

# PIERRE AUGUSTE RENOIR

(1841-1919)

Original research by Lynn R. Gagnon, updated by Susan Bartram, 2004

## CRS RESOURCES:

### Visuals

Mounted reproductions for this presentation are:

- *The Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1881) Phillips Collection (“*Le Dejeuner des Canotier*”) Oil on canvas (51x68 in.)
- *Oarsmen at Chatou* (1879) National Gallery of Art, Oil on canvas (31.9x39.4 in.)
- *Moulin de la Galette* (1876) Musee de Orsay, Oil on canvas (175x131 cm)
- *Girl With a Watering Can* (1876) National Gallery of Art, Oil on canvas (39.5x28.75 in.)

In addition to the above, there are several small, unmounted prints.

- *Madame Monet and Her Son* (1874)
- *Madame Henriot* (1876)
- *A Girl with a Watering Can* (1876)
- *The Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1881)
- *Two Girls in a Meadow*

### Books

Monet and the Impressionists for Kids (2002) by Carol Sabbeth. Includes a chapter on Renoir.

## REFERENCES:

Fezzi, E. Renoir, The Life and Work of the Artist Illustrated with 80 Colour Plates. Thames & Hudson, 1968.

Barnes, A. C. The Art in Painting. 3rd ed. Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1965.

Nochlin, L. Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, 1874-1904. Prentice- Hall, Inc., 1966.

Pool, P. Impressionism. Thames & Hudson, 1967.

The New Painting: Impressionism 1874-1886. Catalogue from 1986 exhibition organized by The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco with the National Gallery of Art, Washington.

# PIERRE AUGUSTE RENOIR

## I. BIOGRAPHICAL HIGHLIGHTS AND RENOIR'S PHILOSOPHY OF PAINTING

1. Reknowned for the following subjects in his paintings:
  - a. Portraits of young girls and children -- he painted many portraits on commission;
  - b. Intimate portraits of French middle -- class life, especially lively groups in sensuous settings; often used his friends as models.
2. Born 1841 in Limoges; moved to Paris as a young child, died 1919 at age 78.
3. Apprenticed to learn porcelain painting after showing early talent for drawing; this apprenticeship of 4 years at an early age resulted in:
  - a. A precise use of the brush;
  - b. A delicate touch;
  - c. An appreciation of the effect of bright colors on a smooth white ground.
4. During his apprenticeship to study painting (1862-64) in the studio of Charles Gleyre, where Renoir met among others Frederic Bazille, Alfred Sisley, and Claude Monet, Renoir began to develop his philosophy of painting, which was to bring him so much success during his lifetime:
  - a. Renoir was very light-hearted: once, when his master Gleyre said to him, "One doesn't paint for amusement," Renoir replied, "But if it didn't amuse me, I shouldn't paint."
  - b. Renoir felt that the purpose of a picture is to decorate a wall -- therefore, colors must be pleasurable themselves.
  - c. He detested the philosophical conversations about art which most of the other artists of his times indulged in; his only theory of art was no theory of all. Renoir painted what pleased his senses; thus, he was not working to following a theory of painting nor to prove one nor to make any special discoveries. He quite simply aimed to paint for the pleasure of himself and for others.
5. In 1881, Renoir met Aline Charigot, who later became his wife; she is the woman seated at the lower left in "Luncheon at the Boating Party" and possibly the woman in "Oarsmen at Chatou". She was one of his favorite models.
6. Success came to Renoir in the late 1880's with his exhibitions in America; the earnings made Renoir financially comfortable, able to earn a living from his painting.
7. By the 1890's, magazines and newspapers began to take a serious interest in Renoir. He was generally favorably received.
8. In 1898 Renoir experienced his first serious attack of arthritis, which had begun in 1888 and eventually crippled him.
9. In 1900 Renoir showed his work at the Exposition Centenielle and was awarded the French Legion d' Honneur.
10. At the Salon d'Automne in 1904, Renoir's exhibition was a triumph (since 1898 there had been bouts of hectic work between frequent cures and periods of convalescence at Aix-les-Bains).

11. In 1907 Renoir began sculpting and completed at least 2 sculptures with his own hands. In the following years, when he could not sculpt due to his paralysis, he directed young assistants to execute his ideas.
12. In 1912 a new attack of paralysis crippled Renoir and condemned him to a wheelchair. In spite of crippled fingers, he went on drawing and painting (see description of late works under "style" below). Treatment from a Viennese doctor enabled him to take a few steps around his easel, but it was a great strain . . . "If I have to choose between walking and painting, I'd rather paint."
13. Ultimate success came at last in 1919. A few months before he died, Renoir's painting "Portrait of Mme Charpentier" was accepted by the Louvre.

## II. STYLISTIC DEVELOPMENT

### A. Early Work: early to mid-1860's

1. Produced primarily during his apprenticeship in the studio of Charles Gleyre (1862-64).
2. Works showed evidence of a constant tug-of-war between various influences, primarily his workmanlike studiousness (coming from his training in porcelain painting) and his love of nature. (Renoir went often to the forests of Fontainebleau with Monet to paint during these years).
3. "Flowers in a Vase" (postcard) is a prime example of this early style.

### B. Development of Impressionism with Monet: late 1860's and 1870's

1. 1869 was the most decisive year for Impressionism. While painting the shimmering atmosphere of light and water at La Grenouillere (a favorite bathing place at Bougival on the Seine) Renoir and Monet discovered that:
  - a. Shadows are not brown or black, but are colored by their surroundings
  - b. Local color of an object is modified by the light in which it is seen, by reflections from other objects, and by contrast with juxtaposed colors
2. This discovery resulted in the following major technical and stylistic changes:
  - a. Greater usage of pure unmixed colors, particularly the 3 primaries (red, yellow, and blue) and their 3 complementaries (green, violet, and orange);
  - b. Avoidance of brown, black and earth tones;
  - c. In order to convey a feeling of movement, they learned to handle paint more freely and loosely, and didn't try to hide their broken brush-strokes. Renoir's approach was less broad and opaque than Monet's, and softer and more feathery.
  - d. Light became the great unifying factor of figure and landscape, and the movement of Impressionism was born.
3. Using the technique of pure color, Renoir worked with Monet to capture a moment of nature, a particular season of the year, the essential character of a day, if not an hour of that day -- all seeming so spontaneous and uncalculated. See "Luncheon of the Boating Party" and "Moulin de la Galette".

- a. Sometimes Renoir preserved the transitory character of Parisian scenes by sketching from a window passers-by, whom his brother had stopped with bogus enquiries.
4. The period of High Impressionism (1872-1880) is especially well represented by Renoir.
    - a. His response to life has been characterized as being that of an adolescent who glories in luscious food and plump pink girls.
    - b. He has also been considered the most instinctively professional painter of the whole group because of the great delicacy and rhythmic unity his paintings show.
- C. “Maniere Aigre” (Classical or Sour Period): early to mid-1880’s
1. Following a visit to Italy, where Renoir saturated himself in the study of classical and Renaissance works, Renoir returned to France thinking he was losing too much stylistically through the Impressionist abolition of shape and contour.
  2. On his return in 1881, classicism dominated his style, and Renoir called this period his “*manière aigre*” (“sour period”).
  3. Stylistic changes during this period:
    - a. Used more intense reds and yellows;
    - b. Drawing became sharply linear;
    - c. Adopted certain traits from 18th century, especially the use of relatively dry pigments, the method of painting skin, insistence on decorative and formal design, sculptural forms, and emphasis on the human figure.
- D. Return to “*Douce and Legere*” Style (“gentle & light”): 1890
1. Gradually, Renoir abandoned his experiments of the early 1880’s and returned to methods more in harmony with his nature and instincts. ....“I would, I think, have reached the grandeur and simplicity of the ancient painters.”
    - a. His hard outlines melted.
    - b. His figures seemed to become one with their surroundings.
    - c. He often went back to the transparent, water-color effects he had loved as a porcelain painter.
  2. Renoir demonstrated with this change that he was not a slave to the past, but could revitalize in contemporary terms the feelings and perceptions of the past. In so doing, he quite simply became famous and successful in his own life-time, at an age when he was still young enough to enjoy it.
- E. Late Works: 1912-until death
1. Towards the end of his life, Renoir suffered from arthritis which crippled his hands; he had brushes tied to his hands and developed a final style of painting in broad brush-strokes and vivid colors.
  2. In a letter to M. Durand Ruel, an art dealer and good friend, he wrote “One always comes back to one’s first love, but with a note added.”

### III. RENOIR'S POSITION VIS-A-VIS THE IMPRESSIONISTS

1. Renoir's style was definitely more eclectic than that of the other Impressionists; he liked "pleine-air" ("outdoors") painting, but also went to the Louvre and studied the old Masters.
2. Because of his personality, Renoir helped to destroy the prejudice against the "revolutionary" ideas of the Impressionists and thereby helped to sell their paintings.
3. Renoir was the most traditional, the most soaked in work by the early painters (visit to Italy).
4. General stylistic differences:
  - a. More interested in rich color effects and solidity of form than other Impressionists;
  - b. Unlike the others, Renoir preferred figure painting to landscapes;
  - c. Renoir did not share their interest in Japanese influences (which tended to both flatten and give a cut-off compositional effect to Impressionist work) but rather revived the rococo style of Fragonard and Watteau (stemming from his porcelain painting studies).

### IV. CHARACTERISTICS OF RENOIR'S STYLE

#### A. Brushwork and Palette Knife

1. In his early works, Renoir used a palette knife, but gradually discarded it after working with Monet because:
  - a. It prevented him from retouching any part of his canvas without first scraping it; and
  - b. He said he preferred to paint in "little strokes which help me merge one color into another".
2. He eventually developed a brushwork which reflects a remarkable feeling for atmosphere and nature through a great range of different type of brush-strokes -- tiny and close. or broad and spaced, or long and sinuous-- all supremely controlled.
3. The very broad, loose brushwork in his very late works is a result of his crippling arthritis. He painted by the use of brushes tied to his hands.

#### B. Color and Light

1. Above all, Renoir was a master of color. He searched for the play of light on color (see "Luncheon of the Boating Party")
2. In the 1870's, working with Monet, Renoir developed the broken color technique of the Impressionists — the use of small dabs of different, usually complementary, colors next to one another which fuse together at a distance by the eye to give remarkably vivid tones..
3. Renoir's use of color is perhaps most unique among the Impressionists and most characteristic of his preference for figure painting in his rendering of human skin. One must see the originals to appreciate the multitude of colors and the porcelain finish which Renoir gives to his rendering of human skin, particularly that of females.

### C. Linear Approach and Dimensionality

1. Throughout his life, Renoir remained more traditional than the other Impressionists in his attachment to the human form, specifically the female form and its qualities of warmth, sensuality and loveliness. Thus, although his paintings such as “Luncheon of the Boating Party” or any of the portrait prints are “impressionistic”, the figures in his paintings have weight and substance. They are very three-dimensional with strongly tactile qualities. Their bodies are rounded, not flattened out like is typical of figures in Impressionism; even the fruit and wine bottles in “Luncheon” have a rounded, full-bodied feeling.
2. Because of his early training in porcelain painting, his attachment to the Old Masters, and his trip to Italy where he was so strongly affected by Classicism, Renoir retained his appreciation for draftsmanship. While lines are not visibly evident in his work, except during his “*maniere aigre*”, Renoir’s shapes and contours remain more distinct and do not as easily blend into adjacent ones as is more typical of Impressionism.

### D. Realism and Detail

1. Early in his work, Renoir showed a very intimate feeling for his subjects and the ability to relate them with the essential harmony of nature in a very realistic way.
2. Renoir’s realism is particularly evident in his painting of people in that:
  - a. Their skin is alive, tender, and wonderfully tactile;
  - b. They are 3-dimensional and well-rounded;
  - c. The personality of the figure comes through with warmth and human interest making Renoir’s works so universally appealing;
  - d. The tendency to forego detail to capture an impression is not so great that we lose the personality of the person. Sufficient detail permits an intimacy between the painted figure and the viewer.

### E. Preference for Portraiture to Landscape

1. Renoir was the only Impressionist to have this preference --he simply delighted in people.
2. His gentleness and grace were thought to be ideally suited to portrayal of children, and he received many commissions for portraits of rich, bourgeois children (see “Girl with a Watering Can” and “Girl with a Hoop”).

## ***V. THE LUNCHEON OF THE BOATING PARTY***

In “Luncheon of the Boating Party”, a group of Renoir’s friends are enjoying that supreme delight of the working man and woman, a day out. Renoir shows us interrelationships: notice the young man intent upon the girl at the right chatting, while the girl at the left is occupied with her puppy. But notice, too, the loneliness, however relaxed, that can be part of anyone’s experience at a lunch party. The man behind the girl and her dog is lost in a world of his own, yet we cannot but believe that his reverie is a happy one. The delightful debris of the meal, the charm of the young people, the hazy brightness of the world outside the awning . all communicates an earthly vision of paradise.

### Comments:

1. This is one of the most famous of Renoir's paintings -- and it's here in Washington;
2. Here Renoir dramatically captures the play of light and shade produced by sunlight on the clothes and faces, resulting in daring color but a feeling of serene harmony;
3. The French title is "Le Dejeuner des Canotiers"; a "canotier" is a rower, oarsman, boater, or straw-hat. Back in France *fin du siecle* straw hats were associated with boaters. Note their prominence in the painting.
4. In the lower left, playing with the dog is Aline Charigot, who later became Renoir's wife. Directly behind Aline is Alphonse Fournaise, Jr., the son of the restaurant proprietor. The setting is the upstairs terrace of the Restaurant Fournaise, a celebrated meeting place for oarsmen on an island in the Seine at Chatou.

### Questions:

1. What is happening in the painting? (Note the impressionistic interest in scenes from everyday life --capturing the moment, as a camera snapshot.)
2. One of the women is the future wife of Renoir. Which one do you think it is? Why? (Our eyes are drawn to Aline via the red-orange in her hat and trim of her dress, and she holds a very prominent position in the scene.)
3. Describe Renoir's use of color . . . for example:
  - a. The tablecloth, is it solid white? (No. Find other tones and observe what happens as we move back from the canvas.)
  - b. Our eyes dance around the canvas; this is due to the play of color and light. Ask for examples and then examine the movement amongst the hats, or the whites or the oranges. Each of these takes our eyes on a trip around the painting.
4. Is there a feeling of movement in the picture—are things happening, have they happened already? Discuss physical movement, of wind, grasses, and flowers, and social interrelationships, discussion, drinking, woman leaving in far right, boating in far left, etc.
5. Judging from this painting, what kind of person do you think Renoir is? Does he like people? Discuss outgoing personality, warmth, love of people and how this is reflected in his painting -- Renoir's special ability to depict personality, to share an intimacy with his subjects.
6. What kind of substance does Renoir give the people? Impressionists usually flatten out their forms and dissolve their 3-dimensionality via lack of detail and use of atmospheric characteristics, replacing verticals and horizontals with angular interpretations. Is that true of Renoir? (No, his people are very much in the round.)
7. Impressionists preferred painting landscapes and water to people. Is that true of Renoir? (No)
8. Let's look at Renoir's drawing of figures and objects. Does Renoir outline his people and objects first and then paint them in? No, he builds form by juxtaposition of colors and by nuances of brushwork; for example, look at the canopy stripes in "Luncheon .

## VI. *OARSMEN AT CHATOU*

### Comments:

1. This is a prime example of the Impressionist attempt to create paintings that capture ever-changing reality at a particular moment — a specific moment of activity as it would appear to the eye, much as a camera would have done. The river shimmers, the people almost seem to be moving. Our impression is of a beautiful summer day. A breeze ruffles the surface of the water, filling the sail and scattering the fluffy clouds. Renoir has captured this fleeting moment with his brush.
2. It also reflects impressionistic quality of lightheartedness; this is not a serious scene, simply a slice of everyday life.
3. The girl in the picture is likely Aline Charigot, who later became Renoir's wife.

### Questions:

1. Is "Oarsmen" a seascape or a portrait? (Portrait, because of the importance of what people are doing. The title gives this away.)
2. Are there any similarities between "Oarsmen" and "Luncheon"?
  - a. Both are scenes from everyday life.
  - b. Active brush strokes are prominent in both.
  - c. Both tell a story.
  - d. Both show movement of people and nature.
3. What are the differences between the 2 paintings? ("Oarsmen" shows less detail, especially in facial expressions; it is more of a general impression; nature is more important in "Oarsmen", especially the water and the sky, and the interplay between the two.)
4. Discuss the role of water. (Reflections of real life, a world perceived by the senses.)
5. Renoir has been called a "master colorist". Why? (Use of hues to delineate substance and form, to move our eyes across the scene from the woman to the boat to the dock across the water. Note the variation within one color and the importance of stepping back from the painting so that the dabs of color which Renoir places next to one another blend into a relatively uniform tone as they are intended.)
6. How does this painting make you feel? Does Renoir love life?

## VII. *MOULIN DE LA GALETTE*

### Comments:

1. Moulin de la Galette was a dance hall in the Montmartre district of Paris (an area popular with writers, artists, prostitutes and workers.) It inspired works by many painters, including VanGogh, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Picasso, in addition to Renoir.
2. In this painting, Renoir portrayed an event in ordinary Parisian life with rigorous

exactitude. The working class crowd frequented dances in open-air cafes, amid windmills and gardens, such as this one at Galette.

3. Renoir painted a joyous crowd with laughter, movement and sunshine. It was his intention, however, to catch the effect made by light filtering through the leaves and playing on figures, which were themselves in movement.

**Questions:**

1. Is “Moulin de la Galette” a landscape or a portrait? (Portrait.)
2. Are there any similarities between “Luncheon” and “Moulin”?
  - a. Both are scenes from everyday life.
  - b. Active brush strokes are prominent in both.
  - c. Both tell a story.
  - d. Both show movement and interaction of people in an outdoor social setting.
3. Is this a daytime or night time scene? How do you know? (Day, because of the sunlight filtering through the trees.)

**VIII. *GIRL WITH A WATERING CAN***

**Comments (paraphrased from National Gallery “tour” description):**

1. In addition to his many other talents, Renoir was a particularly fine painter of children. Even though landscape was the first and most important inspiration for Impressionism, Renoir’s instinct always led him back to the figure.
2. Renoir struggled financially early in his career and painted this and other charming, light-filled scenes, many featuring lovely women and children, in the hope of increasing sales of his paintings.
3. Renoir did not look for meaningful things to paint – he felt a masterpiece didn’t need deep meaning, but simply was meant to be enjoyed.
4. This is not known to be a portrait of a particular girl, but rather Renoir started with a model whom he converted into his favorite type – red lips, large blue eyes, and a round, healthy face.
5. Renoir’s brushwork gives a prismatic brilliance to the deep blue of the girl’s dress, the bright red of her bow and lips, and the cool greens of the lush garden in the background. Rather than blend his colors, Renoir applied them in individual touches that dissolve edges and seem to shimmer with light.

**Questions:**

1. What is happening in the painting? (Note again the impressionistic interest in scenes from everyday life --capturing the moment, as a camera snapshot. This is simply a pleasant scene. The little girl has been watering the flowers and picking daisies.)
2. What season is it, and how can you tell? (Summer – roses and daisies are blooming)

3. Do you think it is sunny or cloudy? Why? (Sunny – the sun is reflecting off her hair, face, and the dirt path)
3. Describe Renoir’s use of color . . . for example:
  - a. The bright red bow in the girl’s hair is repeated in the red of her lips and the reds and pinks of the flowers.
  - b. The rich blue of her dress is echoed in the watering can, which is blended with the dress in such a way that it seems almost a part of it: in her eye: in her shoe; and here and there, in a flower.
  - c. Intense shades of green give a lush quality to the grass and foliage.
  - d. The garden path is warm with sunlight; these same golden tones light up the child’s hair and face.
  - e. The brightness of the colors suggests sunlight. Where they are placed makes them interact, increasing their vibrancy. Cool greens and blues are contrasted with warm tones.
  - f. Colors are knitted together (lawn is kind of green, blue and yellow-green – applied with several small brush strokes but the result is a blended look.
4. Is there any black? (Though the shoes were probably black, Renoir made them dark blue. Impressionist painters didn’t like to use black as it is not a color. Occasionally they would use it for contrast, but in this painting, even the shadows and shoes are dark blue, not black.)
5. Does the painting look posed? (The girl seems proud of herself, and stands confidently, as if she is aware of the artist painting her, but she is caught in the moment, not really posing for a portrait.)

## IX. FROM RENOIR’S NOTEBOOKS

“A work of art ought to catch hold of you, envelop you, carry you away.”

“I’ve always like to feel people swarming around me.”

“Everything that I call grammar on primary notions of Art can be summed up in one word: Irregularity. . . Take the leaf of a tree—take a hundred thousand other leaves of the same kind of tree—not one will exactly resemble the other . . . The value of regularity is in the eye only”

“To be an artist you must learn to know the laws of nature.”

“An artist must listen to his real master: Nature . . . God, the King of artists, was clumsy”.

Proust said that Renoir “had the immortal gift . . . of arresting the passage of time in a single luminous instant.”

## X. SUGGESTED PROJECTS

1. Up until the 1860’s, European painters often painted idealized people and events from the Bible, mythology, or history. In contrast, Impressionist paintings often depict ordinary situations. We may think differently about ordinary situations in our own lives by drawing or writing about them. Ask students to list five things they do each day that might be appropriate

for an Impressionist painting of a modern life subject. Vote on one subject and then have each of the students paint it. A busy, fleeting moment in a hallway or cafeteria, for instance, may seem more beautiful upon reflection. Explain that everyone will have a different “impression” of the scene. Try to emphasize the lights, shadows, and colors in the scene.

2. Ask the students to draw one of their hands. Try drawing the hand alone, and then depict it holding a pencil or paint brush. Have them use chalks or pastels and include all of the colors that are in their skin. Consider the pose or position. Does it look forceful or gentle? What colors did they use?

3. Discover how different kinds of lights affect colors and shadows of objects. Set up a still life for your students. Put a clear glass, a piece of cloth, and a tall, shiny object such as a colorful plastic cup on a large, white piece of paper. Use candlelight and a flashlight covered with tinted Mylar to add color, electric light, and sunlight. Record what happens to the colors, shadows, and shapes of the objects as the light changes. Create drawings from these experiments.

4. Have the students create a scene of a class party using the concept of depth. They don't have to use people as the focus. They can use the inanimate objects found at a typical class party. Have them choose three objects that they want in their landscape. Decide which objects will go in the foreground, middle ground, and back- ground. Draw the fore- ground object first. They should make this object large. Next, decide what objects will go in the middle ground, drawing it slightly smaller in the middle portion of the paper. Finally, repeat this process for the back-ground object, making that object the smallest. To create a landscape with depth and overlapping forms, add more objects and horizontal lines to indicate land. Discuss overlapping and back- ground, middle ground, and foreground.