



Impression

PAINTING QUICKLY IN FRANCE 1860–1890

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PAGES 2–3: Claude Monet, *The Sea at Le Havre* (detail of fig. 65), 1868.
Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh

1 Introduction

Impression: the word appears countless times in nineteenth-century literature, science, art criticism, letters, and diaries. The “first impressions” of places like Mount Etna, the Pantheon, the Alps, or St. Peter’s Basilica were recorded in innumerable accounts sent home by travelers to their families and friends. In European literature, characters going on tours were usually given the opportunity by their creator-novelists to wax eloquent about their “impressions” of the sights they were privileged to witness.¹ What exactly was meant by this kind of “impression”? To begin with, almost all dictionary definitions of the word (and fortunately it is the same in English and French) involve the related word “pressure.” The first of the eight definitions in *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* is: “the action involved in the pressure of one thing upon or into the surface of another; also, the effect of this.” The other definitions deal with printing and other forms of “pressure,” which result in an “impression.”

One wonders, therefore, just what it meant in 1874 for Claude Monet to call one of his paintings *Impression, Sunrise* (fig. 2). The effect of this simple title on the subsequent history of art and its popular manifestations is so great that we stagger under its weight. The word “Impressionism” has virtually stamped out the word “impression” in our imagination, making it difficult for us to recover some of the excitement, risk, and daring involved in the meanings of the root word. It is the purpose of this study to reintroduce the “impression” to “Impressionism” and to allow readers (and viewers of the exhibition) access to the most radical aspect of the movement, an aspect that has been underplayed or overlooked in the art criticism and historiography of recent years.

Clearly, pressure must be involved in an impression. Conventionally, that pressure was direct—the action of an inked plate on a piece of blank paper literally created an impression on the paper. But the word was dematerialized rather early, as we learn from travel literature.² The fourth definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, dating the usage from 1390 through 1888, makes this clear: “The effective action of one thing upon another; influence; the effect of such an action; a change produced in some passive subject by the operation of an external cause.” Here, in a definition of staggering vagueness, we confront the essential problem of the meaning of the “impression” for modern consciousness, a problem that I intend, in this book, to confront head on.

Art-lovers have known for the last hundred years that “impressions” were created by artists called Impressionists. Today, these works are held in very high regard: they fetch extraordinary prices at auction and enjoy massive popular attendance at blockbuster exhibitions. It is important to realize, however, that Impressionist paintings, and the manner of their creation, have not always been regarded in this favorable light.³ A good deal of the current popularity of Impressionism is rooted in the fact that the painters were so persistently misunderstood when their aesthetic advances were new. John Rewald’s pioneering historical narrative of the movement, first published in 1946, charts the personal struggles of each artist and exposes a good deal of the most intense invective against them.⁴ Thus readers were taught to feel morally and aesthetically superior to the contemporaries of the Impressionists—a formula that has proved difficult to resist, despite the efforts of some post-war scholars. For much of the past century, these artists were thought to be simply transcribing their sensations directly onto canvas, without thought or planning. They were, to use the ultimately damning word employed by Arnold Hauser, “passive”—vessels through which sensations passed,

¹ The most accessible source of such material is John Julius Norwich, *A Taste for Travel: An Anthology*, London, 1985.

² See Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760–1800*, Stanford, 1989; Elizabeth Helsinger, *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder*, Cambridge, 1982, and Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1985.

³ For the background to this negative criticism of the Impressionists, see chapter 2.

⁴ John Rewald, *The History of Impressionism*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1946.

without conscious intervention by the artist.⁵ Canvases became a translation of those sensations, which were themselves fleeting or ephemeral rather than permanent and enduring records of actual form. The Marxist Hauser was at his most scathing when he decried this condition as arising from the socio-political conditions of capitalism, in which the root values of society were competition and the desire for individual economic success at the expense of others; the moral rootlessness of urban capitalist life resulted in a passive state of mind, which reached its representational apogee in the work of the Impressionists. We might feel somewhat uncomfortable today in recognizing that Impressionism has become the art form most admired by high society in developed capitalist countries.

Hauser was not alone in his condemnation of Impressionism. The attack on what were considered to be its fundamentally passive and ephemeral characteristics began immediately, and did not come only from conservative journalists who wanted art to project the existing values of the state and of religious institutions.⁶ The enemies of the Impression were, and are, so varied that we cannot categorize them in any simple way.⁷ Many of them will be discussed in the course of this text, but here I must stress both their virulence and their variety. Some of them were contemporaries of the artists, who viewed the enterprise of the Impression as morally and politically subversive, because the paintings looked sloppy and careless. Others were important artist-critics, both within and outside the French tradition — Paul Signac, Fernand Léger, and Henri Matisse come to mind. These writer-painters were troubled by what they considered to be the formlessness of Impressionism and its lack of a clearly articulated theoretical structure. Still others were historians and writers, such as Julius Meier-Graefe, Roger Fry, and Alfred Barr, who decried the anti-intellectual sensualism of the movement and, at their most sympathetic, saw it merely as a necessary “baby step” in the history of the creation of a truly lasting pictorial modernism. To help us understand this critical history, we need a clear-headed reappraisal of the Impression itself.

While planning for the exhibition *Impression: Painting Quickly in France, 1860–1890*, it became clear that in all the hundreds (or thousands) of exhibitions devoted to Impressionism in the past half-century, not one has attempted to gather works that might be called Impressions. Works have been gathered by artist, medium, site, subject, or time-period. These exhibitions have always included works that were painted rapidly as a direct translation of the artist’s sensations, but curators have not really ever considered them in that specific light. It is the aim of this exhibition and book to fill that gap.

The word “Impression” in our title is singular by choice. We wanted to address the larger conditions of the Impression, rather than gather a group of Impressions, as if we knew exactly in what they consisted. The subtitle, *Painting Quickly in France, 1860–1890*, proved controversial even before the exhibition opened. Certain prospective lenders took offence at the implication that their works had been painted “quickly.” Others thought the subtitle in some way trivialized the exhibition and the works within it. Yet it is the very rapidity of execution that lies at the root of the Impression, however it is defined. Jules Laforgue (1860–1887), the great French poet and art critic, claimed in 1883 that the time taken to record an Impression was, hypothetically, fifteen minutes.⁸ Words like “rushed” and “hurried” vie with “unfinished” in the immense criticism about the movement in its early years.

⁵ Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, trans. S. Goodman and A. Hauser, 2 vols., New York, 1951; 3rd edn., London, 1999. In undated paperback editions, which divide the text into four volumes, the essay on Impressionism appears in vol. IV, pp. 166–225.

⁶ Ruth Berson et al., *The New Painting: Impressionism, 1874–1886, Documentation, Vol. I. The Criticism*, The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1996, is the most complete record.

⁷ The enemies of Impressionism merit serious study, of a rigor comparable to that of Christopher Green’s monumental book, *Cubism and its Enemies*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1987.

⁸ Jules Laforgue’s comments were written to accompany an exhibition at the Burlitt Gallery, Berlin; see Appendix, pp. 233–35.

In thinking about rapid painting, we confront a dilemma central to the idea of landscape painting. Nature—the subject of most painting—is not fixed, but constantly changing. As industrialism was brought more and more into nature during the nineteenth century, this remained as true when applied to man-based or urban “nature” as to the sort that exists without the apparent intervention of man. Flux came to be perceived as the central condition of modernity and, like it or not, painters needed to find form for it. Certain of them—chiefly the Impressionists—rushed enthusiastically to do battle with flux; they made images of modernity that, by virtue of their physical survival today, have in fact created *une impression durable* (a lasting impression).⁹ In order to do that, however, they had to make works that looked as rapidly painted as their subjects were short-lived. Sunsets, trains rushing over bridges, sailboats turning, carriages coming down a boulevard, horses rushing toward a finish line, gusts of wind, flowers just cut from the plant, people chatting animatedly in a café, etc.—these were the subjects that the Impressionists chose to investigate.

But it is not merely the rapidity of the “represented time” in the painting that constitutes an Impression. Rather, it is the use of pictorial gestures to create an accord between represented time and “time of representation”—gestures that often have a directional character and a decisive momentariness. If the motif of the painter was in flux, then the painter too had to be in flux, moving rapidly to transcribe accurately the motif’s fleeting character. This idea coincided with the widespread popularization of the *croquis*—a sketch, usually in pencil, executed by the artist who looked fixedly and exclusively at the motif as he made the work of art. He was expected to have such a secure command of the medium (pencil, pen and ink, paint and brush, etc.) and the support (notebook, paper, canvas, etc.) that he could transcribe the motif using marks that he did not need to verify by comparison during the period of transcription. The purpose of the *croquis* was the practice of rapid visual analysis and the building up of a repertoire of gestures and marks that would gradually become automatic to the transcriber.¹⁰

This brings us to a point that is crucial to an understanding of my intention in this study: all the paintings under discussion were not necessarily painted quickly. Rather, they were done in such a way as to *look* as if they were painted quickly. Even works that might have been executed in the course of a few hours required two or three discrete sessions, between which the work was allowed to dry.¹¹ What links the works chosen here is the suggestion of an aesthetic accord between represented time and time of representation—a symbiotic link between style and subject in which the rushed or rapid quality of the former reinforces the corresponding qualities of the latter.

The language of this symbiosis involves “gesture,” the precise record of the artist’s movement while working in his or her chosen medium—the way that the paint has been dragged, laid, or jabbed onto the canvas support. Recent art historians have lagged in the study of gesture, perhaps as a reaction against two previous generations of what were called “formalist” critics and historians, who concentrated on color and touch in their analyses of the modern picture.¹² There is also the simple fact that most art historians and critics inevitably work from photographs—representations of representations, in which the physical character of the original is considerably minimized.

⁹ The phrase is from Jean Baptiste Deperthes, *Théorie du paysage*, 1818, describing the aim of the landscape painter; see chapter 2.

¹⁰ See Gustave Fraipont, *L’Art de prendre le croquis et de l’utiliser*, Paris, 1886; English edn., London, 1911. Fraipont was among the most prolific writers of instructional art books and manuals for use by amateurs in the late nineteenth century; interestingly, his book on the *croquis* is the only such publication on the subject. Investigation is needed of the role of the *croquis* in artistic practice, especially in France, from Delacroix through Vuillard; further knowledge would help with the study of the graphic origins of Impressionist gestures.

¹¹ This has been made clear by physical analysis of the majority of the paintings discussed.

¹² The canonical example of this reductive formalism is the American critic Clement Greenberg, whose scattered essays have been gathered in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brien, 4 vols., University of Chicago Press, 1986–94.

Painters and lovers of painting will find within the works presented here a startling variety of gestures. Each artist had a highly personal way of manifesting his or her character through gesture, and the works are arranged in groups by artist because most contemporary critics thought of the impression as the most personal kind of painting, one most indicative of individual character. Because the artist was working with such spontaneity, his or her intrinsic nature was thought to be revealed precisely because so much of the activity was not subject to second thoughts or control; this study will clearly demonstrate that the Impressions of several artists were, indeed, highly individual. Clearly, however, these artists were also working on a collective project, each of them supremely aware of the experiments of the others. For that reason, we decided to recognize the shared achievement of the Impression by including several artists who never exhibited with the group, but affected their production. We also elected to include one Post-Impressionist artist, Vincent van Gogh, whose oeuvre would be unthinkable without the Impression. Our aim was to gather works that appear to be rapid transcriptions of shifting subjects, and that were considered finished by their makers (either because they were signed in the artist's lifetime, or because we know that they were exhibited shortly after being made). There are some exceptions, however: Manet's *The Funeral* (fig. 38) and Pissarro's *Dulwich College, London* (fig. 150), for example, are included because they clearly deal with the artist's emotional response to the motif and to concepts of finish.

Perhaps the most common criticism of Impressionist works has been that they were not "finished." This is not by chance: one of the principal collective projects of avant-garde painters in the second half of the nineteenth century was an assault on conventions of finish, and the Impressionists were in the forefront of that battle. Another, somewhat more insidious, criticism is that the Impression represents a kind of painting that can be called facile and hence superficial—a notion based on a fear of anything that appears easy in art. A third fear is that the Impression is art without planning or forethought—and, therefore, art that questions by its very nature certain traditionally accepted values of education, memorization, and collective knowledge. In its attempt to privilege immediate experience as a value in itself, Impressionism has always been seen as anti-hierarchical and, consequently, subversive.

We must not forget that Impressionism raised these issues before the development of jazz and other forms of improvised and spontaneous music which, at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, changed popular culture forever. This study sets out to explore the link between the creative mind and modern consciousness, and attempts to find roots for the Impression in previous painting, science, contemporary philosophy, and public life. But even allowing for such precedents, it would be impossible to undercut the sheer vitality of the Impression as a development in art—one that can truly be called the most important of the nineteenth century. No other pictorial advance of the time had, and continues to have, such widespread implications for the future of art and for public taste. Before we smother it in our embraces, it is time for us to look again at "the appearance of spontaneity" and to reassess the real meaning of the Impression.

