TOUR DE FRANCE

Paintings, Photographs, Prints, and Drawings from the Collection of The Art Institute of Chicago
In his critical response to the annual Salon exhibition of 1846, French poet Charles Baudelaire lamented the number of nudes and mythological and historical scenes, which outnumbered paintings that celebrated "the pageant of fashionable life and the thousands of floating existences" of modern Paris. In his view, the quick pace of the city, the bustling of crinolined skirts, and the stop and go of horse-drawn omnibuses were the truths of contemporary life and the only worthwhile subjects for the modern artist. Whereas in the decade after Baudelaire's pronouncement, the painter's brush may have been able to give the impression of urban life, the photographer's camera required long exposures, making it difficult to capture the movement and rich detail of the boulevard parade. It would be two more decades before photography could stop the motion of the man on the street.

The rising popularity of photographic imagery was the focus of Baudelaire's famous diatribe of 1859. Willing to concede to the art of photography its superior ability to record and preserve, he was unwilling to grant the mechanical process a place in the realm of imagination and creative genius. Baudelaire did, however, praise the work of several photographic masters, such as his friend Gaspard Félix Tournachon, known as Nadar, who had initiated a number of innovations in portraiture and photographic adventure. Nadar actually went beneath the streets to photograph the ancient catacombs with the use of a primitive flash; above Paris, in 1858, he made the first panoramic aerial views of the city from his custom-designed montgolfier, or hot-air balloon, called Le Géant (The Giant). A lithograph by Honoré Daumier (fig. 1), dated four years after Nadar's first air voyage, pungently depicts Nadar's role in, as the caption reads, "elevating photography to the height of art."

By the time of Nadar's flights, Paris was already being transformed into what German author Walter Benjamin called "the capital of Europe." The reconstructions of Napoleon III and his prefect of the Seine, Baron Haussmann, opened up the boulevards and created large parks and squares, such as can be seen in Camille Pissarro's 1893 oil painting The Place du Havre, Paris (fig. 2). From his hotel room on the rue St. Lazare, Pissarro painted the sunny facades and roadways jammed with vehicles and pedestrians in what was and still is one of the busiest intersections in Paris.

The life of our city is rich in poetic and marvelous subjects. We are enveloped and steeped as though in an atmosphere of the marvelous, but we do not notice it. —CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, "SALON DE 1846"
For the young artist studying at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts on the rue Bonaparte on the Left Bank, Paris was, to quote Victor Hugo, "an immense hospitality," offering a heady atmosphere more enticing than the classroom. By the 1880s and 1890s, a wide variety of alternative galleries and artistic groups challenged the traditional Beaux-Arts education and annual Salon competition, which had long dominated the commerce of art. Daumier’s painting The Print Collector (fig. 3) shows a collector poring over what are probably Old Master etchings or engravings. In the late nineteenth century, however, contemporary popular imagery, especially the art of the poster, was also considered serious and collectible art. With improvements in color lithography and the 1881 law establishing freedom of the press, artists such as Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Pierre Bonnard, and Jules Chéret were commissioned to make original artworks as advertisements for commercial projects. When the American architect Louis Sullivan was a student at the Ecole in the early 1870s, he, too, was infected by the proliferation of popular imagery, especially cartoons, found in such illustrated magazines as Le Journal Amusant, which he copied and enclosed in letters to his family (see fig. 4).

The undisputed mecca for the young artist looking for a dealer, clientele, and a way of life was the Montmartre district, with its night spots such as the Moulin de la Galette, the Moulin Rouge, and the Chat Noir. The neighboring Circus Fernando was equally popular and a favorite subject for Renoir, Degas, and Toulouse-Lautrec.

Jean Louis Forain’s The Tight-rope Walker (cover) depicts the circus, where a doll-like performer shifts her weight on a rope suspended over a fashionably dressed crowd. In this tiny night scene, Forain captures the excitement as well as the ennui of the audience, many of whom seem distracted and inattentive, with the only true spectators the male admirers whose heads are situated beneath the precariously balanced feet of the performer.

As an artist, a man has no home in Europe save in Paris. "FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE (1888)
While the Impressionists and the next generation of artists influenced by them celebrated the modern aspects of the capital, the actor-turned-photographer Eugène Atget avoided overt references to contemporary Paris in his photographs, which he sold as historical documents. For three decades beginning in the 1890s, Atget used the sepia-toned paper of the albumen process, in the tradition of Charles Marville and other early photographic masters, to evoke the character of old Paris. In photographs such as Montmartre, 2 rue de Calvaire of 1921 (fig. 5), the courtyard and leafless tree perched on the Montmartre hillside are reminders of the once-provincial nature of this village.

Likewise, in the oil painting Mme Vallotton and Her Niece, Germaine Aghion of around 1899 (fig. 6), the Swiss artist Félix Vallotton portrayed his recent bride, Gabriella, seated in an interior that appears to be located in the humble district of Montmartre, but is actually in a modern apartment building in the fashionable and relatively new suburb of Passy. Vallotton presents Gabriella in the comfort of a bedroom reminiscent of the coziness of Dutch seventeenth-century interiors. The blue-and-white tiles of the chimneypiece are similar to tiles from the Dutch town of Delft that were used in the seventeenth century, and they allude to the vogue for stained glass and decorative tiling, which, by the 1890s, were popular features in up-to-date "artistic" homes.

Like Atget, who preferred the unembellished albumen print to the highly manipulated photographs of his contemporaries, the Pictorialists, Vallotton layered oil paints on a wooden panel. This technique had little to do with the modern brushwork on the white-primed canvases of the Impressionists, nor with the scientifically derived color application inaugurated by Seurat, Signac, and other Post-Impressionist painters. Compared to Pissarro’s The Place du Havre, Paris (fig. 2) or Toulouse-Lautrec’s nightclub scene, Moulin de la Galette from the 1890s, which take as their inspiration the complexities of contemporary urban life, the interior of Vallotton from the same period and the cityscape of Atget thirty years later reflect a nostalgia for the old and familiar.

The fact of the matter is that I like living in a modest sort of way. I loathe and detest show and ostentation; things do not appeal to me when they are new, I like old houses and old furniture; I like the place where I live and the things that I use to speak to me of all they have been and seen, and of the people and events that they have known.

*The Journal of Eugene Delacroix* (Paris, May 18, 1850)
City, country, and the buffer regions between the two, which Baedeker refers to in his guidebooks as the "environs," represented three very different geographical and psychological states to the nineteenth-century Frenchman. By the second half of the nineteenth century, improved train networks helped to bring outlying regions in contact with the Parisian way of life. Likewise, improved omnibus routes and railroads enabled the urban dweller, be he a member of "les bleus" (proletariat) or of the bourgeoisie, to leave the city for the recently opened suburban parks such as the Bois de Boulogne, the island of the Grand Jatte, and the riverbank villages of Argenteuil and Chatou. In Henri Cartier-Bresson’s photograph Sunday on the Banks of the Marne of 1938 (fig. 7), the first category of citizens sits with their fleshy backsides to us along the bank to which they have rowed to spend the day. Their postures, attire, and luncheon fare are the flip side of the smartly dressed, carefree couples of Renoir’s The Rowers’ Lunch of 1875-76 (fig. 8).

In Cartier-Bresson’s work, the bulky shapes of the picnickers are lined up in frieze-like fashion on an uninspired spot along the Marne river. In Renoir’s painting, the figures are grouped around an elaborately laid table on the terrace of the popular restaurant in Chatou, La Fournaise. While the high contrasts of the picnickers’ clothing in the black-and-white photograph isolates them from each other and their surroundings like cutouts, Renoir’s brush, loaded with creamy whites and rich blues, flickers over the entire surface of the painting, unifying figure to landscape so that even the still life in the foreground has the visual excitement of motion. In this quintessential Impressionist work, Renoir observed a moment and translated onto canvas the ephemeral light of a sunny day. In his picnicking scene, achieved through the use of a camera rather than a brush, Cartier-Bresson chose a moment no less ephemeral, which, despite its comedic tone, has a quiet monumentality.
Despite her growing urban problems and the havoc wrought by the two world wars, Paris remained the center of cultural Europe into the mid-twentieth century. It was in May, one hundred years ago, however, that one of the most important public festivals, the Universal Exposition, opened with the inauguration of the then largest structure in the world—the 1,000-foot-high Eiffel Tower. Seen from anywhere in Paris, the Tower was a persistent thorn in the skyline. French writer Guy de Maupassant, one of those who signed a petition to prevent its completion, retorted that he frequently ate in its restaurant on the first platform, solely because it provided the “only place in Paris where I can’t see it.” For artists such as Georges Seurat and Henri Rivière, however, the Tower’s complicated A-frame form rising from the relatively uniform city blocks provided a majestic symbol for paintings and colored lithographs.

Among the best-known images of the 1889 structure is the vertiginous view from inside the tower itself, by the Hungarian-born photojournalist André Kertész. In Shadows of the Eiffel Tower of 1929 (fig. 9), Kertész turned the exterior inside out to reveal the lacy shadows cast by the base arches upon the square directly below. This view was one of a series commissioned by the photo magazine Vu to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the Tower’s proud existence. Just as today we celebrate the one-hundredth anniversary of that “unstopable metaphor” of Barthes’s tribute, we also celebrate the next century with the new French landmark, the pyramid at the grand plaza of the Louvre, completed in time for the bicentennial. Seen in the photograph Pyramid, Louvre, Paris (fig. 10) by French photographer Marc Riboud, the pyramid’s faceted double-glass surface permits a view of the surrounding buildings of the original Louvre Palace, while its “abstract and algebraic beauty” evokes both the past and present.

Tour de France: Paintings, Photographs, Prints, and Drawings from the Collection of The Art Institute of Chicago. December 9, 1989 - March 4, 1990 in Gallery 14. Gallery Talks will be held on December 21, January 8 and 30 at 12:15 pm and on January 30 at 6:00 pm.