

Impressionism Project Background Reading

Sources: Interact, ehow.com

Age of Progress

Between 1831 and 1851 the population of Paris doubled as increasing urbanization transformed the city from a cluster of small neighborhoods into a congested, noisy metropolis. The nineteenth century has been called “the age of scientific progress.” The onset of the Industrial Revolution in the 1870s led to an increasingly modernized world. The advent of new inventions like the camera and brighter oil paints in the 1870s opened up greater possibilities for these developing artists.

Antecedents: Realism

The art of the first half of the nineteenth century exalted the romantic and heroic side of people and nature. However, after the Revolution of 1848, artists turned away from historical, biblical and literary themes and began painting the world around them. Amidst the social changes, the Realists responded by painting rural scenes of everyday life. Longing to escape the fast pace of the modern city, the public welcomed these nostalgic scenes that focused on the ordinary working class farmers and laborers. The invention of the collapsible paint tube in the 1830s made it possible for artists to venture out of their studios to literally paint what they saw with their own eyes. The Realists were among the first to work *en plein air* (out of doors). Generally, these artists would do studies and sketches outside and finish their paintings in the studio.

Gustave Courbet, the leader of this group, claimed that Realism was “the final form of art” and “a democratic art.” He changed the course of art history by bringing painting “down to the good, solid earth.” Moreover, Courbet established the right of the artist to paint what he saw, without being bound by tradition or religion.

Impressionists’ Response to Realism

The Impressionists studied Realist paintings; however, they did not view nature as stable and durable, but as transitory, always changing. The simplicity in Impressionist paintings contrasted greatly with the solid, three-dimensional works of their predecessors. Instead of rural subjects, these new artists turned to modern subjects — painting upper-class Parisian society, landscapes and leisure activities. Like the Realists, the Impressionists liked to paint outside. However, they would actually complete works outside to capture the changing elements.

Trademarks of Impressionism

For the Impressionists, the subject of a painting was less important than the properties of color, light and texture. These artists exalted color to convey the fleeting and the spontaneous with thick, broken brushstrokes. Forms in their pictures lost their clear outlines and became dematerialized, shimmering and vibrating in a re-creation of actual outdoor conditions. In essence, the Impressionists eliminated black

from their palette. Instead of the traditional somber tones, these artists utilized bold oranges, blues, greens, reds and yellows on their canvases. Above all, the Impressionists wanted to show the transient effects of natural light.

Consequences

Needless to say, the Impressionists had a profound impact on twentieth century art and culture. Breaking rules and traditions in painting allowed them to push painting beyond the established boundaries. The artists of the twentieth century have continued to seek new and fresh approaches to painting.

Style – Impressionist Artists:

- Set up their supplies outside. Not all impressionists’ paintings were done outside, but most were, and the artists made a point of freeing themselves from the studio.
- Looked for unusual weather and interesting skies. Impressionists loved to paint the way different types of natural light affected objects in their paintings.
- Studied the way natural light hits objects, especially when the effect is fleeting. For example, watch how light bounces along the edges of waves in the water or flickers when moving objects, like leaves, block direct sunlight.
- Considered how movement should look in a painting. In a photograph, a running child will be caught in a stationary pose, but in a painting, effects can be utilized to give the viewer the impression of movement over time.
- Chose ordinary subject matter. Impressionists liked painting scenes of everyday life. They would not set up a scene to paint. Rather, they would find something natural and unplanned. They usually painted ordinary people in everyday scenes
- Used bright, bold colors, often brighter than in nature.
- Tried to capture the fleeting, transitory moment. They usually painted swiftly to catch the mood of natural light.
- Utilized thick and often choppy brush strokes to give tone and texture and an “unfinished” quality.
- Impressionism resulted in artistic independence from the traditional past in color, subjects, texture and tone.

What are the key characteristics of Impressionism?

- Light and its reflection.
- Quickly painted surfaces (or the appearance of quickly painted surfaces).
- Dots, dashes, commas and other short brushstrokes.
- Separating colors and letting the eye's perception mix them.
- Modern life as the subject matter.