

Impressionism

Vol. 1: Impressionism in France

TASCHEN

IMPRESSIONIST ART

1860-1920

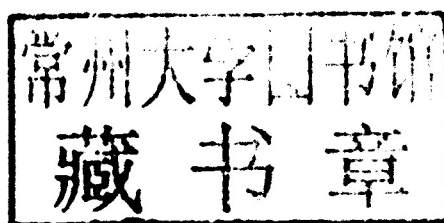
Edited by Ingo F. Walther

Volume I

IMPRESSIONISM
IN FRANCE

by

Peter H. Feist



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“To treat a subject for the colours and not for the subject itself, that is what distinguishes the Impressionist from other painters.”

GEORGES RIVIERE, 1877

Illustration page 2:

Pierre-Auguste Renoir

By the Seashore, 1883

Au bord de la mer

Oil on canvas, 92 x 73 cm

New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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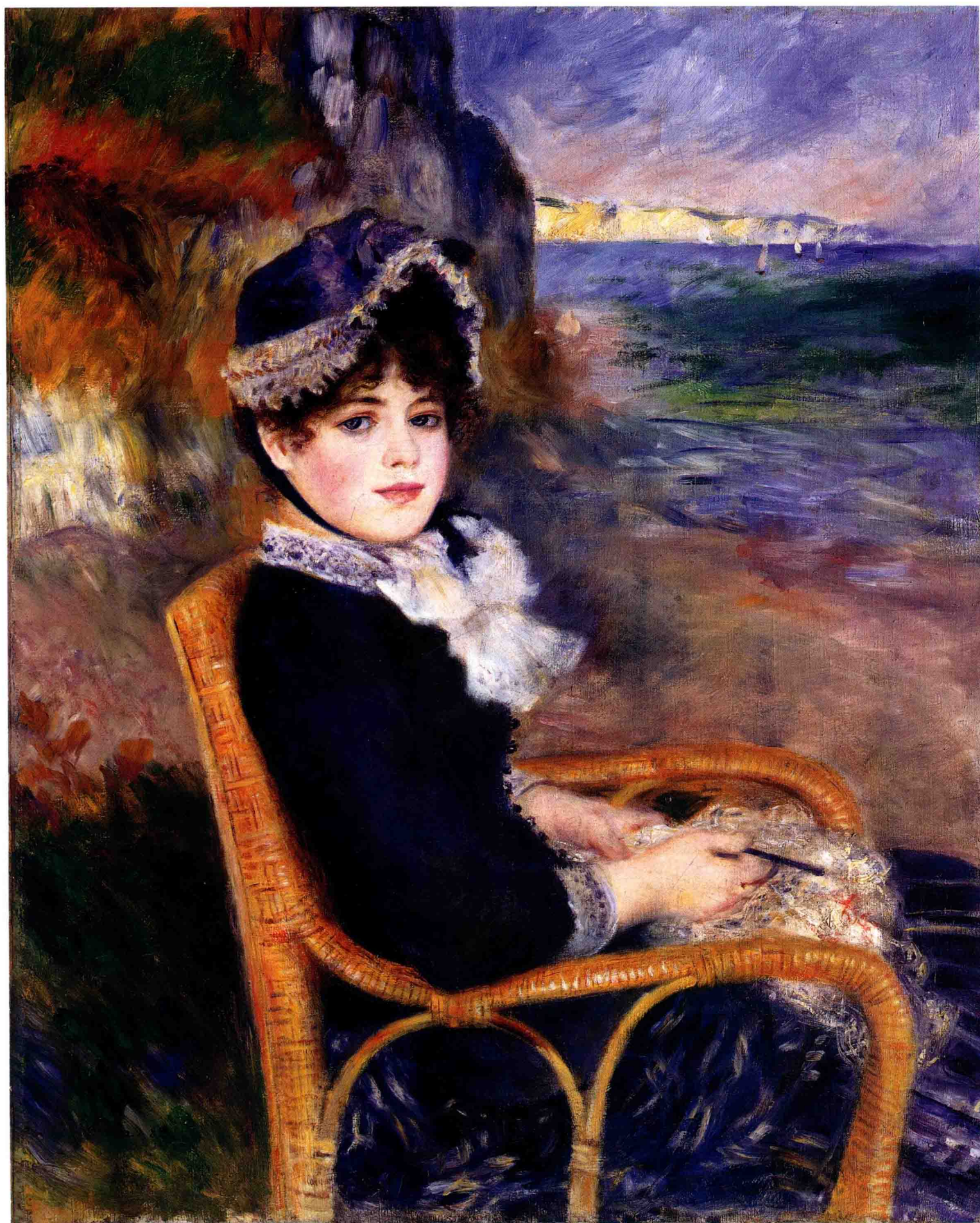
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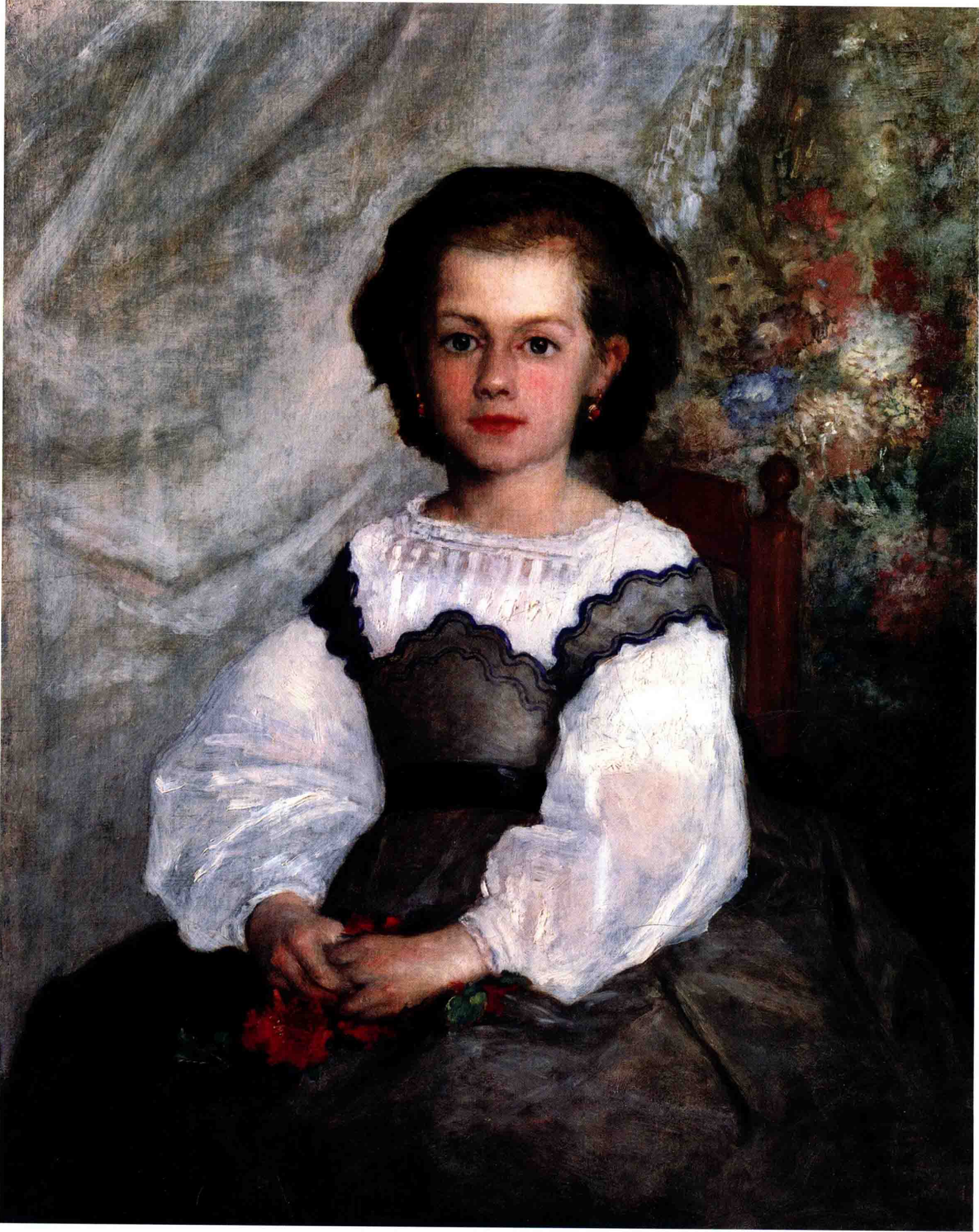
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Editor's Preface

On 15 April 1874 an exhibition featuring 30 artists opened in the Paris studio of Nadar the photographer. They had joined for the express purpose of presenting their work to the public as a group. It was the first group exhibition to be mounted without state intervention or the jurying process. And it was also the birth of Impressionism – an avant-garde event, a revolution that was to be of great significance for all the movements that followed, in Modernist art and after.

And the art that went on display was avant-garde and revolutionary too: landscapes, cityscapes and other subjects from everyday life, in light, luminous colours, full of atmosphere, the brushwork consisting merely of brief strokes and dabs. The paintings had partly been done *sur le motif*, in the open. It was a protest against the dusty studio art of the time with its lofty historical and mythological subjects, its colours predominantly gloomy and earthy, its light chosen purely to suit the artist.

Impressionist painting has remained the most fascinating product of modern art – and the most popular, as has been shown in recent years by spectacularly successful exhibitions of Degas, Gauguin, van Gogh, Manet, Monet or Renoir. Their work fetches record prices. The critical literature on them fills libraries. And yet some aspects of Impressionism have not been sufficiently researched, while several of the painters and their works have remained unknown, or have been forgotten.

This study describes the history of Impressionism, and of Neo- and Post-Impressionism, in France; it also affords an overview of related artistic developments elsewhere in Europe and in North America.

Volume I deals with France. The book aims not only to deal with the illustrious names – Monet, Renoir, Manet, Pissarro, Sisley, Degas, Cézanne, Gauguin, van Gogh, Seurat, Signac – but also to present little-known artists who were important for Impressionism, among them Gustave Caillebotte, a significant painter whose work was not “discovered” till a century after his death. The monograph includes 17 of his paintings. Others included are Bracquemond, Cross, Forain, Gonzalès, Guillaumin, Lebourg, Lépine, Luce, Morisot, Raffaelli and Vignon.

Volume II deals with painting elsewhere in Europe and in North America that was inspired by French Impressionism or evolved parallel to it. Though this art may not always be strictly Impressionist, it nonetheless owed a debt to the French artists even when their style was translated into a different national artistic idiom. Volume II also features a reference section including brief biographies, bibliographies and photographs of 236 artists, as well as numerous entries on other movements, critics, publications and locations.

Pierre-Auguste Renoir
Mademoiselle Romaine Lacaux, 1864
Oil on canvas, 81 x 65 cm
Cleveland (OH), Cleveland Museum of Art



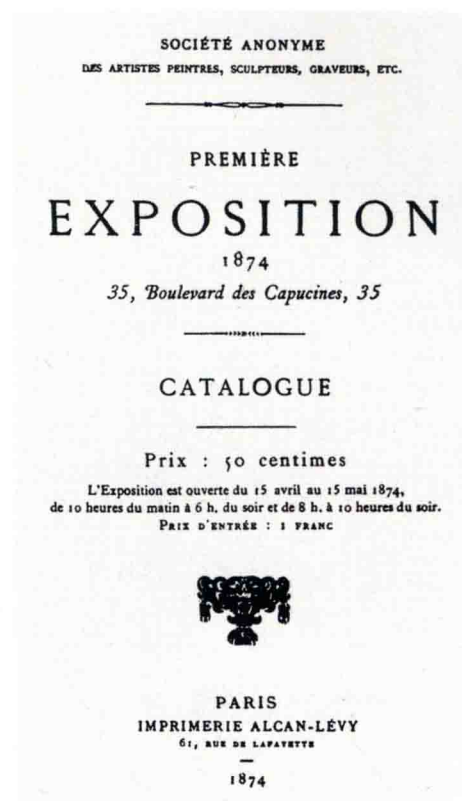
I Appraising Impressionism

Impressionist paintings are today among the most admired of all artworks. They are the pride of every public and private collection. As a rule they offer a visual feast, and possess a magic of their own that captivates the practised connoisseur and the less experienced art lover alike. Countless reproductions have made many Impressionist works familiar worldwide. And the flood of publications is growing continually, making available all the information we ever wanted to have on both the works and the artists.

Nevertheless, the debate on the aesthetic standing of Impressionist art and its place in art history is not over. Like any dispute over value judgements, it never will be. Nowadays, new questions are being raised concerning the forces that power historical developments in art, and the relations of Impressionism to other artistic movements. Many of these questions are being broached because art historians, for a good thirty years at least, have been charting a more complete and nuanced map of 19th-century art history.¹ For a long time it was widely thought that for decades only the Impressionists produced art that was of value and noteworthy as a gauge of the *Zeitgeist*; but this view must now be amended, even if eminent scholars of Impressionism such as John Rewald have been angrily condemning the recent revaluation of Salon art.²

There is a point to such anger as long as market considerations are in the foreground and conservative nostalgia takes precedence over careful aesthetic evaluation. But we must clear the way for a discriminating critical look at Impressionism and at the limits of Impressionist art's capacity to grasp and render the world artistically and to satisfy ever-changing aesthetic needs. Outstanding art moves and impresses us; but this should not obscure our realization that even the greatest masterpiece can never be "absolute", can never fulfil every conceivable expectation. Indeed, its impact may derive from a quality of emphatic one-sidedness.

The term "Impressionist" primarily describes a particular way of painting, drawing or working in graphics. There are comparable approaches in sculpture, literature and music. In relatively early days, when the Impressionist movement was still just one controversial strand in the art scene and at the same time a readily-surveyed aspect of recent art history (which younger artists were already critically rejecting), a young German art critic by the name of Richard Hamann wrote "Impression-



Catalogue of the first Impressionist exhibition, 1874

Claude Monet
Monceau Park, 1878
Le parc Monceau
Oil on canvas, 73 x 54 cm
Wildenstein 466
New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Edgar Degas
 Gentlemen's Race. Before the Start, 1862
Course de gentlemen. Avant le départ
 Oil on canvas, 48.5 x 61.5 cm
 Lemoisne 101. Paris, Musée d'Orsay

ismus in *Leben und Kunst*" (1907).³ Hamann saw the distinctive qualities of Impressionist principles as deriving from a contemporary feel for life itself, from kinds of sensibility and behaviour that could be encountered as much in everyday life, philosophy and science as in art. But another German art critic of about the same age, Werner Weisbach, who had been lecturing on Impressionist painting at the University of Berlin since 1904, took a different approach in the two volumes of his "*Impressionismus: Ein Problem der Malerei in Antike und Neuzeit*" (1910/11).⁴ In linking Impressionist art to the aesthetics of antiquity, Weisbach was seeking to give the new art a respectable ancestry and to explain its principles as fundamentals that were always available to the art of painting. This approach has not been ignored, but scholars today prefer to see Impressionism as one particular artistic type of evolution unfolding alongside others in a historical, cultural and aesthetic situation that was unique. American and British art historians in particular – critics such as Robert L. Herbert, Albert Boime or Timothy J. Clark – stress the decisive part played by cultural and social circumstances in art history, rather than individual aesthetic or formal strategies on the part

of the artists themselves.⁵ “The New Painting. Impressionism 1874–1886”, edited by Charles S. Moffett, provides invaluable documentation of these interrelations.⁶ Moffett’s title comes from an 1876 essay by the critic Edmond Duranty, “to draw attention to the entire spectrum of the modern movement rather than restricting it to one or another ism.”

Impressionism represents the grand finale of a particular way of appropriating the world through painting or drawing. This method, often termed realism, evolved in Europe in the dawn of the modern era. But Impressionism also established various features that were preconditions and characteristics of 20th-century art. For this reason, critics have tended to see Impressionism as either an end or a beginning – or both.

Most of the movement’s principles reveal Impressionism to have been a summation of earlier views and intentions, a conclusion, a peak. What struck most contemporaries as rebellious modernity was in fact closely linked to tradition. Many people today respond to traditionalism of this kind, and with good reason, without being conservative in any narrower

Pierre-Auguste Renoir
Oarsmen at Chatou, 1879
Les canotiers à Chatou
Oil on canvas, 81 x 100 cm
Daulte 305
Washington, National Gallery of Art

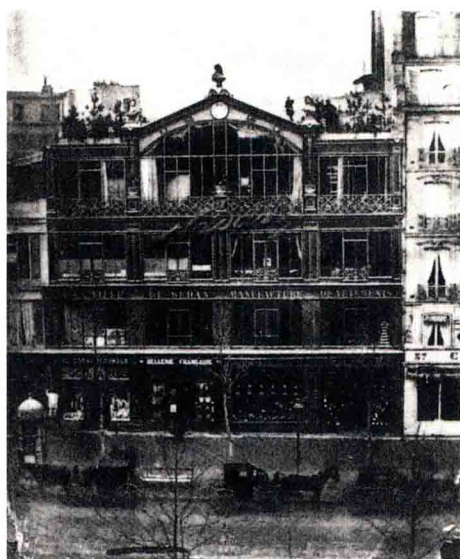


sense of the word. It was not until Post-Impressionism that a fundamental aesthetic upheaval and breakthrough occurred with the “end of scientific perspective” (Fritz Novotny)⁷, when artists departed from an approach long taken for granted, the view that art should reproduce what was actually seen. Taken as a whole, though, Impressionism remains astoundingly contemporary: people today are still struck by the arresting specifics of the paintings. There can be no other explanation for the spectacular numbers that turn out to exhibitions of Impressionist art or for the continuing popularity of Impressionist works with collectors. But since one and the same painting – or “text”, in modern analytic semiotics – can be “read” differently at different times by people with different interests, the present study will include a look at differing ways of reading, then and now.

The Impressionist style of painting first emerged as a definable, shared approach among a small group of young French artists, and it was these artists who were meant by the term – which was originally coined disparagingly. In any account of the movement, the work of Edouard Manet (1832–1883),⁸ Edgar Degas (1834–1917),⁹ Claude Monet (1840–1926),¹⁰ Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919),¹¹ Camille Pissarro (1830–1903),¹² Alfred Sisley (1839–1899),¹³ Frédéric Bazille (1841–1870)¹⁴ and Berthe Morisot (1841–1895)¹⁵ must occupy the central position.¹⁶ These artists produced work over careers of varying lengths. Others who were also involved with the movement deserve more attention than they generally get, however – artists such as Armand Guillaumin (1841–1927),¹⁷ Gustave Caillebotte (1848–1894)¹⁸ or Eva Gonzalès (1849–1883).¹⁹ The Post-Impressionist Paul Cézanne (1839–1906),²⁰ the key figure in the transition from 19th-century to 20th-century art, occupies a special position of his own.

The history of Impressionism would not be complete without the distinctive work of the Neo-Impressionists Georges Seurat (1859–1891),²¹ Paul Signac (1863–1935)²² and their fellows,²³ or of the Post-Impressionists Paul Gauguin (1848–1903),²⁴ Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890)²⁵ and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901).²⁶ A delightful late afterglow of Impressionism came with the *intimisme* of Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947)²⁷ and Edouard Vuillard (1868–1940).²⁸

But the history of Impressionism is not merely a French one. It is European, indeed global, as was demonstrated in 1990 by authors from around the world in “Impressionismus: Eine internationale Kunstbewegung 1860–1920”, edited by the American art critic Norma Broude.²⁹ Impressionism did not derive from French preconditions and circumstances alone, nor would its rapid international spread be explicable if comparable tendencies had not already existed elsewhere.



Photographer Gaspard-Félix Tournachon Nadar's house at Boulevard des Capucines 35. The first Impressionist exhibition of 1874 was held in his studio.

Pierre-Auguste Renoir
The Walk, 1870
La promenade
Oil on canvas, 80 x 64 cm
Daulte 55. Private collection

