

THE ART OF IMPRESSIONISM

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## What is Impressionism?

This seemingly elementary question is not, perhaps, quite so simple to answer as might be imagined. While the term has become part of the common usage of art criticism and much has been written on its history and its technique, the essence of the matter remains elusive. A similar fate has overtaken the word "Renaissance," which was used with far easier confidence a generation or two ago than it is now. We are not quite sure when the Renaissance began, or even when it ended. With more or less unanimity we speak of the "art of the Renaissance," but our thought is far from precise. Perhaps we know too much about it all to make such comfortable classifications as used to be popular. The evolutionary complexities of any period of art, or of society generally, once they are understood with some thoroughness, make easy boundaries difficult and generalizations hazardous.

This is particularly the case with Impressionism. We are slowly learning more about it, but our analyses make us wary of pat answers. Everyone interested in the art of this period knows that both Degas and Monet were members of the so-called Impressionist group, but not everyone reflects on the wide gap which separated their respective styles, a gap which makes most of what might be said about the one inapplicable to the other. In other words, we find ourselves faced with the paradoxical necessity of differentiating between the words "Impressionist" and "Impressionism." The Impressionists were the artists who exhibited together in a shifting alliance from 1874 to 1886, but their individual styles were too various to be accurately described by a common label.

Nomenclature, unfortunately, is only the beginning of the difficulty. Not only

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must one distinguish between artists and a style; it is also necessary to say what that style was, where it came from, and when it can be said to have come to an end. Some Impressionists used it consistently, particularly Monet; others tried it for a while and gave it up, either partially, as Renoir, or almost altogether, as Cézanne and Gauguin. The term was presumably adopted from the derisive twist given to the title of a picture by Monet in Louis Leroy's review of the 1874 group show in Nadar's old studio in the Rue Daunou. Impression: Sunrise was the picture, and the article was headed "Exhibition of the Impressionists." The name stuck to the whole group, thus causing no small part of the confusion. Since Monet's picture was indeed representative of his own developed manner, and since he was certainly the purest Impressionist of the lot, the identification of the new manner with this particular canvas is entirely just. But Degas's art of this period was vastly different, and so were contemporary canvases by Sisley and Morisot.

Basically, the difference between earlier landscape (or figure work) and the Impressionist version lies in three factors: the presence or absence of neutral tones either as underpaint for form construction or as shadow; the colors themselves; and a manner of applying pigment which can be described as "sketchy." These may, for the moment, be considered separately.

The traditional landscape, even as modified by Corot and the Barbizon painters (Barbizon is a village in northern France, famous as an art center), had always relied on browns, greens and grays for achieving that sense of convincing bulk which created tree trunks, hills, ruins, farm houses and so forth. Since artists and viewers alike were accustomed to this convention, they came to believe that only by the use of these equivalents for value could outdoor scenes be

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