

# In the times of the impressionist exhibitions (1874-1886)

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## Presentation

Impressionism no doubt constitutes the most popular pictorial movement in the history of painting. With its lively colours and simple subject matters, it appears to be particularly accessible. Yet it is a complex movement, from an historical perspective as well as from the point of view of its formal ambitions. It is all the more difficult to encompass since it united artists with strong and sometimes opposed personalities who developed styles that were so different that it may be thought far-fetched to brand them with a common label. This is the reason why the visit focuses on the twelve years during which the eight exhibitions by the group were held, when the exchanges between the painters were at their highest point. Before 1874, those who were to become members of the group, not yet officially founded, exhibited little and were not recognised by critics. After 1886, the artists drew apart from one another, impressionism evolved towards new shores, explored by a new generation.

## 1. Definition

Impressionism may be defined according to a series of criteria that add up without constituting laws or dogmas.

### Impression

The word "impressionism" was born out of a quip by Eugène Leroy, a journalist in *Le Charivari*, a satirical newspaper, assigned to report on the first impressionist exhibition. He quoted the title of one of the paintings sent by Monet, *Impression, soleil levant* (*Impression, Sunrise*, 1872, Paris, Musée Marmottan). The painter, conscious of the allusive aspect of his style, justified it by his affirmation of the transposition of his vision, or impression, being more important than an illusionist faithfulness to the subject matter. Monet thus asserted the prevalence of his eye, what Emile Zola called the artist's temperament: "An artwork is a piece of Creation seen through a temperament". The adjective, meant as a joke, was taken over by the artists themselves from 1877 onwards. At the same time Zola offered the following definition of the group: "I think one has to understand impressionist painters as painters who paint reality and who presume to render the very impression of nature, who do not concentrate on details but on the whole. It is true that at twenty paces from the painting one cannot clearly distinguish the nose or the eyes of a character. To render him as one sees it, one must not paint him with his wrinkles, but in the life of his attitude, with the vibrating air that surrounds him." (*Le Sémaphore de Marseille*, 1877).

### The materiality of colour

Impressionism is also defined by the assertion of its pictorial processes (the stroke, traces, *impasti*, patches of naked canvas...) that can still shock proponents of smooth, finished, "léchée" painting. This is precisely what Mallarmé meant when he rejoiced in Manet and his friends renouncing "to veil the origin of this art made of unguents and colours" (1874). Thus, the essential worth of the paint as medium itself is added to the existence of the subject matter and the strength of the artist's temperament.

### Realism

In Zola's words, impressionist painters are "painters who paint reality" and what unites them is the unanimously shared taste for representing their time. With the exception of Degas and Cézanne, who retained a liking for literary subjects, whether biblical or classical, all shared an interest from the beginning for the world that surrounded them. In their exploration of daily life, they followed the path of Courbet and later on Manet, that Baudelaire as a critic considered to be the essence of modern painting. In 1846, the latter had already invited artists to paint their own times, "no less abundant in sublime motifs than ancient ones, one may affirm that since all peoples had

their beauty, we must certainly have our own." If the impressionists' eye emancipated itself from the strict stakes of realism from the late 1880's onwards, these dominated their artistic production from 1874 to 1886. It was during those twelve years that they represented a time of deep mutations: industrialisation, urbanisation, social upheavals, appearance of leisure...

### Independence

Impressionist painters exhibited together in order both to expose and circumvent the organisation of the Beaux-Arts in France that so often proved hostile to them. Since the mid-1860's, Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, Sisley, Degas, Cézanne and Bazille tried to enter the Salon, tenaciously guarded by a jury that did not wish to admit these young artists, judged too innovative. Besides, being accepted would most often have had the consequence of having one's painting submerged in the sheer mass of exhibited paintings, hung out of reach of visitors' eyes. Tired of the regular refusals that prevented critical and amateur recognition, they considered as early as 1867 organising a common and independent exhibition, as Courbet and Manet had already done before them, following the example of Greuze and David. It was only in 1874, after the trauma of the war and the Paris Commune (1870-1871) that this plan was carried out.

The founding exhibition that opened on 15 April 1874 at Nadar's former address, Boulevard des Capucines, originated in the Société anonyme des artistes-peintres, sculpteurs, graveurs created in 1873. Their statutes provided for the organisation of exhibitions without juries or awards and the publication of a journal. The painters meant to take full charge of the sale and promotion of their pictures. Though the impressionist exhibitions sometimes attracted violent reactions from the public and critics, they at last allowed painters to be seen and talked about. The model of artists' association and exhibition independent from the Beaux-Arts administration tried out by the impressionists, soon helped by the art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel, progressively received recognition from the state and other artists from 1881 onwards, and it allowed the spread of all subsequent movements. But Manet, considered leader of the movement, never took part in the events organised by his friends. Cézanne, for his part, exhibited work only twice (1874 and 1877) with the impressionists and very early on he stood apart from the group. Renoir (in 1879) and Monet (in 1880) also preferred joining, for a time, the Salon exhibitions.

After examining what drew the impressionists together, one must also consider what set them apart. As we have mentioned it above, diverging attitudes towards the Salon, for instance, underlined their differences and were the source of tensions. The critic Edmond Duranty's brochure entitled *La Nouvelle Peinture*, published on the occasion of the second exhibition of the group in

1876, highlights the existence of two main trends that intersected with and superposed on each other within impressionism: open air on the one hand, modern life on the other.

## 2. Open air - landscape

### Open air

Open-air painting was not an invention of impressionism. Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, landscape painters commonly worked outside, studying the motif *in situ*. The drawings and sketches they brought back from their excursions were used to make fantastic landscapes composed from memory. English painters, including Turner and the painters of the Barbizon school had insisted on the study of climatic phenomena that demanded intense work in the open air, made easier with the invention of gouache tubes. Yet their paintings were still the result of long periods of work in the workshop. "It is to them [the impressionists] that we owe the study of open air, the sensation no longer only of colours, but also of the slightest nuances of colours, the tones, and also the research on the relationships between the state of the atmosphere that enlightens the painting, and the general tone of the objects that are painted on it" the critic Théodore Duret wrote in 1878. What was new, therefore, with impressionism, was not the total abolition of workshop painting, but rather a systematic way of considering open-air painting. They were not only interested in landscapes and atmospheric variations, but more broadly in all the aspects of life outside the strict frame of the workshop. The impressionists studied their contemporaries in the street or in forests, on the beach, at the waterside, dancing... to submit them to the varying action of light. Thus, what happened was an upheaval of the traditional hierarchy between open air and workshop: the painter spent more time capturing the effects of light on a motif than working at this same motif in the workshop. Zola described in 1868 these landscape painters who "left at dawn, their colour box on their back, happy as hunters who enjoy the open air. They sit anywhere, there on the fringe of the forest, here by the water, hardly having to pick their motif, finding everywhere a living horizon, with a human interest so to speak." It is no longer the particular or extraordinary climatic phenomenon (storm, sunset, rainbow...) that they are interested in, but the slightest variation of the weather.

### Monet, Renoir, Sisley

Among landscape painters, there were also two ways of considering landscape painting. Around Monet was constituted a first group including Renoir and Sisley, the three of them pupils of the painter Gleyre in the early 1860's, and all having shared with Bazille the same outings around Paris before 1870. Besides Monet and Renoir were the ones who, working together at the Bains de la Grenouillère in Bougival, gave birth to the "impressionist" way of painting: a divided stroke

that, seen from a distance, restores the motif. In these paintings of La Grenouillère (none of which belong to the Musée d'Orsay collections), the motif is mostly constituted of the reflection on water of a summer scene, the elements of which seem permeated by the intensity of the sun's rays. Repeating this first experiment, Monet, Renoir and Sisley often chose sites by the Seine where they studied both the reflections and the mobile life animating these sites highly-prised by city-dwellers.

### Pissarro, Cézanne

In 1872, Cézanne settled in Auvers-sur-Oise and got closer to Pissarro who lived in Pontoise. Pissarro was known as a pupil of Corot, whose taste for strongly constructed landscapes he retained. Cézanne and Pissarro often worked together, choosing preferably rustic landscapes with austere villages, preserved from the spread of modernisation. Their brand of impressionism is very different from that of Monet. The strokes are heavier, less flitting, less tributary to the variations of light, and they are closely intricate in order to create dense and complex spaces.

## 3. Modern life

If one can see in Monet's or Renoir's landscapes many images of a particular form of modern life – that of the suburbs and, most often, of leisure –, the critic Duranty insisted in his essay on the necessary representation of urban life and of the mores it engendered. According to his analysis, "The idea, the first idea was to remove the wall separating the workshop from common life... One had to take the painter out of his snuffbox... and take him back among men in the world". He mainly referred to Degas' approach, but certainly also to Caillebotte's, as the latter exhibited work for the first time in 1876 with the impressionists. Degas and Caillebotte made of the human figure, often confronted with the ills of big-city life (solitude, lack of communication, alcohol, prostitution...), the main subject matter of their works.

The main representatives of this modernity, Degas and Caillebotte also shared a common style underlined by an intensive practice of drawing. The latter had all but disappeared from Monet's or Pissarro's working methods, and Renoir declared in 1879 that impressionism had made him lose almost entirely his sense of drawing. Renoir regretted this all the more since he aspired to become, like Degas, a master of the human figure that the impressionist stroke threatened to dissolve in light. Landscape/human figure; colour/drawing constitute two divorce points but also two anchor points from which would emerge both the future evolution of the impressionists and that of their followers. One of Seurat's aims as he painted his *Dimanche à l'île de la Grande Jatte* (*Sunday on the Ile de la Grande Jatte*), presented at the last impressionist exhibition in 1886, was to try and conciliate and synthesise these two main contradictions.

## Preparation and follow-up to the visit

The visit *In the times of the impressionist exhibitions (1874-1886)* can be followed independently, but it was intended to be part of a group of three visits on impressionism: *The Taste of an Era: Painters, the Salon and criticism (1848-1870)* and *After Impressionism (1888-1906)*. In addition to the educational information included in the Fact Sheets, it may be useful to recall the wealth of the impressionist collections of many other museums and in particular, in Paris, of those of the Musée de l'Orangerie and of the Musée Marmottan.

## List of artworks

This visit is voluntarily restricted to pieces shown at the impressionist exhibitions (1874-1886), without trying to draw from this factual event any conclusions as to the authenticity or otherwise of the painters' belonging to a group, by its nature diffuse and constantly evolving. The following list, in the same logic, without being exhaustive, is that of all the artworks housed in the Musée d'Orsay that belong to this category.

### First impressionist exhibition (Paris, 1874)

- Paul Cézanne: *La maison du pendu (The Hanged Man's House)*, 1875; *Une moderne Olympia (A Modern Olympia)*, 1875-1874
- Edgar Degas: *Répétition d'un ballet sur la scène (Rehearsal of a Ballet on Stage)*, 1874; *Une blanchisseuse (A Laundress)* also known as *Une repasseuse (An Ironer)*
- Armand Guillaumin: *Soleil couchant à Ivry (Sunset in Evry)*, 1875
- Claude Monet: *Coquelicots; environs d'Argenteuil (Poppies; near Argenteuil)*, 1875
- Berthe Morisot: *Le berceau (The Cradle)*, 1872; *Portrait de Mme Pontillon*, pastel, 1871
- Camille Pissarro: *Gelée blanche (White Frost)*, 1875

### Second impressionist exhibition (Paris, 1876)

- Gustave Caillebotte: *Les raboteurs de parquet (The Floor Planers)*, 1875
- Edgar Degas: *Danseuse debout, de dos (Standing Dancer Seen from the Back)*, painting on paper
- Claude Monet: *Le déjeuner*, panneau décoratif (*The Lunch*, decorative panel), circa 1875; *Le pont d'Argenteuil (The Bridge in Argenteuil)*, 1874
- Pierre-Auguste Renoir: *Frédéric Bazille*, 1867; *Étude. Torse, effet de soleil (Study. Torso, sun effect)*, 1875-1876; *Claude Monet*, 1875 (?)
- Alfred Sisley: *L'inondation à Port-Marly (Flooding in Port-Marly)*, 1876

### Third impressionist exhibition (Paris, 1877)

- Edgar Degas: *Femmes devant un café, le soir (Woman by a Cafe, in the Evening)*, pastel; *L'Étoile (The Star)*, pastel; *Danseuse, un bouquet à la main (Dancer holding a Bouquet)*, pastel; *Femme sortant du bain (Woman Getting Out of her Bath)*, pastel, circa 1876-1877; *Les choristes (The Choir Singers)*, pastel, 1877; *Femme nue accroupie de dos (Nude Woman Squatting Seen from the Back)*, pastel, circa 1876-1877; *L'absinthe (Woman in a Café)*
- Armand Guillaumin: *Femme nue couchée (Nude Woman Lying)*

- Claude Monet: *La gare Saint-Lazare (The Saint-Lazare Station)*, 1875; *Les Tuileries, étude*, 1875; *Un coin d'appartement (An Apartment Corner)*, 1875; *Les dindons (The Turkeys)*, 1877
- Camille Pissarro: *Les toits rouges, coin de village, effet d'hiver (The Red Roofs, Village Spot, Winter Effect)*, 1877 (?); *La moisson (The Harvest)*, known as *La moisson à Montfoucault (Mayenne) (The Harvest in Montfoucault (Mayenne))*, 1876
- Pierre-Auguste Renoir: *Madame Georges Charpentier*, 1876-1877; *La Seine à Champrosay (The Seine in Champrosay)*, 1876; *La balançoire (The Swing)*, 1876; *Bal du Moulin de la Galette, Montmartre (Dance at the Moulin de la Galette, Montmartre)*, 1876; *Madame Alphonse Daudet*, 1876

### Fourth impressionist exhibition (Paris, 1879)

- Gustave Caillebotte: *Vue de toits (Effet de neige)*, also known as *Toits sous la neige (Roofs in the Snow)*, 1878
- Edgar Degas: *Portraits à la Bourse (Portraits at the Stock Exchange)*, 1878-1879; *Portrait d'amis sur la scène (Portrait of Friends on Stage)*, pastel
- Claude Monet: *Vétheuil, vu de Lavacourt (Vétheuil, seen from Lavacourt)*, 1879; *Effet de neige à Vétheuil (Snow Effect in Vétheuil)*, or *Église de Vétheuil. Neige (Church in Vétheuil. Snow)*, 1879; *La rue Montorgueil à Paris. Fête du 30 juin 1878 (The Rue Montorgueil in Paris. Celebration of June 30, 1878)*, 1878; *Les déchargeurs de charbon (The Coal Unloaders)*
- Camille Pissarro: *Chemin sous bois (Path in the Woods)*, 1877; *Port-Marly, le lavoir (Port Marly, the Washing Place)*, 1872; *Printemps. Pruniers en fleurs (Spring. Blooming Prune Trees)*, known as *Potager; arbres en fleurs, printemps, Pontoise (Vegetable Garden; Blooming Trees, Spring, Pontoise)*, 1877

### Fifth impressionist exhibition (Paris, 1880)

- Félix Bracquemond: *Portrait de M. Edmont de Goncourt*, charcoal on canvas, 1880
- Edgar Degas: *Portraits à la Bourse (Portraits at the Stock Exchange)*
- Armand Guillaumin: *Place Valhubert, à Paris; Quai de la Gare, effet de neige (Railway Platform, Snow Effect)*
- Berthe Morisot: *Jeune femme en toilette de bal (Young Woman Wearing Dancing Clothes)*, 1879
- Henri Rouart: *La terrasse au bord de la Seine à Melun (The Terrace by the Seine in Melun)*, circa 1880

### Sixth impressionist exhibition (Paris, 1881)

- Edgar Degas: *Petite danseuse de quatorze ans (Fourteen-year-old Dancing Girl)*, sculpture

### Seventh impressionist exhibition (Paris, 1882)

- Camille Pissarro: *La bergère (The Sheperdess)*, also known as *Jeune fille à la baguette; paysanne assise (Young Woman with Stick; Sitting Peasant Woman)*, 1881; *Chemin montant à travers champs. Côte des Grouettes. Pontoise (Path Leading up through Fields. Côte des Grouettes. Pontoise)*, 1879 (?)
- Pierre-Auguste Renoir: *Champ de bananiers (Field of Banana Trees)*, 1881

### Eight impressionist exhibition (Paris, 1886)

- Mary Cassatt: *Jeune fille au jardin (Young Woman in the Garden)*, also known as *Jeune fille travaillant (Woman Working)* or *Femme cousant dans un jardin (Woman Sewing in a Garden)*, 1880-1882
- Edgar Degas: *Le tub (The Tub)*, pastel
- Armand Guillaumin: *Les pêcheurs (The Fishermen)*, circa 1885

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# In the times of the impressionist exhibitions (1874-1886)

## • The visit: the artworks

The following selection of artworks is just one possible proposal. The teacher, guide or group leader remains free to choose according to the expectations and composition of the group, availability of pieces and galleries, etc.

### 1. Camille Pissarro (1830-1903): *Gelée blanche, ancienne route d'Ennery, Pontoise (White Frost, Old Ennery Road, Pontoise)*, 1873

- location: upper level, gallery 39
- the subject matter: this painting was made near Pontoise where the painter lived from 1873 to 1882. What is now the prefecture of the Val d'Oise département and its surroundings then offered Pissarro and his friends (Cézanne, Guillaumin and later Gauguin) varied and often rustic landscapes. Pissarro was also interested in other aspects of Pontoise and its surroundings: the factory, the town streets, etc...
- background: *White Frost* was one of five pieces presented by Pissarro at the first exhibition of the group in 1874. The critic Louis Leroy then wrote: "What is that? – You see, white frost on deep ridges. – Ridges, that? That, frost?... But those are sheer scratches of paint uniformly put on a dirty canvas. It has neither head or tail, neither top or bottom, neither front or back." Other critics proved more understanding, including Philippe Burty: "A *White Frost* effect by Mr Pissarro reminds one of the best Millet's" and Castagnary: "As for Mr Pissarro, he is sober and strong... He has the serious flaw of painting on his grounds (*White Frost*) the shadows of trees that stand outside the frame and that for this reason the spectator can only imagine, as he cannot see them... But these faults of logic or these instances of bad taste do not alter his strong qualities as a practitioner."
- observe: Pissarro's dense and rough stroke. Leroy has rightly noted the "scratches" on the surface of the canvas that seems to us to be in perfect harmony with the subject matter. The knife work, the density of the stroke, produce a compact, closed landscape in which the air no longer seems to circulate. This sensation is accentuated by the upward diagonals of the seams that give the composition its rhythm. The character carrying a load seems likewise overburdened by the heaviness of this winter landscape. Pissarro's technique contributes to the impression made by his subject matter. In spite of a broader stroke, despite an analysis of light that is less accurate than that made by Monet in contemporary pieces, *White Frost*, as it captured a particular instant in a winter day, partakes in impressionist research.

### 2. Claude Monet (1840-1926): *Le Pont du chemin de fer à Argenteuil (The Railway Bridge in Argenteuil)*, circa 1874

- location: upper level, gallery 29
- subject: the railway bridge in Argenteuil was often painted by Monet, as well as by Renoir and Caillebotte. Inaugurated in 1863 and rebuilt after the 1870-1871 war, it features a metallic architecture that made it a favourite motif of the

impressionists, who praised modernity. The steam engine passing by adds to the impression of progress and modernism of the landscape.

- background: Argenteuil became the birthplace of impressionism thanks to Monet's long sojourn there (1871-1878). Close to Paris, the town provided for city-dwellers such leisure activities as walking and rowing. Monet explored all the facets of this town uprooted by the massive arrival of Parisians.
- observe: the bridge constitutes the main motif of the painting. The diagonal it represents crosses the whole composition and gives it its dynamics. The passage of the train, with its funnel of steam, accentuates the impression of speed caused by the oblique formed by the bridge and deepens a striking perspective. The stroke that follows the inclination of the grass contributes to the general movement of the composition. Monet's stroke is never uniform. It varies according to the motifs, according to the impression they are meant to render in the painting. The stone pillars of the bridge are painted full length and their massive shape is not understated. They plunge in the Seine and contradict the sensation of outward movement created by the diagonal of the railway.

### 3. Gustave Caillebotte (1848-1894): *Les raboteurs de parquet (The Floor Planers)*, 1875

- location: upper level, gallery 30
- subject matter: this painting constitutes one of the first representations of the urban proletariat. Whereas peasants (*Gleaners* by Millet) or country workers (*Stone Breakers* by Courbet) had often been shown, city workers had seldom been painted. Caillebotte, from a well-off bourgeois background, could have observed the floor planers working in one of the rooms of the family mansion on the Avenue de Miromesnil. Unlike Courbet or Millet, Caillebotte does not incorporate any social, moralising or political message in his work. His thorough documentary study (gestures, tools, accessories) justifies his position among the most accomplished realists. He answered with precision the critic Duranty's injunctions who exhorted painters a few months later to represent what happened in apartments.
- \* background: Caillebotte presented his painting at the 1875 Salon. The Jury, no doubt shocked by its crude realism, rejected it (some critics talked of "vulgar subject matter"). The young painter then decided to join the impressionists and presented his painting at the second exhibition of the group in 1876. In the same year, Degas exhibited his first *Ironers*. The painting was immediately noticed. Critics were struck by this great modern tableau, Zola, in particular, although he condemned this "painting that is so accurate that it makes it bourgeois". On his death, Caillebotte, who was also an important collector of impressionist paintings, bequeathed his collection to the state. Renoir chose the *Floor Planers* to represent



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Caillebotte's painting among that of the impressionists.

- observe: the traditional technique applied to a modern subject. Caillebotte had undergone a completely academic training, studying with Bonnat. The perspective, accentuated by the high angle shot and the alignment of floorboards complies with tradition. Caillebotte quoted the posture of a famous antique copied by all the "daubers" of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. The artist drew one by one all the parts of his painting, according to the academic method, before reporting them using the square method on the canvas. The nude torsos of the planers are those of heroes of Antiquity, it would be unimaginable for Parisian workers of those times. But far from cloistering himself in those academic exercises, Caillebotte has exploited their rigour in order to explore the contemporary universe in a completely new way.

1. Camille Pissarro : *Gelée blanche, ancienne route d'Ennery, Pontoise*, 1873

2. Claude Monet : *Le Pont du chemin de fer à Argenteuil*, circa 1874

3. Gustave Caillebotte : *Les raboteurs de parquet*, 1875

**4. Edgar Degas (1854-1917):**  
*La classe de danse (The Dancing Class)*, begun in 1873, finished in 1875-1876

- location: upper level, gallery 31
- subject matter: this painting constitutes both an individualised portrait, that of the ballet master Jules Perrot, and a reconstructed genre painting showing the end of a rehearsal.
- \* background: Degas was a regular attendant of the Paris Opera House (here it is the Opera House in the Rue Le Peletier), as a spectator but also backstage, and in the foyer. From the early 1870's onwards when they appeared for the first time in *L'orchestre de l'Opéra*, dancers became a favourite subject matter for the painter.
- observe: the highly constructed composition. The scene is set in a room of which the space, organised according to a very accentuated perspective, can be read clearly. The difference between the representation of the ballet master, who can easily be recognised, and that of the dancing girls. The strokes are lighter, less accurate than for the master. But above all, their faces are indistinguishable, with only a few details (head dresses, ribbons, attitudes) providing for variations. Degas seems to represent the type of the dancing girl through the multitude of "petits rats" surrounding the master.

**5. Alfred Sisley (1839-1899):**  
*L'inondation à Port-Marly (Flooding in Port-Marly)*, 1876

- location: upper level, gallery 32
- subject matter: in March 1876, the Seine flooded the village of Port-Marly. The painter, who then lived close by, in Marly-le-Roi, painted three different views of this event.
- background: the painting was exhibited at the second impressionist exhibition, in 1876. Sisley, who presented seven other landscapes, was relatively well received by critics. Zola, for instance, noted that "Sisley also is a very talented landscape painter who commands better balanced means than Pissarro... His painting *Flooding in Port-Marly* is made up of wide brush strokes and a delicate coloration."
- observe: Zola used two words to qualify Sisley's work: "balance" and "delicate". They were constantly used about Sisley. Balance: Sisley constructed his composition according to traditional rules for painting landscapes. The flooding Seine, for instance, occupies a horizontal third of the painting. The sky, the two upper thirds. The screen formed on the left by the shop answers that sketched on the right by the trees prolonged by the telegraph post... Delicacy: the colours, all in tones of grey, answer each other without dissonance. A small red spot (ensign of the building) placed on the limit of the vertical third of the composition, warms the whole.

**6. Claude Monet (1840-1926):**  
*Les dindons (The Turkeys)*, 1877

- location: upper level, gallery 32
- subject matter: it may seem incongruous: a flock of turkeys peacefully move about in a park with the pink and white façade of a castle in the background. Monet wanted to deliver, with his white birds absorbing light, a page of nature, simple and vivid.
- background: Monet made four panels – *The Turkeys, Garden Corner in Montgeron, The Pond in Montgeron, The Hunt* – for the decoration of the dining room of his sponsor Ernest Hoschédé at the Rottenbourg castle (Montgeron, Seine-et-Marne), the façade of which can be seen in the painting. It was the first time Monet practised decoration. He had sojourned in 1876 at his sponsor's to make his panels and he presented *The Turkeys* at the third impressionist exhibition in 1877, hoping to attract new commissions and find new amateurs. The painting was ill-received and attracted "Wild laughter. People were in fits, creased up, holding their bellies", reported Mirbeau in 1884.
- observe: the painting is of a square format, a format Monet often adopted when he made particularly decorative paintings. The highly green grass occupies two thirds of the composition, recalling the plant universe of the "mille-fleurs" tapestries of the late middle ages. The painter sat in a *contra posto*, giving the impression the turkeys are on a hill behind which the castle is partly hidden. The colours are vivid, playing on the opposition of red and green. The irony of the lower framing with the emerging head of a turkey.

- observe: the impression of open air: the irregularly-spread spots of light that modify colours and reconstitute the effect of sun beams through the foliage. The impression of movement: given by the positions of dancers whose size quickly shrinks, by the light that blurs the vision as well as by the dissolution of the drawing that tends to blur the shapes, melting them with the pictorial surface. This impression of life given by a few small events being recounted before our eyes: glances exchanged, gestures...



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**7. Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919):**  
*Bal au Moulin de la Galette, Montmartre (Dance at the Moulin de la Galette, Montmartre)*, 1876

- location: upper level, gallery 32
- subject matter: the Moulin de la Galette was a dancing café at the foot of Montmartre hill. The hill was then a suburb of the capital city where a few mills subsisted, together with many vegetable gardens, and where a working class population lived. It was also there that the Church of the Sacré Cœur was being built from 1872 onwards, meant to be a sign of expiation of the "crimes of the Commune".
- background: the painting was presented at the third impressionist exhibition organised by Caillebotte, Renoir, Monet and Pissarro. Renoir meant to represent an "historical painting": a modern scene staging everyday heroes on a large format canvas. He drew inspiration from two famous paintings of the Louvre: *La kermesse (The Bazaar)* by Rubens and *L'embarquement pour Cythère (Boarding for Cythera)* by Watteau. The modern tone is accentuated by a willingness to render the fleeting pleasures of leisure, in the open air.



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4. Edgar Degas : *La classe de danse*, begun in 1873, completed in 1875-1876

5. Alfred Sisley : *L'inondation à Port-Marly*, 1876

6. Claude Monet : *Les dindons*, 1877

7. Pierre-Auguste Renoir : *Bal du Moulin de la Galette, Montmartre*, 1876

**8. Claude Monet (1840-1926):**  
*La rue Montorgueil, fête du 30 juin 1878 (The Rue Montorgueil, celebration of June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1878), 1878*

- location: upper level, gallery 32
  - subject matter: on June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1878, France celebrated the success of the World Fair that marked the renewal of France after the 1870 defeat and the victory of republicans after the 1876 and 1877 elections. Monet painted on the same day a second view of these decorated streets with a painting now at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rouen: *La rue Saint-Denis*. He wrote in 1920 how he had made his painting: "I liked flags. The first national celebration of June 30<sup>th</sup>, I walked with my working instruments, Rue de Montorgueil; there were flags out all over the street and it was crowded; I saw a balcony, went up and asked for the permission to paint, which was accorded. Then I left, incognito."
  - background: Monet had just left Argenteuil to settle in Paris. After several years spent painting in the countryside, he turned to urban landscapes. In the previous year, he thus painted a dozen views of the Gare Saint-Lazare. At the time when the critics Duranty and Zola, in particular, encouraged artists to paint their own times, Monet sought to diversify his inspiration and wanted to be considered as a painter of a modern life that found its prevailing expression in cities.
  - \* observe: the violence of colours allowed by the profusion of the new flag of the French nation. Only the sky introduces a more natural and delicate note.
- The freedom of Monet's stroke as he juxtaposed "licks" of colours. Seen from a few steps back, they reconstruct the motif otherwise lost in the confusion of brush strokes.
- The boldness of the composition showing the street in its brutal reality: a road framed by buildings looking like a trench in the space of the canvas.
- The anonymous crowd in motion is indicated in a very allusive way, as it dissolves within the street. Monet approached the city as a landscape painter.

**9. Edgar Degas (1834-1917):**  
*Portraits à la bourse (Portraits at the Stock Exchange), 1878-79*

- location: upper level, gallery 31
- subject matter: Degas represented the banker Ernest May, one of his new admirers, in his professional occupation. As he did with his painting *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra* (1870, Musée d'Orsay), originally the portrait of his friend Désiré Dihau, he broadened his scope and made a group portrait.
- background: presented at the impressionist exhibitions of 1879 and 1880, *Portraits at the Stock Exchange* constitutes an answer to Duranty's manifesto entitled *The New Painting*. The critic,

largely inspired by the painter, recommended that portraits be based on "the study of moral reflections on physiognomies and on the outfits, the observation of man's intimacy with his lodgings, of the special feature gained from his occupation..."; the model "is never at the centre of the painting, at the centre of the set. He is not constantly to be seen entirely. Sometimes he appears down to half his legs, half length, cut sideways..." Degas painted, through the features of his model (the man in profile, the only one whose face is visible), the portrait of the codes and customs of a whole social group representative of his time.

- observe: the model is seen from a distance. Degas, the son of a bankrupted banker, was familiar with the society of money makers but refused to enter it. Ernest May is represented in profile, in the middle of action. He is not sitting for his portrait. Degas caught him in a group. The group goes on on both sides of the canvas. The model appears to be an element of a larger story of which he is not the key character.
- Yet, Degas gives him a special status. He is the only one whose face can be seen clearly, he stands almost in the centre of the composition. The gestures of two characters (the man behind him and the one standing in front of him, whose face and above all whose hand holding a paper we cannot see) converge towards him and make him the centre of an action that nonetheless remains secondary.
- The shape in the foreground to the right, hardly sketched, who, in a vague passing human shape, restitutes an impression of movement and action. The role of architecture that structures the composition, organises the development of a parallel story in the middle ground on the left, and contributes to the impression of rigour and austerity.
- The blackish-brown and black tones that accentuate the uniformity of a social group organised according to its own codes.

**10. Edgar Degas (1834-1917):**  
*La petite danseuse de 14 ans (The 14-year-old Dancing Girl), 1881*

- location: upper level, gallery 31
  - subject matter: the model, Marie van Goethem, is fourteen years old and performs the "fourth foot position".
  - observe: this piece is the result of numerous and varied research and concerns.
- the dancing girl embodied, in the end of the 19th century, grace and perfection. But also, because of their fragile existence shared between the lights of the Opera house and the blackness of prostitution to which they were often subjected, dancing girls symbolised the dual character of modern life. This duality found expression in the whole statue: the juvenile body made expressive and perfect by hours of work; the grumpy face in which critics found "a bestial insolence" or a "character so



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deeply vicious". The observations of commentators were not due to mere chance: Degas was then fascinated by the physical anthropology of criminals.

- the wax. The original model of this statue, exhibited in 1881, was made of polychromous wax. It is housed in the Paul Mellon collection in the United States. The Musée d'Orsay exhibits a bronze cast in 1951. Wax as a material is flesh-coloured and it can be relatively easily modelled. It was also used for anatomical models, dolls and mannequins as well as for historical or scientific reconstructions in museums.
- the accessories. Originally, the statue wore a real bodice, woollen stockings, ballet shoes and maybe real hair that were here cast in the mass of the bronze. In the bronze version, only the satin ribbon (originally leak-green) and the tulle tutu are added. These accessories borrowed from real life accentuate the impression of realism given by the piece of sculpture.

8. Claude Monet : *La rue Montorgueil à Paris. Fête du 30 juin 1878*, 1878

9. Edgar Degas : *Portraits à la bourse*, 1878-79

10. Edgar Degas : *La petite danseuse de 14 ans*, 1881

*The Fourteen-year-old Dancing Girl* may be seen as a statue, an idol, or an ethnographic model, the result of Degas' scientific realism as he detailed the vices of his times, or even, inspired by dolls and mannequins, an object of covetousness and play.

### 11. Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919): *Champ de bananiers (Field of Banana Trees)*, 1881

- location: upper level, gallery 34
- subject matter: the painting represents a landscape in the outskirts of Algiers.
- background: from January 1881 onwards, the art dealer Paul Duran-Ruel made regular purchases from Renoir. The painter could then undertake previously unaffordable trips. The first of his trips took him to Algeria, in the steps of Delacroix, whom he admired. The second took him, the same year, to Italy. Algeria, a French colony, might have been more easily accessible at the time than Morocco, which Delacroix had visited. Degas was seduced by the quasi-antique nobleness of the Arabs and by the warm colours. Renoir did not draw figures during this stay, but he made a few pure landscapes that remained rare in his work. This one was presented at the seventh impressionist exhibition, in 1882, where it was surrounded by many figure paintings including the very ambitious *Déjeuner des canotiers (The Boaters' Lunch)*.
- observe: the luxurious vegetation invading a large part of the canvas. The powerful colours of the painting which nevertheless form a very delicate harmony. The very soft, downy, almost spongy stroke of Renoir of which Degas used to say: "he paints with balls of wool!".

### 12. Paul Cézanne (1839-1906): *La maison du pendu (The Hanged Man's House)*, 1875

- location: upper level, gallery 36
- subject matter: the painting was made in Auvers-sur-Oise where Cézanne lived from 1872 to 1874. The hanged man's house is situated Rue du Four and, in spite of its name, does not conceal any sinister drama in its history.
- background: Cézanne had settled in Auvers in order to be nearer to his friend Pissarro with whom he learned both the rules of open-air landscape painting and to master his literary and romantic passions. The painting was presented at the first impressionist exhibition, in 1874. Cézanne's contributions were the worst received by critics who did not know what to make of the artist's imagination (*The Modern Olympia*) or of his *impasti (The Hanged Man's House)*. Yet this painting was the first Cézanne was able to sell to an amateur.
- observe: the compact composition. The sky occupies only the upper part of the painting. The

complexity of the composition that radiates out of a central point following several strong axes: an upward path on the left; another going down towards the centre of the painting; a slope forming a curve going out on the right; the branches of the trees rising obliquely upwards. The interlocking of planes succeeding one another in a very close succession. The depth of the grainy stroke that seems to "lay the bricks of" the painting. The impression of solitude: no characters; the vegetation is frozen. In the choice of his subject (a traditional deserts form), in the mineral and compact austerity of his composition, in his clear but cold tones, Cézanne made a contradictory piece, very distant from those by Monet and Pissarro.

### 13. Georges Seurat (1859-1891): *Studies for the painting Un dimanche à la Grande Jatte (A Sunday at the Grande Jatte)*, 1884: *Sitting Man, Lying Woman, Sitting Women and Pram*

- location: upper level, gallery 45
- subject matter: Seurat's painting (today housed at the Art Institute in Chicago) represents a scene of modern life. The place, an island on the river Seine in the outskirts of Paris, the characters, from different parts of the petty bourgeoisie, the action (walking, angling, rowing, idleness etc...) evoking leisure, the moment, a Sunday, were as many archetypal images of modernity. The very large format chosen by Seurat confirms his ambition to make an historical tableau out of a contemporary moment.
- background: the apparition of Seurat's monumental piece at the last impressionist exhibition, in 1886, marked the end of the impressionist years. The participation of the leader of neo-impressionism was in fact perceived with little enthusiasm by the artists who had exhibited their work in previous impressionist exhibitions. Indeed, Seurat was introducing a new technique, mingling with the impressionists' open-air observation the rigour of academic method and scientific studies of colour made during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. To these technical evolutions added a new spirit reflecting the emergence of symbolism. Seurat executed an important series of drawings and sketches, drawn or painted, to make his painting. Many studies, including those belonging to the collections of the Musée d'Orsay, were made on the motif, in the open air. But they also partake to the academic process that advocated a separate study of each part of the painting, the realisation of general sketches before the final setting of the composition on canvas. Nevertheless they often remained faithful to the lightning of the motif as their aim. This process was besides made necessary by the format of the painting (207x508cm, i.e. 6'9" x 10'1") that made any open-air painting hardly feasible.

• observe: the strokes, different according to the part of the painting, more regular than those of the impressionists. The mix of pure colours: the light-green lawn at the centre of the first study is visibly composed of green, yellow and blue. The dress of the woman in the second study is made up of blue and pink strokes. Besides the blue strokes spread around the figure. The importance of figures compared with the landscape. They do not dominate it yet, as in the case of his final painting, but they prevail monumentally, contrarily to what may be seen in Monet's works. The strength of the composition, alternating vertical and horizontal lines.



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