**Definition:** IMPRESSIONISM from *Dictionary of Visual Discourse: A Dialectical Lexicon of Terms*

Impressionism was an important movement in French, and latterly modern, art in the late nineteenth century. Impressionism rejected the ‘salon’ art of the establishment and committed itself to the pictorial depiction of immediate impressions in all their evanescence and luminosity (hence the description of ‘plein air’ painting). Of all the avant-gardes, Impressionism is the first to explicitly address the problem of representing the fleeting effects of light (the great exponents being Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Alfred Sisley, Berthe Morisot, Camille Pissarro and Georges Seurat). Its musical parallel is best represented by the ‘tone paintings’ of Claude Debussy (1862-1918).

**Summary Article:** Impressionism

*From The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Movement in painting that originated in France in the 1860s and had enormous influence in European and North American painting in the late 19th century. The Impressionists wanted to depict real life, to paint straight from nature, and to capture the changing effects of light. The term was first used abusively to describe Claude Monet's painting *Impression: Sunrise* (1872). The other leading Impressionists included Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas, Édouard Manet, Camille Pissarro, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Alfred Sisley, but only Monet remained devoted to Impressionist ideas throughout his career.

The core of the Impressionist group was formed in the early 1860s by Monet, Renoir, and Sisley, who met as students and enjoyed painting in the open air – one of the hallmarks of Impressionism. They met other members of the Impressionist circle through Paris café society. They never made up a formal group, but they organized eight group exhibitions between 1874 and 1886, at the first of which the name Impressionism was applied. Their styles were diverse, but all experimented with effects of light and movement created with distinct brushstrokes and fragments of colour dabbed side-by-side on the canvas rather than mixed on the palette. By the 1880s the movement's central impulse had dispersed, and a number of new styles were emerging, later described as post-Impressionism.

**British Impressionism** Impressionism had a major influence on the more experimental and progressive British painters in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many of the painters affected were in the circle of Walter Sickert, who spent much of his career in France and was an influential figure who inspired many younger artists. His friend and exact contemporary Philip Wilson Steer is generally regarded as the most outstanding British Impressionist.

**Forerunners and influences** In its representation of light by colour and without definite outline, Impressionism had forerunners in the works of artists such as Diego Velázquez, Francisco de Goya, and Jean-Antoine Watteau. It had, however, a more definite forerunner in English landscape as practised by John Constable and Joseph Turner. The vibrant blues of Japanese colour prints (a discovery of the period) were also influential in the liberation of painting from dark and muddy tones. Gustave Courbet, a painter who promoted realism in art, was an early inspiration with his return to nature and rejection of conventional subjects.

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Atmosphere, colour, and light Manet emerged as leader of the early Impressionists, but it was the experimental work of Monet and his followers that laid the theoretical foundations of the movement. They focused on atmospheric effects, the play of light, and similar qualities of colour and were committed to the study of nature en plein air (open-air) painting. Central to their work was the ‘impression’ – the catching and reproduction of a momentary vivid glimpse of a scene, as opposed to the systematic reproduction of the details that are unseen in such glimpses. They learned the art of presenting a tout ensemble (‘the whole’) wherein details were either deleted or subordinated to the whole. They also thoroughly investigated technique for the first time, banishing the conventional tonality of brown, and the use of all browns, blacks, and ochres. By the majority, all palette mixtures were abandoned and only the pure colours of the spectrum, in addition to white, were accepted. The placing side-by-side of fragments of these pure colours became one of the central ideas of the movement. Others were the simplification of light and shade in the presentation of mass rather than outline; the investigation of shadow, which is not absence of light, but light of diminished intensity; and the separation of local colour and reaction. By following these principles, the Impressionists succeeded to an impressive degree in the portrayal of atmospheric movement – the sway of shadow, the passage of light, the heaving movement of water, the sensation of wind. Camille Pissarro and Sisley excelled in this respect, and Manet departed from his earlier practice to paint as they did in the open. James Whistler, it may be noted, never became an Impressionist in the strict sense of the word, painting from memory and mixing his colours on the palette to the required tone rather than applying pure colour direct. Other artists associated with the movement were Johan Jongkind, Berthe Morisot, and Henri Fantin-Latour.

Decline and legacy Although the movement had run its course by the 1880s, it had a late stage, known as neo-Impressionism, which centred on the technical device of pointillism, wherein spots of primary colour were applied to the canvas, fusing when seen at a distance into the required tone. Inspired by the scientific colour theories of Hermann Helmholtz and Michel-Eugène Chevreul, this technique was developed by Georges Seurat, Camille Pissarro, and Paul Signac. Its main value was to lead to the use of more positive colour, as in Vincent van Gogh’s pictures.

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First Impressionist Exhibition, 1874
Teso Gallery
WebMuseum: Impressionism

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Degas, Edgar Four Ballerinas

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