A Modern Vision

Impressionism and Post-Impressionism

at

The Art Institute of Chicago

Collection of The Elizabeth Stone
Robson Teacher Resource Center

KRAFT GENERAL FOODS
EDUCATION CENTER

The Art Institute of Chicago

Department of Museum Education

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INTRODUCTION

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Impressionism and Post-Impressionism at The Art Institute of Chicago

The works represented in *A Modern Vision* come from one of the largest, richest, and best known collections of French Impressionism and Post-Impressionism in the world. Shortly after the present building of the Art Institute opened its doors in 1893, Chicago collectors came forward to donate works, making this also one of the earliest collections. Chicago's early collectors of Impressionism were businessmen and women whose tastes varied widely. The most important of them, Mr. and Mrs. Potter Palmer, formed a collection of works by Monet, Renoir, Sisley, Manet, Degas and Pissarro. Before 1900, Mrs. Palmer had purchased nearly 100 paintings by Monet alone, and her holdings of works by other artists were superb. Most of the Impressionist works in her collections were acquired between 1888 and 1895, when she purchased truly staggering quantities of paintings on her annual trip to Paris and on her more frequent visits to New York, many chosen with exhibition at the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition in mind.

Numerous works from the Palmers' collection were loaned over the years to the Art Institute, and after Mrs. Palmer's death in 1916, a representative sample was chosen for the museum's permanent collection by the family and museum staff. The Palmer bequest was accessioned by the Art Institute in 1922. At the same time, Robert Allerton presented the first important group of Degas drawings and the Frederick Clay and Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection was presented with which included important examples by van Gogh, Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec, Cezanne and Seurat. The Bartlett gift requires that the works be hung together, resulting in a gallery in the museum with a surprising array of late nineteenth-century French art, anchored at one end by Seurat's great work, *Sunday on the Grande Jatte, 1884*. The Art Institute's acquisition of Impressionist paintings, drawings, and prints has continued to the present day making the collection exemplary.
THE PRELUDE

The Academy and Salon

Entering there, the visitors find themselves at the foot of a magnificent staircase of white stone, on ascending which they arrive at the exhibition of pictures...The halls at the two ends open upon two other magnificent staircases, where the wearied traveller may refresh himself with brioches and babas and drink a glass of Malaga or Xerxes to his liking. A plan much to be recommended is to eat a baba and drink a glass of Malaga at one end, then to march steadily to the other, and repeat the dose. You then descend at the other end of the building into the garden, which occupies the whole of the immense nave and there, under the broad glass roof, you see a great number of statues...after looking at these the majority of spectators stop at the restaurant there established.

The Salon, *Fine Arts Quarterly Review*, 1863

Well into the nineteenth century the annual Salon was a major social event for Parisians. In the vast skylit halls of the Palais de l'Industrie, originally built for the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1855, artists, journalists, dealers, the social elite and the curious discussed and considered contemporary French art. Without the communications media we have today, the Salon was the only means for the public to see the actual paintings which were densely stacked on the walls, often up to the ceiling. Among visitors to the Salon of 1863 were young aspiring artists, whose sympathies and passions were far different from those represented by approved Salon art. The courage and force of conviction of those young artists would help to change the course of western art forever.

The same democratic ideals that inspired an end to monarchy rule with the Revolution of 1798, sought to change the world of art. From its founding in the seventeenth century by King Louis XIV, and his administrator Colbert, the Salon had upheld tradition and served special interests. A hierarchy of subject matter, drawn from ancient history, the bible, and mythology reinforced and promoted the power and greatness of the monarchy and State.

The way paintings and sculptures looked was controlled by a code of aesthetics which dictated the "correct" way to depict emotions, the seamless application of color and paint finish, and the appropriate use of landscape. The Impressionists both challenged the ideals of academic art and inherited its rich legacy. The artists who were their mentors such as Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes often directed their work by providing paintings and

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sculptures to be studied or copied in the Louvre or in the galleries at the Palace of Versailles.

Realism

Having been rejected from the Salon of 1855, Gustave Courbet (Cor-bay, 1819-1877) erected a tent not far from the Palais de l'Industrie where he could exhibit his work, so that the people could decide its merit. Above the door he hung a sign roughly painted with a single word, REALISM. Courbet's work represented a critical moment when literary and visual artists produced work in direct opposition to the ideals of the Academy and Salon.

The realist movement was tied to the rise of democratic sentiments following the Revolution of 1789. These artists hoped to replace crumbling French institutions and traditional economic relationships with what they saw as the true source of the country's strength and hope - the simple honesty and virtue of the common man. In the words of the critic and author Champfleury "Every young man in 1830 was fired by the last spark of the Revolution." The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed a continual groundswell of popular dissent against four successive political regimes. The result was the revolution of 1848, not surprisingly the same year in which Karl Marx and Georg Hegel published the Communist Manifesto.

A few years earlier the invention of lithography contributed to the founding and influence of a popular press and the first satirical weekly, La Silhouette (1829). Gradually a new literary genre, the popular novel, emerged. These roman de moeurs or novels including minute vignettes of private life were passionately read by an increasingly literate French public. As never before, the French people began to understand the forces which shaped their lives and created inhumane living and working conditions in the burgeoning city of Paris.

The satirical illustrations of Honoré Daumier (Doh-me-ay, slide three) and the illustrated novels of Honoré Balzac and Emile Zola, provided sincere and passionate portraits of the people of France, from peasants and soldiers to Parisians and provincial types. The new science of physiognomy, or study of human temperament and character from outward physical features, encouraged artists to describe the people and world around them.

The same forces affecting French literature also resulted in reform of the Ecole des Beaux Arts bringing an end to artistic hierarchy as it had been known at the Academy. Artists left

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Paris during decades of bloodshed, and physical squalor, to live in the countryside. There they sought a return to the nation’s humble, and more democratic origins. Jean Francois Millet (slide two) moved to the Fountainbleau forests in 1849 and gathered other artists around him. The new art of Courbet and Millet was to give dignity to the life and labors of the common man.
Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes (1750-1819)

SLIDE ONE: Alexander at the Tomb of Cyrus the Great, 1796

Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes taught at the Academy and dedicated his work to the art of landscape painting. He studied at the Royal Academy of Toulouse under the history painter Despax and the miniaturist Bouton, and continued his training in Paris and Italy, returning to Italy numerous times to sketch and study the landscape. Valenciennes' life and career embodied the ideals of the era of the Enlightenment, a time when social worth and status were sought through an unprecedented interest in the Classical past. Scholarly subjects, including heroes from antiquity and scenes from foreign lands, attracted patron support and assured the artist's reputation.

In 1796, when Valenciennes was at the height of his career, he painted two landscapes for the Paris Salon, Mount Athos, carved as a monument for Alexander and Alexander at the Tomb of Cyrus the Great. Both paintings represent episodes from the life of Alexander the Great. Scenes from ancient Roman and Greek history were popular in the eighteenth century, with the excavation of Pompeii and the publishing of ancient histories written by Plutarch (46-120 A.D.) and Strabo (63 B.C.-19 A.D.). Alexander (356-323 BC) was the Macedonian king and conqueror who founded over 70 cities, overthrew the Persian empire and laid the foundations for the spread of Hellenism - Greek Civilization throughout the Near East.

In 1793, several years after Valenciennes' painting was exhibited, Napoleon began military ventures in Europe, North America, and Egypt with the same thirst for conquest as Alexander. It isn't surprising that Napoleon aspired to the accomplishments and persona of Alexander, referring to the legendary hero as the greatest general in history. So, over 100 years after the founding of the Salon, art continued to use subjects from history to reinforce ideas of power and greatness.

Typical of artists and patrons of the time, Valenciennes' prestige came from his knowledge of the world, studies of literature, nature, and archeology. Alexander at the Tomb of Cyrus the Great is an example of the "academic landscape," an imagined event in history composed with utmost attention to authentic detail. The palace buildings and tomb of Cyrus (550-529 B.C.) another great conqueror were described in the histories, and to make the tomb authentic Valenciennes added decorative relief sculpture he had seen in reference books that included engravings of famous sites of Rome, Persepolis and Syria. He took
great care to research military dress and armor that would have been used in Alexander's time.

Valenciennes chose the moment when Alexander discovers that the tomb of Cyrus has been broken into and robbed. Bottom right is the tomb's cover, thrown aside to reveal the ancient inscription recorded by the Greek historian Plutarch: "O man, whosoever thou art and whencesoever thou comest, for I know that thou wilt come, I am Cyrus, and I won for the Persians their empire. Do not, therefore, begrudge me this little earth which covers my body." Plutarch continues, "These words, then, deeply affected Alexander, who was reminded of the uncertainty and mutability of life."

The hero's contrived stance, and melodramatic sweep of the arms convey tragic dismay and shock. The Magi, an esteemed wise man who had been left to guard Cyrus's tomb, stands chained, being led off to punishment, while other Magi raise their arms and heads, wailing in despair. A man to the left retreats over the wall, making us wonder if he might know the party responsible for the robbery.

The dark storm clouds, and contrasts of bright sun and dark shadows, add to the drama of the moment. Valenciennes's colors are earthy and muted, except for the red, gold, and silver attire of the hero. Layer after layer of paint has been carefully applied. The surface appears seamless and lacquered; no brushstrokes are visible. The scene is set in an imagined far eastern landscape, with the line of tents carefully leading our eye from the hero to the scenic mountains, the sea and horizon beyond. The landscape is a perfect stage set, a carefully contrived dramatic moment in history.

**Francois Millet (1814-1875)**

SLIDE TWO: *Peasants Bringing Home a Calf Born in the Fields*, 1864

The son of Normandy peasants, Francois Millet was very familiar with the hard life of the rural farmer. As a youth, however, he concentrated more on his art, literature, and Latin studies than on his farm chores. In 1837, Millet moved to Paris to study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, but soon became friends with artists interested in painting the land and common people of France.

In 1849, Millet moved to Barbizon, south of Paris, at the edge of the Fontainebleau Forest, where he lived with his wife and nine children until his death in 1875. Millet lived a meager existence but dedicated himself to painting surrounding fields and farms such as the

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event shown in *Peasants Bringing Home a Calf Born in the Fields*. In the scene, two men ceremoniously carry a newborn calf into a farmyard with the mother cow and milkmaid trailing behind. Young children stand in the doorway of the farmhouse eagerly waiting for the calf's arrival. The mother cow stretches her neck and lovingly licks the calf as the hazy, early morning sun caresses the figures and diffuses their outlines. Soft, feather-like tufts of grass peep out from between the cracks of the gray stone gateway.

Although a gentle and loving moment the figures and setting are marked by the harshness of peasant life. The sloping shoulders and hats of the men in the forefront and their sagging, ragged clothing all evoke a melancholy sense of weariness. The sunlight emphasizes the bent silhouettes of these men while gently pushing them from behind like an invisible hand. Their solemnity contrasts greatly with the healthy pink cheeks of the milkmaid and the smiling cherub faces of the excited children. Unlike Valenciennes' work, the forms are not described in precision and detail, but are roughed out with a coarseness which echoes a peasants' labor. Millet's palette of warm browns and muted greens seems drawn from the earth. In the midst of what would normally be a joyous celebration of new life, Millet, the artist, reminds us that these figures are trapped in a gloomy, never-ending cycle of hard labor and poverty.

Criticism followed the first showing of *Peasants Bringing Home a Calf Born in the Fields* in the 1864 Salon. The coarseness of these peasants was disagreeable to some Salon viewers. In addition they felt it was near blasphemy to portray the birth of a calf with the attention and care one would give to the depiction of the Christ child. The fact that these critics and Salon elitists felt threatened is evidence of Millet's effectiveness at portraying life as he saw it.

By 1867, however, a new appreciation of Millet's work emerged and began to influence contemporary artists. Millet taught the Impressionists to see and seize what was tangible, and express the eternal and beautiful in real life.

**Honoré Daumier** (1808-1879)

SLIDE THREE: *The Legislative Belly*, 1834

Like his contemporaries, Honoré Daumier was impressed by the contradiction between the mighty forces set loose by the Revolution of 1789 and the meager, less humane existence of most French citizens. His strong political consciousness and talents as a draughtsman

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were expressed in lithography, a new printing process which made cheap multiple prints possible and helped the artist to become a powerful adversary of early nineteenth-century French authorities. By the age of twenty-four, Daumier had already served time in Saint Pelagie, the Parisian prison for literary and artistic rebels, militant revolutionaries, and democratic reformers.

Daumier’s fans awaited his return from prison to his job as illustrator of La Caricature newspaper so they could continue to enjoy his satirical lithographs of King Louis Philippe, (ruled 1830 - 1848) and his government. After 1832, Daumier’s work looked at the French parliament, resulting in his series of portrait busts and the group composition, The Legislative Belly (1834).

After spending months in the viewing gallery of the parliament, the artist began by making thirty-six small portrait busts of his subjects, of which Monsieur Prunelle is an example. Daumier memorized every feature of these shrewd men who voted for the construction of railways in which they owned shares, swapped jobs for votes, and feathered their nests with political pluckings. These were men growing paunches and losing hair, rising inappropriately to a point of order or contentedly sleeping out the session. Modeling their sagging jowls, pompous gestures, and idiotic facial expressions, Daumier sought to pinch and pull from clay the character and essence of each man. The series of heads some five to seven inches high were originally painted by Daumier and shown in the office windows of La Caricature, much to the public’s enjoyment. Using these clay figures as models, he created the elaborate lithograph of the legislators shown in Slide three.

The portly figure in the foreground can be recognized as Mr. Prunelle (Mr. Prune) by his mop of hair and bulging belly. Behind Prunelle, Daumier has arranged thirty-five members of the bourgeois legislature in four receding tiers. Working carefully on the sensitive surface of the lithographic stone, he used a blunt crayon for the darker tones, a thinner and sharper one for the lighter tones, and a needle or knife blade to accent a few selected bellies. With a slow build-up of cross-hatched tones he suggested the depth and atmosphere surrounding each man or the deep texture of a poised silk top hat.

Daumier exaggerated each pose and gesture as men chat, smile, slide into stupor, or blow their noses. While the features of each man are individualized, the sagging, overstuffed silhouettes spread themselves one after the other along the curved rail of the bench,
revealing a united physiognomy of type or profile. Daumier gives us the clues we need to draw our own opinions of each man, and of the group.

Daumier executed the largest body of his work in lithography. This printing process invented in 1798, revolutionized book and newspaper illustration in the early nineteenth century. The speed and directness with which a drawing could be reproduced was ideal. The technology gave artists, such as Daumier, Edgar Degas, Mary Cassatt, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, great freedom to experiment with the tonal range of the lithographic crayon, while capturing the images with potent immediacy. With the rapid spread of lithographic shops in Paris, this low-cost reproduction process encouraged a new conception for art, an art for the man in the street.

After the king enacted strict censorship laws, Daumier turned to satire of social life, creating such series as Les Baigneuses (The Bathers) and Les Bons Bourgeois (The Good Bourgeois). He returned to political satire at the time of the 1848 revolution and overthrow of Louis Philippe. He is said to have made more than 4,000 lithographs out of both demand from his admiring public and financial necessity. In the 1870s he became practically blind and spent his remaining years living on a small pension allowed him by the State in a house given to him by Barbizon artist Corot.

**Key Concepts**

- The Paris Salon, founded by Louis XIV, was a controlled forum for artists and steeped in a 200 year tradition that determined appropriate subject matter, the correct use technique and specified ways of depicting emotion.

- Political revolution was the backdrop for a wave of new thought. The new popular press awakened Parisians to their inhumane living conditions and the current state of political oppression. Many artists soon sought to paint what they saw as the source of the country’s strength and hope - its people and landscape.

- Paintings like Millet’s *Peasants Bringing Home a Calf Born in the Fields* struck strong chords for the young Impressionists, yet the traditional Salon found them coarse, even blasphemous. From Millet and Daumier, the Impressionists learned to express the beauty found in scenes from contemporary French life.

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Discussion Questions

Slide One: Alexander at the Tomb of Cyrus the Great, 1796
- This is a story from the life of Alexander the Great. He has just discovered that the tomb of an earlier great leader, Cyrus, King of the Persian Empire, has been robbed. How is this painting like a play you would see in the theater? How do the sky, light, and gestures contribute to the drama of the moment? How does the artist focus our attention on the hero? What do you "hear" Alexander and the crowd in the background saying?

- Notice how the artist has created a sense of deep space. Locate the foreground, the middle ground, and the background. How long would it take you to walk to the distant castle? What landmarks would you notice along the way?

- Valenciennes taught for the French Royal Academy which required its students to paint in very specific ways. Consider the technique used here. Think about: the size of brush, the kind of strokes used to describe the forms, the use of color and light, and the way the composition is organized.

- Geometry is important to this composition. Find the dominant shapes and the visible and invisible lines that unite and order the composition.

Slide Two: Peasants Bringing Home a Calf Born in the Fields, 1864
- Compare and contrast this painting with the Valenciennes. Describe the scene. What is different in the focus of the painting?

- What do you notice first and why? Where does the procession begin? Imagine and describe the sounds, textures, and smells you might experience in this scene.

- How does Millet invites the viewer into this painting?

- What do you think will happen next in this scene?

- Trace the silhouettes of the figures with your finger. What do the silhouettes say about the life and work of the farm family?

- What kind of lines does Millet use most in this painting? Do they seem hard and angular, or soft and rounded?

- Remember how expansive the scene was in the Valenciennes painting? How is the space different in this scene?

- Which painting encourages the most participation? What do you find in the technique or the composition that has made you feel this way?

Slide Three: The Legislative Belly, 1834
11. Study the facial features, gestures and posture of each man. Select several and see if you can imitate the manner in which they would speak and/or what issues they would discuss. Would you put the fate of your country, your hopes and dreams for a democratic republic in the hands of these men?

12. List ways that realism as a literary and artistic style made artists look differently at their world.

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Suggested Activity- Create a Caricature

Materials:
magazines or newspapers featuring contemporary events, eg. People, Newsweek, Life;

- paper
drawing materials.

- Ask students to look through the magazines with an eye to finding people (politicians, movie or rock stars, yuppies or entrepreneurs) whose features and character could be exaggerated and commented upon through caricature.

- Cut out the image and look for ways the face or body could be exaggerated using simplification, changing the scale, color, texture, or quality of lines. A viewfinder could be used to help frame the image.

- Examine the Daumier print to consider the full range of values and textures that have been used to accent facial features and to create form and space. Notice the scratching tool used for accent. Optional: Examine works of other artists who have incorporated caricature into their work such as Leonardo da Vinci, Pablo Picasso, or Jean Dubuffet.

- When students plan their own compositions, ask them to think about the size of the figure(s) in relation to the edge of the paper and concentrate on a means of using distortion, exaggeration, and emphasis to stress the character's personality or essence.

- When caricatures are completed let students name the portraits, perhaps combining the real name with ideas suggested through the exaggerated facial features. Students could also write a limerick about their character, with half-serious, half-silly lines. Mount the portraits. Let the students in the class try to guess the identity of the caricatures.

- If you wanted to be an artist of modern life what ideas would you borrow from the work of Daumier.
IMPRESSIONISM

Seeking a Modern Vision

Numerous complaints have reached the Emperor of the subject of works of art which have been refused by the jury of the Exhibition. His Majesty, wishing to let the public judge the legitimacy of these complaints, has decided that the rejected works shall be exhibited in another part of the Palais de L'Industrie. This Exhibition will be voluntary, and artists who do not wish to participate need only inform the administration...

April 24, 1863, Moniteur universel

By 1863, there was such pressure on the French government because of its exclusion of so many artists from the salon, that the Emperor approved a "Salon des Refusés" where the work of all artists would be available for the public to see. The Academy's authority as arbiters of "excellence" in art was over. Young students enrolled at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts participated in heated discussions over the future directions of art. Among them, attending the less expensive private classes of the academic painter Charles Gleyre (glare), were Claude Monet (moh-nay), Pierre Auguste Renoir (r'nr warh), Frederic Bazille (bah zeeel), and Alfred Sisley (siz lee). Gleyre's traditional techniques seemed to be a dead end to the young artists, who longed to record nature and everyday scenes based on their own close observations. In 1863 Monet urged his fellow students to leave Gleyre's studio, stating, "Let's get away from here. The place is unhealthy and lacks sincerity." He convinced Bazille, Renoir and Sisley to join Millet and other Barbizon painters south of Paris, in the forests of Fontainebleau.

As the number of young artists with similar interests expanded, they found favorite painting spots and cafes, such as the Café Guerbois, where they could meet and discuss the problems and challenges posed by their work. In many ways they respected and learned from traditional painting masters seen during regular visits and painting sessions at the Louvre. They studied and argued about academic theories, admired and visited Delacroix, and observed the commitment of the Barbizon painters to the simple natural beauty of the French countryside and its people.

In the wake of the scientific and industrial revolution, the nineteenth century witnessed an explosion of products on the marketplace and the rise of a middle class which had access to a lifestyle undreamed of earlier in the century. It was members of this class who became the patrons of Impressionism.

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As the Industrial Revolution gathered pace, a number of technological innovations greatly influenced the development of Impressionism. Ready-mixed paints in the tubes allowed artists to move their work outdoors; they abandoned the traditional use of a sombre dark brown primer or undercoat to prime canvases in white or other pale colors. This technique gave colors a greater luminosity, and ultimately led to artists to view the primer as having a tonal value all its own.

Part of the drive to record the spontaneous rather than the contrived came from the invention of the camera. Until the 1840s artists interested in capturing moments in time were dependent on rapid sketching. The camera provided the "image of magical instantaneity," as Degas described it. It was no longer critical that painters acquire skills purely for the need of painstaking reproduction. They became free to explore the nature and problems of painting itself. The camera's unselective eye taught artists to view composition differently. The first aerial pictures Nadar took from his balloon above the city of Paris, or the first animal motion studies made by Eadweard Muybridge provided artists with new and exciting viewpoints. Soon the central focal point or "theatre of action" was replaced in paintings with the same "slice of life" imaging of the camera.

Mid-nineteenth century painters also felt the impact of Japan's entry into the European market and at the Paris Expositions Universelles (World's Fairs) of 1867 and 1878, studied the display of Japanese prints and decorative arts. The cultural community became intrigued with the attitudes and values of the exotic island nation and responded with theatre like Gilbert and Sullivan's The Mikado and Puccini's Madame Butterfly. Painted fans became the vogue, providing income for the young Impressionist artists, who soon became avid collectors and admirers of Japanese woodblock prints. Inspired by their own observations of urban life, the camera and Japanese prints, artists began to crop a scene more arbitrarily hinting at action going on outside a painting's immediate frame.

The First Impressionist Exhibition
The 1860s were tough years for the young artists. The more daring they became, the less the critics and the Salon jury liked their work. The Salon exhibitions continued to place paintings by the new artists in obscure corners. Seeking an alternative to the conservative Salon, young artists began to discuss, and finally to organize an exhibition to market their own work. In 1873, Monet picked up Bazille's suggestion of a group exhibition. Through the joint effort of thirty artists, a group exhibition opened in the studio of friend and photographer Nadar on April 14, 1874.

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The walls exploded with color and the critics exploded with laughter. The critics thought the paintings were sloppy and without detail, in other words, unfinished. The subject matter appeared insignificant, even vulgar; messy brushstrokes were visible, even bare canvas. Unfavorable criticism discouraged public sales. With scorn, a critic used Monet's painting *Impression: Sunrise* to give these "ridiculous" artists a name. To the critics an impression was only a vague blob, not a real painting, and they used the term "Impressionists" as an insult. The exhibition was not a financial success but a group identity emerged. All of the artists were driven by a particular modern vision, one which would be affected by advances in science and technology and yet also respond to major historical forces shaping modern France. The following discussion of Impressionist works is divided into three areas of aesthetic concern: (1) Truth to Nature (2) People and Relationships (3) The Modern Metropolis.

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TRUTH to NATURE

I remember his once saying to me: "When you go out to paint, try to forget what objects you have before you—a tree, a house, a field, or whatever. Merely think, here is a little square of blue, here is an oblong of pink, here is a streak of yellow, and paint it just as it looks to you, the exact color and shape, until it gives your own naive impression of the scene before you." He said he wished he had been born blind and then had suddenly gained his sight so that he could have begun to paint in this way without knowing what the objects were that he saw before him.

Lilla Cabot Perry, quoting Monet, 1927

The landscape of the rural countryside and suburbs of Paris became a favorite subject matter of such artists as Claude Monet, Camille Pisarro, Alfred Sisley, and Auguste Renoir. In part, the French landscape represented a retreat from all that was "modern" in Paris. Under Napoleon III, Paris as we know it today, with broad avenues, boulevards, parks, and monuments was redesigned and rebuilt, replacing the quaint and rustic quarters with clean cut, wide, and airy spaces. Like their fellow Parisians, the young artists enjoyed taking the new train lines to the colorful restaurants and swimming holes along the Seine river or farther afield to developing beachside resorts along the Normandy or Brittany coast.

They brought to the countryside all of the mania for observation seen in the work of Realist artists and Naturalist writers. New paint colors in tubes and new theories about color and perception fascinated the young artists and seemed to justify their passion for plein-aire (out of doors) painting. Being true to nature meant capturing the color spectrum of sunlight. Instead of mixing exact colors on the palette, colors could be organized side by side on the canvas in order to let the spectator's eyes do the mixing. (A purple could be produced by placing small patches of red and blue close together.) Looking at the paintings up close, colors seem to be applied randomly and forms unrecognizable, but images become clearer, more "true" to the glance of the eye, at a distance. Paintings of serene country landscapes gained a vibrancy and life, captivating the eye with contrasting light intensities.

Truth to nature also encouraged a new sensibility toward time and its subtle effect on the environment. Light effects change quickly, causing the Impressionist artists to make repeated visits to the same site. Monet was painting poplar trees one afternoon and said the light he wanted to capture lasted only seven minutes, requiring him to bring several canvases to the site so he could move from one to the other as the light changed. Working to capture this "instantly" forced the artists to paint extremely fast and in many different

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ways; with short quick strokes, layering the paint, putting bright bold colors next to each other, sometimes spreading the paint with palette knives, or even squeezing strands of colors from the tubes directly onto the canvas. The one artist whose life's work embodied the Impressionist's quest for truth to nature and an obsession with the effect of light was Claude Monet.

**Claude Monet** (1840-1926)
Although born in Paris in 1840, Monet grew up in Le Havre, close to what became two of his favorite painting motifs—the sea and the Seine river valley. His artistic career began as a teenager, drawing caricatures for pocket money. He became seriously interested in painting around 1857 when he met and studied under Eugene Boudin, whose land and seascapes painted in *plein-air* (out-of-doors) were to have a major influence on the young artist. After traveling to Algeria for military service in 1861, Monet returned to Paris to study with the academic painter Charles Gleyre. At Gleyre’s studio, Monet became friends with Renoir, Sisley and Bazille and together they formed what was to become the nucleus of the Impressionist group. However, Gleyre's traditional style of painting soon became suffocating to the vigorous and creative Monet, and he left the studio after about two years.

SLIDE FOUR: *On The Seine at Bennecourt*, 1868
Monet painted *On the Seine at Bennecourt* in 1868 while staying in Gloanec, near Bennecourt. It is one of the earliest paintings by Monet in the Impressionist style. His future wife, Camille, is seated on the riverbank, gazing across the water at the town of Bennecourt. The viewer sees Camille from the back, as we look over her shoulders at the vibrating colors and textures of the river and landscape. The unblended brushstrokes are thick, broad, choppy and highly visible, suggesting the rapidity with which they were applied and giving the surface of the canvas a decorative quality. The colors are bright and airy, as if the eye is affected by the glare of a bright sunny day. Monet regarded this painting so highly that he included it with other canvases painted in *plein-air* eight years later at the second Impressionist Exhibition in 1876.

SLIDE FIVE: *Arrival of the Normandy Train, Saint-Lazare Station*, 1877
Monet's fascination with the atmospheric effects of light and color is evident in *Arrival of the Normandy Train, Saint-Lazare Station* (1877). This painting is one of twelve Monet painted of the modern train station, seven of which were exhibited in the 1877 Impressionist exhibition. Trains were an exciting product of modern industry, and the glass skylit station presented a scene filled with atmospheric effects. The critic Rivière felt

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Monet captured the essence of the train station and offered the following description of the painting:

Around the monster, men crawl over the tracks, like pygmies at the feet of a giant...one hears the workers' cries, the piercing whistles of the engines sending out their cries of alarm, the incessant noise of iron and the formidable and puffing breathing of the steam. One sees the grandiose and distracting movement of a station whose ground trembles at every turning of a wheel. The walkways are damp with soot, and the air is clogged with the acrid odor that comes from burning coal.

Through his lively brushstrokes and colors, Monet captures the movement of smoke, steam, and the hustle and bustle of life in the station. "What I see has never been seen before", wrote Monet. What he sees here are pastel hues of pink, green, purple and blue in the smoke of the "iron horse." Thick swirls of paint become steam and smoke and a swarming crowd is suggested by a few quick vertical strokes. The perspective of the train is "head-on," directly into the path of the viewer.

In 1870, Napoleon III led France into a disastrous war with Prussia, and was soundly defeated within a few weeks. The region of Alsace and Lorraine was lost. A population of 1,500,000 was gone, their valuable mines and industry in ruins. Soon afterwards revolution broke out in Paris against the newly elected President, Adolphe Thiers. Two months of fighting between Communards and government troops left 20,000 Parisians dead.

Monet left Paris for London during the Franco-Prussian War and in 1878, he left Paris permanently, moving south to Vétheuil. From this point on his subjects - Rouen Cathedral, the rugged cliffs of Normandy, hills of southern France, or grainstacks in neighboring fields - were painted again and again, as if he drew inspiration from the strength of the land during this period of national strife. The move signified a simultaneous break with the Impressionist group, and after 1880 Monet no longer exhibited in their annual showings.

SLIDE SIX: Grainstacks (End of day; Autumn), 1890-1891
SLIDE SEVEN: Grainstacks (Sunset; Snow effect), 1890-1891
In 1883 Monet moved to Giverny with his wife and eight children and began to paint the farmlands, poplars along the Seine River, and nearby fields of grainstacks. Grainstack (End of day; Autumn) and Grainstacks (Sunset; Snow effect) are only two of more than fifteen grainstack paintings. In each painting Monet contemplated the quality of light, the

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fifteen grainstack paintings. In each painting Monet contemplated the quality of light, the moisture or fog in the air, and the subtle color variations in grass, farmhouses, fences, and stacked grains. He would often take several canvases into the field and move from one to the next as the light changed. Then, returning to his studio, he would adjust the colors, so that the numerous canvases could be hung together and their colors would be harmonious.

In both these canvases the grainstacks nestle into the field, their bold cone tops set off by the strong rectangular bands of sky and horizon. The colors are vibrant. In the snow scene the fields, houses, and hills melt into a blanket of subtle tints of blues, greys, and pinks. The hot yellow-orange sky seems to be pushing its way across the horizon. The texture is bumpy and rough; the paint has become crusty, crunchy snow. One can breathe the clear cold air. In contrast, the forms and distant features of the autumn landscape emerge more distinctly, although basking in soft morning light. Monet's letters are filled with comments on his struggles to come to terms with the inescapable subjectivity of his eye. He knew that the mood he was in affected the way he "saw" the landscape.

For Monet, the grainstacks are forms full of resonance, especially for the French people. Their association with abundance and of man's ability to sustain himself and his animals on the richness of the harvest are obvious and compelling. For the critic Gustave Geffroy, they represented "the poetry of the universe in the small space of a field... a synthetic summary of the meteors and the elements."

It became impossible for Monet to compress his many simultaneous sensations and feelings into a single canvas; he had to work in series in order to convey more completely the nature of his struggle to master the representation of nature. He worked furiously in the last days of spring 1891 to bring a group of fifteen independent canvases of grainstacks into collective harmony. In the end, he succeeded in making something unique—a series of separate paintings that are at once dependent and independent. Monet's intentions can best be understood by seeing groups of his paintings. The Art Institute owns six of Monet's grainstacks, painted from late summer to early spring, in late afternoon, and bright daylight. In this one gallery, it is possible to see nature as Monet saw it.
Key Concepts

- Photography provided an immediacy of experience and new compositional concerns that became an accepted part of the Impressionists’ technique.

- Changes in the preparation of paints and canvases permitted artists to capture the color spectrum of sunlight with vibrancy and life.

- Artists like Monet, Pisarro, Sisley and Renoir moved their work into the countryside, taking with them a mania for direct observation and enthusiasm for the science of color.

- Artists became intrigued with the effects of light and with ways the spectrum of colors changed the way things looked. They experimented with placing pure color side-by-side on the canvas to let the viewers’ eyes do the mixing.

- Truth to nature also encouraged a new sensibility toward time, and therefore toward light. Because light effects change quickly, artists began to paint quickly, giving their work a quality of immediacy more true to actual atmospheric changes.

Discussion Questions
Slide Five: Arrival of the Normandy Train, Saint-Lazare Station, 1877

- Is the train entering or leaving? What color(s) can you find in the steam? Does the vapor seem to dissolve and soften the outlines of buildings, glass, and the other forms?

- Where is the sunlight/shadow? Notice the glass vaulted ceiling reflecting sky and station. What visual qualities in glass would have fascinated the artist?

- You are enclosed in the space. Describe the sounds and smells. How clearly can you see the people and objects moving around you? Have you ever moved quickly through an airport or train station where everything seems like a blur?

Slides Six & Seven: Grainstacks

- Where is Monet standing as he paints the grainstacks?

- What basic shapes do you see throughout the canvas? How do the shapes of the dwellings echo the shapes of the grainstacks? What dominant shapes are in the background?

- Notice the color. Are these the colors you would expect to find in a farm field? Compare the color in the shadows with the bright areas. What colors do you see?

- Contrast the differences between the two slides of Grainstacks. Why paint more than one grainstack - fifteen of them? Imagine painting fifteen paintings of the same motif. What would you learn about ways that we see, about nature, about color?

- How have changes in season or quality of light affected the painting? Without looking at the titles of the paintings, what elements reveal the time of day or season? Look at the short, diagonal brushstrokes Monet uses. How do these help depict light?

- Monet’s grainstack paintings are a celebration of nature’s bounty, of man’s reliance on the earth. What symbol of harvest would you use for Illinois?

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• Do you think the Saint Lazare train station is as beautiful as the grainstacks? Do you think Monet does?

Suggested Activity - Create a Series
Students explore their own idea of a series of works by choosing an object outside and recording it (with Polaroids, sketches, journal entries, etc.) at different times of day and/or on different days. Students create three final variations on the subject.

Materials:
white paper 12" x 18"  
choice of oil pastels, craypas, watercolors  
brushes if using watercolors  
boards and clips for backing

• Explain the nature of Monet's series paintings: creating works of art based on variations of a single motif.

• Monet often painted his subjects from the vantage point of a hotel room, using the window frame as the frame of his view (e.g. Rouen Cathedral, Charing Cross, and Waterloo bridge)

• Ask students to look carefully at the outdoor scene. What kind of day is it? How has the season or time of day affected the atmosphere and light? Notice the shapes and edges of shadows. Are they hard or soft? Notice the relationship between the light and the subtle variation in colors and textures.

• It is important that students complete each series painting or drawing in one session, capturing a single "moment in time". Allow 15 to 20 minutes for this (Monet once said a certain light he wanted to paint lasted only seven minutes).

• After all three works are completed, students can "harmonize" the colors.

• Hang the series in the classroom. Suggest that students title their works and write a short poem evocative of the mood of the moment.

A Modern Vision
People and Relationships

Impressionist artists like Edgar Degas, Mary Cassatt, Berthe Morisot, August Renoir, Gustave Caillebotte and Georges Seurat, made the people of modern France the primary subject of their work. Influenced in varying degrees by their academic training, their approach toward the figure was revealing of character and type much like the popular novels of their time. These were people of flesh and blood, seen in cafés, sitting rooms, or in city streets and parks rather than distant figures from ancient history. The figures are caught in an informal moment, their postures, dress, and activities typically modern and close to the life of the artist.

Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (1834-1917)
SLIDE EIGHT: Uncle and Niece, 1876
More than any other Impressionist, Degas was concerned with the human being - behavior as well as appearance, the inward psyche as much as the outward persona. No detail escaped him and the most seemingly casual drawing of a ballerina or woman potting a plant, could reveal a world of truth. The essence of his work relates to the visual world of Jean Millet (Bringing Home a Calf Born in the Fields - slide two), the world of popular imagery seen in novels and newspapers, and the rich naturalist tradition seen in nineteenth century literature. His link with the Impressionists is his ability to capture the naturalness of the scene with graphic immediacy, especially the gesture (a scratch, a yawn, shoe tying) which is so revealing of character.

Degas was the son of an upper-middle-class banking family, whose mother's family had aristocratic ties in Naples, Italy. From his youth, his interest in the arts was encouraged and at 21 his parents enrolled him in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. After a year of study, he traveled throughout Italy, staying first in Naples, and eventually spending three years in Rome. There he acquired a passion for Italian painting which never left him and which encouraged his interest in the human figure. In Italy he painted a number of portraits, mainly of his relations.

Uncle and Niece is a portrait painted in Naples during his visit there in the mid-1870s. It is a double portrait of his young orphaned cousin Lucie and her bachelor uncle Henri, in whose care she had recently been placed. Separated by many years in age the uncle and niece appear tentative in their new relationship. Degas, having recently lost his own father
and witnessed other family misfortunes, addressed his subjects with awareness and sensitivity.

Degas was an avid photographer and the portrait has the immediacy of a snapshot, but it is carefully composed. The gestures and attitudes of the figures, the gently tilted heads and poised hands, echo each other on the canvas. The uncle's cigar and newspaper caught in mid-air and his sideways glance convey an attitude of annoyance: we, or Lucie, have just interrupted a quiet time in his favorite chair. The mourning clothes they both wear are a symphony of rich shades of black. A psychological distance is suggested by the contrast between the plain wall behind Lucie and the darker glass-and-wood French door behind Henri; and by the curved chair back on which the child leans. At once intimate and distant, casual and guarded, these two relatives and the third relation who paints them on the other side of the paper-laden table, express poignantly the fragility and necessity of family ties.

Brushstrokes vary throughout the canvas, from the fresh smooth texture of skin to the random, rapid large strokes suggesting the books and debris strewn on the table. The canvas can be seen through the paint, a technique employed by many Impressionist artists, giving the painting the unfinished appearance that so annoyed the critics.

In 1862, Degas met Manet while making an etching of a Velazquez in the Louvre, and was introduced by him to the circle of the Impressionists at the Cafe Guébois. Shortly after this meeting, Degas began to paint contemporary Parisian life, racescourses like Manet, and images of cafés, ballet (slide 13), theatre, working girls, brothels, and the slightly seamier sides of Parisian life. In 1872, he visited the United States, where his family had business interests. He was a highly versatile artist, contributing works to every Impressionist exhibition that ranged from oils, to pastel monoprints, painted fans, or sculptural figures of ballet-dancers in wax and bronze.

Mary Cassatt (1844-1926)
Mary Cassatt is one of America's preeminent artists. Her life is a story of one young woman's successful efforts to overcome the limitations of background, precedent, and gender. She lived in an era when artists were often considered eccentrics; furthermore, the thought of a woman being an artist was shocking. Despite her parents' objections, she attended the Philadelphia Academy of Art, where as a woman she was only permitted to draw from plaster casts, never from a live model. She went to Europe and traveled extensively, arriving in Paris in 1874, at the dawn of Impressionism. Cassatt was

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particularly interested in the work of Edgar Degas. She was quoted nostalgically, "I used
to go and flatten my nose against that window and absorb all I could of his (Degas') art. It
changed my life. I saw art then as I wanted to see it." She became friends with Degas and
was the only American invited to exhibit with the Impressionists.

SLIDE NINE: *The Bath*, 1891-1892
She is especially well known for her renderings in paintings, pastels, and prints of the
relationship between mother and child. In *The Bath*, a woman cradles a young child on her
lap. The child tentatively lowers her feet into the basin. As in the work of Degas, it is the
power of the gesture that is all important: the little girl's grasp of her thigh, the hand and
arm braced on mother's knee, the mother's reassuring hold on the child's foot or her hand
encircling the child's waist. Note how telling each gesture is to this moment of tenderness
and care. The woman bends her head ever so slightly to touch the forehead of the child,
creating a curving silhouette which extends up the woman's back, around the head and side
of the child, to the bottom of the basin, to enclose both figures in an oval. Ovals and
circles are repeated throughout the work, in the water, basin, the rounded stomach and face
of the child, head and hair of the mother.

Influenced by photography and the Japanese print, Cassatt presents an unusual overhead
view. The image is alive with pattern and color. The woman's striped dress is in bold
contrast to the decorative play of pattern in the oriental carpet and floral wallpaper. At the
same time the child's flesh is luminous with the color and scent of young skin, just as the
water in the basin swirls with reflected light.

SLIDE TEN: *Mother and Child*, 1895
In the print *Mother and Child*, Cassatt's outstanding skill as a printmaker, a passion she
shared with Degas, is evident. The simplest of lines express the meaning of maternal care
and the mother-child relationship. Paint lines convey the soft texture of the baby's skin,
while lines etched with freedom and force suggest the voluminous sleeves of the mother's
dress. The baby's outward glance, pensive and curious, while touching the mother's
familiar and reassuring face, says so much about the developing child. Cassatt's intuitive
understanding of the mother-child world is remarkable considering that she never married
or had children of her own.

This print is made in the intaglio printing process called "drypoint." Cassatt drew directly
into a copper plate, scratching grooves into the surface with a very strong steel point, i.e.

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the "dry" point from which the process takes it name. With this process the printer fills lines with ink and wipes the surface partially clean before pulling a print. The technique is one of the most difficult for an artist. No corrections can be made once the lines have been cut into the plate. Cassat had to work quickly, drawing from live models, a practice which must have been difficult with such active young subjects.

**Georges Seurat** (1859-1891)

SLIDE ELEVEN: *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte, 1884*

Georges Seurat became a younger friend of the Impressionists, exhibiting his monumental painting *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte, 1884* at their last exhibition in 1886. Like the Impressionists, Seurat portrayed subjects from modern life, but his passion for color theory far exceeded his older contemporaries. Seurat decided to work like a master scientist, preparing many small *plein-aire* studies for his paintings, which he would complete in his studio in a "pointillist" technique. He worked meticulously by placing small brushstrokes of carefully calculated color next to each other with the aim of creating a way of painting which he felt came closer to revealing universal order and harmony.

The painting is large, about 7 X 10 feet, and portrays a Sunday park scene on a small island in the Seine river just outside Paris called "La Grande Jatte." Seurat uses costume, accessories and poses, resembling fashion illustrations of his day, to show a broad range of Parisian types: the upper bourgeoisie in long jackets for the men and corsets and bustles for the women, a *canotier*, or rower, in a sleeveless shirt and sports cap and even a nanny in her white circular hat and scarf.

The deliberate range of types of people is as carefully thought-out as the composition of the painting. The figures are aligned with the landscape in simple relationships of verticals, diagonals and horizontals, and presented in either frontal or profile view. Repetition of arcs, contours, and silhouettes impose order and rhythm. These anonymous bourgeois figures take on the air of mannequins, their erect posture adding a sense of formality and propriety, causing otherwise fluid movements to appear frozen.

The color is careful and deliberate. Recent publications on optics and the science of light and color influenced Seurat, and inspired him to apply his paint using the pointillist technique. Feeling he could not match the vibrancy of colors in nature by mixing tones and hues on his palette, he applied each individual color separately, in careful proportion, with

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small, dot-like brush strokes, placing complementary colors next to each other. According to Seurat, this technique exaggerates their differences and increases their brilliance. The artist even added small “solar” orange dots to give the effect of reflected sunlight. To intensify the effect, he added a painted border and complementary "dots" in 1886, before the painting was exhibited at the last Impressionist exhibition.

For nearly two years, Seurat drew multiple sketches and reworked the painting until every form was integrated into the landscape, every color tone and value perfectly modulated from foreground to distant horizon. His simplification of forms and interest in color for its visual effect marked a turning point in modern art.

**Key Concepts**

- Painters like Degas were especially concerned with the human figure. He allows us a voyeur's peek into the human psyche by capturing a subtle gesture with natural graphic immediacy.

- Mary Cassatt, strongly influenced by Degas' work, employed the power of gesture to capture the most sensitive and intimate moments between women and children.

- New theories on the science of color and light became a fascination for Seurat, who sought them out as a means of giving painting a more universal harmony and order. In Sunday on La Grande Jatte, Seurat's pointillism is used to portray silhouettes of the modern French society, moving us beyond the particular to the ideal.

**Discussion Questions**

**Slide Eight: Uncle and Niece, 1876**

- You just arrived in the room. What are you thinking and what do you imagine are the thoughts of the uncle and niece? Degas is recording an experience of loss. He, along with the uncle and the niece, have all lost loved ones, the child being orphaned and left in the care of the uncle.

- How has Degas charged the painting with emotional energy? Is it the color? Is it the intensity of facial expressions? Is it the power of the gestures - gently poised hands of the little girl, the uncle's cigar and paper suspended in air, the turn of the heads?

- Do you think this painting is finished? Why or why not?

- Notice the the placement of the heads and hands which seem to echo each other. What do you think this uncle does for fun? Do you think you would like to have been left in his care?

**Slides Nine & Ten: Mother and Child, 1891-92 and The Bath, 1895**

- Find and describe the points where the two figures touch each other. What kind of feelings are being communicated to the child through touch? Describe the meaning of the relationship as you see it.

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• Artists use shapes in their compositions to carry meaning. This artist encloses the women and children in a basic shape. Can you trace the shape with your finger? Where else in this composition do you see the shape repeated?

• Discuss the significance of circles in our lives - where do we see them; what do they represent?

Slide Eleven: A Sunday on La Grande Jatte, 1884
What is happening in this painting? What are the people doing? If this is a park scene, where is the action? What sounds can be heard?

• Hold a piece of white paper up between the students and the slide image to "catch" a detail of the painting on paper. Notice the way in which the artist has used his brush to apply color. How would you describe this technique?

• If you look carefully at the white dress of the little girl in the center, you will see tiny dots of green. Where is this color coming from?

• Can you tell what the people are thinking or feeling? Are there any conversations taking place?

• Does the size of the figures invite you into the painting? How are the people dressed? Which way are they facing? Has the artist brought any part of the painting to your attention or brought emphasis to shapes, spaces or colors?

• Is the artist successful in creating a sense of space? How long would it take to walk from the front of the painting to the far end of the island?

• What has the artist chosen to include in describing this scene and what has he left out?

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Suggested Activity - Create a Silhouette
Create a composition based on the use of silhouette and gesture by Cassatt, Degas, and Seurat.

Materials
- white paper or colored construction paper
- Magazines - *Life, People, Newsweek*, etc.
- #2 or ebony pencils
- colored markers, oil pastels, or paint

- Look through magazines to find figures with bold silhouettes and gestures. Identify ways the figures convey feelings, attitudes, or personalities. Select and cut out one page for use as source material.

- Review the silhouettes and gestures seen in the work of Cassatt, Degas, and Seurat. Have students note the way that Seurat did not complete the facial features of his figures. In what ways are color and gesture important to conveying ideas about the relationship between figures?

- Place pencils on paper and draw the complete silhouette of the figure(s) seen in the magazine image. Try not to lift the pencil completing a total outline of gestures, of body position (hands, arms) and profiles. Capture the cut of clothing with the silhouettes (such as those seen in Seurat).

- Use color to reinforce the personalities or to emphasize the meaning of a gesture or movement. In what ways can color be used to illustrate the relationship between two or more figures? Like Seurat, fill in the silhouettes with overall color rather than be concerned for facial detail.

- Title the work. Write a short story or poem about the figure(s).

- Hang the drawings in the room. Where have the students been successful in conveying feelings, attitudes, or personalities of the figures through the use of contour, emphasis, and color?
The Modern Metropolis

Must we admit that the center of this powerful city...is today an opera house? Must our glory in the future consist above all in perfecting our public entertainments? Are we no longer anything more than the capital of elegance and pleasure?

Le Temps, 18 August 1867

The editor of Le Temps was astonished by the extent of entertainments that made Paris "the theater of nations". In 1867, the year of the Universal Exposition, visiting monarchs, visitors and even most Parisians, reveled in the activities exploding in France. Guidebooks written for the world's fair described circuses, concerts, pantomimes, magic shows, puppet and shadow plays, dozens of balls (commercialized dance halls or gardens), and several dozen cafés-concerts. To be a painter of modern life meant grasping this energy and excitement on canvas, and many young artists in their 20s and 30s saw no better technique than en plein aire. Painters living in Paris made the urban scene their preferred subject: cityscapes, city people, and their passions. Edouard Manet took the lead in dismantling the Academy's official canon for art - modern life required it. By the mid 1870s all aspects of theater, opera, the café-concert and the races became common Impressionist themes. This modern sensibility on the one hand acknowledged its debt to traditional art. But on the other it embraced a new visual world photography that included book and journal illustration, paints in tubes, and the science of color and light. Through this progress they found new truth and beauty in the modern metropolis.

Edouard Manet (1832-1883)

SLIDE TWELVE: The Races at Longchamps, 1864
SLIDE THIRTEEN: detail of The Races at Longchamps

Edouard Manet was very much the modern French dandy. Financially independent, like Degas and Caillebotte, he enjoyed the Paris "high life" and absorbed it into his paintings. He was well educated, studied with Thomas Couture, and ultimately evolved a very distinct style - a style influenced by Spanish artists Velasquez and Goya, Flemish and Dutch masters, Japanese prints and photography.

Edward King in My Paris, French Character Sketches (1868) described the appeal of one of Manet's favorite spots, the newly created Bois de Boulogne.

Whatever you wish you may have there. You have only to go to Longchamps for the rush and rattle of the race-course or review; to the Pré-Catalan for garden gossip and sociability of the café; to the charming lakes to gather lilies; and a few steps will take you into the wild wood.

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The racetrack at Longchamps opened in 1857 and was a popular seasonal event for upper-class Parisians like Manet and Degas. The opening of the spring racing season was a highlight for the Parisian social elite. It engaged the entire fashion industry - because one went to the races, as to the theater, to see and be seen. The French public lined up along the Champs-Elysées to watch the procession of open and closed carriages and mounted horsemen, all "dressed within an inch of their lives."

Between 1864 and 1872 Manet created several oils and watercolors, and a lithograph of the races at Longchamps. Manet, in the Art Institute painting, is like a stop-action photographer: he catches the "photo-finish." This view is not a side view from the stands, but for the first time in the history of art, we look head-on at the horses in the same way that Monet looked at the Iron Horse at the Saint Lazare railway station. We are "at the turn" breathing clouds of dust from thundering hoofs and sensing the thrust and energy of the massive horses as they stretch for the finish line indicated by the raised circular pole. Manet pulls us closer to the horses by opening out the front of the canvas to the green turf, the slopes of Saint-Cloud, and the windy sky. On the left, two foreground figures can be distinguished, and further back, a man in top hat, upright in a carriage, spreads out his arms to steady his binoculars.

Painted ten years before the first exhibition of the "Impressionists," Manet here used energetic, spontaneous brushstrokes, filled with light, color and action - an interwoven tapestry. The two women on the left are painted with wide strokes whose texture and direction prepare the way for the liberties taken by van Gogh two decades later. For the racing scene, horizontal strokes, partly blended, define the green turf; rounded swipes of the brush represent the hunched-over jockeys: and thin rays of yellow catch the light on the horse's reins and glistening muscles. Long, diagonal strokes that fade to horizontal one at the crest create the slope in the distance. The spectators are mixed dads of paint, separating hats, parasols, faces and bodies, which nonetheless never come into focus.

Whether applied to horses, viewers, or landscape, the artist's marks seem to result from a spontaneous response to a scene, a perceptual quickness and power of execution that explains why Manet was considered the unofficial leader of the Impressionists. Only a year before painting this work Manet scandalized the art world with his *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe (Luncheon on the Grass)*. The work shows an undressed young woman lounging in a park with two fully dressed men. The painting was rejected by the official Salon jury, and instead was seen by thousands at the *Salon des Refusés.*

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For Manet, painting modern life included such a vision of tension and excitement. Four years after painting several versions of the races at Longchamps he decided not to send anything to the Salon of 1867. Instead, amidst the Paris World’s Fair, he and Courbet set up separate one-man shows as if affirming their leadership role of the avant-garde art world.

**Pierre-Auguste Renoir** (1841-1919)
SLIDE FOURTEEN: *Jugglers at the Circus*, 1879
In the words of Pierre-Auguste Renoir, “The earth as the paradise of the gods, that is what I want to paint." His subject matter was drawn from moments of leisure with friends and family - boating, dining, picnics, or enjoying Parisian theaters and cafés. The son of a tailor of modest means, Renoir was enchanted by the visual sensations of his age, stating "I like beautiful materials, rich brocades, diamonds flashing in the light, but I would have had the horror of wearing such things myself." Renoir was born in Limoges, and moved with his family in 1844 to the center of Paris, in the shadow of the Louvre, which he often visited.

When Renoir was in his twenties, Paris boasted several circuses, the largest of all Europe, some of which could seat up to 6000. One circus, in particular, captivated the attention of artists, the Circus Fernando. In the heart of Montmartre, the Circus Fernando became part of the repertoire of images for Renoir, Seurat, Toulouse-Lautrec, Picasso and many other artists. It would be a favorite stop during soirées at the cafés Chat Noir or Nouvelle Athènes. All of Paris, the worker in uniform, families in Sunday dress, the bourgeoisie in front row seats, and smartly dressed young singles, enjoyed the excitement of highwire acts, and performances by trained horses and riders, monkeys, pigs, and thirty fully dressed dancing dogs.

The two little girls in this painting, Francesca and Angelica, are the acrobat daughters of the circus owner, Fernando Wartenberg. The sisters have finished their act and are taking their bows. One, her arms filled with oranges tossed as a reward by the audience, has turned away and fixes a steadied gaze toward us, the viewer; the other looks up at the crowd, acknowledging its approval. Notice the particular gestures of each child, the secure embrace of the flaming orange treasure, the graceful sweep of arms in preparation for a bow, or the position of the feet - silhouettes of states of mind and character. Renoir has captured the movements of the two children precisely as they walked, waved, and smiled.
on the circus floor. It is an unexpected view, a snapshot moment taken from a front row seat, next to the same barrier encircling the ring seen on a diagonal at the top of the canvas.

Renoir's painting is characterized by a light, feathery, delicate touch (which may owe something to his early training as a porcelain painter) and an obvious delight in the sensual qualities of oil paint. A white or pale background reflects back through the thinned paint covering most of the canvas. The surface of the girl's skin and the background has the translucent quality of chalky pastels. For the gold braiding on the costume and shoe laces, Renoir paints thick strokes of wet paint into wet paint, a technique which simulates reflected light, adding sparkle and glitter to the performers' costumes. The work is a symphony of the softest shades of warm roses and orange, the skin gently glowing in contrast to the rich mass of orange-red of the fruit. Our eye moves around the canvas following the brightly colored fruit, the alternating directions of the girls' glances, and the sweep of the red striped barrier.

Renoir painted with all the painstaking care of the Old Masters, especially two of his favorites, the eighteenth-century artists Fragonard and Boucher. Renoir recognized his debt to his academic studies at the École des Beaux-Arts, and his years in the studio of Charles Gleyre, where he first met Monet, Frédéric Bazille and Alfred Sisley. He was fortunate to have a few wealthy patrons who purchased his work and commissioned portraits. While he participated in the series of Impressionist Exhibitions until 1886, he felt they did not give him the public platform he needed and he continued to send paintings to the Salon, explaining: "In Paris there are scarcely fifteen people capable of liking a painter who doesn't show at the Salon. There are 80,000 who won't buy so much as a nose from a painter who is not hung at the Salon. That's why I send in two portraits every year, little as that is." From 1881 on, while remaining friends with the Impressionist group, Renoir changed stylistic directions to concentrate almost exclusively on the human figure.

**Edgar Degas (1834-1917)**
**SLIDE FIFTEEN: On the Stage, 1876-1877**

The opera building crowning the avenue l'Opéra was the most important new structure of the Second Empire, the hub of the redesigned areas crossed by the grands boulevards. The Emperor Napoleon III and his wife Eugénie often attended the opera along with Parisian high society, setting fashion trends for all of Europe. Degas had loved the opera from a young age, and felt no hesitation at joining the other males (nicknamed "lions") who had

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the privilege of moving freely backstage. It was from this privileged view that Degas made numerous works devoted to aspects of the opera, especially the ballet which in Degas' day was always performed during the intermission.

*On The Stage* is one of a group of paintings, sculptures and monotype prints created by Degas treating the subject of ballet. The artist was a keen observer, attuned to the female figure during disciplined movement or a moment of arrest. *On The Stage* presents a glance at a performance, with its color, lights, costumes and action. We can almost hear the music begin as a corps of dancers in the background engages the audience, while dancers in the foreground seem to exit into the wings. A flood of light spreads across the stage creating a strong horizontal band against which the artist has set the spiraling silhouette of a dancer who almost dances into our arms.

The work is both a print and a drawing. The artist began by working on a large metal plate, drawing and painting on it with thick, viscous ink. The plate was then run through a printing press to produce a black-brown monotype, or unique print, that formed the basis of the pastel. Drawing with pastels over the ink monotype produces an effect of glowing light, or simulates the textures of tulle, hair, wood and glitter.

The print has been cut off, or cropped, leaving the hint of foliage (in the upper right corner) and only portions of the the ballerinas in the foreground. This technique, which is seen in Japanese prints, influenced Degas and other Impressionist artists, and readily encourages the viewer to wonder what exists beyond the edge of the print.

Degas was an avid photographer and we see here the unusual point-of-view and sensation of the momentary snapshot.

**Key Concepts**

- Painters living in Paris made the urban scene their preferred subject: cityscapes, city people, and their passions. The avant-garde drew upon contemporary developments in photography and journal illustration, and theories of color and light to evoke dynamic images of the modern metropolis.

- Manet was considered the unofficial leader of the Impressionists. Ten years before the first Impressionist Exhibition in 1874, paintings such as *The Races at Longchamps* were startling for their graphic immediacy and urban realism.

- In a portrait of circus performers, Renoir paints silhouettes to reveal states of mind and a sense of place, with his own subtle and delicate palette and brushwork.

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• Degas enjoyed experimenting with printmaking techniques, such as the combined monotype and pastel *On the Stage*. Here his powers of observation are keenly attuned to the ballet dancer’s disciplined movement, and the startling sense of energy, shimmer of costume, and rhythm which could be depicted from his backstage point-of-view.

**Discussion Questions**

Slides Twelve and Thirteen: *The Races at Longchamps*, 1864
• Where are we standing? Why would Manet paint "the stretch" - the moment the horses crossed the finish line?

• This painting was made fifteen years before Eadwaerd Muybridge was to publish his stop-action photographs of horses in motion. How is Manet ahead of his time? What preparations might the artist have made to produce this view of the horses?

• What sounds do you hear? What smells are in the air? Is it a windy or rainy day?

• How does Manet accentuate and divide the world of the track from the social world of the grand stand? What kind of brushstrokes are used for the jockeys and horses versus those used for the crowds?

• How has Manet used line to accentuate the forward thrust in the painting? Does the dark tree above the racers help accentuate this movement?

• Who might commission or purchase such a painting? Why do you think Manet painted it?

• In what ways are both subject matter and technique about speed?

Slide Fourteen: *Jugglers at the Circus Fernando*, 1879
• Where in the arena is the viewer seated? How is this point-of-view like one which a camera might capture, or like a Japanese print?.

• Describe the gestures, stance, and facial expression of each girl. How do these characteristics capture the moment and the personalities of the girls?

• Notice the oranges: where they are located, how are they painted, and what the artist has done to help us notice them?

• Notice carefully the various kinds of brush stokes used in this painting. Compare Renoir’s use of the brush on the costume, with that used on the girl’s skin and on the background. How does Renoir’s use of paint and color appeal to our senses?

• In what ways is or isn’t this painting a successful portrait of the circus owner’s daughters?

Slide Fifteen: *On the Stage*, 1876-1877
A favorite subject of Degas was the human figure, especially the world of dance.

• Look at the dancers. Is the ballet over? How do you know?

• Degas loved to draw and used line to capture rhythm, movement, and the characteristic gracefulness of dancers. Look at the arms, heads, skirts, and legs of

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• Degas loved to draw and used line to capture rhythm, movement, and the characteristic gracefulness of dancers. Look at the arms, heads, skirts, and legs of the dancers. Trace their movement with your fingers. Do your fingers move in graceful curves, suggesting music?

• Where is the audience in On the Stage? How do you know? Where do you suppose Degas has placed you, the viewer? Are you just off the stage watching the final movements of one group of dancers as they exit the stage?

• Notice the color red. Follow the pattern it makes as it draws your eye from the front (foreground) of the painting to red accents on the dancers in back.

• Are the textures smooth and flat, or rough and bumpy? What is the texture of the ballerinas skirt?

• Degas enjoyed using the newly invented camera. In what ways does this image resemble a photograph?

Suggested Activity - Shapes That Move

Make a print enhanced with pastels, or a mobile with the theme "movement." Prior to beginning the activity, brainstorm examples of energy and excitement in today's world that might parallel those of late nineteenth century France - contemporary dance, concerts, or music, speed of travel or communications, space shuttles blasting off, etc. Ask students to select one idea for their project and discuss appropriate shapes, colors, lines and materials.

Elementary Level - Mixed Media Prints

Materials:
• white paper
• tempera paint (one color or more)
• oil pastels

• Cover a smooth surface (desk top or table) with a color selected by the student. Using fingers or tools (sticks, toothbrush, pencil) draw an outline of a form into the paint.

• Demonstrate ways that the lines, textures, and shapes selected can suggest energy and movement.

• Print the image: Make the print by holding the paper on one edge and setting the other edge onto the painted surface. Gently flatten the paper, rubbing with your hand. Carefully lift the paper off and set to dry.

• Make several prints, numbering them.

• After the prints are dry, use craypas or crayons to change the image, or to enhance the theme of movement and excitement of modern life.

• Ask each student to select a favorite print and title it. Which prints best embody the ideas in this lesson?
Secondary Level - Mobiles

Materials:
- clothes hangers, sculpture wire, or wooden rods
- fishing line, fine wire, or strong thread
- cardboard paper, and/or construction paper or recyclable junk
- hole punch if using cardboard
- craypas, paint, colored cellophane or other means of adding color

- Students should brainstorm, then select one theme for a mobile that can be constructed of either found objects or art materials.

- Each mobile should embody the main interests of the Impressionists - subject matter drawn from contemporary life, use of line, shape and color to accentuate movement and an interest in the role of light and color in perception.

- Cut out diverse shapes from cardboard, or use found objects which can be adapted for use in the mobile.

- Accent the shapes by adding color.

- Attach the shapes using fishing line, wire, or thread, being conscious of the effect each piece will have when it is suspended.

- Suspend the mobiles. Notice ways each student has interpreted the subject, commenting upon the use of shape and color, suggested and actual movement. Which mobile best embodies the concept of action and energy of today?
POST-IMPRESSIONISM

Color and Imagination

The term Post-Impressionism is commonly used to define and group all artistic experimentation that took place in France during the two remaining decades of the nineteenth century. But artists like Georges Seurat, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin and Paul Cézanne would scarcely have recognized themselves pigeon-hold under such a title. The term, in fact, was not coined until 1910, long after those artists who created the most significant paintings during this period were dead. Unlike Impressionism, the term is problematic because it suggests a firm and purposeful avant-garde movement, caused and unified by a fixed style. It is becoming clear that such a unified movement did not exist, although many of the freedoms the Impressionists had fought for in the 1860s and 1870s in terms of paint application, color, choice of subject and working procedure became part of the artist's stock-in-trade in the 1880s.

The avant-garde artists working from 1880 to 1900 were not drawn together solely due to an awareness of Impressionism. Impressionism itself underwent transformation in the 1880s, as seen in the grainstack series completed by Monet (slides 6 and 7). These decades supported diversity in artistic direction, witnessed by the range of groups which sponsored special exhibitions. The last Impressionist show of 1886 filled five rooms on the second floor above a much frequented restaurant, la Maison Dorée, and was characterized by conflict and dissent. Degas wanted the name Impressionism removed from the title and insisted on timing the show to coincide with the Salon. Several other groups organized shows to compete with official displays or to promote their aesthetic ideas. Paul Gauguin organized the Café Volpini exhibition in 1889, to showcase work from his group who had been painting in Brittany.

The Société des Artistes Independents began to hold annual shows in 1884, off the Champs-Elysées, and featured the work of pointillist artists. A similar enterprise was the Brussels-based Vingt (Twenty) group which held annual exhibitions in Belgium from 1884 onwards, and encouraged the avant-garde. The twenty artists who comprised the group had no single artistic creed; however, they gained a reputation for adventurously seeking the participation of promising, little-known foreign artists. The Vingt show was one of the earliest venues for Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (To-loose-Low-trek), and Vincent van Gogh (Vin-sent van Go) made his only sale of a major picture at the exhibition of

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1890. Also the rise of commercial art dealers, with new business methods, became a factor in the relationship between artist and public. Paul Durand-Ruel began as an Impressionist dealer in the 1870s and initiated a series of one-man shows in 1883, fueling the spirit of individualism in avant-garde art.

The Paris-based art of the late nineteenth century was characterized by a great variety of technical and stylistic innovations. Despite the range of styles, there are dominant issues and prevailing currents visible in the work of three artists: - Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.

**Paul Gauguin** (1848-1903)

SLIDE SIXTEEN: *Day of the Gods (Mahana no Atua)*, 1894

Paul Gauguin's prominence among the artists of his time probably had as much to do with the dramatic events of his life as with the appeal of his art. His flight from European civilization to take up a "primitive" existence in Tahiti became legend, and contributed to the myth of the artist as a tortured soul, destined to live outside the bounds of civilized society.

Gauguin began as a successful stockbroker in Paris and an amateur collector of modern paintings, including some by Paul Cézanne (Say-zann) and Pissarro. At the age of thirty-five, however, without formal artistic training, he decided to devote himself entirely to art. He abandoned his business career, left his family, and by 1889 was the leader of the avant-garde.

The exotic and faraway had always held an appeal for Gauguin; he was partly of Peruvian descent, had spent four years of his childhood in Peru, and six years of his youth as a sailor. As an artist, his life became nomadic; he moved between villages in Brittany (considered the most "backward" of the French regions), the island of Martinique, Arles (where he lived and worked with van Gogh for a brief and stormy period), the island of Tahiti, and the Marquesas where he died.

Along with Western middle-class life, Gauguin renounced Western artistic tradition, including Impressionism, and called for a return to archaic and "primitive" styles, believing that they were the only true path for art. He believed that people who led simpler lives were more in touch with their feelings and emotions, and that simplifying the style of a painting would increase its emotional intensity, its immediacy of experience. "A strong

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emotion," he said, "may be translated immediately; dream on it and seek its simplest form."

The idea of primitivism in art was not new, but Gauguin was among the first to put the doctrine into practice, exhibiting perhaps the boldest advance beyond Impressionism at that time.

As can be seen in Day of the Gods (Mahana no Atua) painted in 1894 during a brief return to France, modeling and perspective have given way to flatter and more simplified shapes. The decorative quality of the paint surface is emphasized through the use of heavy outlines, all done in brilliant colors which are equally "unnatural". Gauguin once questioned and advised one of his students in the following way: "How do you see that tree?...Is it quite green? Then put on green, the finest green on your palette; --and that shadow, is it a bit blue? Don't be afraid to paint it as blue as possible."

Although small in size, the painting seems monumental, having some of the character of a great religious fresco. It can be seen as Gauguin's attempt to create a collective image of the South Seas, one which transcends all of his earlier painted images. The background is dominated by a monumental sculpture of a god, which Gauguin derived less from Tahitian or Polynesian traditions than from Indian and Southeast Asian prototypes. For this reason, the painting can be interpreted as representing a universal, non-Christian spirituality, rather than as an accurate ethnological representation of Tahiti.

The real subjects of the painting, however, are the three figures in the foreground and the sacred pool before them. The most spectacular and mysterious portion of the painting is the zone in the lower third of the canvas, where color reigns supreme. If it were not for the ripples around the feet of the central figure, and the small mound of green earth at the bottom left, the entire area would be abstract. Yet those few clues indicate that the surface is a sacred pool that reflects not the world of appearances, but the ultimate essence of form and color. Gauguin seems to have decided to represent some higher, more mysterious reality in precisely the place where the actual world would be reflected. It is probable that the three young women are meant to signify the three "Stages of Man"--birth, life, and death. Significantly, the central figure, representing life, has placed both feet in the pool of reflections; the figure at the left, representing birth, touches the water only with her toes; and the figure at the right, symbolizing death, turns away from the pool completely.

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Ultimately, Gauguin's intent in this painting is mysterious. It may express his belief that the central purpose of art is to evoke symbolic realms rather than to represent the visual world.

**Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)**

Vincent van Gogh grew up in a small town in Holland and before becoming an artist, tried several professions—art dealer, teacher, preacher, even missionary in a Belgian mining district. In Belgium, he drew and painted the miserable existence of miners in sketches, which he sent to his brother, Theo, a Paris art dealer. Theo was devoted to his brother and encouraged him throughout his career.

At thirty-three Van Gogh left Holland for Paris, eager to continue his work in the mecca of the art world. He spent hours studying the paintings in the Louvre, and became friendly with the Impressionist painter, Pissarro. At the last show of the Impressionists in 1886, he was overwhelmed by Georges Seurat's painting *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte, 1884*. Van Gogh became interested in the painting's surface, its material and formal sense of color and order, and its quiet simple calm. Soon the surface of van Gogh's paintings began to embody a basic interest of the Post-Impressionists "Remember that a painting, before it is a war horse, a nude or some anecdote or other, is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order" (Maurice Denis, 1890). Van Gogh experimented with thick layers of paint and exaggerated the pointillist mark and with colors that evoke the world of feelings and emotion - encrusting the painting's surface with energy and life.

Van Gogh was to become the most committed and prolific portraitist of the Post-Impressionists. Looking back to the Dutch tradition embodied in Hals and Rembrandt, he was convinced that the portrait was the highest form of art, and planned to paint a series of modern heads. Van Gogh's portraits are very different from the Impressionists' (compare Degas, Slide 8 or Renoir, Slide 14). The Impressionist portraits have an air of naturalism: the sitter's personality is not seen simply through facial expression but through resemblance and placement in an everyday setting. Van Gogh's portraits are more probing or emblematic: unreal settings add symbolic or decorative dimensions and enrich the psychological power. His portraits were not commissioned; he painted people he knew and himself. Between 1886-1888, he painted twenty-four self-portraits, one of which is in the Art Institute's collection.
SLIDE NINETEEN: *Self-Portrait*, 1886-1887
SLIDE EIGHTEEN: detail of *Self-Portrait*
Van Gogh's strokes are looser and longer than the pointillists', so that the effect of his paintings is expressive and emotional rather than cool and objective. The Art Institute's *Self-Portrait* focuses on the head and eyes of the painter. Van Gogh employed color to heighten the emotional intensity; deep green eyes stand out dramatically against the red and red-orange eyelids. His directional strokes give form to the head and nose and suggest the bone structure beneath the surface of the skin. The background is a display of particles of color: intense green, blue, red and orange that vibrate with an electric energy.

SLIDE SEVENTEEN: *The Bedroom*, 1888
In 1888, van Gogh traveled to Arles, in the south of France, where he hoped to establish an artists' colony in the warm climate. In a letter he described his new home with great sensitivity to the sensual and emotional qualities of color:

My house here is painted the yellow color of fresh butter on the outside with glaringly green shutters; it stands in the full sunlight in a square which has a green garden with plane trees, oleanders and acacias. And it is completely white-washed inside, and the floor is made of red bricks, and over it there is the intensely blue sky. In this I can live and breathe, meditate and paint.

He painted frantically in his new house. Part of his drive came from his plan to decorate the walls of his home and studio before his brother and friends—whom he had invited to live with him or visit—joined him. When his friend, the artist Paul Gauguin, was due to arrive, he painted great bunches of sunflowers, views of a nearby garden, portraits of his friends in Arles, and several views of his bedroom.

Of these works, Gauguin particularly favored *Bedroom at Arles*, a composition that van Gogh had planned very carefully. To van Gogh this painting represented rest and "harmony." He wrote to Gauguin in 1888:

Well, I enormously enjoyed doing this interior of nothing at all, of a Seurat-like simplicity; with flat tints, but brushed on roughly, with a thick impasto, the wall pale lilac, the ground a faded broken red, the chairs and the bed chrome yellow, the pillows and the sheet a very pale green-citron, the counterpane blood red, the washstand orange, the washbasin blue, the window green. By means of all of these very diverse tones I have wanted to express an absolute restfulness.

Underlying the neatness and order presented in the painting is an uneasiness created by the intense palette of colors, upward slant of the floor and bed, and the emptiness of the room. The paint is applied so thickly that we can almost feel the surface of each object. By

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opening up the foreground of the painting we are invited in to experience the artist’s dreams.

Gauguin spent some time with van Gogh in Arles but they argued constantly. When Gauguin left, van Gogh's mental imbalance increased and he became seriously ill. After several hospitalizations he died in 1890, at the age of thirty-seven, in Auvers. His friend, Dr. Gachet, planted sunflowers around his grave. Van Gogh spent only ten years producing over 800 oil paintings and an even greater number of drawings, only a few of which were sold during his lifetime.

Toulouse - Lautrec (1864-1901)
SLIDE TWENTY: At the Moulin Rouge, 1892-1893

"Mad about drawing," is the way his family described young Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (lau-trek). As a schoolboy he filled the borders of his notebooks with drawings of teachers, friends, horses, other animals, and imaginary scenes. When he wasn't drawing, he was putting on puppet shows with his cousins and friends, playing dress-up in the wild costumes his father collected and joining his father riding horseback, hunting, and fishing.

The Count and Countess de Lautrec lived in a French country estate that had been in the family since almost the time of Charlemagne. For those 900 years most of the men in the family had led an active, outdoor life. Young Lautrec loved being outdoors, especially the riding, but it ended for him when he was 14. He spent weeks and months in bed during a long illness that finally stopped his legs from growing. He amused himself by drawing as he lay in bed. He illustrated his letters to a favorite uncle with sketches of what he saw at home and at Nice in the south of France.

At 17, Lautrec decided to become an artist; by 1882 he had arrived in Paris to study with academic painters, but before long became immersed in the artistic debates of the day. He was inspired by the Impressionists' colorful paintings of everyday life, and the lively drawings and caricatures appearing in the French press or popular novels, like the work of Honoré Daumier (Slide 3). By this date, advanced painters of Paris were more interested in the changing aspects of social life than in the changing look of the city that seemed to preoccupy the Impressionists. The novelty of revitalized Paris had worn off and the avant-garde writers and artists approached their subjects more critically. Modern life had begun to leave an imprint on the people of Paris and it was the world-weary that Lautrec was attracted.

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The hub of Parisian artistic and intellectual life, traditionally situated in the Latin Quarter on the Left Bank, had moved to Montmartre where rents were cheaper and artists and writers were in close contact with the pulse of the city. Lautrec moved into Montmartre joining other artists like Seurat and Renoir. In a letter to his grandmother in 1886, he complained of feeling very ill at ease living this "bohemian life," but he felt it was necessary if he was to achieve his goal of depicting this "demi-monde" (half-world). The artists' studios adjoined nightclubs, cafés, the circus, theaters and brothels - the fascinating artificial world of nocturnal entertainment seen in *At the Moulin Rouge*. For over a decade, from the later 1880s to 1890s, the dance-hall and its performers were one of the staple subjects for Lautrec, both as a painter of work for exhibition and the market, and as a printmaker producing posters, song-sheets and collectors' impressions.

The Moulin Rouge opened in 1889, to a fanfare of publicity. The newspaper *Figaro illustré* described it as a magnificent garden which can hold more than 600 people, shaded by great trees. A stage presenting a *concert-spectacle* nightly - the Moulin Rouge featured dancing, donkey races, merry-go-rounds, shooting alleys, seasonal masked balls, even a huge elephant could make an appearance. Every night 'les artistes peintres, sculpteurs, littérateurs, membres de cercles, danseurs, enfin le Tout Paris, joyeux' were to be found there. The entrance couldn't be missed as it featured a giant red windmill, a symbol often appearing in posters. Such publicity sought to entice the bourgeoisie with a heady mixture of artistic Bohemia, flamboyant spectacle and female company, while reassuring the gentleman client that the venue was chic and not too marginal.

Lautrec drew and painted this exciting new establishment and its principle dancers many times before he painted *At the Moulin Rouge*. It is a fairly large painting, but is rather private and special as it represents a group portrait of Lautrec and his friends at the chic locale. Lautrec in the bowler hat and his tall cousin are shown walking across the rear space, having passed the famous performer, La Goulue, who adjusts her hair in a mirror. Seated at the table are (clockwise) editor Emile Dujardin, with brown suit, La Macaronna, a quadrille dancer, Paul Sescau, photographer, and Maurice Gilbert, vintner. It has been suggested that the central woman with red hair is Jane Avril, the dancer. The huge yellow and green face exiting the scene is English dancer May Milton.

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A contemporary writer Ernest Maindron describes Lautrec's painting style: "...in his
drawing there is nothing that is useless or ill-considered... people are always shown in
appropriate settings; the disappointments that overwhelm them, the poverty that tortures
them, the desires that convulse them: all can be read there, indelibly engraved." In *At the
Moulin Rouge*, the single most important action - the departure of May Milton, the great
blue-green face floating off the canvas - occurs in the margin of the composition. The
frozen expression of her face, illuminated by an invisible stage light so that it resembles a
mask, contrasts with the various casual groups in the canvas's center stage. Here, men and
women sit staring blankly at nothing, or stand or saunter silently, apparently in isolation
from another. The painting's incisive and daring composition, with unusual perspective
and cut-off, flattened figures, dramatic palette, and the sensational world it depicts have
made it Toulouse-Lautrec's most memorable and perhaps his greatest painting.

Some time after the artist's death at the age of 37, *At the Moulin Rouge* was cut down, a
reverse L-shape piece including the face of May Milton was removed, probably to make the
composition less radical and more saleable. It was reassembled sometime before 1924,
when it was exhibited at the Art Institute in a special exhibition devoted to Toulouse-
Lautrec.

**Key Concepts**

- Post-Impressionism regarded 'nature' as illusory, no more than a collection of
  external appearances. Forms in nature would be simplified, their essence sought in
  color and line rather than specific detail.

- Viewers were initiated into a higher realm of experience through the use of signs
  and symbols to express a state of mind, or abstract idea beyond the concrete
  material world.

- The surface of the canvas took on greater importance as color, density of paint,
  brushstroke, line, and texture became decorative tools - means of creating vibrant
  color harmonies and surface patterns.

- Post-Impressionists sought to restore primacy to individual creativity and the
  imagination.

- Artists were prepared to experiment with a range of media including ceramics,
  lithography, stained glass, theatrical decor and mural painting.

- Gauguin bid to prove that lines and colors were capable of expressing intangible
  ideas. His followers were asked to forget the trivial details of natural forms and
  and to create a visionary world of thoughts and dreams.

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Van Gogh's self-portraits did not seek a resemblance, but expressive power, and a continuing and genuine search for self-knowledge. At the same time they were a vehicle for experimenting with color and brush stroke.

**Discussion Questions**

**SLIDE SIXTEEN:** *Day of the Gods (Mahana no Atua)*, 1894
- Describe the people and the landscape. Is this a scene from everyday life?

- Does Gauguin appear interested in the affect of atmosphere and light like the Impressionists?

- Compare this work with Seurat's *La Grand Jatte.* (SLIDE 11) How are the colors different? the brushstrokes? the people? Even though these people are dressed differently, do they seem to have something in common - a stillness, anonymity?

- Look carefully into the water in the foreground. What do you notice? How does Gauguin invite you to use your imagination?

**SLIDE SEVENTEEN:** *Bedroom at Arles*, 1886-67
- The color spectrum can be divided into warm and cool colors. Colors that are considered warm are reds, oranges, yellows and earth tones like brown and tan. Cool colors are blues, greens, purples, and greys. How does the balance between warm and cool colors in Van Gogh's *Bedroom at Arles* affect your perception of the room?

- Notice the bed and the objects on the table. Does this room look like a comfortable place? How do the colors--or any other aspect of the painting--affect your judgement?

- How is this bedroom a self-portrait?

**SLIDE NINETEEN:** *Self-Portrait* (1886-87)
- Notice how Van Gogh paints streaks of orange and green in and around his eyes. If you mixed these two colors together, they would make brown. Instead, Van Gogh places them next to each other to create a sharp contrast and to intensify the expression.

- Why do you think van Gogh makes the eyes so important? Artists make self-portraits by looking at themselves in a mirror. What does this image of the artist tell you about him?

- Compare this self-portrait with Degas' *Uncle and Niece* (SLIDE 8) and Renoir's *Jugglers at the Circus Fernando* (SLIDE 14). Notice the settings, the characteristic poses and the use of color.

**SLIDE TWENTY:** *At the Moulin Rouge* (1892-93)
- Where are you, the viewer, as you look at this scene?

- Lautrec was strongly influenced by the world of popular imagery (book and journal illustration). How do these people resemble the Daumier caricature (SLIDE 3)? Notice the way in which Lautrec draws with his brush. This is very similar to the manner in which artists draw with a waxy crayon on the lithographic stone in preparation for making a poster. Lautrec created many posters for cafes and dance halls of Montmartre, his drawing style used for lithography influenced his painting style.

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• What effect does May Milton’s face have on this composition? How is it like the forward push of Monet’s train at the St. Lazaar station (SLIDE 5) or Manet’s forward rush of horses at Longchamps (SLIDE 12)?

• How are the colors very unlike those of the Impressionists? How do they evoke the world of the night in Paris?

_Suggested Activity - Collage_

_Materials:_
- 18" x 11" heavy white paper
- single sheets of colored tissue paper
  - blue, red, yellow, purple, green, orange, brown, black, white, grey
- If possible, variants of blue, red, and yellow should be supplied
- white glue (Elmer’s) thinned with water
- old paint brushes
- craypas
- scissors

• Look at the different ways color is used in _Day of the Gods_ by Gauguin and _At the Moulin Rouge_ by Toulouse-Lautrec. In these two paintings, the background is as important as the figures as far as setting the mood of the work.

• Imagine your own scene. It can be a place you see every day, or an imaginary scene. Outline on your white piece of paper with a pencil the background of your scene. For example, if you decide upon a scene showing people walking across the street, sketch the pavement, buildings and sky.

• Now think about what colors you want to use in your background. Think about the light in your scene and the mood you would like to express. Hold different pieces of tissue paper together up to the light and notice the different colors that are made when you use various combinations. If you put a white piece of paper over or under a color, you will get a lighter version of the color, which is called a _tint_, or a _pastel_. Try black or grey with a color also, and you will get a darker, dulled out version of the color. This combination is called a _shade_ of the color.

• When you begin to arrange the color in your background, also think about the shapes you want to use. Look at how hard and defined the areas of color are in the pool of water in _Day of the Gods_. Also notice how streaky and undefined the background is in _At the Moulin Rouge_. Tearing the shape will give it a softer edge that will blend easily into others, while cutting it out will give the edge stronger contrast and definition. Think about using little strips out of the paper, also.

• When you're ready to start, brush the watered-down glue across the tissue paper and lay it down upon the paper. Experiment with different layerings of color for different effects. Think carefully about which colors you place together. Look at Van Gogh's paintings to see how he places colors together that contrast sharply for dramatic effect. Consider putting one color next to another in a combination that you might normally think would be ugly. Experiment with creating darker areas of one color and various combinations of others.

• When you've finished with your background and it is completely dry, use the craypas to draw any figures or objects you would like in your scene. Look carefully at the

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technique of very small dots used in La Grande Jatte for one method. Try not to draw any lines or "color in" any areas with the same craypas, but color with the tiny dots instead. See how adding more dots or slashes of one color changes the shade of the area when you step back from your work. Or, experiment with creating figures with the blended, streaky strokes that you might see in At the Moulin Rouge.

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Slide Check List

1. Pierre Henri de Valenciennes
   French, 1750-1819

   *Alexander at the Tomb of Cyrus the Great*, 1796
   Oil on canvas, size 42cm x 91.4cm
   Mrs. Harold T. Martin (restricted gift), 1983.35

2. Jean Francois Millet
   French, 1814-75

   *Peasants Bringing Home a Calf Born in the Fields*, 1864
   Oil on canvas, size 81.1cm x 100cm
   Henry Field Memorial Collection, 1894.1063

3. Honoré Daumier
   French, 1808-1879

   *The Legislative Belly*, 1834
   Lithograph, 28cm x 43 cm
   Charles Deering Collection, 1941.1258

4. Claude Monet
   French, 1840-1926

   *On the Seine at Bennecourt*, 1868
   Oil on Canvas, 81.5 x 100 cm
   Potter Palmer Collection, 1922.427

5. Arrival of the Normandy Train, Saint Lazare Station, 1877
   Oil on Canvas, 59.6 x 80.2cm
   Mr. & Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection, 1933.1158

6. Grainstacks. (End of day; autumn) 1890-91
   Oil on canvas, 65 x 100 cm
   Mr. & Mrs. Lewis L. Coburn Memorial Collection, 1933.444

7. Grainstacks. (Sunset: snow effect) 1890-91
   Oil on canvas, 65.3 x 100.4 cm
   Potter Palmer Collection, 1922.431

8. Edgar Degas
   French, 1834-1917

   *Uncle and Niece (Henri de Gas and his Niece Lucie de Gas)* 1876
   Oil on canvas, 99.8 x 119.4 cm
   Mr. & Mrs. Lewis L. Coburn Memorial Collection, 1933.429

9. Mary Cassatt
   United States, 1845-1926

   *The Bath*, 1891-92
   Oil on canvas, 100.4 x 66 cm
   Robert A. Waller Fund, 1910.2

10. Mother and Child, 1895
    Drypoint, 29.2 x 23.8 cm
    Joseph Brooks Fair Collection, 1940.920

11. Georges Seurat
    French, 1859-1891

    *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*, 1884, 1884-86
    Oil on canvas, 205.7 x 305.8 cm
    Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection, 1926.224

12. Edouard Manet
    French, 1832-83

    *The Races at Longchamps*, 1864
    Oil on canvas, 43.9 x 84.5 cm
    Potter Palmer Collection, 1922.424

13. Detail, *The Races at Longchamps*
14. Pierre-Auguste Renoir
French, 1841-1919

Jugglers at the Circus Fernando, 1879
Oil on canvas, 130.8 x 97.8 cm
Potter Palmer Collection, 1922.440

15. Edgar Degas
French, 1843-1917

On the Stage, 1876-77
Pastel over monotype on cream laid paper
59.2 x 42.5 cm
Potter Palmer Collection, 1922.423

16. Paul Gauguin
French, 1848-1903

The Day of the Gods, Mahana No Atua, 1894
Oil on canvas, 69.6 x 89.9 cm
Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection,
1926.198

17. Vincent van Gogh
Dutch, 1853-1890

The Bedroom, 1888
Oil on canvas, 73.6 x 92.3 cm
Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection,
1926.417

18. Self-Portrait, 1886-87
Oil on canvas, 42 x 33.7 cm
Joseph Winterbotham Collection, 1954.326

19. Detail, Self-Portrait

20. Henri de Toulouse Lautrec
French, 1864-1901

At the Moulin Rouge, 1894-5
Oil on canvas, 123 x 141 cm
Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection,
1928.610
CHRONOLOGY

WORLD EVENTS BETWEEN 1848-1905

1848 Karl Marx publishes *Communist Manifesto* in England

✓ 1853 Remodeling of Paris begins under Napoleon III

✓ 1856 Gustave Flaubert publishes *Madame Bovary* in France

✓ 1859 Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species by Natural Selection*

1862 Building of the Paris Opéra starts, designed by Charles Garnier (finished 1874)

1874 Louis Pasteur invents pasteurization of dairy products in Paris

1865 Abraham Lincoln assassinated April 14
   Civil War ends May 26 (surrender of last Confederate army at Shreveport, Louisiana)
   Thirteenth Amendment to U.S. Constitution abolishes slavery

✓ 1869 J. Lister initiates antiseptic surgery
   Wagner composes "Tristan and Isolde"

1866 Alfred Nobel invents dynamite in Sweden
   Dostoyevsky publishes *Crime and Punishment* in Russia

1867 Russia sells Alaska to the U.S. for $7, 200,000.
   Pierre Michaux begins to manufacture bicycles in France

✓ 1869 Opening of Suez Canal in Egypt
   First postcard introduced in Austria
   Leon Tolstoy publishes *War and Peace* in Russia

✓ 1870 Napoleon III defeated, Third Republic proclaimed in France
   The Franco-Prussian war begins

✓ 1871 The Commune rules Paris for two months
   Franco-Prussian War ends 1871

✓ 1874 First Impressionist exhibition, Paris (group shows: 1874, 1876, 1877, 1879, 1880, 1881, 1882, and 1886)

✓ 1875 Bizet's opera "Carmen" presented in Paris

✓ 1876 Heinrich Schliemann excavates Mycenae, in Greece
   Alexander Graham Bell invents the telephone in United States

1877 Thomas Edison invents phonograph in United States

1878 Paris World Exhibition
   Electric street lighting introduced in London

1879 The public granted unrestricted admission to the British museum in London

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First performance of Henrik Ibsen's drama, *A Doll's House*

1881 The first of all cabarets, "Chat Noir" opens in Paris

1884 Mark Twain publishes *Huckleberry Finn* in United States

✓ 1886 Statue of Liberty dedicated, in New York City, gift of France

✓ 1889 Alexander Gustave Eiffel designs the 1,056 feet high Eiffel Tower for the 1900 World Exhibition, Paris

1891 Gauguin settles in Tahiti
Toulouse-Lautrec produces his first music hall posters in Paris

1893 "Art Nouveau" appears in Europe
✓ Henry Ford builds his first car in Detroit

✓ 1894 Debussy, French Musical Impressionist, composes "Prelude a l'apres-midi d'un Fauve"
Gustave Caillebotte's collection of Impressionist paintings rejected by the Musée Luxembourg, Paris

✓ 1894-1906 Dreyfus affair in France reveals widespread anti-semitism

1895 August and Louis Lumiere invent a motion-piecture camera in France

1896 Puccini composes "La Boheme" in Italy

1898 Paris Métro (subway) opens
Pierre and Marie Curie discover radium and polonium in Paris

✓ 1900 Sigmund Freud publishes *Interpretations of Dreams* in Austria

1903 Orville and Wilbur Wright fly a powered airplane in Kitty Hawk, N.C.

1904 Church and State separate in France

✓ 1905 "Les Fauves" artists christened by art critic Louis Vauxcelles
Albert Einstein formulates theory of relativity

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

Impressionism and Post-Impressionism


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Recommended for Adults and Senior High School Students


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