



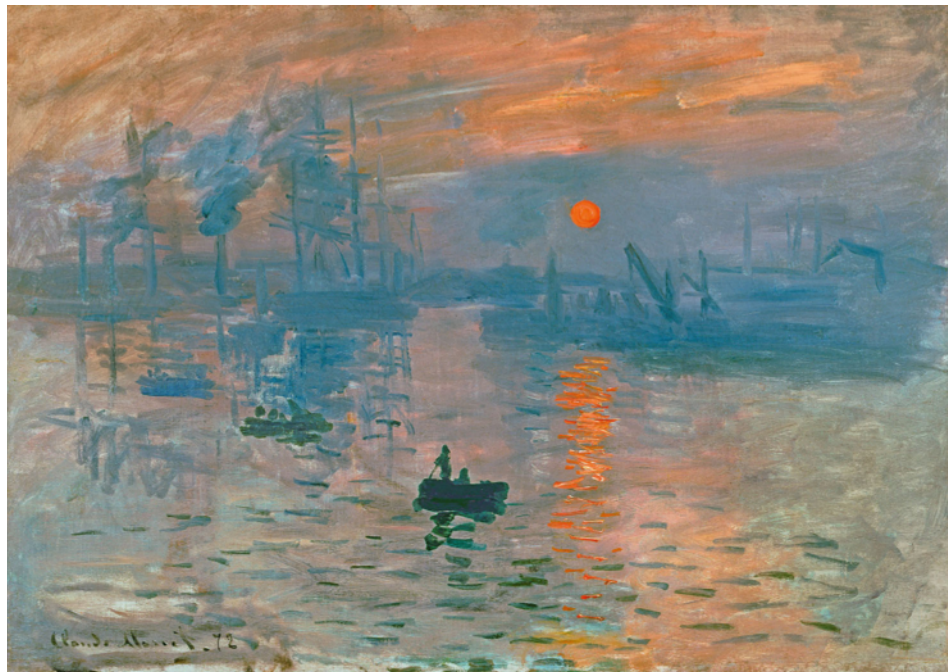
How to make an Impression

In 1874, a group of painters rejected by the official Paris Salon staged its own show and changed the course of art. It was France's convulsed lurch into the modern era that helped spark the Impressionist revolution

ON April 15, 1874, a blazing orange sun rising over the port of Le Havre freed a fishing boat from the dull vestiges of the dying night and French art from the staid shackles of the Salon's lifeless academia. Claude Monet's *Impression: Soleil Levant* lent its name to the new, revolutionary approach to painting that was presented on that April day: Impressionism.

Exactly how different this style—full of loose brushstrokes and preoccupied with light—was from the rigid artistic traditions of the past emerges clearly from the Musée d'Orsay's newly opened 'Paris 1874: Inventing Impressionism' exhibition in the French capital, which presents a selection of the works exhibited in April 1874 next to paintings from the Salon of that time. Nonetheless, the Anonymous society of painters, sculptors, and printmakers, as the group of 31 artists behind the first Impressionist exhibition called themselves, hadn't initially set out to stage an artistic rebellion: 'They wanted to exhibit, couldn't exhibit in the official Salon and, therefore, found a way to create their own platform; but the fact that they did it was revolutionary,' believes art dealer David Stern of Stern Pissarro. He is married to the great-granddaughter of Camille Pissarro, artist Lélia Pissarro and, therefore, has both professional and familial ties with the movement, whose inaugural show he will commemorate with an exhibition, 'Celebrating 150 years of Impressionism', featuring works by Pissarro, Sisley, Degas and Renoir.

However, the art of the group was as much a product of the times as of the painters' pioneering vision and individual talent. France, explains Allison Deutsch of Birkbeck University's School of Historical Studies, had experienced frequent upheaval since the Revolution of 1789, including in 1830, 1832, 1848 and 1871. The Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 and the radical experiment of the Commune of Paris that ended in bloodshed in May 1871 would have forced the young artists to join the military or seek refuge in the countryside: 'The impact of war or dislocation cannot be overestimated. But revolutionary events were not foreign to them before 1870–71 either,



Freedom: Monet's *Impression, Soleil Levant*, 1872, put a name to the growing revolution

because the memory of the revolution of 1848 permeated public consciousness and affected the art of their predecessors.'

Although France lurched violently into the modern era, the same years also saw rapid economic expansion, particularly during Napoleon III's Second Empire (1852–1870).

‘Their art would be judged not simply as a reflection of a new aesthetic, but as the reflection of national identity and culture’

‘Especially relevant to the evolution of Impressionism was the rise of the bourgeoisie,’ points out Dr Deutsch. ‘The expanding middle class was eager to see itself and its surroundings represented in art and in smaller canvases, which could be hung in their newly acquired domestic spaces.

Impressionism fit the bill for some of the more open-minded members of this class.’

This was also an era of industrial and technological progress, with one advancement in particular playing a crucial part in the development of Impressionist art, according to Mr Stern: ‘Suddenly, tubes of paint were invented and you could go and paint out in Nature.’ Although John Constable in Britain and the Barbizon School in France had painted *en plein air* in the 1830s, the handy, portable tubes patented by American portraitist John G. Rand in 1841 and popularised in France later in the century made the task much easier. ‘As landscape impressionism came to be understood as seeking to capture the ephemeral moment in Nature, the quality of atmosphere and light at a specific time, being able to paint on the spot, in the field, became crucial both to how Impressionism was practised and understood,’ points out Dr Deutsch.

Progress also offered a new choice of subjects: ‘Impressionists,’ notes Dr Deutsch, ‘were some of the first to paint modernity as they saw it.’ As an example, Mr Stern cites Pissarro's 1872 *Bords de l'Oise, Environs de Pontoise*: ‘You've got the chimney stacks on the right in



Left: *La Cueillette des fruits*, 1905, by Renoir. Right: *Modernism encroaches* in Pissarro's *Bords de l'Oise, Environs de Pontoise* of 1872

parallel with the masts of the barge on the left and the smoke. That was modernism coming.'

Perhaps more surprisingly, Impressionism was even influenced by French foreign and international trade policy. In the mid 19th century, when Japan was coerced to open up to the world after about two centuries of isolation, France pursued close diplomatic and economic ties. Among the most notable imports from the Asian country were ukiyo-e woodprints from late-18th- and 19th-century masters such as Hokusai, Eisen, Kuniyoshi and Kunisada: 'Japanese prints were known for flattening out perspective, simplifying figures and objects, using unusual viewpoints and juxtaposing broad areas of flat, bright colour,' observes Dr Deutsch. 'Impressionism was understood in similar terms.'

Political, social and economic changes also affected the public's reaction to the new art movement: the defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and the events of the Commune

triggered a widespread crisis of confidence in French power, according to Dr Deutsch. 'Art was called upon to be a source of pride and patriotism. So when [the Impressionists] organised their show in 1874, the stakes were high. Their art would be judged not simply as a reflection of a new aesthetic, but as a reflection of national identity, French culture and the state of the nation. For those who liked Impressionism, it represented the energy and initiative of young French artists. For those who hated it, it signified the degeneration of French culture.'

With politics swirling around their work, Impressionists were often labelled as revolutionaries. 'It was as if their practice and exhibition strategies, which represented such a rupture from routine and tradition, aligned them with the political far left,' remarks Dr Deutsch. In truth, only Pissarro had strong leftist views, with a long-standing interest in anarchy: 'He subscribed to anarchist

newspapers,' explains Mr Stern. 'The anarchists then were interested in less government intervention, less control: let the countryside people live their lives—he idealised that.' The rest of the group, by contrast, was not particularly politically radical.

Yet, these accidental rebels did revolutionise art far beyond the confines of their country and their era. Although their movement was as fleeting as it was influential—from 1878, each of the Impressionists began looking at other ways of working, according to Mr Stern—they paved the way for Abstractism, Cubism, Abstract Expressionism and, from there, much of contemporary art. Never did so few achieve so much in such a short time. *'Paris 1874: Inventing Impressionism' is at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, France, until July 14 (www.musee-orsay.fr)* *'Celebrating 150 years of Impressionism' is at Stern Pissarro, London SW1, May 30–June 29 (www.pissarro.art)*

WEIRD & WONDERFUL

SCALDING hot dishes and highly polished wooden tables don't mix well, but, as the 18th century was about to dawn, clever silversmiths came up with a solution: they made hoops. Used to support hot plates or bowls, they protected wooden surfaces from damage at the same time as looking beautiful. Over the course of the following century, these hoops became, somewhat bizarrely, known as Irish potato rings, despite being neither an Irish invention, albeit popularly made by silversmiths from Dublin, nor specifically intended for



potatoes. Indeed, the 1909 *New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* dispelled the 'unfounded notion' that they were 'used to keep together a heap of potatoes,' although a letter published in *COUNTRY LIFE* in June 1967 suggested that, in Irish households at least, they were commonly employed to support oak bowls full of spuds

in their jackets. The Cotswold Auction Company is offering a pair from the late-Victorian or early-Edwardian era in its Silver, Jewellery, Watches, Asian and Whisky sale in Cirencester, Gloucestershire, on April 9–10, with an estimate of £300–£500 (www.cotswoldauction.co.uk). →



The sound of music

Guilhermina Suggia turned heads. Born in Portugal in 1885, she was a child prodigy and grew to become one of the world's greatest cellists. A head she turned more than most belonged to COUNTRY LIFE's founder, Edward Hudson. They became engaged in 1919 and Hudson, enamoured as much of her talent as of her beauty, gave her a 1717 Stradivarius, with which she would perform for the rest of her life. He also commissioned Augustus John, by then at the apogee of his career, to paint her portrait (*right*). As John worked, she played Bach, prompting Charles Marriott to write in COUNTRY LIFE on April 7, 1923, 'It is a picture by painting out of music, with the personalities of both artists fully expressed, but without conscious effort.' By then, however, the romance between gawky publisher and glamorous musician was on

the wane—Suggia eventually married José Mena, although Hudson remained a lifelong friend.

The John portrait toured a few American museums before it was bought by Sir Joseph Duveen in 1925 and later donated to Tate, where it remains today. For more on John, 'Augustus John and the First Crisis of Brilliance', an exhibition of his early work, is at Piano Nobile, 96/129 Portland Road, London W11, from April 24–July 18.



A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN

ANTIQUES dealer Nick Jones is known for his mix of old and new, often creating an interesting tension between the clean, but elegant lines of the period furniture he stocks with modern, even Brutalist, artwork and accessories. 'Follow a colour or line to link pieces together,' he advises. 'This French console from about 1750, with sinuous Rococo details, is a warm honey colour—not brown, not beige—which allows it to happily blend in with clients' existing pieces.' It works beautifully with a contemporary vase by Italian ceramicist Claudia Frignani (represented by MadeinBritaly gallery) the inspiration for which, like Rococo design, comes from the natural world. Both dealers exhibit at The Decorative Fair, Battersea, SW11; the spring fair runs from May 7–12.

Take five: moments in the life of Philip De László

A NEWLY opened exhibition at Gainsborough's House in Sudbury, Suffolk, 'Philip De László: Master of Elegance' (until June 23), puts the spotlight on the British years of one of the early-20th-century pre-eminent painters.

1. Born Laub Fülöp in Budapest in 1869, De László had a gift for art and rose to become the portrait painter of choice for Europe's finest, including, in 1899, Austrian Emperor Franz Josef I, who ennobled him in 1912
2. In 1900, he married Lucy Guinness, settling in London

- in 1907, where he quickly became a favourite Society portraitist. According to the De László Archive, which curated the exhibition at Gainsborough's House, he painted more royal sitters than any other artist. Among them were Edward VII and Queen Alexandra, as well as Queen Marie of Romania, née Princess Marie of Edinburgh (*pictured*), whose portrait was loaned by the Muzeul Național Peleş to go on display in Sudbury
3. One of the reasons for his success was that he engaged



his sitters as he painted them, so that their expressions would be more natural

and he would capture their personality, as much as their likeness

4. Despite having become a British subject, De László was interned during the First World War for sending money back to his family in Hungary. He suffered a breakdown as a result
5. The internment didn't diminish his standing and, with his name cleared in 1919, he continued to paint Britain's great and good, including Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother and Elizabeth II, when she was Princess of York 🐉