



Impressionism: a Turning Point

The Impressionist painters of the last third of the 19th century, Manet, Monet, Pissaro, Morisot, Renoir and others represented a new freedom in the visual arts. Turning their backs on the canvas as a 'window' into an illusion of reality in deep space, which had dominated painting since the Renaissance, they opened their eyes to the reality offered by the play of light and color on surfaces in the open air. Rather than controlling the light and composition in the studio, they evolved a system of brushwork that captured what the eye actually saw, and put it on a canvas that emerged as a curtain of shimmering color and light. Form glowed in the light of day.

In their first group show, held independently in 1874 and poorly received, a critic gave them the label of "Impressionist." It was not meant kindly, but meaning--unfinished, a sketch only. The Impressionists wore the name proudly. They, of like mind, grouped together, supporting each other artistically, physically and philosophically. The academic tradition did not end. The rebels worked on in parallel, gradually gaining some acceptance. Their efforts made the more extreme and individually expressive work of the Post Impressionists like Cézanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin not only possible, but probable. New schools, new ideas and expressions could now form free of the old limitations of academic acceptance. It was a turning point for all the arts, but it began with eight or nine stubborn and insistent painters.

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