



The
Impressionist
Revolution
MONET to MATISSE
from the Dallas Museum of Art

Cover: Claude Monet. *The Water Lily Pond (Clouds)* (detail), 1903. Oil on canvas; 29 3/8 × 42 1/2 in. Dallas Museum of Art, The Eugene and Margaret McDermott Art Fund, Inc., bequest of Mrs. Eugene McDermott in honor of Nancy Hamon, 2019.67.13.McD

The Impressionist Revolution: Monet to Matisse from the Dallas Museum of Art traces the origins of the independent artists' collective known as the Impressionists and the revolutionary course they set for modern art. Breaking with tradition in both how and what they painted, as well as how they showed their work, the Impressionists redefined what constituted cutting-edge contemporary art. The unique innovations of its core members—Gustave Caillebotte, Mary Cassatt, Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Berthe Morisot, Camille Pissarro, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Alfred Sisley—set the foundation against which following generations of avant-garde artists reacted, from Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh to Piet Mondrian and Henri Matisse.

The name Impressionism, which the group had begrudgingly accepted by 1877, was given to them by the French critic Louis Leroy as an insult in response to Monet's now-iconic painting *Impression, Sunrise* (fig. 1): "Impression, of that I was sure. I also said to myself that, since I was impressed, there must be some impression in there. . . . And what freedom, what ease of brushwork! Wallpaper in its embryonic state is even more finished than this seascape."¹

Seeing paintings like this reproduced on coffee mugs and wall calendars gives the impression that Impressionist artwork was always in high demand, that it was always appreciated for



Figure 1: Claude Monet. *Impression, Sunrise*, 1872. Oil on canvas; 19 3/4 × 25 5/8 in. Musée Marmottan Monet, Gift of Eugène and Victorine Donop de Monchy, 1940, Inv. 4014. © Musée Marmottan Monet / Studio Christian Baraja SLB

its atmospheric effects, that its pastel hues were always seen as picturesque, that this art was beautiful enough to invite into our most intimate living spaces. And yet that couldn't be further from the truth. It can be hard today to understand why these paintings were seen as comical at best and grotesque at worst by the artists' contemporaries.

The most frequent criticism aimed at the Impressionists was their perceived inability to create a finished picture. One writer observed: “The *impressionists* are painters who have the audacity to give us a glimpse, a simple impression of things, without making the effort to enter into the detailed study of line, of color, nor the thousand other knowing combinations that painters of the past had the good nature to be concerned with. A self-respecting *impressionist* (some say *impressionalist*) does not put on these airs and graces: he proceeds by the abrupt application of colors. He takes his brush and forcefully dabs the canvas; something shocking results from this process that stuns the viewer and it's our imagination that is responsible for completing [the picture].” He goes on to concede, “It's not that there aren't certain qualities in some of the works exhibited by the impressionists; but they are qualities of a very rudimentary nature: all of them made sketches, not one of them made a painting.”²

Although today we use the term Impressionist to loosely describe the aesthetic of short, staccato strokes of bright pigments applied rapidly, Impressionism as it emerged in the 1870s wasn't a single, unified style. Rather, it reflected a shared desire among a small group of avant-garde artists to capture their experience of contemporary life through subject and style. The Impressionists painted rapidly, especially when painting outdoors, often applying pigment wet-into-wet to record movement and fleeting atmospheric effects. Polished brushwork that eliminates the visible traces of the artist's hand was shunned in favor of loose, almost gestural dabs and dashes. Rather than relying upon linear perspective and volumetric shading with tones of black to create the illusion of spatial recession or depth, the Impressionists constructed their compositions by layering and juxtaposing vibrant hues. They applied paint directly onto a light-colored ground or canvas, often leaving areas unpainted, to increase the colors' vibrancy and convey the optical sensation of light.

Because there was almost no support for this radical approach to painting, either in the press or from mainstream collectors, these experimental artists banded together to find a way to make a living outside the conservative state-run fine arts system. In fact, it was



Figure 2: Pierre-Auguste Renoir. *Roses and Peonies in a Vase* (detail), 1876. Oil on canvas; 23 7/8 x 20 1/4 in. Dallas Museum of Art, The Eugene and Margaret McDermott Art Fund, Inc., bequest of Mrs. Eugene McDermott in honor of Sarah Perot, 2019.67.22.McD



Figure 3: Berthe Morisot. *The Port of Nice* (detail), 1881-82. Oil on canvas; 15 x 18 1/4 in. Dallas Museum of Art, The Wendy and Emery Reves Collection, 1985.R.40

their rejection from the French government's official Salon exhibition—essentially the only path for professional success in nineteenth-century Paris—that drove them to organize their first group exhibition in 1874.

Under the name of the Anonymous Society of Painters, Sculptors, Printmakers, Etc., the Impressionists organized a total of eight exhibitions between 1874 and 1886. The artwork in their shows featured mundane scenes drawn from middle-class life unfolding in and around Paris: the hustle and bustle of carriages and pedestrians on expansive boulevards, quiet gardens and streets in the suburbs, sweeping views of coastal ports and major waterways, idyllic views of the countryside, and serene still lifes in intimate domestic spaces.

The Impressionists' insistence on depicting modern subjects in an equally modern style and displaying their works on their own terms was nothing short of a revolution. Yet the story of this movement isn't simply about the artists who participated in the exhibitions or adopted its radical aesthetic. It's also about the long shadow it cast over contemporary art production for decades to come. Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, Pierre Bonnard, Henri Matisse, Piet Mondrian, Edvard Munch, and Ernst Kirchner, among

many others, grappled with its legacy, whether adapting or reacting against its core tenets in their quest to plot the trajectory of modern art.

Even today, when we see artwork in museums and galleries that reflects our collective lived experience—unremarkable domestic moments, snapshots of life in urban and rural settings, assemblages made from the detritus of contemporary life, abstract compositions that declare the primacy of color and mark making to convey a mood, sensation, or impression—we can credit the Impressionists for having the audacity to start this revolutionary war, even if most of them lost the battle.

Adapted from Nicole Myers, “That 1870s Show,” in The Impressionist Revolution: Monet to Matisse from the Dallas Museum of Art, ed. Nicole Myers (Dallas Museum of Art, 2025).

Notes

1. Louis Leroy, “L’exposition des impressionists,” *Le Charivari*, April 25, 1874, cited in Ruth Berson, ed., *The New Painting: Impressionism 1874-1886: Documentation*. Vol. 1. *Reviews* (Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1996), 26. Author’s translation.
2. Argus, “Chronique,” *La Semaine des familles*, April 21, 1877, 47, cited in Berson 1:123. Author’s translation.



Figure 4: Henri Matisse. *Still Life: Bouquet and Compotier*, 1924. Oil on canvas, 29 1/4 x 36 1/2 in. Dallas Museum of Art, The Eugene and Margaret McDermott Art Fund, Inc., in honor of Dr. Bryan Williams, 2002.19.McD

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Upper-Level Galleries

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