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As France celebrates, it doesn't seem like 150 years since the first impressionist exhibition

A major exhibition opens at the Musée d'Orsay and there are shows and festivals across the country



☛ Claude Monet's Poppies, part of the exhibition 1874: Inventing Impressionism. Photograph: Photo RMN/Musée d'Orsay distribution RMN

To look at Claude Monet's Impression, Sunrise is to live in its moment. You are right there in Le Havre docks at sunrise, in the purple misty light, as cranes and ships vaguely materialise in the weak light of the sun's low red disc.

You could also note what it does not have. It does not have firm borders or precise forms: the people in boats are just blue dabs, as are the boats. The sunlight and ship masts mirrored in the water are spattered, incoherent.

By the standards to which European artists had cleaved for the previous four centuries, Impression, Sunrise isn't a finished work of art at all but an oil sketch. "An impression indeed!" the critic Louis Leroy sneered when it was unveiled along with works by Berthe Morisot, Edgar Degas, Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro and more in an 1874 group show. Another critic dismissed the works as "paint scrapings from a palette spread evenly over a dirty canvas". But it was Leroy's review that bit, with his parting shot that the entire show was "the exhibition of impressionists".



☛ 'Spattered, incoherent': Claude Monet: Impression, Sunrise, 1872. Photograph: Musée d'Orsay distribution RMN

The name stuck and 150 years on, the first impressionist exhibition is being commemorated in France with the enthusiasm the British reserve for a royal wedding. The Musée d'Orsay's exhibition 1874: Inventing Impressionism opens on 26 March, with other impressionist shows coming in Strasbourg, Tourcoing, Clermont-Ferrand, Chartres, Nantes, Bordeaux, with an impressionist festival planned in Monet's Normandy.

Yet it doesn't seem like a century and a half. Impressionist paintings look like today's city streets, cafes and stations, give or take a top hat. In the years immediately before that Paris exhibition, some of the pioneering impressionists came to Britain to escape the Franco-Prussian war. When you look at Pissarro's views of south London or Monet's Thames, it is like looking in a mirror, although in homegrown Victorian art you see another age trussed up in frock coats. The impressionists opened a window and let in the air.

That spontaneity is what Lélia Pissarro remembers from her impressionist childhood. This painter and art dealer, who is staging her own 150th anniversary show at her London gallery, was born in 1963, the great-granddaughter of artist Camille Pissarro. As a child she was taught art by her grandfather, who had been taught by his father, Camille.

It wasn't so much artistic rules that she inherited as a joyful sense of being an artist. She and her grandfather would go out in a boat to paint and drink: "I would have cider with water when I was eight." After school in Paris she would munch sandwiches among Monet's Water Lilies in the Orangerie, at one with them, for "Monet was my grandfather's godfather."

Boat parties and picnics and painting in the open air: the pleasures of impressionism that young Lélia Pissarro absorbed are the same delights that keep us coming back to this art. I can hardly tear my eyes away from Monet's Bathers at La Grenouillère in London's National Gallery. It's a summer day on the Seine and people are frolicking in the cool water that breaks up in dapples and blobs of sunlight: no one, it seems, has a care in the world as two women in bathing suits chat with a man before taking the plunge.

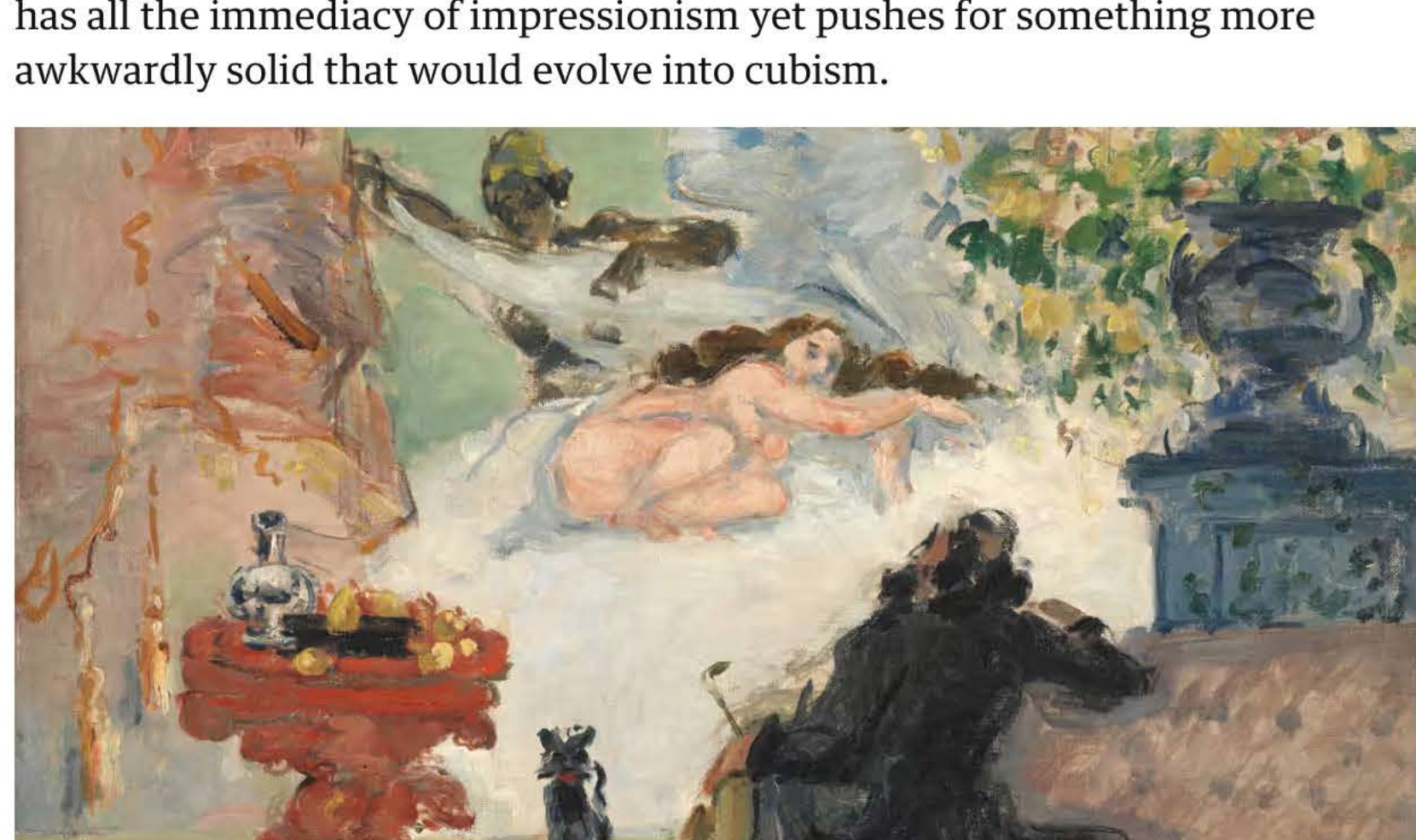
This was painted in 1869, five years before the official birth of impressionism, yet the free and easy atmosphere is more like a 1960s film. Paris in the art of the impressionists is a city where women and men encounter each other in unrepressed ways on dance floors, in theatres and cafes. In Renoir's Bal du Moulin de la Galette, people flirt around a table covered with bottles and glasses, while behind them couples sway and embrace in an open-air dance dappled with sunlight and desire.



☛ Auguste Renoir: Bal du Moulin de la Galette, 1876. Photograph: Patrice Schmidt/Musée d'Orsay distribution RMN

There's no better way to reclaim the radical nature of impressionism than by revisiting its inaugural exhibition of 1874. Women artists claimed their natural place as in no previous art group. One of the most represented artists was Berthe Morisot, with nine paintings, the same number as Monet; only Degas had more. They included her intimate masterpiece The Cradle, in which a mother watches her baby sleep.

The show also made room for a difficult outsider, Paul Cézanne. He showed his bizarre canvas A Modern Olympia, in which a naked woman is stared at by men, and The Hanged Man's House, a view of a village through trees that has all the immediacy of impressionism yet pushes for something more awkwardly solid that would evolve into cubism.



☛ Paul Cézanne: A Modern Olympia (detail). Photograph: Patrice Schmidt/Musée d'Orsay distribution RMN

Already in 1874, impressionism was unleashing the next rapid steps to 20th-century art. Within a decade, Seurat would be abstracting the kind of scene Renoir loved into his ironic painting of mathematically shaped people in geometrical skirts and hats enjoying pixellated sunlight, A Sunday on La Grande Jatte. Thirty years on, Henri Matisse would transfigure the sunlit freedom of Monet's La Grenouillère into his ecstatic 1904 vision of naked women enjoying a picnic on a colour-drenched beach, Luxe, Calme et Volupté. Monet and Renoir lived to see a urinal exhibited as art by Marcel Duchamp, and just 50 years after 1874 the first Surrealist Manifesto would be published.

The year 1874 was truly the birth of today's art, releasing wave after wave of avant garde discoveries. Yet impressionism deserves to be loved for itself, not just for where it led. One of Monet's paintings in that epochal exhibition was a melting scene of two pairs of people walking down a hillside towards us through a deep field of poppies that are blooming in uncountable red spots: the day seems eternal, the afternoon endless and most strangely of all, the duos of mother and child appear identical. As one descends towards the bottom of the painting and invisibility, another pair reaches the top of the hill. Remembering her childhood, Lélia Pissarro reaches for Proust's image of the "petite madeleine", a cake that opens the floodgates of memory. Monet's poppy field does that for me because we had an Athena framed print of it in the living room when I was a kid. Looking into it, now as then, I am released from time.

Jonathan Jones's top 3 impressionist masterpieces

Claude Monet: Water Lilies, 1890s-1926

Orangerie Museum, Paris



☛ Claude Monet's Nymphéas (Water Lilies) at the Orangerie Museum in Paris. Photograph: Remy de la Mauvinière/AP

In these vast paintings of his lily pond shown, as he planned, in curving oval galleries to totally immerse the visitor, space dissolves and reality blurs into reflections and memories as impressionism proves it can probe the most profound mysteries of being.

Camille Pissarro: The Boulevard Montmartre at Night, 1897

National Gallery, London



☛ Camille Pissarro: The Boulevard Montmartre at Night. Photograph: Print Collector/Getty Images

The city lights blaze against a scarily pink as crowds of anonymous pleasure-seekers fill the pavements in this painting that could show any 21st-century city on a Saturday night yet was done in the age of horsedrawn carriages.

Berthe Morisot: Reading, 1873

Cleveland Museum of Art



☛ Berthe Morisot: La Lecture (Reading), 1873. Photograph: Howard Agriesti/Musée d'Orsay distribution RMN

This foundational impressionist work that was in the 1874 exhibition puts female experience into the fields. Morisot's subject loses herself in book as she communes with the green and lifegiving natural world that the impressionists made more fresh than ever.