

# IMPRESSIONISM

The years before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century are known in France as the '**Belle Epoque**', the '**golden age**' when life was for living.

It was a time when Paris prospered with new roads, railways, buildings and innovations such as Electric street lighting were being pioneered. The **middle classes**, particularly became more secure, prosperous and influential in society than they had been before.

Mass entertainment was widely available in the form of café-concerts and dance halls. Famous examples would be the **Folies Bergere** and the infamous **Moulin Rouge**.

Within this middle class, a group of like-minded painters began to emerge. With **comfortable family backgrounds to support them**, artists were able to experiment with ways to capture this vibrant way of life. They began to revolt against the established 'norms' of '**Salon Art**' which had always been the preserve of the upper classes. This **rebellion** was not at all well received.

Painters such as **Auguste Renoir, Edouard Manet, Berthe Morrisot, Edgar Degas and Claude Monet** rocked the establishment and changed the face of visual art forever. The artist was no longer the puppet of the upper classes, pandering to their every whim and vanity. The artist became a **social commentator; a political activist; a champion of the under classes; a ground-breaking trendsetter**. Challenges were even handed directly to the establishment and patrons of the visual arts – biting the hand that feeds. **Scandal** ensued and a group now collectively known to us as **The Impressionists**, (See Explanation below..)was born.

Photography was still in its infancy at this time, and, although popular, portrait photography was still limited in what it could offer the sitter. Painters in particular though, realised that perhaps the eternal struggle to create an accurate image of a person or thing was no longer what should concern them. This opened up a wealth of **new directions** and possibilities.

Everyday Parisian life was captured more effectively than by any contemporary camera could. The group generally concentrated on the **working classes**, those in **service** and **entertainment** industries, for their subjects. This was particularly true of **Auguste Renoir's** work. Others, such as **Edgar Degas** took the equally unusual step of capturing **moments that were overlooked** by most. **Monet** went even further and committed a vast portion of his career simply documenting the **effects of light** on everyday objects.

Gone are the **formal qualities** of previous painting. No airs or graces, no posing or clearly staged compositions. Images of **leisure time activities**, cheap social entertainment- the Saturday night dance; the Sunday afternoon promenade, strolling, courting, flirting in the parklands and boulevards of Paris.

Such paintings are like the "**Kodak moments**" of their time. They capture moments of life: emotions, glances, expressions; as well as light effects, textures, movements and actions. Despite our modern understanding, early photography, with its long exposure times, could never accurately capture such 'moments'.

# Manet

(c.1550 Titian – Venus of Urbino / c.1806 Goya – The Naked Maja) – an example of the traditional reclining nude from the Renaissance period. The figure is posed in a very provocative way and this is clearest from the expression on her face. Venus looks as if she would be a very 'willing companion' to any of her viewers. Remember the majority of these viewers would be male and certainly, the only ones who could have purchased such an expensive item would have been male.

**1862 Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe – Luncheon on the Grass** – So many protests about the 'Salons' not accepting these early works by Manet, Monet, et al, that a special "**Salon des Refuses**" was set up independently of the establishment, to exhibit this new style. Manet's "**Luncheon...**" caused major scandal by challenging the male dominance and **sexism** of the art establishment

**1865**

**Olympia** – Reclining nude female with strong **feminist** symbolism. Picks up the challenge to the establishment where "Luncheon.." left off. **Neck lace and black Cat** tell us this is a **prostitute**, well looked after by up market 'clients', (see silk sheets, expensive shoes, employing a maid). She is not there to 'serve' the males, however, and **challenges them with her stare**. This is a woman in control. Caused an incredible scandal as male gallery goers made to feel like '**perverts**'.

**1866 Still Life with Salmon** – the subject is very traditional, almost a celebration of wealth and privilege. The way that the paint is handled is less crisp, less defined and more 'sketchy' than previous still lives. Manet is beginning to make comments, through his paintings, about the objects' significance as status symbols, not really the objects themselves. It's like a commentary on the corruption and imbalance in society.

**Monet**

**1865 Still Life with Melons** – The composition and handling of the paint in this image look quite simple but display Monet's growing obsession with capturing light. All seven visual elements leap out of this painting to support this obsession. Colour is captured in a lively, contrasting way with the cool grey/blue background and blue patterned plate giving a strong contrast to the warm oranges of the fruit. The strong tones provided by the light source on the left give form to the individual object which are skilfully observed in their individual shapes. The intricate pattern of the "Delft Blue' China plate contrasts with large flat areas of wall and table.

**1876**

**Mme Monet in Japanese Dress** – A very clear admission of the **influence that Japanese culture was having on western Europe**, France and artists in Particular from about 1860 onwards. See also **Hokusi** and **Horishige** for More details of this influence.

**Degas**

**1865 Still Life/Portrait with Chrysanthemums** – The handling of the paint here in Degas' arrangement is quite striking. The brushstrokes are visible and actually used to help suggest things, e.g. the petals of the Chrysanthemum, (a flower associated with Birthdays and long life), flower. This was seen as a weakness in an artist at the time. Degas contrast the texture of the flowers with the flatness of the portrait. It really looks like Degas is experimenting here and as always, giving us a glimpse into a private moment. The dull palette of colours in the portrait and background contrast with the vivid colours of the flowers.

**1879**

**Mlle La La at the Circus Fernando** – Performers of all kinds inhabit Degas' artworks. In this case a famous circus performer. The composition here is the most important element, choosing a difficult viewing angle and carefully working out how to balance background with the focus on the figure. This is not the view of the circus audience, as it first seems. We are in fact, way up in the trapeze network itself, treated to the view of a fellow performer to Mlle La La. The sketch shows how painstakingly Degas researched his images and how he was mainly a 'studio' artist, not 'en plein aire' as some of his contemporaries had become.

## **Morisot**

**1867 Still Life with a Cut Apple and Pitcher** – an incredibly brave painting, not only at this time but for a woman. It was difficult enough for a woman to be taken seriously as an artist, without painting in a way that looks initially unskilled and even unfinished. This is like a hybrid of Monet's light experiments and Degas's texture experiments. It is as if Morisot has looked to the object and then, covering them up, trying to paint her memory of the still-life. The detail, the sharpness are all missing, but it is as if she is capturing just the essence of these objects. Remember, practicing this with objects made her more confident in portrait and more profitable works,

**1869 The Artist's Mother and Sister** – The combination of paint handling, and delicate use of all of the visual elements here have an effect very like Monet's experiments in capturing light. The figures and the poses are very like Renoir, however, the whole effect is much more 'feminine'. This is not only because of the subject matter but because of a sensitivity perhaps? Morisot was a friend to many male Impressionist artists and arguably as good if not better than them. Certainly she was brave.