IMPRESSIONISM, the true picture

Spring 2020, Mondays 12.30-3.00pm

Instructor: Christopher Wood

Office hours: Wednesday, 2.00-4.00 or by appointment, 19 University Place, rm. 334

Impressionism—a luminous and sensuous way of painting developed in France in the nineteenth century—is for many people the gateway to art. In its own time, Impressionist painting was rejected by the art establishment and the general public. But today Impressionism is prized because there are no symbols to decode and no obscure subject matters demanding insider knowledge. It is a democratic art form. This course will try to understand the original, radical intentions of the Impressionists—their rejection of tradition, their embrace of modern life, their competition with photography. We may learn that there is, after all, more than meets the eye in Impressionism.

What is the meaning of the course’s title? An Impressionist painting tries to give a “true picture,” or at least a truer picture, of reality. In another sense, we will try in this seminar to get behind prevailing myths and commonplaces to arrive at a truer picture of what Impressionism was.

We will study closely the artists Manet, Morisot, Pissarro, Renoir, Monet, Sisley, Cézanne, Cassat, and Degas, as well as their Realist predecessors Courbet and Corot and the Post-Impressionists Seurat, Signac, Gauguin, and van Gogh. We will also read literary and other texts from the period—“primary” sources, in other words, writings by contemporaries who were eyewitnesses to the Impressionist revolution.

There are no prerequisites for this course—that is the whole point of Impressionism. It is an art form that anyone can approach.

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REQUIREMENTS and GRADING:

1. class participation, incl. class presentations (20%)
2. reading assignments (approx. 60-100 pp. per week)
3. three 3-4 page essays (15% each)
4. one final paper involving research, approx. 10-12 pages (35%)
5. brief classroom presentations (5 minutes) throughout the semester, as well as somewhat longer presentation (10 minutes) on the final paper
6. class visits (field trips) to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art (TO BE SCHEDULED)

Expectations:

The focus in this seminar will be on artists and artworks. The aim is to learn how to look at, talk about, and write about art. The weekly meetings will be structured around looking at works of art, with reference to the assigned readings; and it is expected that everyone will contribute to the conversation. There is also a strong emphasis on writing. Each writing assignment will ask for a different kind of writing.

Each student is expected to: learn to use his/her eyes and imagination when approaching works of art; develop a critical attitude when reading or looking; develop a fluent way of speaking and writing about art; master the basic facts about the major Impressionist artists and their historical context; know the major paintings.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

(NB in addition to the readings listed here, there will be weekly assignments from the textbook: Belinda Thomson, *Impressionism: Origins, Practice, Reception* )

January 27  Introduction: what were the Impressionists rebelling against?

They were a loosely allied group of French painters whose works were not admitted to the annual government-sponsored art exhibition in 1873. Some of them chose to embrace their rejection with pride. Critics, mocking the simple subject matter chosen by these painters, their straightforward approach to composition, drawing, and color, and their apparent ignorance of the basic principles of painting as taught in the art academies, called them “Impressionists.” This week we will try to capture the initial excitement of the Impressionists’ challenge to official and orthodox ideas about art.
Reading: Contemporary critical responses to the first Impressionist exhibitions. Stéphane Mallarmé, “Edouard Manet and the Impressionists” (1876) in Art in Theory: 1815-1900, 585-93

February 3  Art in the decades after the French Revolution

A new “culture of art” emerged in the early nineteenth century: the publics for art, the places where art could be seen and read about, the social status of the artist, and the range of preferred subject matters had all changed. Our focus will be on the artistic ancestors of the Impressionists: the Romantic colorists Delacroix and Géricault, and the realists Daumier and Corot. A technological breakthrough that would alter the nature of painting forever was announced in Paris in 1839: photography.

Reading: Linda Nochlin, “The Nature of Realism,” from Nochlin, Realism, chap. 1; Susan Sontag, On Photography, chap. 5.

February 10  Riddles of Realism

“Realism” is a concept associated with the artists Courbet and Manet, but also with major French writers of the period such as Balzac and Stendhal. “Realism” was the rejection of tired old subject matters drawn from history or mythology in favor of the direct gaze onto contemporary life. The realist shows you how things really are, relying on the evidence of his eyes. Realism as an artistic strategy was often associated with progressive or radical politics.


FIRST SHORT WRITING ASSIGNMENT DUE SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 5.00pm

* February 17: no class, President’s Day *

February 24  “The painting of modern life”

In 1863 the poet and critic Baudelaire wrote an essay calling for a new form of art, “the painting of modern life.” The old ways of life had been transformed by the class struggles launched by the French Revolution, by new technologies such as the steam engine, train travel, and photography. It remained to us, Baudelaire, said, to invent the new ways. Did Impressionism initiate modern art? This week again our main focus is on Gustave Courbet and Edouard Manet.
March 2  The “Impression”: painting in the here and now

The Impressionists burst on the scene in 1874, with a new and informal way of painting whose lack of structure shocked contemporaries. The painting of color and light was also an art of forgetting, and an art of pleasure, for the Impressionists seemed equally unconcerned with the traditional subject matter of painting and with the new, politically charged subject matter of the Realists. Monet, Morisot, Pissarro, Cézanne, and Renoir were drawn to subject matter associated with moments: an effect of light, a mood, a pause in the rhythm of daily life. Is this a kind of “realism”? Is there a political dimension, after all, to this seemingly harmless kind of art? What does it mean to depict modern people at leisure? Is Impressionism more at home in the city or in the country—or in the suburbs?


March 9  Impressions of family and domestic life, and of the life of women in the city

Favored subject matter was the life indoors: mothers and children, families at home. Several of the most important Impressionist painters were women: Morisot, Cassat. Male painters, including Manet, Degas, and Renoir, were also drawn to such scenes, as well as to the lives of women in the city. This week we will develop interpretations of such works.


SECOND SHORT WRITING ASSIGNMENT DUE FRIDAY, MARCH 13, 5.00pm

* Spring break*

March 23  Degas: spectacle, leisure, labor

A major artist who rejected the label “Impressionist” was Edgar Degas. Degas was a careful student of the earlier history of art, and he did not commonly paint outdoors. He maintained a focus on the human body. His compositions were not straightforward and unstructured, like those of some of his colleagues, but artfully constructed, sometimes under the influence of
Japanese woodblock prints. Our meeting will be devoted to this difficult artist whose works do not offer simple pleasures.


March 30 Monet: what is plein-air painting?

European painters first ventured outdoors to paint in the Renaissance. But on the whole the great tradition of landscape painting in Europe was created indoors, in the studio. Not until the mid-19th century, when paint could first be purchased in metal tubes, did artists take seriously the project of painting en plein air, or under an open sky. The aim was now to capture the momentary effects of light and color that created a mood, a feeling, a sensation. The master of this mode of painting was Claude Monet, whose adventures in creative looking extend over many decades and continue to attract us even as they seem to defy interpretation..


April 6 Cézanne: new constructions of space and time

The most dedicated, even obsessive, student of pictorial form was Paul Cézanne, a painter who spent his last decades in rural isolation painting local landscape motifs over and over again, trying to grasp the essence of things. His exacting and challenging paintings earned him the highest admiration of critics and other painters. Cézanne seems to approach something like pure painting.


THIRD SHORT WRITING ASSIGNMENT DUE FRIDAY, April 10, 5.00pm

April 13 Destinies of Impressionism I: Impressionism and the Avant-gardes

What did the avant-garde artists of the early 20th century (Matisse, Picasso) think of the Impressionists? was Impressionism the first avant-garde art, and therefore pointing forward to the art of today? or was it the last great moment of the art of painting, and so pointing backward to the luxurious art of the Renaissance and Baroque? In this final week we consider
the important role played by Impressionism in twentieth-century thinking and writing about art, including philosophy.


April 20  Van Gogh: a still more real realism: truth to spirit, truth to self

A Dutch artist of a singular and somewhat unstable nature and a pure spirit of utter sincerity, a seeker, van Gogh created absolutely original works which were understood by almost no one in their own time. Now his paintings are among the most highly valued of all. We will try to see van Gogh’s works with fresh eyes, and with an understanding of the whole person as conveyed by his moving and insightful letters.


April 27  Seurat and Signac: divisionism; a new classicism?

The reaction against Impressionism can be dated already to the 1880s. Some younger painters, without abandoning the commitment to the brightly colored palette or to the subject matter of modern urban life, nevertheless tried to restore a measure of order and balance to their pictorial compositions. Their work could be interpreted both as radically new and as a return to classicism.


May 4  Destinies of Impressionism II: international Impressionism

This week will we study the exportation of Impressionism to America, Germany, Italy, Scandinavia, and elsewhere.

(no reading assignment—work on final papers)

May 11  Presentations on final papers

FINAL PAPER DUE FRIDAY MAY 15, 5.00 pm