

The Development of Impressionism

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this discussion, you should be able to do the following:

- Explain how France's defeat at the hands of the Germans changed the French attitude toward art and culture.
- Explain how social, artistic, and technological changes influenced the course of French art in the last third of the nineteenth century.
- Explain the principles of impressionism and how they varied from traditional art.
- Explain the use of symbols in symbolist poetry and write some symbolist poetry of your own.
- Explain the devices in Debussy's music that correspond to visual impressionism and poetic symbolism.

KEY TERMS

By the end of this discussion, you should understand the following terms:

- Impressionism
- Motif
- Symbolism

PREPARE

Study the following instructional material:

In many ways, France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 was as important in ushering in a new era for the French as it was for Germany. France had long been the greatest military power on the continent. It was the first great nation-state in the Middle Ages and dominated the political scene during the religious wars of the seventeenth century.

During the French Revolution of the late eighteenth century, the people deposed and beheaded their monarch, which ushered in a reign of political anarchy called the First Republic. Napoleon Bonaparte, a military hero who was given dictatorial powers, restored order and eventually had himself crowned emperor.



Franz Winterhalter (1805–1873), *Emperor Napoleon*

Another revolution in 1848 overthrew the last Bourbon monarch and set up a Second Republic. This one, like the first, quickly became an empire under a member of the Bonaparte family, Napoleon's nephew, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, who was crowned Napoleon III. The Second French Empire was a conscious attempt to capture the glories of the past, and the new emperor favored art that was as big and bombastic as his ego.

But Napoleon III's defeat at the hand of the Germans in 1871 brought an end to these glories. Napoleon was traded for a Third Republic, and the pretensions of the Second Empire were abandoned. The French decided that, if they could not be the military masters of the world, the door was still open to them culturally.

Technology and art

Two technological advances permanently changed the face of art during this time of political change. The first was the invention of the camera. Since the Renaissance, the ideal painter was one who had the ability to capture the form, colors, features, and personalities of subjects in the natural world as realistically as possible. The camera changed all that. Henceforth, no painter would ever be able to compete with this device for sheer accuracy and lifelike imitation. Painters had to find some other purpose if the art form was to survive.

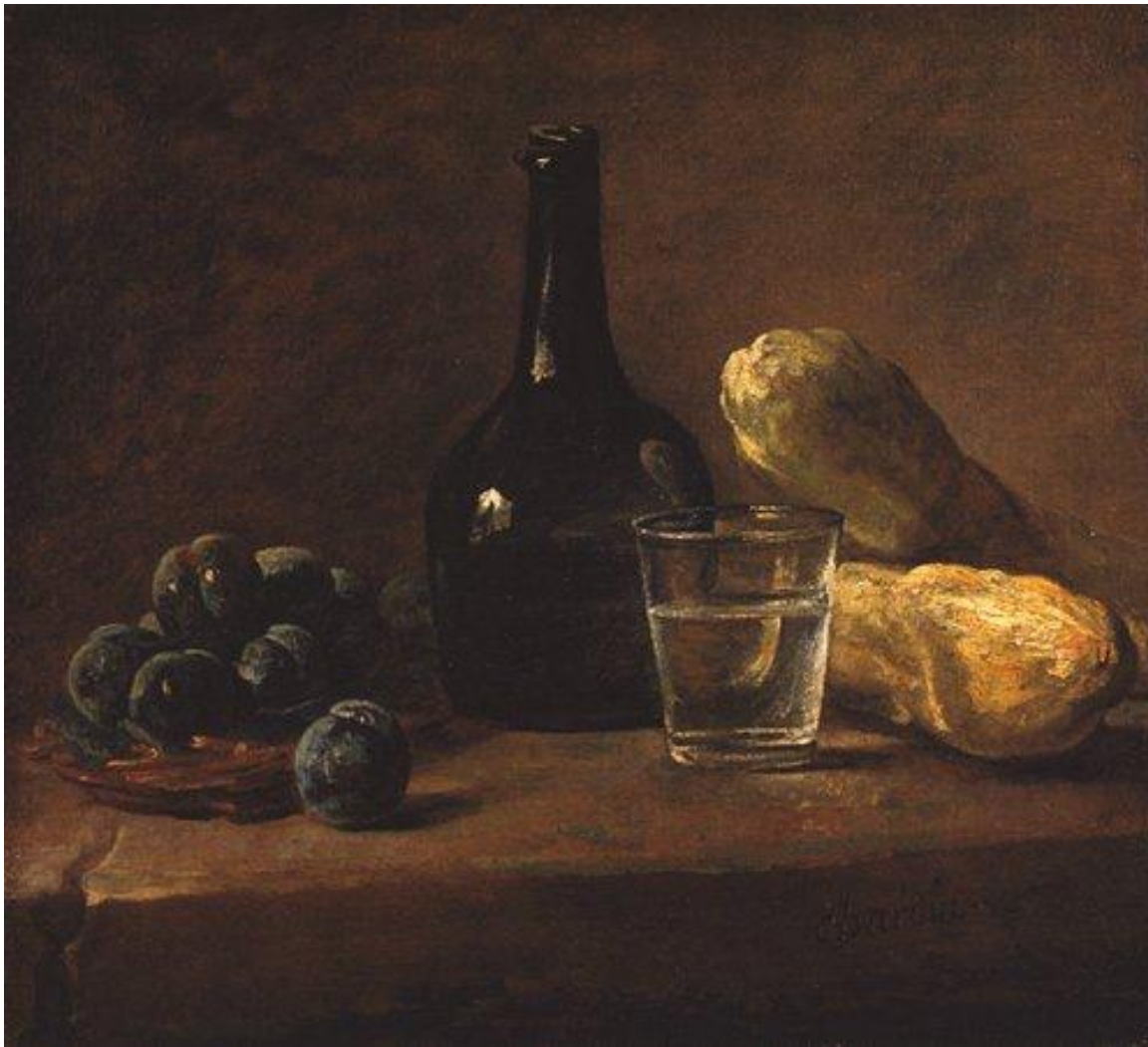


Albrecht Dürer (c. 1471–1528), *Young Hare*

The second technical invention was oil paint offered in metal tubes. Up to this time, painters had to mix their own paint, and since it would dry in a few hours, they could only make enough for immediate use. This tied artists to their studios. But now a painter could easily pack a kit, throw in his tubes of paint, and head for the countryside.

Impressionism

Both of these changes are reflected in the work of a group of nineteenth-century painters that have come to be known as the **impressionists**. This group centered on the work of Edouard Manet (1832–83), whose goal was to rid painting of any practice that he considered stale and meaningless. Conventional painters of Manet's day claimed they had discovered the secret of representing nature; Manet believed this claim was based on a misconception. Traditional painting, he believed, represented men and objects under artificial conditions: models posing in the light of a studio while the painter used the interplay between light and shade to create a sense of solidity and roundness.



Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699–1779), *Still Life with Plums*

The public had become so accustomed to this manner of representation, they forgot things don't really appear that way in real life. Manet believed that, in real life, the contrasts between light and shade are not nearly so even. The lit parts are much brighter, and the unlit parts are dappled in various shades of gray. According to Manet, "if we look at nature in the open, we do not see individual objects each with its own colour but rather a bright medley of tints which blend in our eye or really in our mind." This same idea holds true with line. The old paintings were concerned with showing all the details of all the subjects with equal attention. But Manet realized that, in reality, the eye does not see things that way. In fact, the eye tends to focus on only a small region, and the rest of its view tends to be blurred and unclear.



Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergeres*

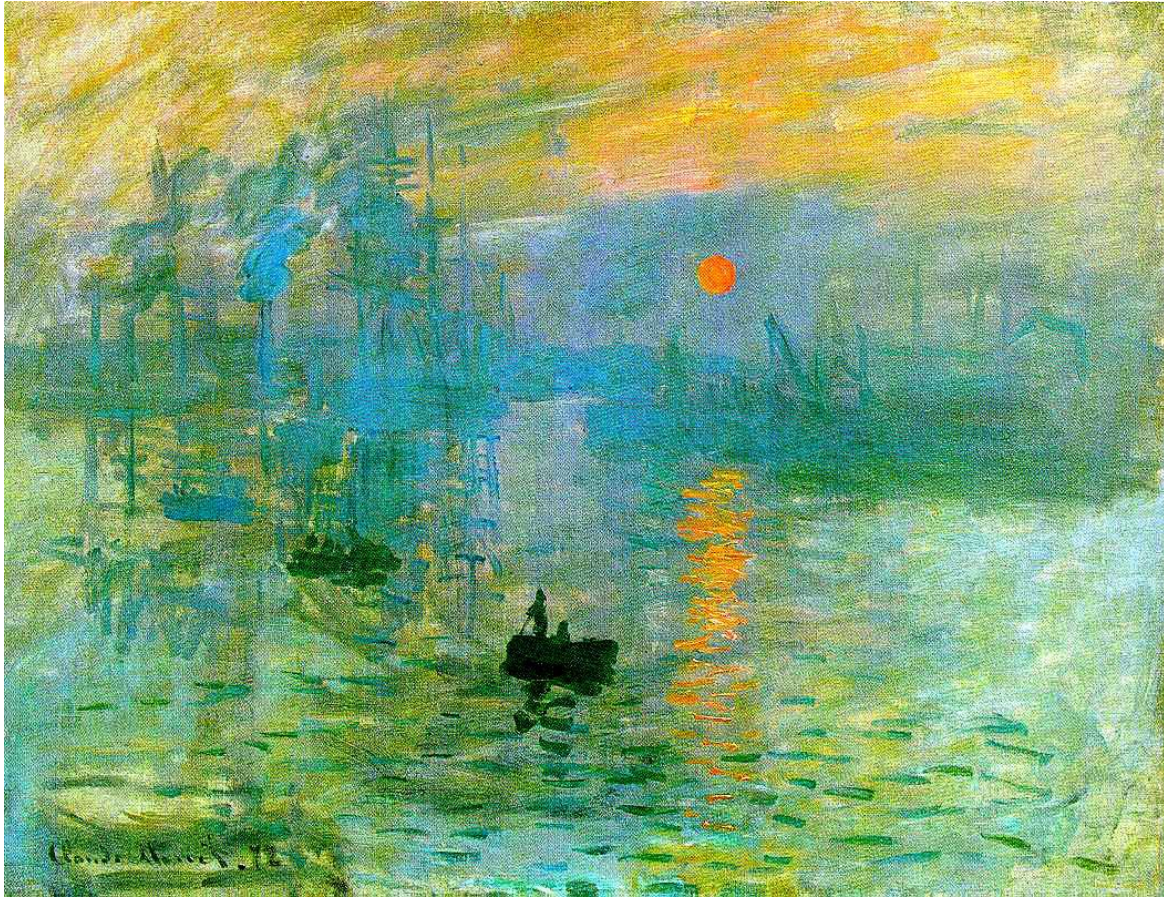
Manet's painting techniques, which abandoned the principle of mellow shading in favor of strong and harsh contrasts, caused an outcry among traditional artists. In 1863, the academic painters refused to show his work in an exhibition at the Paris Salon. Following an uproar carried by the community and artists, the authorities showed all the condemned works in a special show they called the "Salon of the Rejected" ("Salon des Refusés").

Among the painters who joined Manet was Claude Monet (1840–1926). Monet urged his friends to abandon the studio once and for all and to never paint a single stroke except in front of the “**motif**.” He had a little boat outfitted as a studio to allow him to explore the moods and effects of river scenery. Manet painted Monet in this attitude.



Manet, Monet Working in His Boat

Furthering Manet's movement, Monet felt that a painting should be finished on the spot, which changed not only the painters' work environment, but also the ideals of painting. In order to catch a fleeting moment, the painter had no time to mix and match colors, but instead had to paint them in rapid strokes, abandoning detail in favor of a general effect. While this apparently sloppy approach enraged the critics, it enabled Monet to see things with a new set of eyes. This new style was called impressionism after Monet's painting *Impression, Sunrise* (*Impression, soleil levant*).



Monet, *Impression, Sunrise*

Monet became famous for his landscapes, but others of his associates applied the same principles to different subjects. Auguste Renoir (1841–1919) captured the gay life of the Parisians of his day, still mostly interested in the medley of colors and the effect light has as it dapples the faces and dress of a swirling crowd.



Renoir, *Dance at the Moulin de Galette*

Here, only the heads of some of the people in the foreground are shown with any detail, but even then they are depicted in an unconventional manner. The eyes and forehead of the sitting lady are in shadow while the sunlight plays on her mouth and chin. Beyond, the figures in the painting become increasingly dissolved in light.

The joy of looking at an impressionist painting is to step back a few paces and watch the brushstrokes fall into place and come to life. Impressionism is the art of giving the eye only the minimum of what it needs to fill in the blanks. The picture it creates is not so much on the canvas, but in the mind.



Camille Pissaro (1830–1903), *The Boulevard des Italiens, Morning, Sunlight*

In the end, it took little to convince the public that impressionism was a valuable technique. The works of impressionistic artists became some of the most admired paintings in history. The critics who derided them were shown to be shortsighted, and art criticism as a profession suffered a stunning blow. Moreover, the success of the experimentalists encouraged even more dramatic experimentation. The struggle of the impressionists became one of the most treasured legends in the history of the art, and soon, this very misunderstanding became a stock-in-trade for artists everywhere, even to the point that artists and critics alike began to believe that the wider an artwork's appeal, the less valid it was.

Symbolism

A parallel to impressionism was the symbolist movement in poetry. Like impressionism, **symbolism** sought to transfer thoughts and feelings from the mind of the poet directly to the mind of the reader. Symbolists sought to use words not as concrete ideas, but rather as symbols that summoned up various emotional connections. Thus, disconnected symbols reigned, and logic and descriptive narrative took a backseat or were ignored completely. Paul Verlaine (1844–96) is regarded as one of the pre-eminent symbolist poets. Many of his poems speak of *ennui*, a kind of depressed boredom that sets in once all passions have been sated and all desires met. This feeling is characteristic of the post-romantic period. After all the sound and fury of Wagner and his disciples, many artists were left feeling a bit empty. In "There is Weeping in My Heart" ("Il pleure dans mon coeur"), Verlaine uses rain as a symbol for this kind of pointless melancholy:

Il pleure dans mon coeur
Comme il pleut sur la ville.
Quelle est cette langueur
Qui pénètre mon coeur?

There is weeping in my heart
Like the rain falling on the town.
What is this languor
That pervades my heart?

O bruit doux de la pluie,
Par terre et sur les toits!
Pour un coeur qui s'ennuie,
O le chant de la pluie!

Oh the patter of the rain
On the ground and the roofs!
For a heart growing bored,
Oh the song of the rain!

Il pleure sans raison
Dans ce coeur qui s'écoeur.
Quoi! nulle trahison?
Ce deuil est sans raison.

There is weeping without cause
In this disheartened heart.
What! No betrayal?
There's no reason for this grief.

C'est bien la pire peine,
De ne savoir pourquoi,
Sans amour et sans haine,
Mon coeur a tant de peine.

Truly the worst pain
Is not knowing why,
Without love or hatred,
my heart feels so much pain.

Likewise, music had its parallel to impressionism with the music of Claude Debussy, although Debussy never applied the term to himself and preferred to think of himself as a symbolist. Nevertheless, his music, with its colorful orchestration, created a hazy, dreamy sound that paralleled the tiny brushstrokes and gray shading of visual impressionism. Its ambiguity toward tonality is much the same impulse as the impressionists' blurring of line and color. "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun" ("Prelude à l'après-midi d'un faune") is one of Debussy's most impressionistic works. It is an orchestral work based on "The Afternoon of a Faun" ("L'après-midi d'un faune"), a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898), another important symbolist poet:

These nymphs, I would perpetuate them.
So bright
Their crimson flesh that hovers there, light
In the air drowsy with dense slumbers.
Did I love a dream?
My doubt, mass of ancient night, ends extreme
In many a subtle branch, that remaining the true
Woods themselves, proves, alas, that I too
Offered myself, alone, as triumph, the false ideal of roses.

Debussy captures both the languor of a lazy, hazy summer afternoon and the sensuous feelings experienced by the faun during his dream. Note the exotic scales in the flute, the rich chords in the harp, and the shimmering effects in the orchestra.

[LISTEN TO DEBUSSY'S "PRELUDE TO THE AFTERNOON OF A FAUN"]

TEACH ONE ANOTHER

Discussion questions:

1. In what ways did France's defeat at the hands of the Germans change France's attitude toward art and culture?
2. What other social, artistic, and technological changes influenced the course of French art in the last third of the nineteenth century?
3. Describe Manet's attitude toward traditional art. How do his techniques differ from the conventional artists of his day?
4. What does Monet mean by painting from the "motif"? How does this attitude change painting?
5. How does rain characterize the *ennui* of "There is Weeping in My Heart"? What other symbols add to the prevailing mood of the poem?
6. What are some of the symbols in the lines from "The Afternoon of a Faun" by Mallarmé? What mood results from the use of these symbols? What techniques does Debussy use to capture this same mood in his purely musical work?
7. Impressionism introduced new approaches to art that led to a dramatic shift in painting techniques. Initially, art critics did not approve; however, in a short time, most people came to understand the impressionist aims. This was an important step in the rise of modernism, the idea that art's purpose is to devise something new and surprising. How do you feel about the idea of modernism? What are its benefits to art? Does it have any limitations? What are they?

PONDER AND PROVE

Prepare and submit the following creative assignment:

Write a couple of lines of symbolist poetry to describe the mood you are in right now.