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IMPRESSIONISM

Mark Powell-Jones

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with notes by Philip Cooper



Phaidon Press Limited
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Front: Edouard Manet, *Monet Painting in his Floating Studio*, 1874
(Plate 23)

Back: Edgar Degas, *The Dance Class*, 1873–5/6 (Plate 21)

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Impressionism

The Origins of Impressionism

The roots of Impressionism can be found in a number of different and apparently conflicting movements in thought and art. First and foremost, it sprang from the tradition of naturalism in the visual arts, from the idea that the painter's job is to produce a convincing image of reality. This apparently simple aim has within it an unresolved ambiguity: is the convincing image one that shows the world as the artist knows it to be, or is it one that shows it as he and others perceive it? Primitive societies, knowing that a man has two eyes, tend to demand that his image should always have two eyes as well. In the years leading up to the Renaissance, however, painters began to move towards painting scenes not as they knew them to be, but as they would appear from a particular viewpoint, so that a man in profile was shown with only one eye, and a man in the foreground was bigger than a castle in the background. The public, in short, was trained to accept the use of perspective, a convention that came to seem so natural that Europeans were quite surprised to find that to people outside their tradition a drawing of a table in perspective simply looked like a drawing of a crooked table. The achievement of the Impressionists was to match the revolution that occurred in the Renaissance with regard to the representation of form with a revolution in the representation of colour. For the first time in the history of art they made a prolonged and concerted attempt to paint objects not the colour that we know them to be but the colour that we see them.

Naturalism was not, however, popular with the art establishment in France and elsewhere, which believed that mere problems about the representation of reality had been solved once and for all during the Renaissance. That being so, it was felt that the sacred duty of the artist was to search for and express in his painting the ideal, to bring into people's lives precisely that which is lacking in reality. Now traditionally the artist, like any other craftsman, had been at the service of the society in which he lived. Naturalism had flourished only when, as in seventeenth-century Holland, those who paid for the paintings were interested in the representation of reality. The extraordinary decision of the Impressionists to produce work for which not only was there no strong demand, but towards which the public felt active hostility and contempt, can be explained only by reference to the effect of Romanticism.

The Romantics were not in the least concerned with mundane reality but they did have strong and influential views on the relationship of the individual to society and to nature. They expressed what were, in terms of established European thought, two revolutionary views. The first was that an individual's personality was of an importance that transcended any limitations imposed by his place in the social hierarchy, and that it was not only permissible, but in some way rather heroic, to hold views that went clean contrary to



Fig. 1
 Courbet
 Burial at Ornans
 1850. Oil on canvas,
 312 x 663 cm. Paris,
 Musée d'Orsay

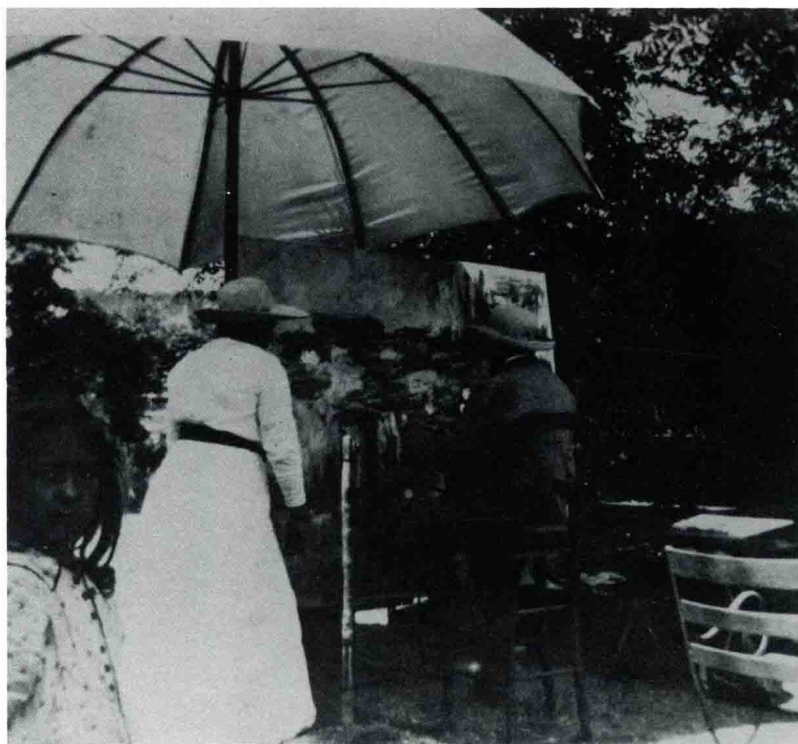
accepted opinion. From this followed the concept of the noble outcast, misunderstood and mistreated by society, which made being heroic in this sense a position that previous generations would have regarded as both pitiable and laughable. The second was that nature is admirable not, as previous generations had tended to believe, in so far as it had been ordered by man, but in and for itself. So, if naturalism provided a tradition and an unresolved problem, Romanticism provided an attitude towards nature that made study of it seem desirable, and a self-image for the artist that made it possible for him to pursue it even in the face of public hostility.

Courbet and the Barbizon School provided a third essential element in the birth of Impressionism – an actual, living example of painters who had already set out on such a path. Courbet, who in his art and opinions totally rejected both Romanticism and Idealism, was nevertheless the epitome of the Romantic outcast. In works like



Burial at Ornans (Fig. 1) he had not only taken it upon himself to represent ordinary people (who were about as likely to be found in the canvases of respectable painters as in the drawing rooms of polite society), but also outraged even those who were prepared to accept the sentimentalized poverty of the peasants in the work of a painter like Millet, by showing the peasants as they actually were. Such outrage derived from a belief (shared equally by Courbet and the régime, which he as a revolutionary republican loathed) that to allow that common people were a fit subject for art was to imply that they were fit to govern, and that to show up official art as a sham was to imply that the structure of the régime was one too. From Courbet's example artists learnt that the representation of reality was not simply a technical exercise, but rather an activity with considerable social and intellectual implications. They also learnt that it was possible for an artist to take on society and win at least widespread notoriety,

Fig. 2
Monet painting at
Giverny with his step-
daughter Blanche
Hoschedé-Monet,
c.1915



and the admiration of a select few.

The Impressionists were not, however, much attracted by Courbet's subject-matter or technique. It was Corot and the Barbizon School who provided examples of painters working towards a sincere understanding of nature. Their work did not in any sense represent a revolution in the history of landscape painting. Turner had demonstrated a more daring approach to problems of atmosphere, by painting the effects of light and mist, and even the Barbizon School's emphasis on work in the open air had been anticipated by the English landscape school. Yet it was these painters that the Impressionists looked up to with admiration, and it was from them and, in Monet's case, Boudin and Jongkind, that they took their subject-matter and approach.

The Early Years

Monet was, from the beginning, the dominant force in the development of Impressionism. It was his profound love of nature and his obstinate belief in the importance of finding the most perfect way of rendering its appearance on canvas that set and kept his friends on the path towards Impressionism, and it was he who continued to develop it with the greatest tenacity right to the end of his life.

Claude Monet was born in 1840 and grew up at Le Havre in Normandy. His talent, rather ironically in view of the fact that his later work showed little or no interest in the human face, first showed itself in juvenile caricatures. These were so successful that he was able to sell them in the shop of a picture-frame maker, and there in 1858 he met Eugène Boudin. Although Monet initially detested the older artist's seascapes he finally accepted his invitation to go sketching in the country. It was in the country, he later recalled, that 'My eyes were finally opened and I really understood nature: I learned at the same time to love it.'

In 1859, at Boudin's suggestion, Monet went to Paris. He decided to remain there in order to become a painter but, with a radical arrogance

almost unbelievable in a half-educated young provincial, declined to take what was then the only recognized training at the École des Beaux-Arts. Instead, he continued to study landscape and started to draw the nude at a private establishment, the Académie Suisse. In 1860 he was drafted to Algeria as a conscript in the French army.

In 1862 Monet, who said later that 'the impression of light and colour' that he had received in Africa 'contained the germ of my future researches', became ill and was bought out of the army. At home in Le Havre in the summer of that year he met the Dutch painter, Johan Barthold Jongkind. 'From that time', Monet recalled, 'he was my real master ... it was to him that I owe the final education of my eye', and indeed Monet's land- and seascapes of the 1860s are closer in their boldness and solidity to Jongkind's than to Boudin's relatively timid work (Fig. 3).

Monet's father insisted that if he wanted an allowance he must enter the studio of a successful painter. Reluctantly he agreed, and went to work under Charles Gleyre, the most popular and lenient of the academic teachers. There he met Frédéric Bazille, a rich young man from the south of France, Alfred Sisley and Auguste Renoir.

Renoir was unique among the Impressionists in coming from a poor family, and in having grown up in the poorer quarters of central Paris. He was apprenticed as a painter of porcelain, and when the business closed down, he managed to earn good money by painting blinds and mural decorations in cafés. By the age of 21 he had earned enough to keep himself as an art student, and passed the entrance exams for the École des Beaux-Arts with high marks. He settled down to work in Gleyre's studio, where, as he later recalled, 'I stayed quietly in my corner, very attentive, very docile, studying the model, listening to the master.' Indeed had it not been for Renoir's unacademic love of bright colours and the disturbing influence of Monet, he and his fellow pupils – Sisley, who intended to compete for the Prix de Rome, and Bazille – all might have become successful establishment painters.

In 1863 Henri Fantin-Latour, impressed by the fluency of Renoir's talent, first led him out of the studios. 'You can never copy the masters enough', he told him, and sent him off to the Louvre. Monet preferred a different avenue of escape and set out with Bazille to paint in the



Fig. 3
Jongkind
Sainte Adresse
1862. Oil on canvas,
27 x 41 cm.
Private collection



Fig. 4
Renoir
Self-portrait
1876. Oil on canvas,
73 x 56 cm. Cambridge,
MA, Fogg Art Museum

country, at Chailly on the edge of the Fontainebleau forest near Barbizon. In the following year he went again to Chailly, this time bringing with him Renoir and Sisley as well as Bazille. This was their introduction to nature, and, under the influence of Monet and of Diaz, a Barbizon painter with whom Renoir made friends, they began to develop an interest in landscape.

Back in Paris it was the work of Edouard Manet that exerted the greatest influence on the young painters. Manet, after the considerable success of his *Guitar Player* at the Salon of 1861 was refused, along with a large number of other painters, at the Salon of 1863. The resulting outcry led to the opening of the Salon des Refusés, at which he showed a painting entitled *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* (Plate 2). This, by showing naked women, not in a safely allegorical context, but having a picnic in the country with men clothed in contemporary dress, caused considerable scandal. It also identified Manet in the public's mind as the leader of radical tendencies in art.

Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe interested Monet, not for the scandal it caused, but because it highlighted, although failed to solve, the problems of integrating figures into landscapes painted in the open air. These problems he set out to solve in 1865 and 1866 in a series of studies for a painting to which he gave the same title.

In the late 1860s, Monet and Renoir also became interested in painting scenes of Paris. To an extent these also reflected the influence of Manet, who in the *Music in the Tuileries* (Plate 1) had provided the most successful answer yet to Baudelaire's plea for a 'painter of modern life'. They also show the effect of the work of photographers like Nadar. For in these cityscapes, as in photographs, scenes are taken from unexpected angles, and people are represented as stick-like figures, more part of the urban scenery than individuals. The programme for the painter of modern life laid out by the literary critics was, however, like all programmes, anathema to the essentially pragmatic approach of the Impressionists. It was left to artists standing rather apart from the mainstream of Impressionism, like Manet himself and above all Degas, to capture the beauty of contemporary Parisian life.

The Development of Impressionism

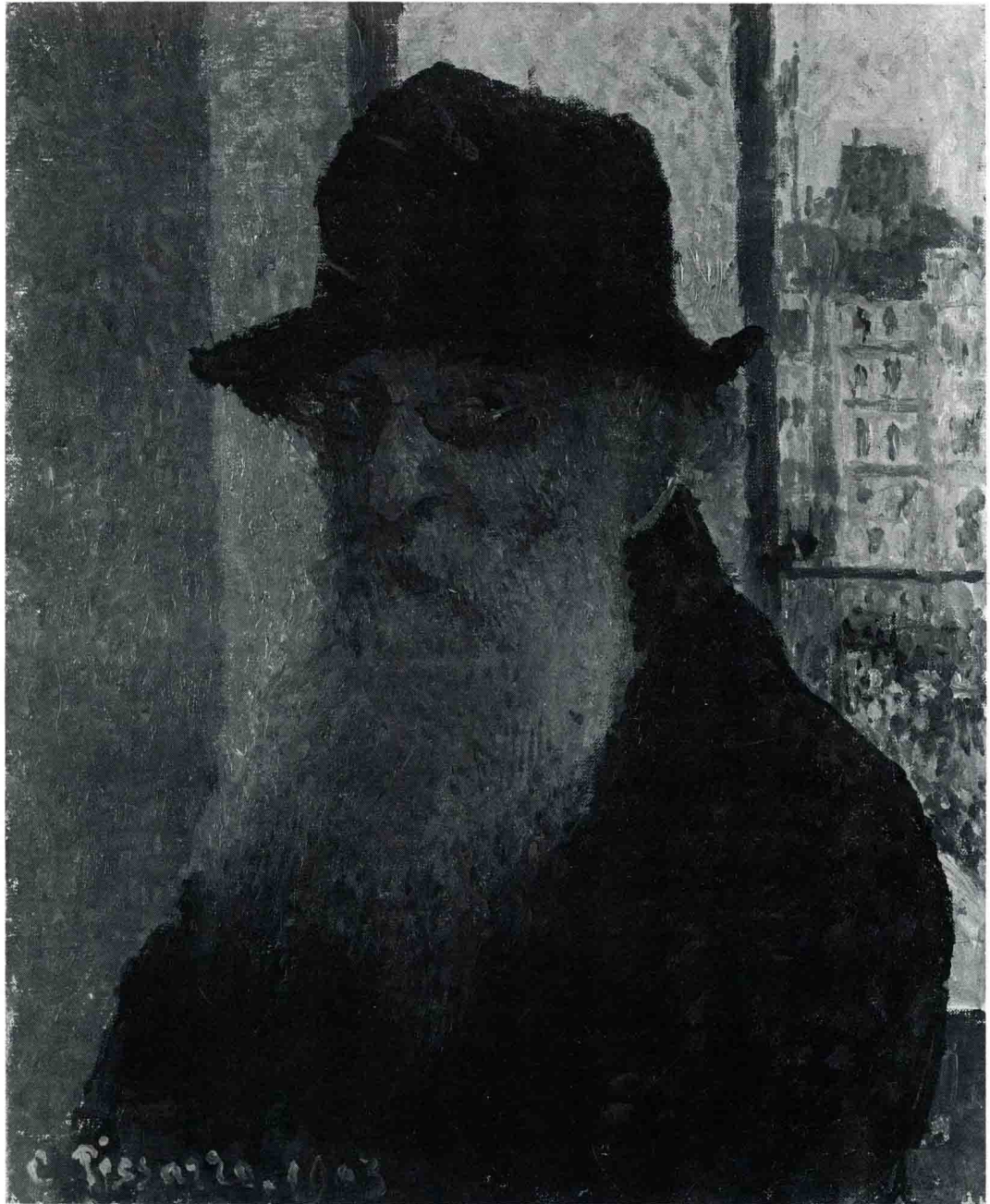
It was during the years immediately before and after the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune that Monet, Renoir and Pissarro developed that approach to the representation of open-air scenes that came to be termed 'Impressionism'.

Fundamental to the development of Impressionism was the belief that the sensation received in the open air, before the motif, was of primary importance, and that to work up a landscape in the studio was inevitably to dull and even falsify the impression obtained on the spot. Monet, following the example of Boudin, was, as we have seen, the first of the group to realize the virtues of this approach. It was he who introduced his friends to it and who maintained their faith in its value. As a result of working in the open air, Monet and his friends became increasingly convinced that the sombre coloration and brown shadows sanctioned by traditional landscapists were untrue to nature. In an effort to purify and brighten his colours Monet, following the example of Manet, began to prime his canvas with a white ground instead of with the sombre base used by even so radical a painter as Courbet. Renoir, with his innate love for bright colours, and Pissarro, who proclaimed that it was necessary to use only the three primary colours and their derivatives, also moved towards a brighter palette.

Fig. 5
Photograph of Manet
by Nadar, c.1865.



Fig. 6
Pissarro
Self-portrait
1903. Oil on canvas,
41 x 33 cm. London,
Tate Gallery



Through their close and continuous observation of nature, Monet and Renoir became aware that shadows are in fact coloured by the objects around them, and in Monet's *Terrace at the Seaside* and Renoir's *Lise*, both of 1867, this knowledge is already apparent. In order to develop it they liked to work on snow scenes, for snow being pure white, and thus colourless, has the advantage of showing up with particular clarity the colours that are reflected on to it.

In the struggle to represent nature as it is perceived, rather than as we know it to be, Monet, Renoir, Pissarro and their friends tried to be as humble as possible before it. They wanted to allow nature to speak through them rather than impose their preconceived ideas on it. Paintings must, they felt, record not, for example, a tree, a winding road and some rooftops, but those impressions received from them, which would in turn be interpreted by the viewer in the same way that he would interpret the impressions received directly from the scene. In the past a painter interpreted and then painted the impressions he had received as objects. Now the painter would renounce the act of

interpretation and paint only the impression.

In an effort to rid themselves of the tendency to think in terms of delineating objects with lines, which resulted from the artist's pre-emptive interpretation of what he saw, the Impressionists needed to select subjects to which a linear approach was clearly inapplicable. As snow showed up the impossibility of the colourless shadow, so water, mist, masses of blossom, or grass rippling in the breeze showed up that of the outline. Working at La Grenouillère, a popular bathing place near Paris, and, after the war, at Argenteuil, Monet and Renoir grew close to each other both in style and subject-matter, as shown by Renoir's *La Grenouillère* (Plate 10) and *Path through the Tall Grasses* and Monet's *Boats at Argenteuil* and *Poppy Field at Argenteuil* (Fig. 7). Increasingly, in the attempt to represent ever-changing reflections in the ripples of the water they preferred to use short and even comma-like brush strokes. Using these to place small, pure dabs of colour side by side, they were able to create on canvas the vibrant interplay between different colours that direct as well as reflected light produces in nature. Through this technique they were able to take as their subject not the objects themselves, but the light and atmosphere that surround objects, thereby giving their works a unity that was quite independent of composition.

The development of Renoir's and Monet's work was observed and appreciated by their friends. After Pissarro had met and painted with Monet in London during the war, his work, such as *Lower Norwood*,

Fig. 7
Monet
Poppy Field at Argenteuil
1873. Oil on canvas,
50 x 65 cm. Paris,
Musée d'Orsay





Fig. 8
 Pissarro
 The Red Roofs (Côte
 St Denis at Pontoise)
 1877. Oil on canvas,
 54 x 65 cm. Paris, Musée
 d'Orsay

London, Effect of the Snow, Entrance to the Village of Voisins (Plate 16), *Village near Pontoise*, and *The Red Roofs* (Fig. 8) moved strongly in the direction that Monet's work had taken, though retaining a feel for construction and for the solidity of things that was his own. Sisley and Berthe Morisot also moved away from the influence of Corot toward a fully Impressionist approach, as shown by Sisley's *L'Ile de Grande-Jatte* and *The Road Seen from the Chemin de Sèvres*, and Morisot's *Field of Corn* and *In the Garden*, and even Manet when he visited Monet at Argenteuil in 1874 followed their example.