

A *LITTLE* ESSAY ON IMPRESSIONISM

By Gainor Roberts

Perhaps, if one could pick one word to describe the second half of the 19th century, it would be “*discovery*”. What we know today, as the telephone, rocket science, explosives, the internal combustion engine, aviation, and transportation, were all products of the Industrial Revolution. Charles Darwin and Louis Pasteur, to name only a few, were on the cutting edge of science, and their discoveries and writings galvanized their own contemporaries in ways that were unknown previously. The causes of the major diseases that threatened mankind were discovered and shortly thereafter cures would be found for most of them.

A two-week holiday to the country was easily accomplished by taking the train, and ordinary people could work and accumulate a measure of wealth not known before. There was leisure time, intercontinental travel, and intense interest in other cultures and civilizations.

The center of culture in the Western World was Paris. From the 1850s the city was being torn up and remodeled. Streets were widened into the boulevards of today; the easy climate of Paris was a natural for the open-air cafes that sprang up everywhere. People who worked during the day, assembled later in the cafes and bars and the Bohemian lifestyle of the artists of Paris was booming. There was a sort of intellectual middle class; people were interested in art, literature, and scientific theories. The technological revolution had made life easier for people, gave them more time to play, and many had money to spend. It sounds sort of like our own time. The Franco-Prussian war in 1870 interrupted this happy lifestyle, and enormous hardship hit everyone, especially the artists, but after the war was over, in a few years, life returned to its easy going ways.

ART HISTORY

If you have ever tried to read art history you will feel assaulted with “isms” and “schisms” that totally confuse you. Keeping it straight is a hard task for even the most dedicated student of art. If you read about the Impressionists you need to read a lot before you might be lucky enough to come upon a paragraph explaining exactly *how* they painted. History is not so interested in the *hows* and attempts to answer the *whys*. Most accounts of the Impressionist are more interested in when they visited each other, what shows they entered, and what shows they were rejected from, and in the more racy accounts, who they slept with! Tidbits of gossip about one or the other of them filter into these accounts, and anecdotes about various feuds between them are interesting, but hardly enlightening about their painting methods and what relevance it has for us today. Reading their letters to each other is a lot of work, and even there you have to filter out lots of news, and if you have ever read *Dear Theo*, Van Gogh’s letters to his brother, you can find many jewels of information about his methods and insights into color theory. However, plowing through it is, for me, a once in a lifetime ordeal!

My own painting is based on Impressionist theories and ideas which came to me from my teacher and my “grandteacher” although neither of these men is considered an Impressionist, they both taught the method of building a canvas based on Impressionist ideas. It is important, I think, for artists to have an understanding of Art History, perhaps, not in depth, but at least have an overview of the major trends in painting over the centuries. We don’t need to know the details about each artist, unless we want to make deeper investigations. Art History books are readily available from the Libraries and the Internet is a great source of information about art and artists.

I think if we understand the context in which we learn to paint, and the influences and rebellions that created that way of thinking, we can be free to make our own explorations and contribute new ideas to it. A trip to the local museum can be an enriching experience, especially when viewing contemporary art, if we understand the way art builds on itself over the centuries. The ridiculous of today might be the greatest art created in the next century!

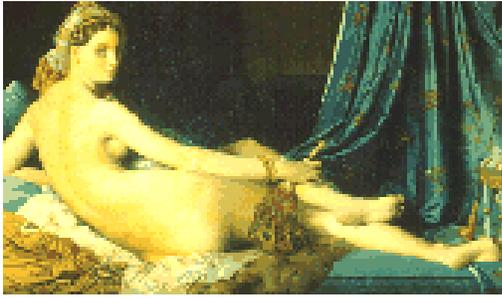
Unfortunately the textbooks are pretty dreary reading. The one best book I have *ever* found on art is called the *Techniques of the Great Masters of Painting*. It is out of print, but available from used book dealers, easily found on the Internet. A large, heavy book, with very small print, it is an in-depth analysis of the way artists did their paintings. Along with this there is a narrative text that puts into context the shifts of fashion in art from one decade to the next, and it explains artists materials and why certain techniques were used in relation to what artists had available at that time.

THE ACADEMIES

To understand Impressionism it is necessary to understand how art was done, and especially how art was taught. Equally important is how artists materials changed over the centuries and how those materials impacted the painting methods used by artists. It was against the academy system that the Impressionists revolted, or at least that is what is generally believed. In truth, the revolt started at least a decade before the Impressionists were a “group” with a name, and the revolt started with the academicians themselves; many were teachers of the Impressionists.

In the Middle Ages artists were regarded as manual laborers. Art production was a dirty trade, as well as hazardous to one’s health, due to the highly poisonous materials used. Music, mathematics and literature were considered worthy pursuits. Art academies were formed in the 16th century to give artists a boost in respect. The intellectual side of art was taught, anatomy, geometry (perspective) and drawing. Artists were taught how to use line, to *represent* forms of nature, since line, as such, doesn’t exist in nature. Line as well as shading allowed a three-dimensional form to appear rounded on a flat surface. If this was performed well, the artist was considered to be attaining a high intellectual plane. Painting, or dealing with color, was considered to be associated with the vulgar side of human nature, as it was “sensual”, and it was also associated with the dirty, practical side of art, and therefore not elevated to the lofty ideals of the human mind. This split between line and color, artist and artisan, and the intellect and the senses, continues on and on throughout the centuries, down to the 19th and even the 20th, and probably will continue into this one as well.

As the Academy improved the status of the artist by emphasizing drawing, it also came under the control of the monarch, Louis XIV and stayed intensely political for many decades. The guilds of the Middle Ages promoted craftsmanship and understanding all aspects of the trade. Studios, like that operated by Reubens [1577-1640], employed apprentices who were instructed by the master. They learned the trade by working on their master’s paintings. In the academy the artists were taught to draw, and idealize, the human form, as in the Ancient Greek and Roman art. This represented a pure form of truth, and the mind could be elevated to a lofty place. Eventually subject matter fell into line with this idea and became a hierarchy of appropriate subjects: lowest was still life, and highest was classical painting showing Greek and Roman themes from history or from mythology where the human form was idealized and great morality was expressed. A trip to the museum will usually turn up these “classical” paintings that were dramatic, included many figures in various stages of dress and undress, and had moralistic, patriotic, or mythological content. This was considered the ideal painting in the early 19th century.



The nude was revered, and this painting by Ingres, shows how classical painting was supposed to idealize the human form

One controlling policy of the Academies was to forbid artists from “hawking” their wares, or advertising. Artists were considered so lofty it was beneath their dignity to advertise and seek clients. The market place for their work was the *Salon*, which means “room” in French, and was so named for the Salon Carré, (square room) in the Louvre, where the early exhibitions of Academy-trained artists were held. It was here that works were sold, prizes given, and commissions arranged. The Salon, held each year, may have started as a good idea, but by the middle of the 19th century, it had become so enmeshed with French politics, and was so competitive, it had to collapse from the absurdity of its own practices. Of course wall space was limited, it always is, and to overcome this a jury decides who gets in and who gets rejected. The jury also decides who is the best artist, and medals are conferred on the top contestants. They competed for the Prix de Rome, and later even for the Legion of Honor! Today we don’t even recognize the names of many of the top prizewinners. The system was self-serving and hardly democratic.

The group controlling all this was called “The Academy” and consisted of artists who were elected by their peers to a lifetime membership in this elite club. Academicians had the lofty position of advising the government in all art matters, and they controlled the Salon Show each year, by managing it and selecting the jury for it. This system continues today, and if you see “NA” after an artist’s name it stands for “National Academy” which means that artist has been elected to a similar elite body in our country. The counterpart in England is “RA” which stands for Royal Academy. By its nature the academy had extreme power over creativity, as artists could be made or broken by acceptance or rejection in the Academy and the Salon shows. There were no “galleries” or other ways to sell art. Eventually the alternative to being trained in the *École des Beaux-Arts* was to attend one of the independent academies that were privately run and not tied into the government. The most famous of these schools was the Academy Julien, which taught academic painting, but was more relaxed about it, and they accepted most interested students. The Academy Julien often helped students prepare to gain acceptance into the *École des Beaux-Arts*. Another famous independent school was the Academy Suisse, which didn’t provide instruction but provided artists with models, and studio space to work in and meet each other. This would be a very important place, since many of the painters that formed the Impressionist group met each other either here or at the Academy Julien.



Detail of a painting by Delacroix, showing a heroic theme, "Liberté Leading the People" executed the academic tradition and using chiaroscuro to the fullest advantage

One of the keys to understanding 19th century painting is to understand the technique of chiaroscuro. This means light/dark in Italian. It has to do with the way a form was modeled in paint, from the darks to the lights. Think of a Rembrandt painting, and you will see the lights thickly painted, while the darks are a thin wash of paint. This method of painting was not just a vogue; it was done because of the nature of the paint itself

Prior to the 19th century, paint was usually ground by hand, either by the artist or his apprentice. Later in the 18th century paint merchants came on the scene. They ground paint that was stored in pig bladders, and artists like Turner used these containers to paint on location. However, it was cumbersome, and the pig bladders did not preserve paint well. The search was on for better methods of manufacturing, storing and grinding paint that was suitable for fine art. Paint is made by adding oil to the powdered pigments most of which come from the earth. Each color requires a differing amount of oil. The trick is to get the paint to disperse in the oil, but not be grainy, or have too much oil. Paintings will crack, peel, or self-destruct if the under layers contain too much oil. The age old rule "fat over lean" has always applied to how painters should approach their work. This means that when an artist is working with diluted oil paint, to create the sought after transparency, the final layers should contain more oil than the earlier layers of paint or even the ground. The ground is the surface upon which the paint is laid, and is usually some kind of mixture of white lead in oil and it was usually tinted with either dark tones or pale tones depending on the fashion of painting at the time. A dark ground was generally the accepted method by which academic painting was done. At some point the pale ground was introduced and artists had another challenge to paint chiaroscuro on a light canvas. When the Impressionists painted, they used very pale grounds, or plain white canvas as their bright colors looked better on the white ground.

The tin paint tube was a very important invention for artists. Now paint could be stored without spoiling, and the tube was portable and easy to manage. Artists had been painting outside for a century before the invention of tube colors around 1841, but strictly academic techniques were better suited to the studio and artists often used watercolors outdoors.

The 19th century was a time when miserable failures in artist materials occurred. Artists, and paint manufacturers tried various methods of making their paint flow better, because, now, artists didn't have a lowly apprentice to grind by hand the day's paint. By the 19th century the color merchant was the supplier of paint to most artists. Additives to the paint appeared to help the paint flow, but some of these chemicals would eventually destroy the painting. What the artists continued to seek was that thin transparent wash of dark color glazed into the shadows that characterized ideal academic painting. These chiaroscuro effects were the mark of a fine artist, and everyone had to master this concept to compete in the Salon shows and become recognized by the academy.

Slowly, some of this changed. Paint and pigments were manufactured to higher standards. Some academic artists tried to paint in a higher key, lighter and brighter color, and changed their studios so they were filled with light. The studio itself was an important part in producing chiaroscuro effects. The light came from a high, north-facing window, and the light was raked across the form (or body) to create dense shadow areas and dramatic highlights. More artists went outside to paint, and a few daring artists, actually completed their paintings on site rather than completing them in the studio. There were artists who used white paint in their shadows, and some of them actually were adding opaque color to the darks. These practices were considered radical departures from the strict rules of the academy. The painters who became the Impressionists admired these artists, one of which was Corot. A few of the most respected artists of the 19th century could venture into forbidden territory and get away with it. Many simply got fed up with the rules and strayed away. Some finally became embroiled in endless squabbles with the Academy, over rejections, not only of themselves, but also their students. With artists trying new things, and materials becoming more stable, the academy system was threatened. The Salon shows became even more political, and winners were selected by silly and arbitrary methods. By the 1860s many painters were challenging the authority of the Academy. Many of these challenges came from the teachers of the artists that became the Impressionists, so the revolution had begun in earnest fifteen or twenty years before the first Impressionist show.

JAPANESE PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHY



Hokusai
The Great Wave Off Kanagawa
From "Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji"; 1823-29 (140
Kb); Color woodcut, 10 x 15 in; Metropolitan Museum
of Art, New York

These two prints are examples of Japanese woodblock prints called Ukiyo-e. It is hard *not* to fall in love with the art of the Japanese printmakers. The Impressionists saw prints like these, if not these exact ones, in Paris, and it profoundly influenced their work. Japanese art was well known in Paris. Hokusai and Hiroshige were inspirations to many painters, and Mary Cassatt, Monet, and Van Gogh, for example, did not attempt to hide their admiration for this art form. We can see it in their paintings. Japanese art does not rely on linear perspective the way Western art does. Objects recede by overlapping forms, and a tonal change takes place that implies distance. The Impressionist painters used this technique frequently. Flat planes of color, often broken by a touch of complementary color, were other devices of Japanese prints. It is easy to see how the

Impressionists admired these techniques in their own work. Some Japanese artists experimented



Hiroshige
Driving Rain
#46 from the 53 stations of the Tokaido Road
Worcester Art Museum, John Chandler Bancroft
Collection, Worcester, Massachusetts

with altered viewpoints. Instead showing a scene at eye level they might depict a scene from above, giving the viewer an unusual vantage point. Many Impressionists' paintings are based on odd angles and scenes painted from above. They loved to paint street scenes from 2nd and 3rd floor windows and balconies.

We tend to think of photography as a 20th century invention, but it was actually invented early in the 19th century. Great advances were being made in photography and color photography was invented shortly after the first Impressionist show. While the Impressionist painters were still showing as a group, the American photographer, Eadweard Muybridge, was invited to Paris to lecture and meet a large group of French painters. Muybridge's photographs of the human figure and animals in motion are a monumental achievement. His photographs are still in use by artists and illustrators, and his work proved that the galloping horse lifted all four feet off the ground at the same time, thus forever changing the way artists depicted the horse in art. In America, during the last half of the 19th century, artists like Thomas Eakins who was a flawless draughtsman and a student of anatomy, used photography as an aid to his work. In fact, Thomas Eakins was one of a group of Philadelphia professors who brought Muybridge to the University of Pennsylvania where much of his groundbreaking work on the animal in motion was subsidized and carried out under the auspices of the University.

Early photographs could not capture subtle gradations of tone the way they do now. Artists were keen to incorporate this look into their paintings. Also, in photography, there is the problem of depth of field, which makes part of the photo out of focus. Some artists were interested in those fuzzy out of focus backgrounds that appeared in photography.

1874 IMPRESSIONISM GETS A NAME

By 1873, disgusted with the stranglehold the Academy had over artists, a small group of painters had formed a cooperative that they called *Société anonyme des artistes peintres, sculptueurs, graveurs, etc.* The core members of the new group were: Monet, Renoir, Sisley, Degas, Berthe Morisot, Pissarro, Beliard, Guillaumin, Lepic, Levert and Rouart. Some of these artists paintings had been accepted at the Salons. The Franco-Prussian War had brought extreme hardship to everyone, especially the artists of Paris, and their one champion, the art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel had been forced to close down for a while to await better times. Collectors were hard hit as well. The idea of forming a cooperative to sell their work was both a challenge to the Academy and Salon system, as well as a desperate attempt to find buyers for their work. Remember that rejection from the Salon show meant that your work was not seen by the important people inside the circle of art, or by potential customers. You would have to wait a year for the next show to come up. The group included several artists who were very well established and who

commanded high prices for their work. This gave some credibility to the whole group. Their names are not well known today although their work is wonderful.

This group of artists did not want to have a Salon des Refusés. This idea had been tried before. What they wanted was to show their new work, unseen by the Academy and the Salon Jury so it would not have a “stigma” attached to the painting as a reject. Each artist agreed to show only work that had never been sent to the Salon.

It’s a miracle that this group persisted! Like most organizations this one was full of conflict, jealousies, and rejected ideas. Some of them even objected to Cézanne being part of the group! They felt he was a hick from the country. Eventually, policies were hammered out, jobs were filled, and dues were paid.

April 15, 1874 was the opening of the first show of the new Société. The photographer, and man-about-town, Nadar, had vacated his studio and gave the second floor space over to the new group. 165 works of art were shown, by 30 artists. As is usual in these cooperatives, the hanging committee disappeared, one by one, growing tired of the work, and left Renoir to hang the show. Also, as is usual in this type of group show, without a juror, it is impossible to achieve an even unity to the presentation, and Renoir rejected the work of one artist that was still very academic in his methods. Degas persuaded him to add those works after the show had been open for a few days. The show was open at night, a new idea, and members of the group had to “gallery sit”. Controversy raged in the press, and the friends of the Impressionists, Zola, for example, extolled the show, while others scoffed, reviled, or simply laughed at what they saw.

There was a joke going around about the artist’s method of painting, which was to load a pistol with several tubes of paint and fire them at the canvas, finishing it off with their signature. Does that sound familiar?

CRITICS

The critics felt that the paintings they saw at the first Impressionist show was bad art, although most of them celebrated the gumption of these artists to band together and put on their own shows. Remember that some *other* paintings by these artists had been accepted by the Salon shows.

The word “impression” was used in art, even by academicians, as a positive aspect in starting a painting. Keeping your first impression of a scene, or idea, was considered to be very important by many fine academic painters. In fact, the method of teaching painting, helped painters to keep their first impression fresh, and by the standards of the 19th century, spontaneous.

However, as important as capturing your first “impression” it was also important to “finish” a painting. This meant that the transparent glazes in the shadows were perfect, paint in the lights was thick and beautiful, and everything was smooth as glass. Brushmarks were considered crass. Sketches were sketches, and they were used as notes to finish paintings.

The critics who attended the first show of the *Société* were appalled to find unfinished artwork hanging on the walls. It deeply bothered them that artists would stoop to such low levels. Many art critics of the day were positive about the idea of the group, and praised the idea of this society, but oh, those unfinished paintings!

“*Impression: Soleil Levant.*” was the title of Monet’s Le Havre harbor scene that drew this commentary from the critic Jules Castagnary, April 29, 1874, published in *Le Siècle*.

The common view that brings these artists together in a group and makes of them a collective force within our disintegrating age is their determination not to aim for perfection, but to be satisfied with a certain general aspect. Once the impression is captured, they declare their role finished. The term Japanese, which was given them first, made no sense. If one wishes to characterize and explain them with a single word, then one

would have to coin the word *impressionists*. They are *impressionists* in that they do not render a landscape, but the sensation produced by the landscape. The word itself has passed into their language: in the catalogue the *Sunrise* by Monet is called not *landscape*, but *impression*. Thus they take leave of reality and enter the realms of idealism.

Thus the word “impressionist” was used to describe the members of this group. Castagnary goes on to say:

After Courbet, after Daubigny, after Corot, one cannot say that the impressionists invented the unfinished. They vaunt it, they glorify it, they raise it to the dignity of a system. They make it the keystone of their art, they put it on a pedestal and adore it; that is all. This exaggeration is a manner. And what is the fate of manners in art? It is to remain typical of the person who invented them or the small clique who accepted them, it is to shrink rather than to expand; it is to become stationary without reproducing, and soon to perish where they stand.

Fortunately for us the “impressionists” ignored this critic! There were other reviewers,



Monet
Impression, Sunrise 1872

This is the painting that Castagnary is referring to in his review, the painting that got the whole lot of them called Impressionists.

more scathing than Castagnary, and the jibes and jokes went around the Paris cafés about the show of the “Impressionists” so many people came to see what the furor was about. We have not come far from this in the 127 intervening years, when we recall the tizzy created by the show at the Brooklyn Museum with the painting of the Virgin Mary and her “dunged” face

TECHNIQUE

The aims of the true impressionist painters, Monet being the ringleader, with Renoir, Sisley and Pissarro close behind, were fairly simple. To become an impressionist you must have direct contact and observation of your subject. You must not imagine, recreate, or finish paintings away from the setting. You must try to see all the colors as they are. You must try to find the exact value and color as you see it, and try to record that faithfully without making it up. Monet put color where he saw it, and if he didn't see it he painted it gray or brown, as he saw that. Impressionism's imitators put colors everywhere and Monet said “since Impressionism, the official Salons which used to be all brown have become blue, green and pink, but it's all confectionery.” Contrary to popular belief, the original Impressionists were not dabbling color next to color to mix in the eye. That came slightly later, as scientific color theories were worked out in the paintings of Georges Seurat who only showed with the Impressionists at the last group exhibition in 1886. Monet's later works, before his death in 1920, would be so abstract as to not have much form at all, just color juxtaposed next to color. The titles tell us that he was painting

water lilies and they were enormous paintings worked both outside in elaborate easels and inside his studio. Monet regularly finished his paintings in the studio as Impressionism faded into Neo-Impressionism, and Post Impressionism. However, as an Impressionist in 1874, you had to keep your paintings fairly small, portable, and have a white, or pale, ground. Working on a white ground was totally the reverse of the academic tradition where paintings were worked over various neutral colors, browns, grays, and ochers. This created much brighter paintings, because bright colors placed over white was not changed by the underlying ground color.

You must, if you are closely observing the color changes, use a small brush, and apply pure, undiluted paint, in little strokes. You must work the entire canvas, everywhere, until it has built up to the point that there is nothing more to say. As you work this way, dabbing paint everywhere, your lines will disappear. The linear aspects of the Impressionists works were minimal, and form and color were everything,

Most of these early Impressionists did not read theories about color and light. They were interested in concentrating on exact reproduction of colors as they saw it. It has been noted that there are no rainbows and no storms in Impressionism. This technique is not really suited to catching the momentary change of light and it was much later in Monet's life that he started to paint series of canvases, in an attempt to see the change of light, hour by hour, as in the famous Haystack paintings, or the Rouen Cathedral series. It was also difficult to bring paint box, canvas and easel, into the weather, although Monet painted many snow scenes under gray skies. Earlier artists like Constable and Turner were interested in capturing these momentary changes of light and atmosphere, but they went into nature with a tiny paint box, small scrap of paper or canvas, and painted the fleeting scene in 20 minutes, and then reproduced it inside the studio on a grand scale using their little sketches as notes. The Japanese woodblock artists depicted weather and a few of the Impressionists tried to show rain and snow in their paintings, but sunlight was the important feature for most of them.

It is also not true that the Impressionists did without earth colors and black. Monet and Pissarro used both and Renoir removed black from his palette only to add it again, declaring it to be the "the queen of colors". It was the Neo-impressionists who experimented with no black or earth colors, and even Seurat resorted to them to make his pointillist paintings sparkle.

This paragraph, written by Pissarro to a young painter in 1881, sums up so much of the Impressionists' mind:

Don't be afraid of putting on color; refine the work little by little. Don't proceed according to rules and principles, but paint what you observe and feel. Paint generously and unhesitatingly, for it is best not to lose the first impression. Don't be timid in front of nature; one must be bold, at the risk of being deceived and making mistakes. One must always have only one master—nature; she is the one always to be consulted.

AN ESPRIT DE CORPS

One aspect of Impressionism that seems to be one of its most engaging is the comradeship of these men and women. Never before had an art movement developed where a large number of its members would become some of the greatest artists of all time. They knew each other, and many were life long friends. They painted together, played together, and exchanged ideas in the cafes, and in letters to each other. When one of their members was down and out, someone else would take them in. They learned from each other, and had arguments and feuds, and competitions for acceptance in shows led to intense rivalry between them although mostly friendly. I think it's this aspect that is one of the most captivating to us today. When American painters went to France to learn at the Academies, they tried to do the same thing, found a group, which was sympathetic to certain theories and ideas.

IMPRESSIONISM IN AMERICA

There were several excellent art academies in America, The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, and the National Academy of Design in New York. Although excellent schools, it was thought to be the ultimate experience for a 19th century artist to make their pilgrimage to Paris. Thomas Eakins, John Sargent (who started studying in Paris in 1874) Mary Cassatt, James Whistler, Winslow Homer, William Merritt Chase and a legion of other artists studied abroad and returned to America to found their own schools, or to become teachers in the American academies. Many of them continued with their academic traditions. Some experimented with Impressionism and others became Impressionist painters. Groups were formed, in emulation of the camaraderie of the Impressionists.

By 1893, at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Impressionism was recognized as a major force in American Art. One group that was formed was called "The Ten" and included Childe Hassam, John Twachtman, Alden Weir (his home and studio in Connecticut is now a National Park), William Merritt Chase, among others. The Ten had group exhibitions and attempted to emulate their French Impressionist predecessors.

One painter, who went abroad in 1888, was Robert Henri He enrolled in the Academy Julian, and the École des Beaux-Arts.



Robert Henri

Woman on the Beach

This painting shows the unmistakable influence of the impressionists, in its Monet-like brushwork, and the subject, women outside in nature, was a favorite subject of the Impressionists.

For a while he had his own teaching studio in Paris. One could not be a young artist in France and not know about the Impressionist shows, participate in the raging debates over academic art versus the modern approach, or become intrigued with the idea of a Cooperative of Artists who showed together. The last Impressionist show was held in 1886 but their work was around, and by then the major Impressionists were being shown in America.

Henri was not a Frenchman, but was born in America, raised in Nebraska. His father was implicated in a murder and the family fled to Atlantic City where his sons changed their names. Robert Hen-rye as it's pronounced, followed in the wake of the French Impressionists and rebelled against Academic art, and formed a "school" of followers who became known as "The Eight". Some of the members of this group were newspaper engravers from Philadelphia, and they came together in New York. The sensational show of their paintings is said to have ushered in modern painting in America.



Robert Henri
The Little Dancer(1916-1918)

Oil on canvas, 40 1/2 X 32 1/2"

Butler Museum of Art

Getting away from Impressionism, Henri developed a unique style, which depended on fluid brushwork, and a chiaroscuro effect, as he often used a very dark background with very bright highlights. Sometimes his drawing and anatomy was not well done, but he appealed to a new way of thinking about art in America and he was a gifted and brilliant teacher.

Robert Henri's greatest achievement was as a teacher, and some of the twentieth century's finest artists were his students. His book *The Art Spirit* is still in print and popular with many art students today. One of the places he taught was at the Art Students' League, a New York art school that was founded in opposition to the National Academy. Anyone could go there, regardless of talent. New ideas were taught there, and many brilliant teachers impacted many generations of artists down to this day, including me.

Another group, mostly of Henri's students, formed in the 1920s that included Edward Hopper, George Bellows, and John Sloan, which was called The Ashcan School. Not a school, but a group of painters, they were called this because they preferred to paint the dark side of New York, focusing on the back alleys, the low-lives, and the streets of Manhattan that were teeming with immigrants and other interesting characters.

One painter, who was a student of both Robert Henri, and George Bellows, was my teacher, Robert Brackman. His work could hardly be called "Impressionism" although that is what he taught. By the 1930s and 1940s Impressionism and Academic theories had merged, and from each something was gained. Artists were now free to paint what they pleased, in whatever style suited them. Abstract art was shown alongside realistic art. The young artist could choose which style represented his talents, and he could obtain a classical education at places like the National Academy, or he could study at the Art Students' League and be inspired by any number of superb painters teaching there. The Revolt against the academy was complete.

The merger of Impressionism with Academic art may be seen in the work of such great American Artists as John Singer Sargent, who never abandoned his academic training, but who picked up many Impressionistic ideas and played with them in some of his paintings.

The Impressionists, and their heirs, can teach us all something about spontaneity, keeping the impression fresh, using fresh, bright color, picking simple subjects, and depicting life around



Robert Brackman
Somewhere in America
ca. 1933-1934
Smithsonian American Art Museum

This charming child is typical of the portraiture of Brackman. He took the color theories of the Impressionists and the loose brushwork of Robert Henri and developed a kind of academic/impressionist style. He was a fine draughtsman and he distained sloppiness or casualness in his work. He continued the tradition of Henri and was a teacher to three generations of painters.

us. The academic tradition can bring to our work a mastery of drawing, an understanding of values, and a focus on traditional materials and their properties. We can strive to create paintings that will not fall apart due to shoddy and poor materials and methods. We can take the best of both avenues and make our paintings sing with color while emphasizing form and values.

Wandering through the metaphorical avenues of art history, we can admire, criticize, and scratch our heads over the types, varieties, methods, and intent of artists, and their times. The Impressionist's paintings seem to reach out, as a group, and give us some kind of emotional kickback that just doesn't exist in other styles of painting. For us today, more than a century later, these paintings are fresh, clean, and sparkling. The landscapes don't pretend to be anything more than what they are, the portraits, show real people, in real settings, who speak to us in smiles and gestures, that we can recognize and identify with, and the still lifes give us flowers and fruit, that we want to touch and eat, making these paintings the most sensual paintings ever to be painted.

EVENTS—1874

This is what was “going on” in the world during the year(s) when the Impressionists had their first group exhibition in Paris

Ulysses Grant was president of the United States. He was reelected in 1872 in spite of many scandals in his administration.

Queen Victoria was reigning in England. Three years later she is declared “Empress of India”. Disraeli is prime minister.

Pressure canning of foods is introduced in the United States.

The Russian composer Smetana wrote “Ma Vlast” (My Fatherland). Johann Strauss II presented “Die Fledermaus” in Vienna. Verdi presented the Requiem in Milan, “Boris Godunov” was performed in St. Petersburg by Modest Mussorgsky, Johannes Brahms wrote “Variations on a Theme by Hyden” in 1873, Wagner introduced “Götterdämmerung” in 1874, Tchaikovsky’s “Piano Concerto #1” was introduced in 1875 and on tour in America 1875-1876

Massachusetts enacts the first 10-hour day for women.

The ASPCC (American Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children) is formed after a badly abused child is found wandering the streets naked and injured. The only agency in existence at that time was the ASCPA (Animals) and this organization took in the child, (claiming that she was an “animal”) and they formally brought charges against the child’s drunken foster mother after which the ASPCC was formed.

In New York City, Macy’s Department store shows a doll collection in what was to become a worldwide tradition of extravagant Christmas window displays.

Railroad travel was commonplace in America and Europe. The first shipment of Montana beef cattle bound for “The East” arrives at the railhead at Ogden, Utah Territory.

The Telephone would be invented the following year.

The ice cream soda was invented in Philadelphia at a celebration for the Franklin Institute.

DDT was invented the year before and is described in “The Proceedings of the German Chemical Society”. Its significance as a widespread insecticide would be recognized some years later.

Two different machines for barbed wire were invented the year before, and its use by both farmers and the military is well known. This marked the end of the open range in the West.

Billoth discovered streptococci and staphylococci.

In the next year, 1875, Bosnia and Herzegovina have uprisings against the Turk rule.

Reconstruction in the south is nearly over.

Edison was working on many inventions to improve the telegraph during this time period. He made inventions to improve the typewriter which The Remington Company bought. The first practical light bulb was to be invented in 1879.

During the Franco-Prussian war (declared in 1870) Louis Pasteur proved, and then attempted to persuade the doubting medical corps, that sterilization of wounds, bandages and instruments would prevent infection and disease. Later, in 1876 he proved that the anthrax bacillus was causing an epidemic in cattle and sheep. The French Academy of Medicine would make him a member, in spite of his lack of formal degrees.

In 1873 the Pekin duck is introduced to Long Island by the Stonington, Connecticut sea captain, James E. Palmer. The white ducks are a variety of the mallard. An important industry arises from this.

The first bridge across the Mississippi River is tested and then opened on July 4th. 300,000 people came out to witness the “collapse” of the bridge while 7 locomotives loaded with coal and water chugged across the span, in each direction, and then stopped in the middle. The bridge did not collapse and was officially opened two days later with celebrations, cheers, parades, political speeches (of course) band concerts, and fireworks.

Gerhard Henrik Hansen discovers the leprosy bacillus. The disease will hereafter be named Hansen’s disease.

Prototypes of the electric streetcar are made in New York City. It will be awhile before they are perfected.

Sophia Jez-Blake founds the London School of Medicine for Women. Three years later she will gain the legal right to practice medicine in Britain.

Robert Wood Johnson, in New Jersey, pioneers improved surgical dressings.

The U.S. Supreme Court upholds a city’s right to levy taxes to support its public school system.

The Chautauqua movement begins in the US. It was started by Methodist Bishop, John Heyl Vincent and farm machinery maker Lewis Miller, as a summer training program for Sunday school teachers. It quickly expanded into a traveling tent show of lecturers that brought culture to small-town America. By 1877 100,000 people will sign up for home-study correspondence courses. Still in existence, Chautauqua lectures may be heard on some PBS stations in America.

Some popular writers of the era: Mark Twain; Emile Zola (a friend of Cézanne's and very involved with many of the Impressionists’ shows. He wrote criticism that was published in the Paris press extolling the virtues of Impressionism); Tomas Hardy (*Far from the Madding Crowd*); Anthony Trollope (*Phineas Redux*); Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (*Die Messalinen Wiens*) (it is from this writer’s last name that we get the word “masochism”); Paul Verlaine (*Romances sans paroles*); Arthur Rimbaud (*Une saison en enfer*) (Verlaine left his wife in 1871 to live as Rimbaud’s lover, but in 1873 Verlaine shot Rimbaud in the wrist in a lover’s quarrel and served a two year sentence in prison. Rimbaud, who wrote unconventional poetry wanted to see an amoral society emerge. When that didn’t happen he went into business as a North African merchant and trader and amassed a fortune before he died in 1891).

Important advances in photography took place by English photochemist William Bolton. He demonstrated that nitrates could be washed out of photographic emulsions through a process that would be used hereafter in developing photographic films. Photography had been invented nearly 35 years before!

P.T. Barnum opened his “Hippodrome” in Madison Square Park. He sold his lease to a man named Patrick Gilmore, who renamed it “Gilmore’s Garden” where it was used for flower shows, the first beauty pageant, the first Westminster Kennel Club show, and various

organizational meetings like the Temperance Union. Barnum continued to pitch his circus tent at Gilmore's Garden each year. Now, of course, we know the site to be Madison Square Garden.

Lawn tennis is patented and brought to the United States from Bermuda.

Levi Straus starts to put copper rivets in the pockets of their blue jeans and overalls.

The WCTU (Women's Christian Temperance Union) is founded in Cleveland. 135 women meet and dedicate themselves to erasing the traffic in liquor.

1873 Sigmund Freud enters medical school in Vienna. He is impressed by the poet Goethe's scientific explorations, and Freud is driven to join in the study of natural science and attempt to solve some of the problems confronting scientists at that time. In his third year in school he discovers his passion for the human neurological system, and becomes so engrossed in investigating the central nervous system he neglects his regular courses and it takes him 3 years longer to complete medical school.

In 1876 George Custer will be killed at the Battle of Little Bighorn.

Charles Darwin, who died in 1882, wrote *The Descent of Man* (1871), and *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). These books were detailed expositions of topics that had been confined to small sections of the *Origin of the Species*. The importance of his work was well recognized by his contemporaries; Darwin was elected to the Royal Society (1839) and the French Academy of Sciences (1878).

Many prototypes of the gasoline-powered engine were developed from 1860 on. In 1876 a patented internal combustion engine was shown at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. French, German, British and American inventors were all coming up with variations of the engine and a French inventor developed a vehicle that ran on kerosene and ran at top speed of 4mph as early as 1862.

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