IMPRESSIONISM, the true picture

FYSEM-UA 757
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.

Disability Disclosure Statement: Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. The Moses Center website is www.nyu.edu/csd. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosecsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

Electronics policy: the use of laptops, tablets, and phones is not permitted in class. A private screen will compete with the other focal points in the room: the projected images on the wall screen; the comments of your peers; and the remarks of the instructor. If you wish to take notes, please do so by hand if possible. However, I would in general discourage extensive notetaking and instead encourage active involvement in the images and words at hand. I hope
you can share my commitment to making our time together in the classroom, as much as possible, free from distractions.

**Textbook:** Belinda Thomson, *Impressionism: Origins, Practice, Reception* (available for purchase at NYU Bookstore). The reading assignments from this book are mostly bunched up in the central weeks of the course; you might find it easier and more sensible to read the book early in the semester, before things heat up. It is an easy and enjoyable read so it shouldn’t be a challenge.

**NYU Classes and the “Forum” tool:** Syllabus, reading assignments, powerpoints with images, and assignments will all be posted on the Classes website. You will receive Announcements as email messages but they will also be stored on the Classes site. We will make use of the “Forum” tool on the site: you will be asked to respond to texts and images, and to respond to the statements of your classmates. This will in part provide a basis for class discussions.

**Class participation:** It is very important for me that we establish a considerate, supportive, and inclusive atmosphere in class. All comments and questions deserve attention and respect. I hope and trust that you will all come to class prepared, with a good grasp of the reading assignments, and prepared as well to contribute actively to discussions.

**Office hours:** You don’t need to have a specific problem or request to come see me in office hours. I am available during the posted hours, but also at other times, by appointment. I am eager to get to know you all and to talk about the seminar as well other topics with you.

**REQUIREMENTS and GRADING:**

1. class participation: active contributions to discussions as well as the online Forum, and 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 pages (35%)
5. two class visits to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, one visit on your own to that museum, and a visit to a museum of your choice over spring break

**WRITING ASSIGNMENTS:**

**February 17,** 5.00 pm: description and analysis of one or more paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (3-4 pp.)

**March 23,** due evening before class: description and analysis of one or more paintings at an art museum of your choice (3-4 pp.)
April 13, due evening before class: short writing assignment, topic TBA (3-4 pp.)

April 20, due in class: term paper proposal (1 page)

May 15, 5.00pm: term paper, topic to be determined in consultation with instructor (approx. 10 pp.)

Writing assignments may be sent as email attachments; printed and stapled and hand-delivered copies also welcome. Please give your papers titles, and please number the pages. There is no need to reproduce well-known works; however, if you are discussing a little-known work please try to provide an illustration.

Overall expectations:

The focus in this seminar will be on artists and artworks. The aim is to understand these historical artworks as products of their time, but also as still-active presences in our own time. I hope to teach you how to look at, talk about, and write about art. The weekly meetings will be structured around looking at works of art, with accompanying discussion of 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

January 27  Introduction and overview of course

The Impressionists were a loosely allied group of French painters whose works in the 1860s and 1870s were routinely rejected by the annual government-sponsored art exhibition. 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,” i.e., painters who were content to jot down a few impressions of what they saw but were too lazy to bring their canvases to completion. Some of these artists chose to embrace the hostility and incomprehension of the public with pride. This week we will try to capture the initial excitement of the Impressionists’ challenge to official and orthodox ideas about art.
Reading:
Primary sources: Contemporary critical responses to the first Impressionist exhibitions; Stéphane Mallarmé, “Edouard Manet and the Impressionists” (1876) in *Art in Theory: 1815-1900*, 585-93 (will be read and discussed in class)

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 are 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. A technological breakthrough would alter the nature of painting forever was announced in Paris in 1839: photography.

Secondary sources:
Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, on Romanticism, pp. 7-48

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, Stendhal, and Flaubert. “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.

Reading:
Secondary sources:
Meyer Schapiro, “Courbet and Popular Imagery,” pp. 164-91

February 17: no class, President’s Day: first writing assignment, due 5.00pm

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.

Reading:
Primary source: Charles Baudelaire, “The Painting of Modern Life” (30 pp.)
Secondary source:
Emmelyn Butterfield-Rosen on Posing Modernity exhibition (10 pp.)

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, Sisley, 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?

Primary sources: Jules Laforgue, “Impressionism” (1899). Other primary sources (about 30 pages total)
Secondary sources:
Richard Shiff, “Defining Impressionism and the Impression” (6 pages)

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.

Reading: Thomson, *Impressionism*, chaps. 4-5, pp. 87-147.
Secondary sources:
March 16: no class, spring break

March 23: Metropolitan Museum of Art group visit I: second writing assignment, due Sunday evening, March 22

March 30: 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.

Reading: Thomson, Impressionism, chaps. 6-7, pp. 148-220
   Secondary sources:
      André Dombrowski, “Edgar Degas’s Place de la Concorde” (25 pp.)

April 6: 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..

Reading: Thomson, Impressionism, chap. 8, pp. 221-238.
   Primary sources: Marcel Proust, passages on the painter “Elstir” from In Search of Lost Time (10 pp.)
   Secondary sources:

**April 13:**  **Metropolitan Museum visit II:** third writing assignment, due Sunday evening, April 12

**April 20:**  **Cézanne: new constructions of space and time**

* term paper proposal due in class *

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.

Reading:


Secondary sources:
Roger Fry, “Cézanne: A Study of His Development” (1927) (excerpts, 5 pp.)
Paul Smith, “Cézanne and the Problem of Form,” pp. 145-63

**April 27**  **Post-Impressionism I: Van Gogh and Gauguin: 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.

Reading:

Primary sources:
Vincent van Gogh, selections from his letters, pp. 29-47
May 4  Post Impressionism II: Cézanne and Seurat: 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.

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.

Reading: Thomson, Impressionism, chap. 9, pp. 239-259.

Primary source:
Julius Meier-Graefe on Impressionism (22 pp.)

Secondary sources:
Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” OR Cézanne and Unity of Modern Art

May 11: Presentations on final papers

FINAL PAPER DUE FRIDAY MAY 15, 5.00 pm