



History & Geography

For history and geography, you can read through the lessons and history of Impressionism that we have included below. We have also included various videos under the History & Geography section.

“Impressionism is only direct sensation. All great painters were less or more impressionists. It is mainly a question of instinct...”

~Claude Monet

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Impressionism Era History

Impressionism

Impressionism was a radical art movement that originated in France in the late 1800s. The artists, who later became known as "Impressionists," rebelled against classical subjects, embracing a modern take in their desire to create works that reflected the world. Light was one of the major focal points, and they used color to provide definition instead of black lines. The Impressionists emphasized the practice of "en plein air painting," or "painting outside." Initially ridiculed by critics, Impressionism has since been embraced as one of the most popular and influential art styles in Western history.

Beginning of Impressionism

Impressionism coalesced in the 1860s when a group of painters including Claude Monet, Alfred Sisley, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir pursued en plein air painting together. American artist John Rand was never a prominent artist in the group, but he revolutionized the art world by using paint from a tube. His new invention offered easily portable, pre-mixed paint, and allowed painters to bring their process outdoors.

This advancement in the art world allowed spontaneity and a casual quality to the work of Impressionists. Over time, other artists joined in the practice, and their exploration together moved from indoor studios to outdoor cafes, with regular get-togethers to discuss their ideas.

Realist painter Édouard Manet was part of this crowd and is often referred to as an Impressionist because of his early influence on and close friendships with the members of the movement. The Impressionists took many of Manet's techniques to heart, particularly his embrace of modernity as subject matter and the spontaneity of his brush strokes, along with his use of color and lighting. All these qualities are displayed in his 1863 painting *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*.

The movement made its official debut in 1874 in a show hosted by the Paris photography studio of Félix Nadar. This show was an alternative to the Académie des Beaux-Arts' Salon de Paris, which had been the official exhibition and overseer of art world standards since 1667.

Comprised of works submitted to the Salon that were rejected by the Académie, the group calling itself "The Cooperative and Anonymous Association of Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers" featured 30 artists showing work, including some now-famous names in art: Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Alfred Sisley, Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas, and Camille Pissarro.

The Impressionists took their name from an insult hurled by the press at one of Monet's paintings, *Impression, Sunrise*. Critics heaped scorn on the work presented in the show as "unfinished" and compared it unfavorably to wallpaper.

Claude Monet

Monet was a leader of the movement, and his brief brush strokes and fragmented color application found their way into the works of others.

He was particularly interested in the passage of time in his portrayal of light. His series of paintings capturing Rouen Cathedral at different times of the day and year offer clear examples of Monet's ideas on how a subject can be transformed by properties around it. His most famous of this series is 1894's *Rouen Cathedral: The Facade at Sunset*.

Monet expanded his Impressionist practice throughout his life, culminating in his multiple studies of the Waterlily Pond, produced from 1898 to 1926, of which the later works in the series (done just before his death) achieve an almost abstract quality.

Pierre-Auguste Renoir

Renoir was considered the other leader of the Impressionist movement. He shared Monet's interests but often preferred to capture artificial light in places like dance halls and directed his studies of the effects of light on figures, particularly the female form, rather than scenery, and he frequently focused on portraiture.

Everyday life was Renoir's preferred subject matter, and his portrayal of it is drenched in optimism. His 1876 painting *Moulin de la Galette*, which depicts the crowded dance garden on the Butte Montmartre, utilizes both artificial and natural light to portray a jolly party atmosphere and highlights many of Renoir's interests.

Other Impressionists

Edgar Degas is often considered a part of the Impressionist movement since he did exhibit with them, notably in the 1874 show, but he did not consider himself an Impressionist, as he preferred to be thought of as a Realist. His relationship with the Impressionists was a supportive one meant to help the group combat the narrow objections of the status quo. His fascination with the human figure, particularly in the form of dancers, has aligned him thematically with the Impressionists.

His protégé Mary Cassatt, an American living in Paris, was one of the major female artists prominent in the movement. Like Renoir, she was interested in portraying people and is best known for her images of women and girls in private moments, best exemplified in her 1880 painting *Girl Sewing*.

Another prominent woman in the movement was Berthe Morisot, Manet's sister-in-law. Morisot embraced a lighter color palette like the other Impressionists and was considered a large influence on Manet's later work.

Pointillism

An offshoot of Impressionism was Pointillism, otherwise known as Neo-Impressionism. It was born in 1886 when Georges Seurat displayed his piece *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* and declared the original movement out of date.

Seurat's style is defined by small dots of color that appear more separate when viewed close-up but blend into a cohesive image as the viewer pulls back. Seurat developed this style along with painter Paul Signac.

Camille Pissarro, an important figure in the movement, aligned with the Neo-Impressionists in his later years thanks to his fascination with optics, though this was not received well by the public. His son Lucien spent a longer time as part of the Neo-Impressionists, though he is not as well known as his father.

Post-Impressionism

Paul Cézanne lurked at the edges of the Impressionist movement and was pivotal to Post-Impressionism, which also included major painters like Paul Gauguin, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Edvard Munch, Gustav Klimt, and Vincent van Gogh.

Never a consolidated movement, Post-Impressionism was more a reaction against Impressionism, which it considered too stifling. Post-Impressionists chose to portray not just what was tangible, taking a more symbolic and emotive approach to their subject matter, especially in color use, which was not required to express realism.