

Press release



Masterpieces from Paris Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne & beyond Post-Impressionism from the Musée d'Orsay

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra :
4 December 2009 – 5 April 2010
National Art Center, Tokyo :
26 May – 16 August 2010
**Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, De
Young, San Francisco :**
25 September 2010 – 18 January 2011



Vincent Van Gogh, *Autoportrait*, 1887, huile sur toile, 0,441 x 0,351 m.
Paris, Musée d'Orsay © RMN (Musée d'Orsay) / Gérard Blot

When Roger Fry organised Manet and the Post-Impressionists at the Grafton Galleries in London, almost a century ago, he coined a term which was quickly used to designate an aesthetic “revolution” led mainly by Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat and Van Gogh. In the British critic's mind, the new label was more than a chronological category. The new term abolished the old. Impressionist painting was deposed as not fully modern and relegated to the rank of a superficial, bourgeois practice, whose retinal narrowness was matched by its vacuity. It is not hard to see what Fry owed to late-nineteenth century thinking and its underlying oppositions. The notion of post-Impressionism and an outdated evolutionism greatly simplified what was really happening in art in 1885-1905 and the stakes involved.

The Musée d'Orsay's exhibition first seeks to demonstrate the stylistic mutation in the great Impressionists after the last group exhibition in 1886. Monet, Degas and Renoir did not cease to work alongside the rising generation. Cézanne did not turn his back on Pissarro, who for a time painted in a Neo-Impressionist style for love of the old masters, Puget and Poussin alike. The younger painters closely observed the least change and the least initiative in their elders' work. There was an open spirit of competition. The art market, the critics and the press, which represented a real counter-power for the official Salons, made each new idea accessible, open for discussion and reuse. Art was unprecedented in its diversity. What Fry played down in the name of a highly hypothetical formal unity, were precisely the differences in aesthetic ambition and visual culture characteristic of these twenty years.

We now know that it would be just as pointless to ignore Seurat's familiarity with art teaching, and Van Gogh's admiration for Bastien-Lepage as the Romantic legacy that Gauguin exploited

until his pseudo-retreat in Tahiti.

We are just as aware of what separated him from Van Gogh as we are of their delicate complicity. Another major effect obviously lies in the construction of symbolism as a completely separate movement. The subjectivity it holds up as a central principle in its “rupture” cannot be reduced to a few formal innovations, unnatural colours, distorted perspective, synthetic drawing, and illusory abstraction. If symbolism marked its period it is because it expressed a different relationship between man and himself and the world. But this relationship is anything but detached from its time by a rejection of modernity. Post-Impressionism and Symbolism have long been opposed out of blindness or ignorance. Artists such as Seurat or Signac are supposed to be rooted in scientific positivism while Gauguin and Redon moved in a pre-surrealist dream world.

The exhibition corrects these antagonisms forged in the 20th century. It questions the encounter between the avant-garde and the revival of major decorative works about 1900. Rather than confine itself to Fauvism and Cubism, a foregone conclusion, the circuit sheds light on Bonnard and Vuillard’s experiments in fields other than easel painting in the early 20th century. In short, it is indeed question of cutting new paths through a period which had been too well mapped out.

The 114 canvases on display include some of the collection’s greatest masterpieces (Monet, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec, Gauguin, Henri Rousseau, Vuillard, Bonnard, etc.). This exhibition is a historic event due to major renovation work on the Impressionist galleries. This particular combination of paintings will never travel again.

Sections

- Impressionism and its avatars around 1886: Monet, Gervex, Besnard, Sargent
- Development: Monet, Pissarro, Sisley and Degas after 1886
- Monet between Giverny and London
- Late Renoirs
- Cézanne and “Cézannity”
- Neo-Impressionism in France and elsewhere (Seurat, Signac, Cross ...)
- Van Gogh
- Toulouse-Lautrec’s Montmartre
- Gauguin and the Pont-Aven school
- The galaxy of the Nabis
- Inner sounds (Puvis de Chavannes, Redon, Moreau...)
- Rousseau, a lone rider?
- The triumph of the decor

Curated by :

Paris : Guy Cogeval, president of the Musée d’Orsay; Stéphane Guégan and Sylvie Patry, curators at the Musée d’Orsay

Canberra : Christine Dixon, curator at the National Gallery of Australia

Tokyo : Mitsue Nagaya, curator at the National Art Center

San Francisco : John E. Buchanan, Director of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

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