The Industrial World Represented by 19th Century Artists

Presentation
This visit is aimed primarily at history and economics classes, but it may also be of interest to literature students and any group interested in studying art in its historical and social context. It is based on the relationship between the art and the history of the period, and juxtaposes two distinct approaches. The first approach, taken by the majority of teachers and historians, is to use the paintings, sculptures and objects of art as documents to support an argumentation. In this case, the works are selected according to the information they contain relating to the 19th century Industrial Revolution. The second approach - that of art historians - tends to focus on the artwork itself. Artists do not simply relate narratives, events, and settings in the manner of schoolbook illustrations but, imbuing their works with personal or collective experiences, they surpass mere representation and transform their chosen subjects. This visit therefore endeavours to construct a synthesis between the works exhibited in the Musée d’Orsay, representative of the arts of the latter half of the 19th century, and the major phenomenon of the era, the growing industrialisation of France and Western Europe and its related social, political and cultural transformations.

The Visit: list of artworks

Before and after the visit

Visitor’s Sheet

On the representation of industry in the visual arts, the bibliography is much shorter:

- Exigences de vérité dans la peinture française entre 1830 et 1870, musées des Beaux-Arts de Chaumont, 1989
- Images du travail, peintures et dessins des collections françaises, musée national Fernand Léger, Biot (Alpes-Maritimes), 1983
- Caroline Mathieu and Alain Simon, “1880. La tour Eiffel et l’exposition universelle”, Le Petit Journal des grandes expositions, no 196, mai-août 1889
- Peinture et société au XIXe siècle, CNROP,

Ils plumes à l’usine, images du travail dans la peinture française de 1870 à 1914, exhibition catalogue, the Pau, Dunkirk and Evreux museums, Somogy, 2001.

Bibliography

A few history “classics” on the industrialisation of France, its society and landscapes (1848-1914):

- Jean-Pierre Bonna, La Révolution industrielle, Seuil, “Pointe”, 1973
- Pierre Guiral, La Véritable histoire en France à l’époque du capitalisme, Hachette, 1976
- Maurice Agulhon (general editor), La Ville de l’industrie, tome IV, l’histoire de la France urbaine industrielle France 1814-1914
- Louis-Alexandre Deschamps, La Ville de Saint-Denis, Musée des Hommes, 1998


Excellent written, photographic, audio-visual and educational documents, on the same topic:

- Gérard Naudet, Les Chemins du XIXe siècle, La Documentation photographique, no 8079, octobre 1989
- Madeleine Berthiez, Chantal Georges and Frédéric Monet, Sociologies et usages du bâtiment, La Documentation photographique, no 8018, août 2000.

- Sylvie Gonzalès (editor), Des chemins dans la plaine 1850-1930, catalogue of the exhibition in Saint-Étienne, Musée d’art et d’histoire, Ceraphine, 1998
- François Rochez (introduction by), Les Grecs. Montebourg-les-Mines/Le Creusot, Ecomusée du Creusot,

- Peinture et société au XIXe siècle, CNROP,

- Sylvie Gonzalès (editor), Des chemins dans la plaine 1850-1930, catalogue of the exhibition in Saint-Étienne, Musée d’art et d’histoire, Ceraphine, 1998
- François Rochez (introduction by), Les Grecs. Montebourg-les-Mines/Le Creusot, Ecomusée du Creusot,


This visit intends to take a wide-ranging look at the industrial age which includes working-class housing, work in the home – so common in the 19th century – the major arteries of transport and communication – a crucial characteristic of the industrial age, vital for commerce – and the leading players: the workers themselves, but also the industrial barons, bankers and “capitalists”… Taking such a broad view of the subject, indispensable for the balance and coherence of the visit, is also sound historical practice.
Before and After the Visit

This relatively complex visit assumes that the pupils have already studied both the history and the main artistic movements of the period. One suggestion for continued study is to make other, similar studies on the relation between artworks and specific historical themes: the Musée d’Orsay offers analogous visits on the rural world, political power, the image of women and of children. Conversely one may follow the present theme of industrialisation in Art into other periods - the 20th century is very well covered by the Musée National d’Art Moderne (Pompidou Centre), and the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (Avenue du Président Wilson) - or in other forms - a visit to an “industrial” museum for example: the Musée National des Arts et Métiers in Paris, in the mining area of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, the Centre Historique Minier in Lourdes near Dax, the Musée d’Art et d’Industrie in Besançon, the Musée d’Art et d’Industrie in Saint-Etienne, the Ecomusée in Le Creusot, and the Maison des Canuts in Lyon, etc. Also, whether still in business or not, various industrial firms with origins dating back to the nineteenth century, are open to school group visits, such as La Découverte du Dewavrin, La Verrerie Déuremieux in Allier, and the Monier chocolate factory in Nantes. Finally, keeping the Musée d’Orsay’s selected period in mind, one can explore a variety of buildings of different functions, which tell of the period’s contemporary fabrication techniques not forgetting grand accomplishments such as the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Val d’Or in Thiers... A comparative study between the visual arts and literature could be based on Gérard Bértranou (1855) or The Violent House (1856) by Balzac, for financial systems and the development of capitalism, The Black Pox (1861) by George Sand, Les Moulinettes (1862) by Victor Hugo, Germinal (1885) or The Beast in Man (1880) by Zola, which are set in societies and landscapes transformed by industry, or even Hard Times (1854) by Dickens, A Stitch in Time (1858) by Lytton Strachey, In an Enemy of the People by Ibsen, for the environmental problems arising from industrialisation. In cinema, besides the pessimistic and fantastical vision in Metropolis (Fritz Lang, 1926) and diverse literary adaptations of nineteenth-century “classics” (by René Clément, Jean Renoir, Claude Berri, etc.), the industrial saga is retraced by Anton Wajda in The Great Promise (1974) and by Mauro Bulghin in Metalls (1980); both are also literary adaptations. Modern Times (1935) by Chaplin evokes the dehumanising effects of production line systems like Taylor’s and others, implemented in America since the beginning of the 20th century but still rarely in application in France before 1914, and not yet directly echoed in the artistic production of the period.

The Visit: list of artworks

As the list of artworks - which is by no means comprehensive - is indicative only, the guide is free to choose which artworks support their demonstration and it is not really advisable to present more than twelve pieces in the course of a guided visit.

Octave Tausset: Une famille malheureux (An Unhappy Family), 1910
Thonet frères: curved wood furniture, from 1849 onwards
Pierre-Auguste Renior: Chandalier sur la Seine (Barges on the Seine), 1909
Claude Monet: Le pont du chemin de fer à Argenteuil (The Railway Bridge in Argenteuil), 1875-1877
Claude Monet: Les chêneys de charbon (Unloading Coal), 1877
Claude Monet: La gare Saint-Lazare (The Saint-Lazare Railway Station), 1877
Edgar Degas: Les reposseuses (The Laundresses), 1876-1878
Edgar Degas: Portraits à la Bourre (Portraits at the Stock Exchange), circa 1876-1878
Jean Carriès: Le mineur de la Loire (The Loire Miner), circa 1880
Ferdinand Datert and Victor Constantin: Palais des Machines, 1889 World Fair, 1/200m model by Rémi Masse, 1889
Constantin Meunier: La porte de la ville (The Black Country), 1885
Constantin Meunier: Pêcheurs au corax (Puddlers at the Furnace), 1895
Ferdinand Cormon: La Juge (The Judge), 1895
Lambert Waldon: Les docks de Cardiff (Cardiff Docks), 1894
Jean Federspiel: Les ages de l’œuvre (The Ages of the Worker), 1895
Camille Pissarro: Paysage, bateau Dauphine, mouret house, soir; matin (Dauphine Basin, Low Tide, Sun. Morning), 1894
Maximilien Luce: Les bûcherons de pays (The Pit Drivers), 1902-1905
Hector Guiramand: ornamental fonts, circa 1895-1900
Paul-Louis Delance: Grève à Saint-Ouen (Strike at Saint-Ouen), 1908

Chronological landmarks

1760-1785 Watt’s steam engines
1773 The Wealth of Nations (Adam Smith)
1791 iron puddling [process to obtain iron or steel, light in carbon]
1792 the gas lamp (Morbeck)
1798 Essay on the Principle of Population (Malthus)
1808 Banque de France (Franco-German, 1807)
1808 first steam powered vessel
1813 first steam locomotive (Stephenson)
1817 Principles of Political Economy and Taxation (McCulloch)
1822-1828 first photographs (Niepce)
1828-1830 Liverpool-Manchester railway line
1833-1840 first automatic machine-tools
1839 The Organization of Labor (Léon Blum)
1840 What is Property? (Proudhon)
1844 electric telegraph (Stuart Mill)
1844 Principles of Political Economy (McCulloch)
1845 The Communist Party Manifesto (Marx, Engels)
1848 World Fair in London (1855, 1857, 1867, Paris)
1851 right to strike in France – International Workers’ Association set-up in London (Marx, Bakunin...), the “First Internationals”
1858 nationalisation of the State coal
1870-1880 development of the internal combustion engine
1878 Bell’s telephone
1878 first electric railway (Siemens)
1879 Prémat plan (canals, harbours and waterways)
1883 first electric power stations
1884 trade unions authorised in France (Waldeck-Rousseau Act)
1888 discovery of aluminium
1888 World Fair in Paris (Eiffel Tower)
1893 creation of the Office du Travail (partially to survey working conditions)
1892 working day limited to 10 hours for women and minors
1893 foundation of the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT)
1898 first motor show
1898 law on accidents at work in France
1900 World Fair in Paris (The Great Exposition, the forty...) 1890-1900 progressive universal reduction of the working day to 10 hours
1898 beginning of the implementation of the Taylor system in the Renault factories at Billancourt
1910 law on the first working positions for workers and peasants

On the eve of the first world war, workers represented 42% (United Kingdom), 50% (Germany), 51% (France) of the active population.

In Britain, the increase was even more dramatic: a million and a half in 1845, four million by the 1870’s and nine million by 1914.

In France, their number increased from one million in 1845 to three million by 1886 and to four million by 1914.

In Britain, the increase was even more dramatic: a million and a half in 1845, four million by the 1870’s and nine million by 1914.
Before and After the Visit
This relatively complex visit assumes that the pupils have already studied both the history and the main artistic movements of the period. One suggestion for continued study is to make other, similar studies on the relation between artworks and specific historical themes: the Musée d’Orsay offers numerous visits on the rural world, political power, the image of women and of children.
Conversely one may follow the present theme of industrialisation in Art into other periods – the 20th century is very well covered by the Musée National d’Art Moderne (Pompidou Centre), and the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (Avenue du Président Wilson) – or in other forms - a visit to an “industrial” museum for example: the Musée National des Arts et Métiers in Paris, in the mining area of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, the Centre Historique Minier in Lewarde near Douai, the Musée d’Art et d’Industrie in Bondy, the Musée d’Art et d’Industrie in Saint-Etienne, the Economois in Le Creusot, and the Maison des Camus in Lyon, etc. Also, whether still in business or not, various industrial firms with origins dating back to the nineteenth century, are open to school group visits, such as La Decauvriere in diabeticola, La Verriere Goutemil in Aulnay, and the Moulin chocolate-factory in Nuits-Saint-Georges. Finally, keeping the Musée d’Orsay’s selected period in mind, one can explore a variety of buildings of different functions, which tell of the period’s contemporary fabrication techniques not forgetting grand accomplishments such as the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Val d’Or in Thiers…
A comparative study between the visual arts and literature could be based on Gérard Bérégovoi (1855) or The Voyagers Home (1856) by Balzac, for financial systems and the development of capitalism, The Black Town (1861) by George Sand, Les Mondes (1862) by Victor Hugo, Germinal (1885) or The Brass Mill (1880) by Zola, which are set in societies and landscapes transformed by industry, or even Hard Times (1854) by Dickens, Analogie (1890) by Étienne Clair, On the Enemy of the People by Ibsen, for the environmental problems arising from industrialisation. In cinema, besides the pessimistic and fantastical vision in Metropolis (Fritz Lang, 1928) and diverse literary adaptations of nineteenth-century “classics” (by René Clément, Jean Renoir, Claude Berri, etc.), the industrial saga is retraced by Anton Wajda in The Land of the Great Promise (1974) and by Mauro Bolognini in Metalli (1980); both are also literary adaptations. Modern Times (1936) by Chaplin evokes the dehumanising effects of production line systems like Taylor’s and others, implemented in America since the beginning of the 20th century but still rarely in application in France before 1914, and not yet directly echoed in the artistic production of the period.

The Visit: list of artworks
NI: the list of artworks - which is by no means comprehensive - is indicative only. The guide is free to choose which artworks support their demonstration and it is not really advisable to present more than twelve pieces in the course of a guided visit.

- Octave Tussaud: Une famille moins pauvre (An Unhappy Family), 1940
- Thonet: curved wood furniture, from 1849 onwards
- Pierre-Auguste Renoir: Châtelus sur la Snié (Barges on the Seine), 1909
- Claude Monet: Le pont du chemin de fer à Argenteuil (The Railway Bridge in Argenteuil), 1875-1876
- Claude Monet: Les douches de charbon (Unloading Coal), 1879
- Claude Monet: La gare Saint-Lazare (The Saint-Lazare Railway Station), 1877
- Edgar Degas: Les reposantes (The Laundresses), 1865–1870
- Edgar Degas: Portraits à la bière (Portraits at the Stock Exchange), circa 1876–1879
- Jean Carrié: Le mineur de la Loire (The Lour Miner), circa 1886
- Ferdinand Dutert and Victor Constantin: Palais des Machines, 1889 World Fair, 1/200th model by René Mauvez, 1889
- Constantin Meunier: Au pays nair (in the Black Country), 1900
- Constantin Meunier: Pavillons au tour (Paddlers at the Furnace), 1895
- Fernand Cormon: La Jolie (The Faire), 1895
- Lionel Walden: Les docks de Cardiff (Cardiff Docks), 1894
- Leon Ferdinand: Les ages de l’ouvrière (The Ages of the Worker), 1895
- Camille Pissarro: Dieppe, bassin Duquesne, murier haute, soleil, matin (Dieppe, Duquesne Basin, Low Tide, Sun, Morning), 1904
- Maximilien Luce: Les batteurs de pieux (The Stock Drillers), 1902–1905
- Hector guimard: ornamental fonts, circa 1905–1907
- Paul-Louis Delance: Grètes à Saint-Ouen (Storks at Saint-Ouen), 1908

Chronological landmarks
1769–1785 Watt’s steam engines
1779 The Wealth of Nations (Adam Smith)
1785 iron puddling [process to obtain iron or steel, light in carbon]
1792: the gas lamp (Murdock)
1796 Essay on the Principle of Population (Malthus)
1805 Banque de France (banking system)
1815 first steam powered vessel
1818 first steam locomotive (Stephenson)
1817 Principles of Political Economy and Taxation ( Ricardo)
1822-1832 first photographs (Napier)
1826-1850 Liverpool–Manchester railway line
1835–1840 first automatic machine-tools
1839 The Organisation of Labour (Louis Blanc)
1840 What is Property? (Proudhon)
1841 electric telegraph (Bell)
1843 Principles of Economic Policy (Stuart Mill)
1848 The Communist Party Manifesto (Marx, Engels)
1851 World Fair in London (1855, 1862, 1867, 1870; Paris)
1861 right to strike in France – International Workers’ Association set up in London (Marc, Bakunin…), the “First Internationals”
1868 emancipation of the Sure rural
1876–1880 development of the internal combustion engine
1878 Bell’s telephone
1879 first electric railway (Siemens)
1879–1880 development of aluminium
1880 World Fair in Paris (Eiffel Tower)
1882 creation of the Office du Travail (part. Unity to survey working conditions)
1884 founding of the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT)
1889 first motor show
1890 law on accidents at work in France
1890 World Fair in Paris (the Ex-Orry, the...)
1890 progressive universal reduction of the working day to 10 hours
1898 beginning of the implementation of the Taylor system in the Renault factories at Billancourt
1910 law on the first rest periods for workers and peasants

On the eve of the first world war, workers represented 42% (United Kingdom), 40% (Germany), 31% (France) of the active population. In France, their number increased from one million in 1815 to three million by 1866 and to four million by 1891. In Britain, the increase was even more dramatic: a million and a half in 1815, four million by the 1850’s and nine million by 1891.
Bibliography

A few history “classics” on the industrialisation of France, its society and landscapes (1848-1914):

- Jean-Pierre Ronin, La Révolution industrielle, Seuil, “Pointe”, 1973
- Joel Michel, La Mode décerneuse d’hommes, Gallimard, 1993, “Découvertes”
- Jean-Pierre Daviet, La Société industrielle en France 1848-1914, Seuil, “Pointe”, 1995

Excellent written, photographic, audio-visual and educational documents, on the same topic:

- Gérard Naret, Les Ouvriers au XIXe siècle, La Documentation photographique, no 870, octobre 1989
- Jean-Paul Fargier and Pierre Sesmat, Le Foulonnet du XIXe siècle 1845-1914, Musée d’Orsay/BfN/les films du Tambour de soie, 1989
- Madeleine Rebérioux, Chantal Geogel and Frédérique Moret, Sociologie et usine du début du XIXe siècle, La Documentation photographique, no 9014, août 2000

On the representation of industry in the visual arts, the bibliography is much shorter:

- Exigences de réalité dans la peinture française entre 1830 et 1870, musées des Beaux-Arts de Caen, 1989
- Images du travail, peintures et dessins des collections françaises, musée national Fernand Léger, Boit (Alpes-Maritimes), 1985
- Peinture et société au XIXe siècle, CNP, “Dialignes sciences humaines et sociales”, 12 slides with booklet, undated
- Dominique Schneider, Caroline Mathieu and Bernadé Clément, Les Schneider, Le Creusot, Une famille, une entreprise, une ville (18th-1990), Fayard/RMN, 1997
- Sylvie Gonzalès (editor), Des chemins dans la plaine 1830-1930, catalogue of the exhibition in Saint-Denis, Musée d’art et d’histoire, Creaphis, 1998
- Les plans à l’usine, images du travail dans la peinture française de 1870 à 1914, exhibition catalogue, the Pau, Dunkirk and Evreux museums, Summer, 2003

Presentation

This visit is aimed primarily at history and economics classes, but it may also be of interest to literature students and any group interested in studying art in its historical and social context. It is based on the relationship between the art and the history of the period, and juxtaposes two distinct approaches. The first approach, taken by the majority of teachers and historians, is to use the paintings, sculptures and objects of art as documents to support an argumentation. In this case, the works are selected according to the information they contain relating to the 19th century Industrial Revolution. The second approach - that of art historians – tends to focus on the artwork itself. Artists do not simply relate narratives, events, and settings in the manner of schoolbook illustrations but, imbuing their works with personal or collective experiences, they surpass mere representation and transform their chosen subjects. This visit therefore endeavours to construct a synthesis between the works exhibited in the Musée d’Orsay, representative of the arts of the latter half of the 19th century, and the major phenomena of the era, the process of industrialisation of France and Western Europe and its related social, political and cultural transformations.

The first Industrial Revolution (end of the 18th century in Great Britain, first half of the 19th in Western Europe) was based on the exploitation of coal as an energy source and on metallurgy and textiles as primary industries. The second, between roughly 1860 and 1914, was based on electric energy, oil, the internal combustion engine and the production of steel. But such economic phenomena did not automatically become subjects or sources of inspiration for artists! Even followers of the Realist school, only exceptionally chose subjects from the industrial world: “social” themes were overwhelmingly represented through the portrait of the rural lifestyle and agricultural labour, irrespective of the period or artistic movement. At the same time, our conceptions of the “industrial world” should by no means be limited to images of workers and large factories… This visit intends to take a wide-ranging look at the industrial age which includes working-class housing, work in the home – so common in the 19th century – the major arteries of transport and communication – a crucial characteristic of the industrial age, vital for commerce – and the leading players: the workers themselves, but also the industrial barons, bankers and “capitalists”. Taking such a broad view of the subject, indispensable for the balance and coherence of the visit, is also sound historical practice.
1. Octave Tassaert (1808-1874): Une famille malheureuse (Un Unhappy Family), 1849

Location: ground level, Seine galleries

Also entitled The Suicide or Young Girl Suffocating. His suicide scene, several versions of this painting exist (two may be seen in museums in Bayonne and Monpeller). The artist was himself going through difficult times while he painted Un Unhappy Family in 1848. The economic crisis and 1848 revolution brought about a profound slump in the art market. But thanks to the director of the Beaux-Arts, this painting was bought for 2000 francs by the State (the equivalent of a year’s salary for a modest-ranking civil servant), and was exhibited at the 1850 Salon. The subject was inspired by a passage of the Paroles d’un excentrique by Lamennais (1840), the book was influential in the social Christian movement and received wide public acclaim: “snow covered the roofs, a frozen stream laced the windows of the crumpled and cold dwelling... an old woman warmed her pale and shivering hands by a hearth... the girl spoke to her: Oh mother! You haven’t always been so much money... And the old woman gazed at the image of the Virgin. And the girl sobbed... A while later, two women, luminous as a couple of souls, could be seen on their way to heaven!”

The family’s former position of relative wealth is suggested by a few details such as the armchair in which the mother lies dead. The man, husband and father, is absent, probably dead. Miserable and ruin are therefore unavoidable, a fate common to the working classes and described in various novels (Le Drum Shop by Zola) or suggested in many realist paintings (The Lightning by Antignon, What is Called Ignorancy by Stevens...). The two women have therefore ended up in this garret under the roof, the final stage of their social downfall. The end is suggested: “work is lacking, the winter is cold and starvation approaches with its hideous and slow agony”. Théophile Gautier wrote in his report on the 1850-1851 Salon, Tassaert was fond of sad, sentimental themes and was himself to commit suicide with gas.

2. Camille Pissarro (1830-1903): Chalands sur la Seine, 1869

Location: gallery 19, ground floor

Pissarro was attracted by the harbours in Le Havre and Dieppe. He stayed in Dieppe during the summers of 1890, 1901 and 1902. His primary interest was aesthetic: he wrote in a letter “my subjects are very beautiful, the fishery, the outer harbour, the Duquesne harbour, the Pullet, in the rain, in the sun, in the smoke”), the industrial nature of Dieppe’s harbour activity being of secondary interest, despite Pissarro’s active support of the libertarian cause. A modern, low angle view, accentuates the animation and activity of the harbour.

5. Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919): Chalands sur la Seine (Barges on the Seine), 1869

Location: gallery 18, ground floor

Renoir painted this work at the age of 28, having already emerged from anonymity but not yet having received the impressive official sanction which was to come. The Seine was its true subject. In the 18th century, the Seine had acquired the status of “National river”, and was accordingly an essential element of any contemporary French landscape (viz. Fernand Brang, L’Identité de la France), like forests for Germany, roads and mills, cloudy skies and seascapes for Holland, and meadows and large trees for England. The Impressionists painted mostly humankind landscapes, fields, cultivations, rivers and gravel slopes such as a man could find whilst out walking. The Impressionist landscape focused on connections and paths of communications (roads, canals, and, in the case of Monet, even railways) which conveyed a dynamic image of France, marked by the boom in trade and industry under the second Empire. The barges express the strength of the Industrial Revolution whilst giving it a more peaceful aspect than vowel smouldering furnaces or steam locomotives. They represent a new-forgotten reality as, after peaking with the Freycinet plan (1878), waterways declined as means of transport.
4. Ferdinand Dutert (1845-1906) and Victor Contamin (1840-1905): Palais des machines, 1890 World Fair, L'etoile gallery 22 Location of the end of the central axis, towards galleries 22-27

The Galerie des machines was built for the 1890 World Fair on the Champ-de-Mars. Four hundred and twenty meters long, a hundred and fifteen meters wide and forty five meters high, it offered eight hundred thousand square metres of exhibition space, set the world record for the length of a vault and was intended to “create an unfathomable impression of greatness and might” with a construction cost five times cheaper than brick and mortar. A circular gallery, with two electrically operated moving bridges allowed the public to look down on the machines located on the ground floor. The critic, Ferdinand Dutert, worked in close collaboration with the main engineer Victor Contamin, a specialist in the resistance of materials. The elegance of this steel architecture did not cause the same polemic as the resistance of materials. The elegance of this steel structure in 1855, officially inaugurated in 1867 at the occasion of the World Fair. But Monet’s interest was undoubtedly wider: he gives an optimistic, most playful vision of industrialisation, with the blue and pink harmony of the engine fumes. He also strikes a synthesis between two themes of Impressionism: landscape and modern life.

5. Claude Monet (1840-1926): Les drapeaux de cheminées (Industries), circa 1877-1874 Location: upper level, gallery 29 (Morseau-Viénot collection)

This painting features two fundamental elements of industrialisation in France: the bridge and the railway. They dominate the landscape and hold the eye of the viewer. Judging by the direction of the chimney smoke which seems to build the engine, the train is not moving very fast. This is far from being the first time Monet represented the railway yet he approached the subject with prudence, preferring to feature the picturesque wagon with its traditional shape, to the more modern engine, mostly scarcely suggested by its plume of smoke. (4 Tram et la Country side: the engine, has been similarly avoided in this painting, where all the space is occupied by the bridge. The painting is entirely given over to the theme of passage: the flowing river, the railway, the bridge, and the train itself representing a movement which unifies in space and also, with the changing era, in time.

6. Edgar Degas (1834-1917): Les repasseuses (The Laundresses), 1876-1878 Location: upper level, gallery 51

Laundresses were somewhat frequently featured with a construction cost five times cheaper than brick and mortar. A circular gallery, with two electrically operated moving bridges allowed the public to look down on the machines located on the ground floor. The critic, Ferdinand Dutert, worked in close collaboration with the main engineer Victor Contamin, a specialist in the resistance of materials. The elegance of this steel architecture did not cause the same polemic as the resistance of materials. The elegance of this steel structure in 1855, officially inaugurated in 1867 at the occasion of the World Fair. But Monet’s interest was undoubtedly wider: he gives an optimistic, most playful vision of industrialisation, with the blue and pink harmony of the engine fumes. He also strikes a synthesis between two themes of Impressionism: landscape and modern life.

7. Claude Monet (1940-1926): Les drapeaux de cheminées (Industries), 1877 Location: upper level, gallery 52

This is another Impressionist painting devoted to the river Seine, but in a heavily industrialised landscape. The scene is revisited from the suburban train connecting Paris with Argenteuil, where Monet lived from 1874 to 1876 in the lowground, the coal-deliverers are emptying the cargoes to supply the Clichy gas factories (which still exist). The landscape is framed by the metallic archway of the Asnières bridge, while the Clichy bridge appears in the background. The viewpoint and the framing seem to have been influenced by Japanese prints. The theme of cholera passing on bridges is frequent in the Impressionist oeuvre or in that of his fellow-artists. Bought for 2000 francs by the state (the equivalent of the yearly wages of an sub-lieutenant), the painting offers an optimistic vision of industrialisation. The representation of the smouldering furnaces, with its play of chiaroscuro effects, creates a sense of harmony. The division of labour makes it possible to paint workers both at rest and at labour but it was nevertheless impossible to render the noise, heat and painful conditions of work with the hope of reaching the age of forty. The location of the forge is not specified: the artist’s objective being to give a generalised representation of this industry unified. For the 1900 World Fair, Cormon, a painter awarded numerous official commissions (and who became the director of the Ecole nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts) was to be entrusted with decorating the Saint-Lazare railway station, which he knew later on, who was an itinerant preacher in the same region. The hills (grey, green, mauve, beige and black touches) are carved by a deep valley through which the railway passes. A low, grey sky is filled with the smoke from the chimneys of the brick factories. Industrialisation has become an industrial landscape, entirely turned over to the exploitation of coal, and entirely devoid of humans, animals or vegetation. This dirt is far removed from the Monet’s pink and lavender blue, engine fumes in his Saint-Lazare. Having been with paintings and religious scenes, Constantin Meunier became a socialist activist and turned to representing the world of work. The 1900’s in Belgium were marked by the growth of political, social and trade union organisations with the workers’ movement who, following the 1893 riots, obtained partial male suffrage – mark 2 in the picture. This painting was bought by the French state in 1890 after the Ring exhibition that introduced contemporary Belgian artists to the French public.
4. Ferdinand Dutert (1845-1906) and Victor Contamin (1840-1905): Laus des machines, 1890 World Fair, 1890, oil on canvas, 250 x 150 cm; (see note 5).
5. Claude Monet (1840-1926): Les dindonneuses, 1878-1879, oil on canvas, 72 x 90 cm.
7. Claude Monet (1840-1926): Le pont du chemin de fer à Argenteuil (The Railway Bridge at Argenteuil), circa 1874-1875, oil on canvas, 55 x 72 cm.
8. Claude Monet (1840-1926): La gare Saint-Lazare (The Saint-Lazare Railway Station), 1877-1879, oil on canvas, 148 x 195 cm. (see note 9).
10. Maximilien Luce (1858-1941): Les batteurs de pieux (The Pile Drivers), 1892-1893, oil on canvas, 90 x 150 cm.

Degas has chosen a rough weave canvas to paint this scene, undoubtedly because of the colour effects it allowed, but perhaps also because of the subject presented. A critic noted that the colours “somewhat coarse pink, orange yellows and cabbage greens” were well suited for these “suburban laundresses” (Paul Jamot, La Gazette des Beaux-Arts, 1914). Degas’ stance has often been discussed: real or only sanitary tenderness? Whatever the case may be, this aris-tocratic living in Montmartre tried to reveal social truths of his characters through painting their physical presence. Over a span of twelve years, Degas painted four different versions on the theme of laundresses.


This is another Impressionist painting devoted to the river Seine, but in a heavily industrialised landscape. The scene is revived from the suburban train connecting Paris with Argenteuil, where Monet lived from 1871 to 1874. In the background, the coal-deliverers are emptying the barges to supply the Cléry gas factories (which still exist). The landscape is framed by the metallic archway of the Asnières bridge, while the bridge itself appears in the background.

The viewpoint and the framing seem to have been influenced by Japanese prints. The theme of coal-transport on bridges is frequent in the work of Hiroshige (1797-1858) and Hokusai (1760-1849), and colour have little in common with these artists’ work. Certain details are realistic (the workers’ clothes, the coal, etc.). Nevertheless, the subject of this artwork, presented at the fourth Impressionist exhibition in 1879, remained exceptional in the artist’s production.


Like Manet and Caillebotte, Monet was interested in new social upheavals and endeavored to portray “the postes of railway stations” (Zola, 1877 Salon). He painted eleven different views of the platforms of the Saint-Lazare railway station, which he knew well as he divided his time between Argenteuil and Paris and often went to Normandy. This painting represents the older part of the station, built in 1841-1843 and covered with a new metallic structure in 1855, officially inaugurated in 1867 at the occasion of the World Fair. But Monet’s interest was ulteriorly broader: he gives an optimist view of industrialisation, with the blue and pink harmony of the engine fumes. He also strives to synthesize between two themes of Impressionism: landscape and modern life.

4. Ferdinand Dutert (1845-1906) and Victor Contamin (1840-1905): Palais des machines, 1890 World Fair, 1890, oil on canvas, 250 x 150 cm; (see note 5).
5. Claude Monet (1840-1926): Laus des machines (The Ironing Women), 1890 World Fair, 1890, oil on canvas, 250 x 150 cm.
12. Constantin Meunier (1831–1889): Puddlers au four (Puddlers at the Furnace), 1895
Location: ground level, gallery 56

Beneath his rediscovery, 50 x 49 cm

Belgium was deeply transformed by industrialisation and its artists represented the working environment far more frequently than the French. Puddlers are metal workers who work molten iron using a long metallic bar, decarburizing it and transforming it into steel. Here Meunier shows the puddlers removing the molten steel which is to be placed in a barrow. The heat, obviously intense, explains the bare torso of the workers. The chosen subject influenced the forms, as Octave Mirbeau remarked: “When one wants to represent Work, one is not painting a female nude, methodically draped, her anatomy distorted or exaggerated by costume, his anatomy distorted or exaggerated by toil and the panting of hard labour. But the time has not yet come for governments, ministries, collectors and art lovers to understand these things.”

Meunier, a member of the art section of the Belgian Workers’ Party, expressed mankind “strongly, in its mass” as a writer himself and friend of Jaurès and Clémentel, Meunier made “a piece of propaganda by showing facts which cannot be denied”. Maxime Luce used these puddlers for a drawing published in Le Soir (issue number 47, April 1896), an anarchist newspaper chaired by Émile Pouget.

Location: middle level, gallery 56

Walden, an American, was a pupil of Carolus-Duran in France. He exhibited this fascinating landscape, Cardiff Docks, in 1896. Cardiff was the ragged port of Wales exporting the produce of nearby mining areas, around which smelting industries, demanding large supplies of fuel, had developed. Walden played with the effects of rainy night, fog and artificial light to create an industrial landscape seemingly devoid of humanity. The silhouette of the locomotive driver is barely visible, while the railroad tracks, signals, trains and boats seem to be the sole operatives of the industrial machinery. In this representation of the docks - the nocturnal world where wet and shining surfaces reflect the lights - the artist has fused an acrid poetry with the sticky triviality of a mystery space. This railway landscape, both attractive and disturbing, makes for an interesting comparison with Saint-Lazare Station by Manet.

1. Octave Tassinari (1807–1874): Une famille malheureuse (An Unhappy Family), 1840
Location: ground level, gallery 56

Engraved by the Impressionist Eugene Guillaumin, this was exhibited at the 1850 Salon. The subject was inspired by a passage of the Purloins de mon cœur by Lamennais (1840), the book was influential in many realist paintings (viz. Viollet-le-Duc, Léopold Delacroix, and father, is absent, probably dead. Misery and ruin are therefore unavoidable, a fate common to the bourgeois husband and father. A while later, two women, luminous as a couple of souls, could be seen on their way to heaven!

The family’s former position of relative wealth is suggested by a few details such as the armchair in which the mother lies dead. The man, husband and father, is absent, probably dead. Misery and ruin are therefore unavoidable, a fate common to the working classes and described in various novels (viz. The Dead Shop by Zola) or suggested in many early paintings (The Lightning by Fantin, What is Called Forgery by Stevens...). The two women have therefore ended up in this garret under the roof, the final stage of their social downfall. The end is suggested: “work is lacking, the winter is cold and starvation approaches with its horrible and slow agony”. Théophile Gautier wrote in his report on the 1850–1851 Salon: Tassinari found it sad, sentimental themes and was himself to commit suicide with gas.

2. Camille Pissarro (1830–1903): Stepper, bassin Duquesnoy, meer van ovaal, oel on canvas, 1894
Location: gallery 18, ground floor

Pissarro was attracted by the harbours in Le Havre and Dieppe. He stayed in Dieppe during the summers of 1890, 1901 and 1902. His primary interest was aesthetic: he wrote in a letter: “my subjects are very beautiful, the fishery, the outer harbour, the Duquesnoy harbour, the Billot, in the rain, in the sun, in the smoke”; the industrial nature of Dieppe’s harbour activity being of secondary interest, despite Pissarro’s active support of the libertarian cause. A modern, low angle view, accentuates the animation and activity of the harbour.

5. Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919): Chalands sur la Seine (Barges on the Seine), 1869
Location: gallery 19 (Antonin Personnaz du fruit)

Renoir painted this work at the age of 28, having already emerged from anonymity but not yet having received the impressive official sanction which was to come. The Seine was its true subject. In the 19th century, the Seine had acquired the status of “National river”, and was accordingly an essential element of any contemporary French landscape (viz. Bernard Léonard, L’Identité de la France), like forests for Germany, roads and railways, clouds, skies and seascapes for Holland, and meadows and large trees for England. The Impressionists painted mostly humanised landscapes, fields, cultivations, rivers and rocky slopes such as one could find whilst out walking. The Impressionist landscape focused on connections and paths of communications (roads, canals, and, in the case of Monet, even railways) which conveyed a dynamic image of France, marked by the beam in trade and industry under the second Empire. The barges express the strength of the Industrial Revolution whilst giving it a more peaceful aspect than would smelting furnaces or steam locomotives. They represent a new satisfactorily reality as, after peaking with the Freycinet plan (1876), waterways declined as means of transport.