

IMPRESSIONISM

The word was coined in 1874 after a hostile critic had looked at Monet's painting "Impression-Sunrise."

Influences on the Impressionists

1. The Camera. Occasional members, e.g. Degas, of the group sought to compete with the camera and its sense of the instantaneous, the fleeting impression of reality frozen for all time. The public became slightly disenchanted with the camera's too perfect presentation of skin blemishes. Hence, "cosmetic effects" were applied by retouchers to render fashionable plates in magazines or for clients. In a sense, the camera revitalized painting.
2. Scientific Experiments. New colors were available; oil paint was in tubes! New developments in color theory: the kaleidoscope; optical recompositions achieved by using pure pigments from spectrum colors that were produced when light passed through a prism. Thus, black, the Academy School's favorite, was noticeably absent from the spectrum. A French Chemist, Eugene Chevreul, Director of the Dyeing Department of Gobelins Tapestry Factory in Paris, had in the first half of the century, conducted a series of experiments that led to an influential book, The principles of Harmony and Contrast of Colors and Their Application to the Arts. He demonstrated that juxtaposed colors affect each other. Every color leaves behind a visual sensation, an after-image of its complimentary color (1).
3. Japanese Prints. Had become known in Europe in early 1860's and were collected and studied by many artists who admired the clear, flat patterns, the unexpected points of view, informal glimpses of contemporary life, and that the main or dominant figure was sometimes cut by the picture frame or placed in the bottom left or right corner. Another point of influence was that Japanese woodblock artists, like Utamaro and Hokusia, eliminated perspective.
4. Franco-Prussian War. When Paris was besieged and the young painters joined militia ranks, Renoir was drafted into the Cuirassiers, Bazille died at the Front, and Monet, not wishing to fight for the Empire, made his way to London. There he met again with Pissarro, who had also fled Paris. On their return to Paris, they noted the social change and turbulence from the war and re-formed the group. Only this time, a stronger bond was forged.

Aims:

1. Attempt to paint subjects in a temporary and instantaneous manner.
2. To reject idealistic interpretations and literary anecdotes and concentrate on color and light.
3. To create the illusion of forms bathed in sunlight and atmosphere.

What they believed in:

1. The intensive study of light as a source of color.
2. Their truth was that the actual color of the object is usually modified by the quality of light in which it is seen, and by reflections from other objects.
3. That shadows were made up of dark tones and colors, not black or gray.

How they achieved this:

1. The Impressionist's "rainbow" palette: black was forbidden. Clear colors applied directly to the canvas.
2. The juxtaposition (mixing) of colors on the canvas, which the eye fuses at a distance, produces a more intense hue than the mixing of the same colors on the palette. Hence, you must stand back to appreciate an Impressionistic work. (Although it isn't exactly true that the Impressionists separated primary colors (yellow/blue) and juxtaposed them on the canvas to create a secondary color (green), they did achieve brilliant effects with short, choppy brush strokes which seemed to catch the movement of light. Monet and his friends longed for light colors and to make natural light explode on the canvas. Their paintings received much criticism because, close up, the canvases became unintelligible. A certain viewing distance was required before forms and objects become prominent.)

Formation of the group:

It was at the Café Guerbois that Monet and the other young radical painters used to go, always attentive to Manet, who had upset the artistic tradition of the Paris Salon. They adopted Manet's concepts of color and canvas organization but applied these to outdoors. They extended the idea of the commonplace subject of the 1850's-1860's and added new-found color intensity that had a profound effect on the direction of art.

Monet seemed to radiate such passion and dedication that he soon became the leader among his contemporaries, Degas, Renoir, Sisley, Bazille, Pissarro and Berthe Morisot, although diametrically opposed, had stronger, more positive ties through a common creed: "To truth, our ideal."

All the Guerbois believed that the duty of artists was to render faithfully, without allegory or fictionalizing what they saw about them. "All I did was to look," said Monet. Basically, this group of young radicals did not differ from the ideals or works of Courbet or writers like Astruc, Duranty, and Lola—all ardent advocates of realism.

The difference between Courbet and Monet's group was though they view the same world, the younger artists saw it with sharper eyes and looked at it in broad daylight instead of the dark filter of the studio. As a result, they saw more, and this in turn was cast in a wider range of pure color and light.

With Monet, the search for the moment became a method. In the year of his death, 1926, he summarized his lifetime's work as the endeavor to paint "directly from Nature, striving to render my impression in the face of the most fugitive effects." On another occasion, he stated that, "What I

seek is instantaneity.” And to this end, he deliberately pitted himself against the most unstable aspects of landscapes: the fluidity of water and the perpetual motion of light (2).

The Impressionists showed their work as a group for over a decade, but inevitably the diverse personalities and backgrounds began to split the group. The first freshness was disappearing: they began to rely more on theory than intuition. Experimentation became an important factor, especially with Monet, who carried methods furthest in painting serial painting of the same scene (e.g., 26 views of Rouen Cathedral, 16 views of Waterloo Bridge). With each group, river or cathedral, Monet observed at the same place noting differing climactic and atmospheric conditions. He gives a record of the passing of time and movement of light over identical forms. This tends to result in the breakup of form and solidity, and ultimately, to a form of abstraction.

Prepared by Robyn Diener

- (1) The World of Manet, 1832-1883; Time Life Library of Art, 1968. Time Life Books, New York, p 105.
- (2) The World of Manet, 1832-1883; Time Life Library of Art, 1968. Time Life Books, New York, p 88-89.