establishment that presided over the only official forum for 19th-century artists to exhibit their work), the Impressionists presented canvases depicting quiet landscapes and scenes of mundane, everyday life, full of loose, expressive brushwork to represent fleeting effects of light and atmosphere. It's hard to imagine, now, that the quality of brushwork or the choice of subject in a painting could shock viewers, but for 19th-century Paris, these paintings represented something akin to a revolution.



Edgar Degas *Dancers at the Barre*, ca. 1900
Phillips Collection



Claude Monet, *Nymphéas*, 1916-19. Fondation Beyeler.

Far from the revered history paintings typically exhibited at the Salon—epic, realistic, and highly detailed canvases depicting grand historical, literary, or mythological events—Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, and Camille Pissarro instead portrayed what they saw in the world around them. They documented the social changes sweeping the city of Paris, including the development of the suburbs and the various forms of leisure activity—from weekend sailboat regattas to evenings at the cabaret—that were emerging across a new, urban middle class.

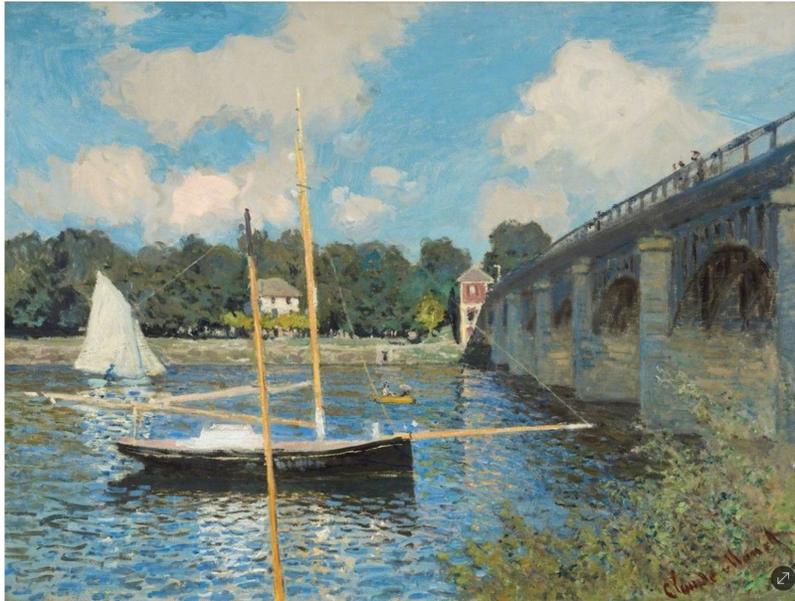
Eschewing both the techniques and subject matter of their predecessors, the Impressionists demonstrated that contemporary life required a new language to represent the radical shifts taking place in society. And critics responded with both horror and awe. Conservative critics denounced the unfinished, sketch-like quality of their paintings, while more progressive ones championed their fresh and innovative depictions of modern life.

The group did not adopt the name “Impressionists” until its third exhibition, in 1877, three years after the critic Louis Leroy, bemoaning the incompleteness of the Monet’s *Impression, Sunrise*, referred to it as a mere “impression.”

The Leaders of Impressionism

The group of artists who participated in the Impressionist exhibitions fluctuated over time, but in addition to Monet, Degas, and Pissarro, the figures associated with the group included Gustave Caillebotte, Berthe Morisot, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Mary Cassatt, Alfred Sisley, and Edgar Degas — though the latter painter rejected the label and is considered by some to fall outside of the movement. Although the members did not adhere to a singular artistic vision, their work shared fundamental characteristics.

They often employed short, broken brushstrokes, a technique evident in Monet’s *The Bridge at Argenteuil* (1874), a scene that he painted seven times to quite different effect. In this version, he layers and juxtaposes various touches of color to give the impression of flickering reflections on the surface of moving water.



Claude Monet *The Bridge at Argenteuil*, 1874

Some Impressionists applied paint in thick layers, called impasto, sometimes with a palette knife or even directly from the tube, giving their canvases a palpable texture and presence. They also adopted an expanded color palette; rather than employing the somber shades of history paintings, they used colors to render highlights and shadows, seeking to reflect the rich chromatic nuances of the real world.

Many of the Impressionists experimented with synthetic pigments, especially vibrant new shades of yellow, blue, purple, and green. Those who focused on landscapes and scenes of everyday life took their canvases outdoors, en plein air, painting from direct observation rather than from inside a studio. Unconcerned with creating objectively realistic representations, the Impressionists sought to capture changing effects of light, weather, and atmosphere, employing their loose, gestural brushwork to convey the dynamism of their new environment.

In 1853, a vast public works program, commissioned by Emperor Napoleon III and executed by his representative, Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, had begun in an attempt to modernize Paris. With renovations taking place until 1870, this program revolutionized the city's entire structure. Haussmann's program—frequently referred to as “Haussmannization”—included demolishing crowded medieval neighborhoods, enlarging roads and boulevards, creating parks and squares, and annexing the suburbs.

As the construction began to change Paris, the Impressionists captured the appearance of this modern metropolis. Pissarro and Caillebotte—the latter showed in the Impressionist exhibitions despite painting in a more realistic style than his colleagues—painted bird’s-eye views of the city’s wide, tree-lined boulevards filled with pedestrians and horse-drawn carriages.

In *Boulevard des Italiens, Morning, Sunlight* (1897), Pissarro hints at groups of people by using closely clustered strokes of color to represent a crowded street bustling with figures in top hats and bonnets. Other Impressionists chose to capture the essence of modern life by documenting the industrial infrastructure—trains, bridges, and factories—of Paris, or detailing leisure activities in and around the city.



Camille Pissarro *Boulevard des Italiens, Morning, Sunlight*, 1897
National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.



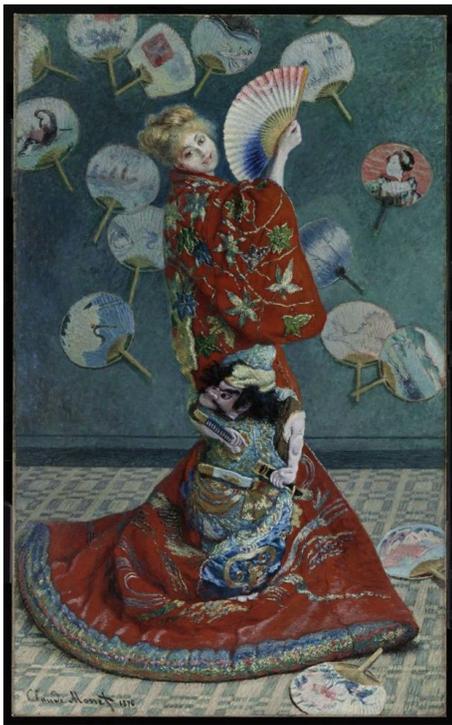
Edgar Degas *Dans un café (L'absinthe)*,
1875-1876
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

The development of the suburbs was just as important to the Impressionists as the transformation of Paris. The expansion of the railroads made areas of the countryside newly accessible to those seeking a respite from the city. Argenteuil, a small suburb fewer than 10 miles from the center of Paris, was one of the most popular retreats. Many Impressionists, including Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, and Sisley, immortalized Argenteuil’s river views, bridges, streets, and gardens in their paintings.

Among the best-known images of Argenteuil are those painted by Monet, who spent extended periods of time in the small town. He painted the railroad bridge numerous times, from various angles and at different times of the day, and in 1873 he created *The Artist’s Garden in Argenteuil (A Corner of the Garden with Dahlias)*, a painting of his garden. The two tiny human figures in the background are overwhelmed by the vibrantly

colored flowers, painted in a thick impasto that gives the blooms exaggerated prominence as they seem to pop off the surface of the canvas.

These pastoral images of suburban life stood in stark contrast to the busy, and more gritty, scenes of Parisian life, such as Degas's *Dans un café (L'Absinthe)*, which shows a solitary woman drinking absinthe in a bar, a figure who represents the alienation of modern urban life, viewed from the voyeuristic perspective that the artist was known for.



Claude Monet, *La Japonaise (Camille Monet in Japanese Costume)*, 1876. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston.



Mary Cassatt *Maternal Caress*, ca. 1891
National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

The group was also deeply influenced by the sudden influx of East Asian visual culture into Europe in the late 19th century. After the Japanese resumed trading with the West in the 1850s, many foreign imports, including Japanese prints, fans, kimonos, lacquers, and textiles, began arriving in Europe.

The aesthetic qualities of these objects, especially Japanese Ukiyo-e woodblock prints, had a strong impact on artists like Monet, who employed Japanese-inspired motifs, as in *La Japonaise* (Camille Monet in Japanese Costume) (1876), in which he poses his wife, Camille, in a kimono surrounded by Japanese fans.

Mary Cassatt, herself an avid printmaker, incorporated the flatness and overall patterning characteristic of ukiyo-e prints into her own work; this is especially evident in the upholstery and the woman's dress in *Maternal Caress* (1890–91).

Others, including Degas, an avid collector of Japanese art, incorporated the asymmetrical compositions and elongated pictorial formats favored by Japanese artists. This interest in Japanese art and culture, referred to as japonisme, continued to inspire artists a generation after the Impressionists, including Vincent van Gogh and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.

Why Impressionism Matters



Frank Weston Benson *Summer*, 1909
RISD Museum

Although the last Impressionist exhibition was held in 1886, the movement remains one of the most popular in the history of Western art. Considered by many to be the first avant-garde movement of the Modernist period, Impressionism served as a springboard for many artistic movements of the 20th century, including Symbolism, Fauvism, and Cubism. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, many Americans, most notably Cassatt and John Singer Sargent, spent periods of time in Paris and worked closely with members of the Impressionist movement. Cassatt, who was close friends with Degas, was the only American who was officially asked to join the Impressionist exhibitions.

Although Cassatt spent the majority of her adult life in France, most of the Americans who worked in Paris, including William Merritt Chase, Childe Hassam, and Frank Weston Benson, eventually returned to the United States, bringing the Impressionists' painting technique and penchant for depicting fleeting effects of light and atmosphere back home with them to create the movement now known as American Impressionism.

Several artists of the Post-Impressionist generation, such as Paul Gauguin, Georges Seurat, and Paul Cézanne, participated in the Impressionist exhibitions, but they would go on to push the boundaries of painting even further, untethering color from reality entirely, flattening forms, and moving closer toward abstraction.

Although there are many avant-garde movements that did not take stylistic inspiration from the Impressionists, the group's rejection of an established, state-sponsored style served as a model for similarly independent exhibition groups throughout Europe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such as the Vienna Secession, in Austria, and Die Brücke, in Germany.

<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-monet-impressionists-paved-way-modern-art>