



French Avant-garde Art in the 1880s

In 1886, after a four-year hiatus, the Impressionists organized their last group show. Disagreements between the founding members of their cooperative were probably the chief reason for the demise of the exhibitions. Yet they had also outlived their usefulness as a Salon alternative, because in 1884 the new Society of Independent Artists had organized its first non-juried salon, the Salon des Indépendents (see page 380). In addition, many of the original members of the Impressionist group had made lucrative arrangements with art dealers to show their works in private galleries and no longer needed to show their works in group exhibitions.

This was the heyday of what Harrison and Cynthia White have called the “dealer–critic system.” In their book *Canvases and Careers* (1965), they define this system as a mode of art marketing in which dealers would buy large numbers of paintings by relatively unknown artists and organize exhibitions of their works. They would cajole, bribe, or otherwise persuade critics to write positive reviews, and would then sell the works at vastly inflated prices. It was pure art speculation, made possible by new developments in banking that allowed dealers to take out substantial loans to finance their purchases. Of all nineteenth-century artists, the Impressionists benefited most from this system, since they were emerging at the time it reached maturity. The two principal French dealers of the late nineteenth century,

Paul Durand-Ruel and Georges Petit, made their fortunes by investing in Impressionist paintings. The artists, in turn, became rich and famous thanks to the dealers.

While the dealer–critic system improved the economic situation of some artists, it also created a ruthless world in which greed ruled and money talked. Many young artists trying to make a career in the 1880s and 1890s felt drained and demoralized by the cut-throat competition. Paul Cézanne retreated to his native region of Provence, where he was supported by his family; Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) escaped to the distant island of Tahiti, and Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) shot himself, tragically, at the age of 37 after a year-long stay in a mental hospital in the south of France. While the Parisian art world cannot take all the blame for these incidents, it was certainly a contributing factor. None of these artists sold more than a handful of works during their lifetime, and when they died their names were virtually unknown.

Georges Seurat and Neo-Impressionism

The Impressionist shows ended on a high note. The exhibition of 1886 featured a record number of 246 works, including several major paintings by young, still largely unknown artists. And although neither Monet, Sisley, nor Renoir participated in it, their absence was compensated for by substantial submissions of new and original works by Cassatt, Degas, Morisot, and Pissarro.

Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Children's Afternoon at Wargemont*, 1884. (Detail of FIG. 17-16.)



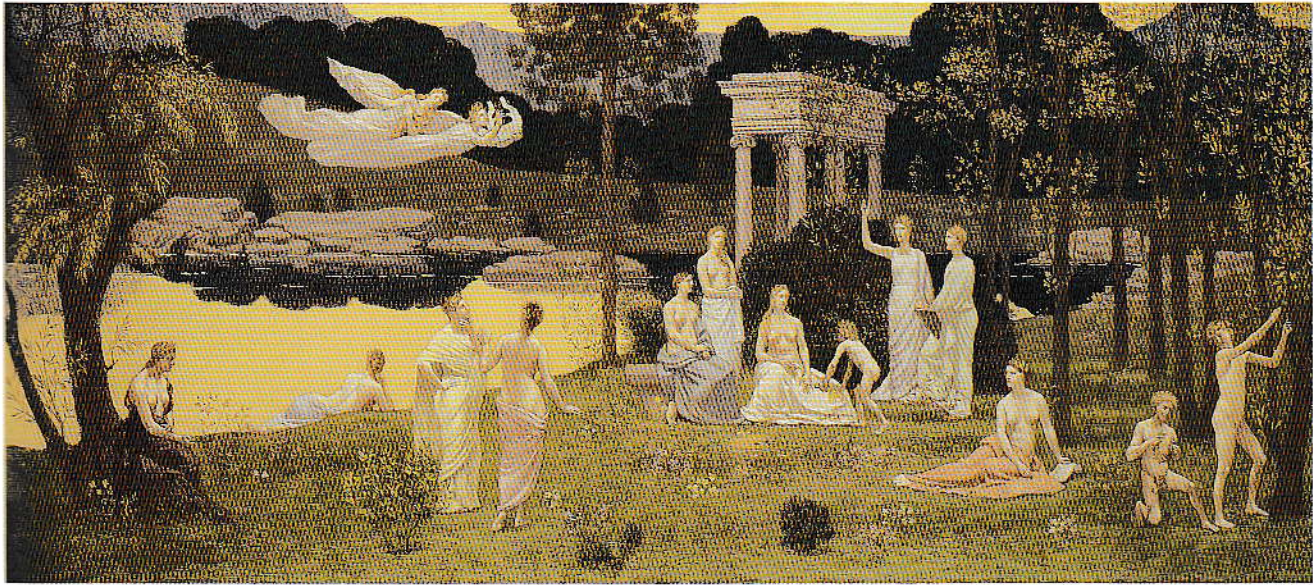
17-1 Georges Seurat, *A Sunday at La Grande Jatte*, 1884, 1884–86. Oil on canvas, 6'7" × 9'10" (2 × 3 m). The Art Institute of Chicago.

Perhaps the most discussed painting at the exhibition of 1886 was *A Sunday at La Grande Jatte*, 1884 (FIG. 17-1), a monumental landscape with figures by the 26-year-old Georges Seurat (1859–1891). The painting represents a popular Parisian park on the island of La Grande Jatte (the Big Bowl) in the Seine River. Here, on Sundays, Parisians came out to stroll, fish, row, or just relax. While at first glance the subject resembles Impressionist paintings of leisure, such as Renoir's *Ball at the Moulin de la Galette* (see FIG. 16-31), on closer inspection it differs radically. First of all, measuring more than 6 by 9 feet, it dwarfs most Impressionist paintings, except for a few early works by Bazille and Monet. Second, the painting juxtaposes different social classes, an unusual if not unprecedented incident in Impressionist painting. Looking at the lower left corner of Seurat's painting, for example, we see the reclining figure of a worker, dressed in sleeveless top and cap, right next to a seated middle-class couple in their Sunday best. In the center, a prim nanny with a little girl dressed in white is contrasted with the elegant lady and her husband—or paramour—in the right foreground. Similar oppositions of social class are found throughout the painting.

Not only the painting's content but also its formal qualities show a departure from Impressionist painting. Seurat's seemingly frozen, aloof, and simplified figures are a far cry

from the animated men and women encountered in the works of Renoir or Degas. Instead, they bear a resemblance to the statuesque figures in the wallpaintings of Puvis de Chavannes (see FIGS. 16-10 and 16-12), even though the classic timelessness of the latter is, of course, quite distinct from the modernity of Seurat's characters. According to someone who knew him well, Seurat was impressed by the "pictorial majesty" of Puvis's works. He is also said to have admired the artist's superior "arrangements of figures." And there is, indeed, an interesting parallel between the careful spacing of the figures in Seurat's *A Sunday at La Grande Jatte*, 1884 and the figural compositions of many of Puvis's later murals, including the idyllic *Sacred Wood* (FIG. 17-2), which was exhibited at the Salon of 1884 before being installed as a mural in the Museum of Lyon.

The carefully ordered composition of Seurat's picture is matched by a meticulous paint application, a technique commonly referred to as pointillism (after the French *pointille*, small dot). In a process that took nearly two years, Seurat built up the entire painting with tiny dabs of paint (FIG. 17-3). These small dots of different colors were placed on a base color that approximated the local color—the color of the object depicted. The grass, for example, is composed of touches of blue, dark green, light green, and orange, painted over a thin green ground.



17-2 Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Sacred Wood*, 1884–89. Oil on canvas, 3' × 7'7" (92.7 cm × 2.31 m). The Art Institute of Chicago.

At the exhibition of 1886 Seurat's painting attracted a great deal of critical attention for this unprecedented brushwork. Félix Fénéon (1861–1944), a young critic who was the same age as the artist, was especially enthusiastic. He referred to Seurat as a "Neo-Impressionist," and saw him as an heir to the Impressionists for the way he broke up the paint surface. But he argued that Seurat had gone beyond the Impressionists—hence the prefix Neo- (new)—by turning the Impressionists' random, choppy brushwork into a systematic, even scientific, method of paint application. Referring to *Modern Chromatics*, a textbook on color by the

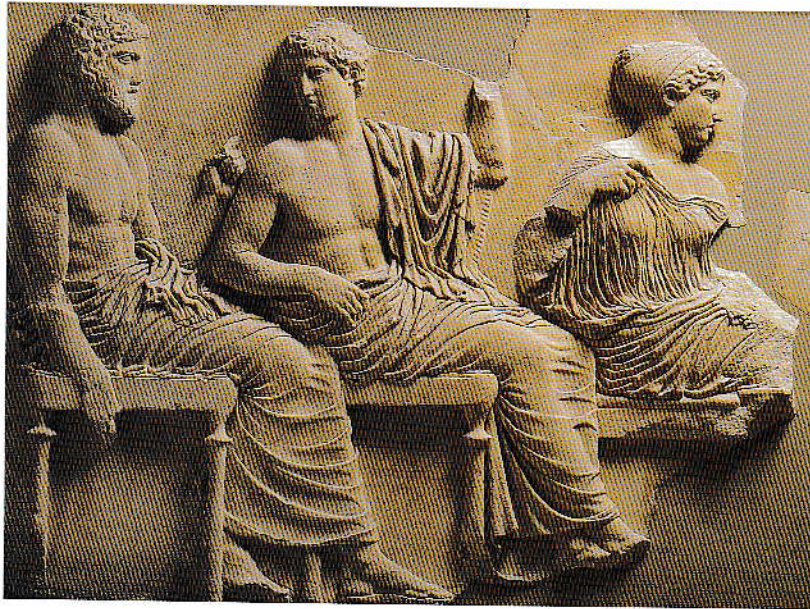
17-3 Georges Seurat, *A Sunday at La Grande Jatte*, 1884, detail of FIG. 17-1.



British physicist Ogden Root (published in French in 1881), Fénéon proclaimed that Seurat's method was aimed at achieving an "optical mixture." He explained that the little color dots in the artist's paintings sent out light rays of different colors, which fused in the eye. According to Fénéon, this lent Seurat's painting a greater luminosity than the traditional "pigment mixture," in which the colors were mixed on a palette. Comparing Seurat's painting to a tapestry, Fénéon argued that a tapestry woven of, for example, blue and yellow threads, presents a more luminous, lively green than one woven of green threads alone.

In spite of Fénéon's authority, it is not obvious that Seurat's pointillist brushwork enhances the luminosity of his painted colors. Seurat's finished works often seem less, rather than more, luminous than those of the Impressionists. If not luminosity, what was the artist attempting to achieve with his painstaking technique? When we study Seurat's paintings in detail, we find that in most areas he offsets the dominant color with small touches of its complementary. In the dark blue jacket of the seated girl with the ponytail, for example, a base color of dark blue is enlivened with touches of light blue and orange—its complementary (see FIG. 17-3).

Eugène Delacroix had done something quite similar 50 years earlier in the shaded areas of his paintings (see page 217). It is no coincidence that there was renewed interest in Delacroix's work in the 1870s and 1880s, sparked in part by the writings of the art critic and theorist Charles Blanc (see page 380). In his discussion of Delacroix's use of color, Blanc repeatedly referred to the writings of Michel-Eugène Chevreul (1786–1889), a pigment chemist who, early in the century, had developed a theory about the psychological impact of colors. Chevreul argued that color combinations appear beautiful when they are "in harmony."



17-4 A section from the frieze depicting the Panathenaic procession, Parthenon, Athens, 442–438 BCE, height 41" (1.06 m). Acropolis Museum, Athens.

Such harmony could be achieved either by juxtaposing similar intensities of analogous colors or by carefully balancing contrasting ones.

Seurat's method, like Delacroix's, appears to be indebted to Chevreul. The achievement of color harmony by means of the use of contrasting colors was important to him both for aesthetic and for symbolic reasons. Aesthetically, it was a way to achieve an effect of timeless and ideal beauty. Seurat, as we have seen, was not interested in capturing a fleeting glimpse of contemporary reality. Instead, he wanted to create paintings that were idealized monuments to modernity. His artistic model was the Classical frieze of the Parthenon in Athens, representing the Panathenaic (all-Athenian) procession (FIG. 17-4), part of an important festival that was held in Athens every four years. "I want to make the moderns pass by as in that frieze," he once said, "capturing their essential qualities by placing them on canvases arranged in color harmonies." Symbolically, his harmonies of contrasting colors reflected the harmonious gathering of Parisians of contrasting social backgrounds.

Seurat's tendency to instill form with meaning—in other words, for his colors, brushstrokes, and lines to be as significant as the content of his paintings—was carried even further in later works, especially those he created shortly before his premature death at the age of 31. *Le Chabut* (FIG. 17-5), of 1889–90, depicts a scene not dissimilar in subject and composition to that of Degas's *Café Concert* (see FIG. 16-35). The painting shows performers on a narrow stage, seen from the angle of a spectator who is identical with the viewer of the picture. It is you, the viewer, who is seated right behind the bass player in the orchestra pit. On your left, you see the conductor raising his baton; on your right is a fellow spectator who is drooling at the sight of the dancers' underwear. On the stage, illuminated by fancy gas lamps, two male and two female dancers perform the *chabut*, a variant

of the cancan, distinct from it in that it involves both male and female dancers. Marked by what, at the time, was considered an obscene display of legs and petticoats, it was deemed a vulgar form of entertainment, attended by seedy bourgeois and prostitutes hoping to snare a lustful client.

Both the composition and the individual figures in *Le Chabut* seem subject to strict rules of geometry, symmetry, and repetition. Note, for example, the exact repetition of the fold patterns in the dancers' skirts, and the symmetry and sameness of the dancers' legs, even male and female, identical but for the little bow ties on the women's shoes. Note also the emphasis on diagonals and the insistent use of yellow, orange, and rust brown, offset by touches of blue, throughout the entire painting. In 1886 Seurat had become acquainted with Charles Henry (1859–1926), a university librarian, whose interests combined science and aesthetics. Fascinated, like Chevreul, by the psychological effects of color, Henry had developed a systematic theory of the psychological impact of lines and colors. In simplified terms, this theory held that some lines and colors (such as upward-moving diagonals and warm colors) give pleasure and, in so doing, expand human consciousness; others (such as downward-moving diagonals and cool colors) cause discomfort and a feeling of lethargy and numbness. Henry used the term "dynamogenous" for the first, "inhibitory" for the second.

Formal analysis of *Le Chabut* quickly reveals the importance of Henry's theories for Seurat's late works. The painting's composition is dominated by upward-sweeping diagonals at angles that most effectively achieve Henry's "dynamogeny." In addition, its palette, in which warm colors (oranges, yellows, brown) dominate, creates an uplifting and energizing effect. Form and subject thus work together to suggest that, in the dreary existence of modern man, spectacles such as the *chabut*, filled with light, music, and erotic stimulation,



17-5 Georges Seurat, *Le Chahut*, 1889–90. Oil on canvas, 66% × 55" (1.69 × 1.41 m). Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.



17-6 Funeral Procession of Ramose, Hall of Pillars, tomb of the Vizier Ramose, ca. 1350 BCE. Wall painting. Thebes, Egypt.

provide brief interludes of pleasure and oblivion. Through his careful stylization, Seurat has turned the performance of the *chabul* into something of a modern ritual, much like the sacred procession in the Panathenaic frieze or the

ceremonies depicted in Egyptian art (FIG. 17-6) that he so admired. Such rituals, as contemporary anthropologists realized, likewise served to lift participants and viewers temporarily above the humdrum level of everyday life.

17-7 Georges Seurat, *Bathing Place at Asnières*, 1883–84 (with additions from 1887). Oil on canvas, 6'7" × 9'10" (2 × 3 m). National Gallery, London.



Neo-Impressionism and Utopian anarchism: Signac and Pissarro

Seurat's *A Sunday at La Grande Jatte*, 1884 carried the day at the Impressionist exhibition of 1886. But it was not the only work to show the new, methodical approach to painting that Fénéon had labeled Neo-Impressionism, but which Seurat himself called Chromo-luminarism and his follower Paul Signac, Divisionism. (Both terms referred to these artists' application of paint in small dots or patches of contrasting shades, which, seen from a distance fused in the eye ("optical mixture") to form shimmering colored surfaces.) Seurat's pictorial interests were shared by a number of artists, who had been familiar with his work since he exhibited his first major painting, *Bathing Place at Asnières* (FIG. 17-7), at the first Salon des Indépendents (of which he was one of the founders). Although that painting did not yet show the full development of Seurat's pointillist method, it did demonstrate his preoccupation with capturing the

essential, permanent qualities of contemporary urban life. And it made a big impression on many artists who saw it.

Among the "followers" of Seurat were several who were his age or slightly younger, such as Paul Signac (1863–1935), but also a few who were older, notably Camille Pissarro. Signac exhibited 11 paintings at the Impressionist exhibition of 1886. Some of these were older works, still in an Impressionist vein; others demonstrated his new Divisionist method. *Gasholders at Clichy* (FIG. 17-8) was perhaps the most original among them, both for its subject and its formal qualities. The painting depicts a group of huge, rusted gasholders in Clichy, the Parisian suburb where the gas for the city's street lighting was stored. It is a modern industrial landscape, the type of scenery that at the time was considered ugly (and still is, by many) and unsuitable as a pictorial subject. Although modern industry had not been absent from nineteenth-century painting, it had, for the most part, been an incidental element in landscape pictures. In Impressionist paintings, such as Monet's *Impression, Sunrise*



17-8 Paul Signac, *Gasolders at Clichy*, 1886. Oil on canvas, 25½ × 31¾" (65 × 81 cm). National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

and Sisley's *Inundation at Loge Island* (see FIGS. 16-21 and 16-26), for example, steamboats and telegraph poles are mere accents denoting modern times. They do not distract the viewer's eye from the beauty of the natural landscape; on the contrary, they focus attention on it.

To Signac, however, the gasholders are the main subjects in an outdoor scene in which a few weeds are the only natural elements to be found. But the artist has transformed the dreary industrial subject into a festive, colorful scene, dominated by bright blues, oranges, yellows, and greens. Even the dark gasholders are flickering with touches of yellow, rust red, and blue. Signac's unusual approach to his grim and grimy theme has often been linked to his political convictions. Along with Seurat and many of his contemporaries, he hoped for a better world in which class differences would be eliminated and there would be social justice for all. While to some this hope never went beyond a utopian dream, to Signac it was a spur to political engagement. Like many artists and writers of his day, he was drawn to anarchism, a political doctrine that held that government is not only unnecessary but harmful.

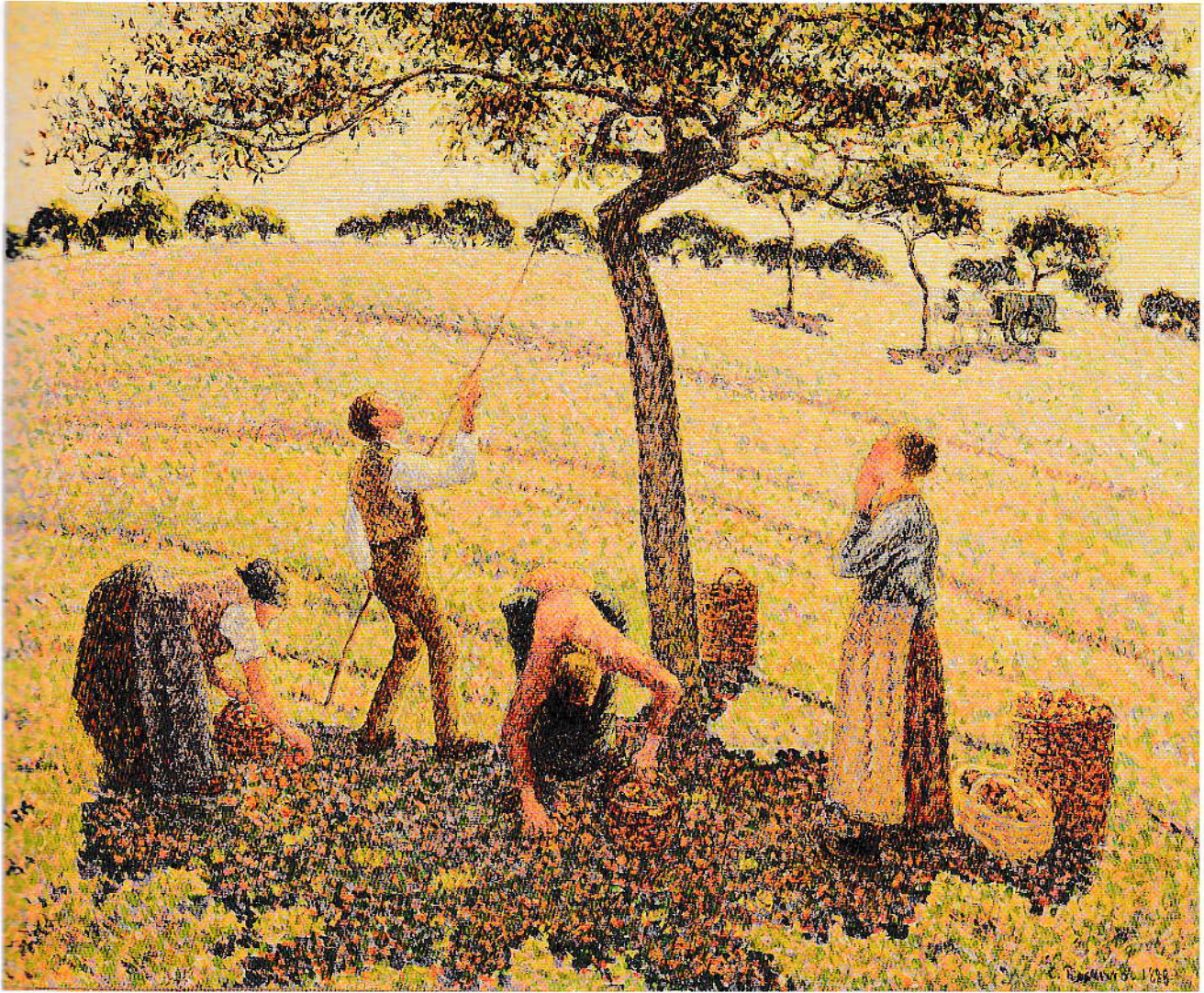
In painting the grim suburb of Clichy and its ugly, polluting gasholders in such a way that they looked "solid and dazzling," Signac wished to create a monument to industrial workers. It did not matter to him that the workers themselves were not present, except through the blue smocks and dark blue pants hung out to dry on the picket fence. The gasholders were testimony to their heroic labor.

Signac obviously realized that the city fringe was not only the site of the workers' glory but also the place where the consequences of social injustice were most blatantly visible. When, later in his career, he tried to imagine the new harmonious world that he and his friends hoped anarchy would bring about, it was a natural one, unspoiled by industry, in which people of different class, gender, and age enjoyed their leisure time together. His *In Times of Harmony*, which he originally intended to call *In the Time of Anarchy* (FIG. 17-9), of 1894, builds on Seurat's *Sunday at La Grande Jatte* and, ultimately, on Puvis's *Sacred Wood*, with which it shares the timeless dream of a golden age. It is a celebration of a modern Utopia, a beautiful, clean, and natural world in which men, women, and children live together in peace and harmony.

17-9 Paul Signac, *In Times of Harmony*, 1894. Oil on canvas, 9'10" x 13'1" (3 x 4 m). Montreuil Town Hall.



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17-10 Camille Pissarro, *Picking Apples at Eragny*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 23 × 28" (59 × 72.4 cm). Dallas Museum of Art.

Although Signac was a follower of Seurat rather than the instigator of Neo-Impressionism, he became the movement's most important spokesperson and propagandist, publishing a book on it and persuading many artists to join it. Among others, Signac befriended Camille Pissarro's son Lucien, who introduced him to his father. The elder Pissarro shared Signac's political views, and similarly began to use his work to express his dream of social justice. Unlike Signac, however, Pissarro concentrated on rural life, and, starting in the 1870s, increasingly turned from landscape to peasant painting. By the mid 1880s he began to combine this subject matter with a new formal approach, influenced by the scientific ideas about color that Seurat and Signac had pioneered.

In Pissarro's idealized view of the countryside, peasants labor in peace and harmony. *Picking Apples at Eragny* (FIG. 17-10), of 1888, one of the later versions of a subject he treated frequently in the 1880s (a larger version was exhibited at the exhibition of 1886), exemplifies his numerous paintings of harvesting scenes, in which each person performs

a necessary task. One man shakes the tree to make the apples fall, while two women pick them up and put them in baskets. A third woman, whose baskets are filled, looks on, perhaps giving the man some hints as to which branches to hit. The figures are set against the vast expanse of a field, painted in small touches of bright colors, which give it an almost festive appearance. Labor here is not a chore, but a joyful form of social cooperation.

The "Crisis" in Impressionism

The innovative works that were exhibited by Seurat, Signac, and Pissarro at the last Impressionist exhibition are often seen as symptomatic of what has been called a crisis in Impressionism. This expression suggests that, some time during the mid 1880s, serious doubts arose in artists' minds about the validity of Impressionism and its essential goal of capturing reality as it presented itself to the human eye. At

the time, however, few if any artists or critics would have understood the term “crisis,” because the changes that were taking place in art at the time were more of an evolutionary nature. But change there was, not only in the works of these three artists but also, in different ways, in the works of established Impressionists such as Monet, Degas, and Renoir, and those of their younger followers.

Monet and the Later Series Paintings

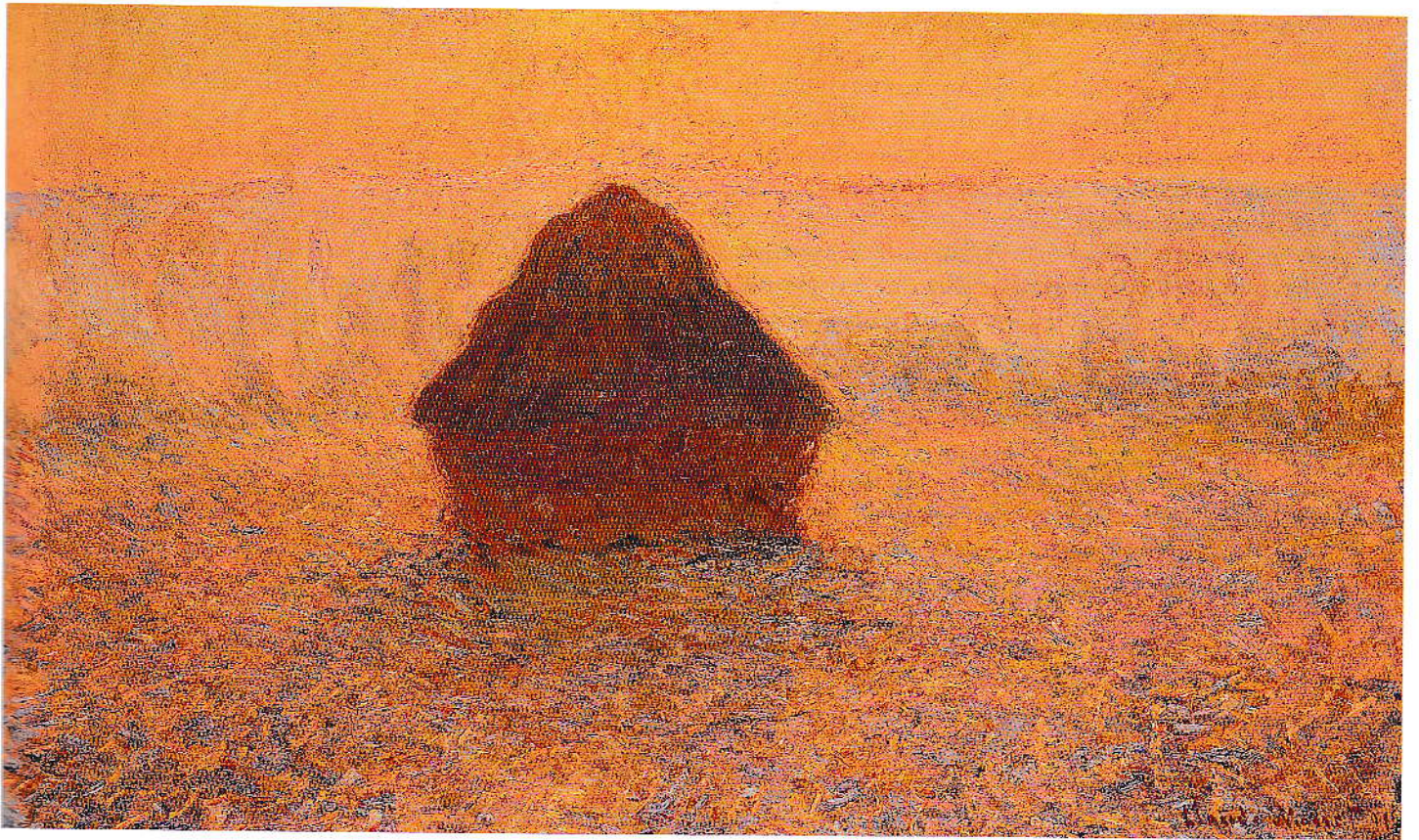
Monet’s artistic approach, in the course of the 1880s, evolved from pictorial objectivity toward subjectivity. He had always been interested in painting the world as he saw it rather than as he knew it. Yet from the early 1880s onward (see, for example, figure 16-28), he increasingly called attention to his personal vision of reality, presumably to suggest to the viewer that there was no knowable reality, that the appearance of reality depended both on exterior circumstances, such as light and atmosphere, and on the viewer’s perception.

This point was made most emphatically in several series of paintings made in the 1890s, in which he represented the same subject—haystacks, the cathedral of Rouen, a row of poplars by a river—at varying times of the day, in different seasons, and in diverse weather conditions. These series were different from the ones he had made in the 1870s and 1880s (see page 393), in which he had frequently changed the viewpoint and the angle of vision. While in the earlier series the viewer is taken on a tour of the Saint-Lazare station or the Normandy coast, in the later series he or she is asked to sit still and quietly observe the dramatic changes wrought in a simple form by changing light and atmospheric effects.

The *Haystack* series (FIGS. 17-11 and 17-12) came first. The nearly 30 canvases were painted outside Monet’s house in Giverny, a small village not far from Paris, where he had moved in 1883. Monet worked on the series for nearly two years, beginning some time in 1890. In May 1891 his dealer Durand-Ruel showed 15 of the canvases in his gallery. It was an unprecedented event, not only because solo exhibitions were still uncommon at the time but also because of the

17-11 Claude Monet, *Haystack*, 1890–91. Oil on canvas, 25½ × 36” (65.6 × 92 cm). The Art Institute of Chicago.





17-12 Claude Monet, *Haystack, Sun in the Mist*, 1891. Oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 39 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (65 cm × 1 m). Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

simplicity and monotony of the subject. To a public used to the motley variety of the Salons and other contemporary exhibitions, this show must have appeared as an exercise in minimalism. Indeed, arranged as they were in Durand-Ruel's gallery, these paintings no longer functioned as individual pieces that each required attention. Instead, they had become a sort of decoration, enhancing the wall surface with their varied colors and textures. This increased importance of form and substance at the expense of content and meaning represented a radical redirection of pictorial art that paved the way for twentieth-century nonobjective painting.

In 1890, however, things had not progressed that far. In Monet's painting the haystacks are still clearly recognizable for what they are. Haystacks, common signifiers of rural prosperity, had been frequent motifs in Barbizon painting, and Monet himself had painted them earlier in his career. In 1890 he may have selected them for their simple forms, which made them a suitable medium to depict the effects of sunshine, mist, rain, snow, dawn, and dusk. Figures 17-11 and 17-12 demonstrate that the *Haystack* paintings differ dramatically, in spite of their identical subject matter. Each one depicts a single cone-shaped stack of hay in a field lined by trees, but the palette and brushwork are distinct. In one painting a haystack on a snowy field is painted with thick, heavy strokes in largely cool colors—blues, blue-greens, and whites—offset by reds in the lower part of the

stack and the ground. In the other, a haystack painted in orange and violet is set against a barely defined background, composed of dense, short strokes of pink, orange, yellow, and violet. The painting's subtitle, *Sun in the Mist*, points to the remarkable effects that are visible in nature when light and atmosphere cooperate to transform the ordinary into the poetic. While both paintings were based on actual observation, the artist went beyond merely noting down his color sensations, as he had in earlier works. In these paintings he tried to intensify his sensations, condensing them into an ever smaller number of dominant colors. It also appears that Monet became interested in the aesthetic rather than the documentary aspect of his paintings. His formerly haphazard brushwork has been replaced by a much more orderly treatment of the paint surface, in which different surfaces (ground, sky, mountains, haystack) are marked by different paint textures. It is noteworthy that, from this time onward, Monet increasingly tended to finish his paintings inside the studio, taking more time to reach the desired coloristic and textural effects.

Monet's late series have sometimes been compared with musical compositions in which a theme is repeated several times in different variations. Just as a composer, in his variations, could change key, tempo, rhythm, and dynamics, so Monet altered colors, brushwork, and texture in his different versions of the haystack theme.

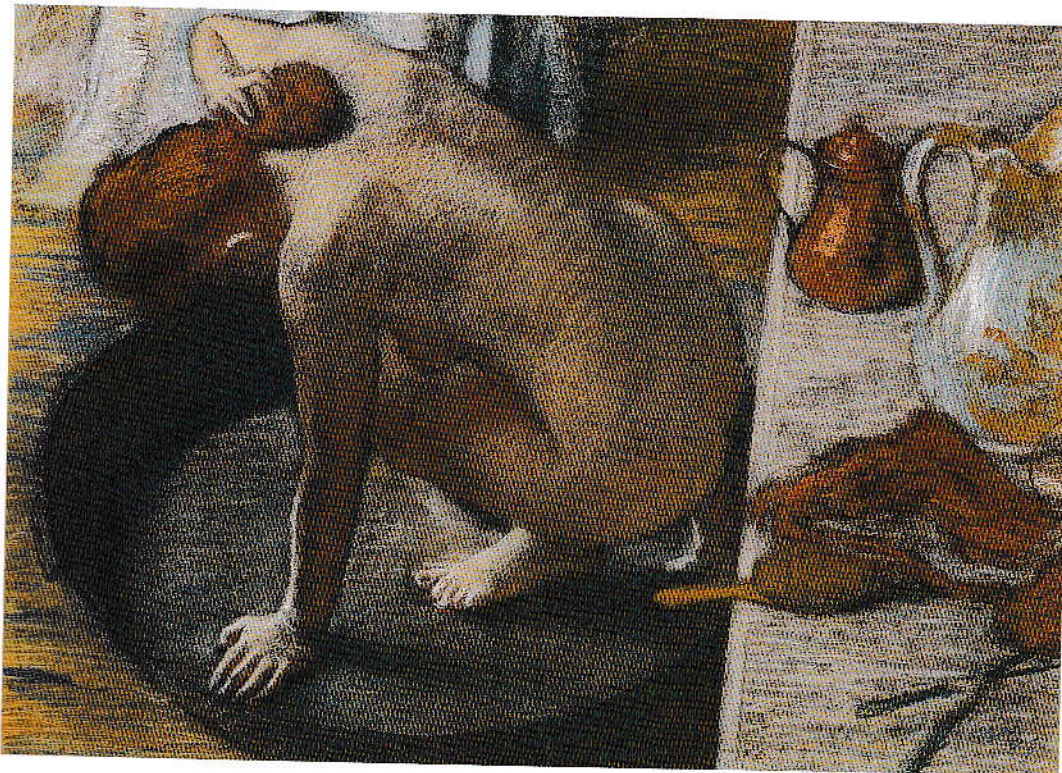
Degas in the 1880s

While Monet's evolution in the 1880s and 1890s is marked by a changing pictorial approach, the work of Degas, during the later part of the 1880s, changed most visibly in its content. Without abandoning the ballet and racetrack scenes that he had treated earlier, Degas became interested in the theme of women grooming themselves in the privacy of their bedrooms. This involved a shift in the presentation of his human subjects from the "theatrical" to the "absorptive." These two terms, coined by the art historian Michael Fried, help to distinguish between figure paintings in which the subject seems to be aware of the painter's (and, by extension, the spectator's) presence and those in which the subject is not. In "theatrical" paintings, figures look and act a certain way because they are conscious that they are being looked at. In "absorptive" paintings, figures are unaware of the observer, absorbed as they are in their private thoughts and actions.

Degas's pictures of ballerinas on stage exemplify theatricality, but his images of naked women are utterly absorptive. Looking at pictures such as *The Tub* (FIG. 17-13), exhibited at the last Impressionist exhibition in 1886, the viewer feels like a voyeur catching a forbidden glimpse through a keyhole. This pastel presents a woman crouching in a small tub and rubbing her neck with a sponge. On the counter next to her is a haphazard array of grooming tools. Nothing could be further from the elaborately posed "display" nudes of Ingres, Cabanel, or even Manet. This is truly the modern nude as Baudelaire had envisioned it when he wrote that naked women, in modern times, are seen only "in bed, . . . in the bath, or in the anatomy theater."

Pastel (see *Pastel*, page 400) was the medium of choice for Degas's *Toilettes*, as his pictures of women bathing were called in his day. As time went on, Degas used pastel in an ever more unconventional manner, combining it with other media such as charcoal or tempera to reach rich, brilliant effects. Like Monet, and perhaps following the example of the Neo-Impressionists, he became increasingly interested in surface texture. In most of his late pastels the colors are applied in a carefully organized manner, often with a view to simulating the surface textures of the different objects and materials represented.

During this period Degas also turned to sculpture, not for the purpose of sales and exhibitions but as a private medium, for his own enjoyment. Indeed, only one of his sculptures was ever exhibited, a highly unusual work that became his most famous three-dimensional piece and remains one of the best known and most loved nineteenth-century sculptures today. Shown at the Impressionist exhibition of 1881, Degas's *Little Dancer of Fourteen Years Old* was a wax statue of a child ballerina. She wore a tutu made of gauze and sports a wig of real hair, tied with a ribbon. The sculpture was exhibited in a glass case, much like the figures found in contemporary wax museums. Today it is better known through the 28 bronze casts (FIG. 17-14) that were made of it in the twentieth century and which are distributed among museums across the world. In its time, the *Little Dancer* created something of an uproar, not only for the medium used by the artist but also for its "dreadful ugliness." One critic recommended that the work should be relegated to the Musée Dupuytren, a celebrated zoology collection that contained wax models of the heads of murderous criminals.



17-13 Edgar Degas:
The Tub, 1886.
Pastel, 23 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 32 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
(60 × 83 cm). Musée
d'Orsay, Paris.



17-14 Edgar Degas, *Little Dancer of Fourteen Years Old*, 1881. Bronze, partially colored, cotton skirt, satin ribbon, wooden base, height 39" (99.1 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The *Little Dancer* was perceived as a specimen of human degeneration, a much-feared biological trend that entailed a return to a lower stage in the evolutionary process traced by Charles Darwin. Degeneration, believed to manifest itself both in behavior and physical characteristics, was thought to occur in the lowest urban class, from which dancers and actresses were normally recruited. Believing that this class included a higher percentage of criminals and prostitutes than all others, scientists concluded that its children, girls like the one represented in the *Little Dancer*, were destined to a life of depravity.

Even those who praised the work could not help seeing the *Little Dancer* as a human specimen. They applauded the sculpture for its "exact science," admiring the way Degas had captured the facial characteristic of the degenerate, such as a low forehead, which presumably indicated a return to an evolutionary state closer to the ape. According to the critic Joris Huysmans, the "terrifying reality" of the sculpture and its unusual materials made the work daringly modern. "The fact is that, at a stroke, M. Degas has upset all the traditions of sculpture in the same way that, already some

time ago, he had rocked the very foundations of painting." Few critics saw the sculpture as we see it today—an image of a spirited teenager, proud of her lithe body and eager to show off the dance steps she has learned.

The *Little Dancer* aside, sculpture, for Degas, was primarily an experimental medium in which he explored relationships between form and space. Using wax and plasticene, he made hundreds of ballerinas, horses, and bathers, often reusing the materials to make new figures. At his death, some 150 pieces were found in his studio. Many of these were later cast in bronze and found their way into museums and private collections. *Rearing Horse* (FIG. 17-15) may serve as an example. Like Degas's paintings of horses (see FIGS. 16-36 and 16-38), it shows the artist's interest in exploring the way in which horses move in real life. The work may be based on the artist's actual observation of a horse or on his study of the photographs of Eadweard Muybridge (see page 401). Clearly, Degas's horse is unlike the carefully orchestrated rearing or trotting horses we see in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sculpture (see FIGS. 5-11 and 9-1). He shows the complexity of the horse's movement as it simultaneously rears its front legs and turns its head, perhaps in a moment of fright.

17-15 Edgar Degas, *Rearing Horse*, 1888–90. Bronze, height 12½" (30.8 cm), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

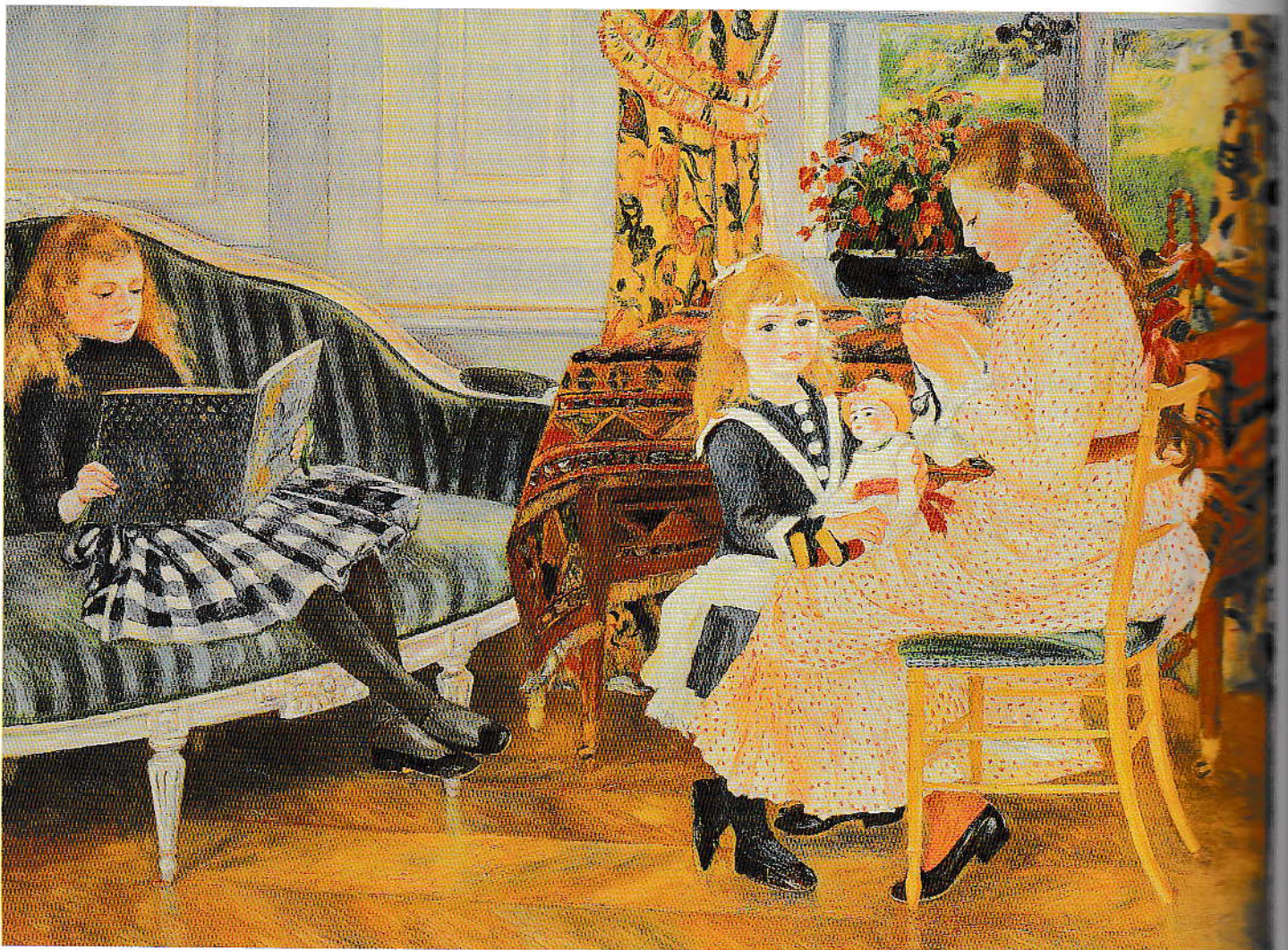


Renoir in the 1880s

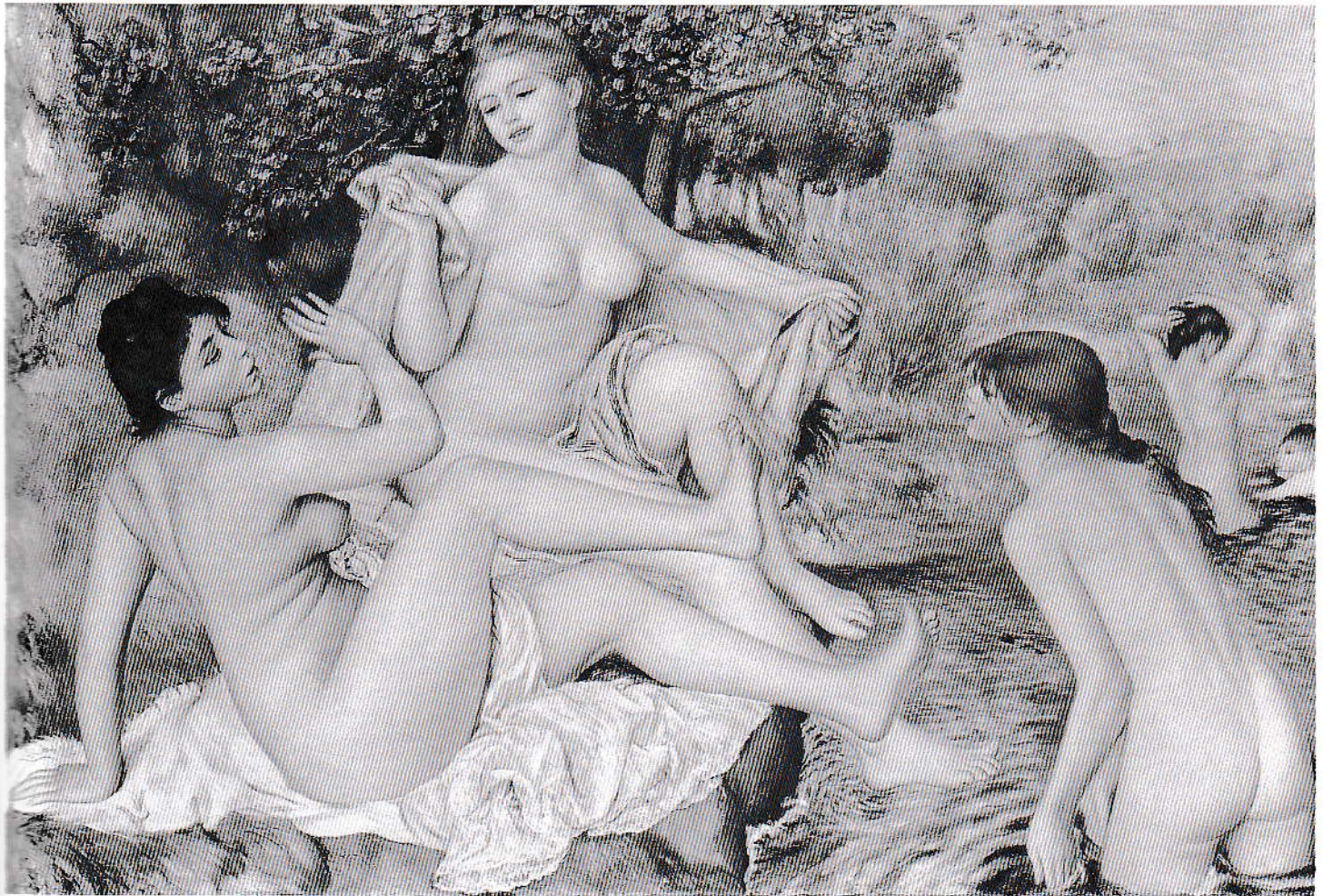
If any artist consciously experienced an artistic crisis in the 1880s, it was Renoir. Thanks to a business deal with Durand-Ruel in 1881, he was financially independent and, for the first time, able to travel abroad. A trip to Italy, where he was "seized by the fever to see the Raphaels," seems to have confirmed doubts in his mind as to the validity of all that he had accomplished up to that time. Many years later he told the dealer Ambroise Vollard (ca. 1867–1939) that by the early 1880s he felt he had "reached the end of Impressionism, and could neither paint nor draw." In despair, Renoir retraced his steps to his academic training in the

studio of Charles Gleyre and began to study the works of Ingres, whom he saw as the greatest academic artist of the nineteenth century.

Renoir's works of the mid 1880s don't look as if they were done by the same artist who had painted the *Ball at the Moulin de la Galette* (see FIG. 16-31). *Children's Afternoon at Wargemont* (FIG. 17-16), for example, shows a new emphasis on flowing, streamlined contours and a return to a smooth paint surface that is vastly different from the choppy brushwork of the 1870s. Even though we would never mistake the work for one by Ingres, in some ways it is more like that artist's paintings (see, for example, figures 5-22 and 10-22) than Renoir's own earlier work.



17-16 Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Children's Afternoon at Wargemont*, 1884. Oil on canvas, 50 × 68½" (1.27 × 1.73 m). Nationalgalerie, Berlin.



17-17 Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Bathers*, 1887. Oil on canvas, 46 × 67 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (1.18 × 1.71 m). Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Renoir's "Ingresque" period culminated in the *Bathers* (FIG. 17-17), of 1887, a large work that not only recalls Ingres's painting style but also his subject matter. Indeed, *Bathers* would seem to be the consequence of what the literary critic Harold Bloom has called "anxiety of influence." Bloom's term refers to the feeling of awe an artist may feel in the presence of the work of an older, much-admired artist. Such a feeling can lead to creative impotence, yet it can also drive the artist to an attempt to emulate the older master. This is precisely what Renoir appears to have aimed at in *Bathers*, which he subtitled *Trial for Decorative Painting*.

Bathers is Renoir's attempt to create a modern, "improved" version of Ingres's nudes, an idealized, "decorative" work that lacks the older artist's anatomical distortions. Renoir felt strongly that art should be anchored in nature, the essence of which was, for him, irregularity and infinite variety. Rejecting what he called "false perfection," he aimed for an idealism that did not subject nature to rules of symmetry and geometric proportions. Thus, while his bathers show the flowing contours and large areas of smooth, soft flesh

of Ingres's nudes, they differ from them in that they have spines and joints, dimples and skin folds. In addition, Renoir's bathers have varied bodily proportions, complexions, and hairstyles: They are individualized, rather than generalized to conform to a single ideal of female beauty. What Renoir's painting does have in common with Ingres is an effect of timelessness and permanence. Indeed, Renoir's interest in creating such an effect was analogous to Seurat's, even though his method was quite different.

By the late 1880s Renoir had retreated from the linearism and stylization of the *Bathers*. *Gathering Flowers* (FIG. 17-18), of 1890, represents a return to looser brushwork and to contemporary subject matter. Yet the painting lacks the snapshot quality of earlier paintings such as *Ball at the Moulin de la Galette*. The poses of the two girls seem carefully studied rather than "snatched" from reality. Turned with their backs to the viewer, they seem completely engrossed in the making of their wildflower bouquets. Their contemplative absorption is a far cry from the action and theatricality of Renoir's early paintings.



17-18 Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Gathering Flowers*, 1890. Oil on canvas, 31¼ × 25½" (81 × 65 cm).
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Paul Cézanne

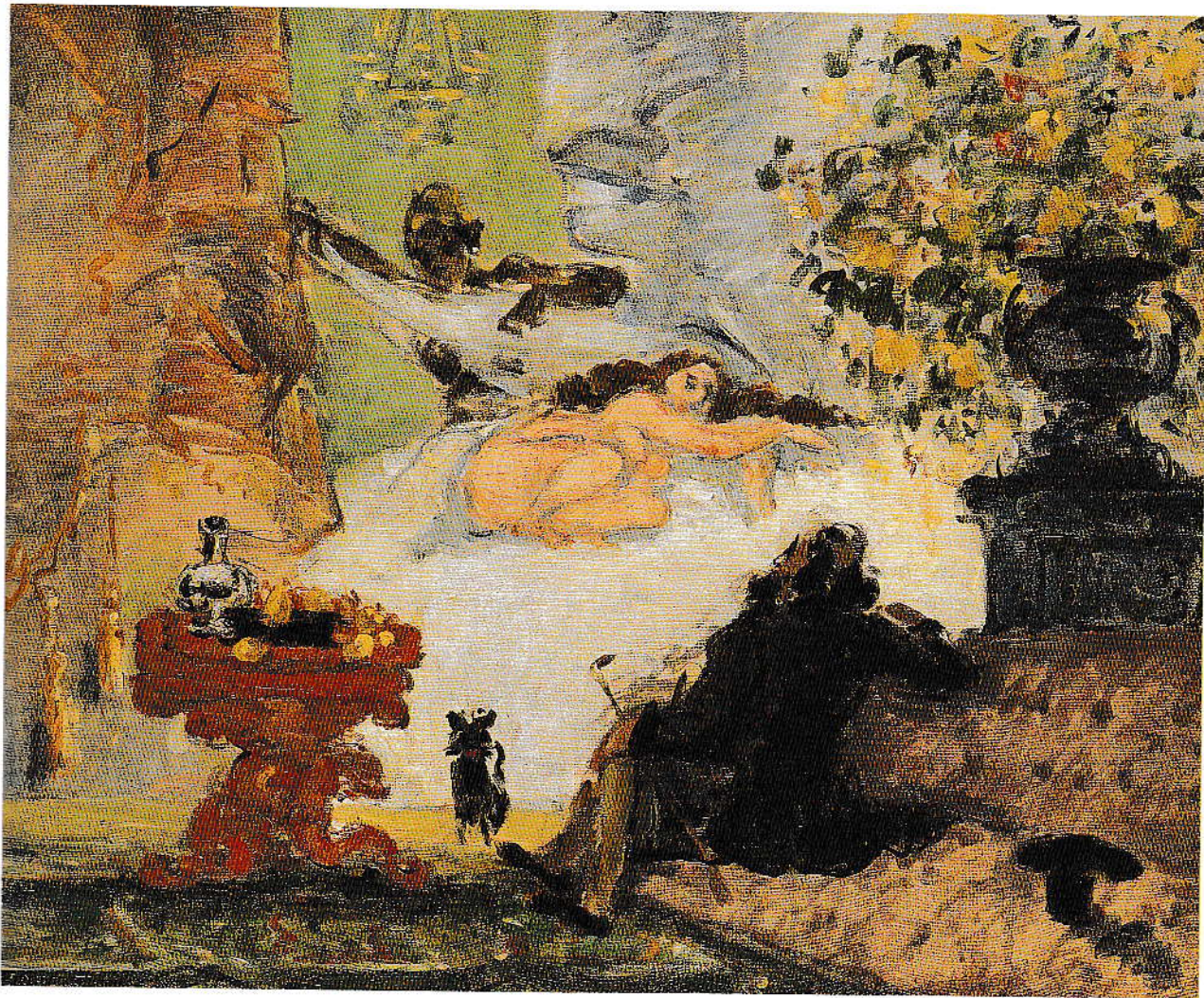
Like Seurat, Paul Cézanne tried to give his subjects a sense of timelessness and permanence. Perhaps the artist best summarized their analogous efforts when he said that he wanted to “make of Impressionism something solid and enduring, like the art in museums.” Cézanne belonged to the Impressionist generation. Born in 1839 in Aix-en-Provence, in the south of France, he came to Paris in 1861. Unenthusiastic about city life, he frequently returned to Aix and settled there permanently in the mid 1880s. In the 1870s he participated in two Impressionist exhibitions, urged by Pissarro, his self-appointed mentor. Feeling sympathy for the shy Cézanne, Pissarro may have hoped that his inclusion in the Impressionist shows would make up for the artist’s repeated rejections by the Salon juries of the 1860s. Ironically, the negative criticism that his works received at these shows caused Cézanne to stop exhibiting altogether.

The paintings Cézanne showed at the Impressionist exhibitions of 1874 and 1877 mark the artist’s transition to

Impressionism. Throughout the 1860s and into the early 1870s, his work had been characterized by a preference for religious subjects and sexual fantasies, which were painted, for the most part, in broadly brushed dark colors. *A Modern Olympia* (FIG. 17-19) of about 1873, though still in the realm of sexual fantasy, demonstrates his new engagement with modernism, particularly with the work of Manet. The painting, which was exhibited as a “sketch” at the exhibition of 1874, shows a curled-up nude reclining on a white, shapeless mound. She is “unveiled” by a black woman for the enjoyment of a balding, middle-aged man (perhaps Cézanne himself, who turned bald at a young age), seated on a couch in the foreground. Seen from the back, both the man and his dog seem so absorbed by the nude that they are oblivious to the wine and fruit displayed on the side table.

As the title suggests, Cézanne’s sketch was an attempt to update Manet’s *Olympia* (see FIG. 12-35), much as Renoir’s *Bathers* had been an attempt to modernize Ingres. But whereas Renoir’s effort seemed serious, Cézanne’s painting, deliberately childlike, looks a bit like a caricature. This may be fitting, since Manet’s *Olympia* itself had been a parody of a work

17-19 Paul Cézanne, *A Modern Olympia*, ca. 1873. Oil on canvas, 18¼ × 21¾" (46 × 55.5 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris.





17-20 Paul Cézanne, *The House of the Hanged Man*, ca. 1873. Oil on canvas, 21 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 26" (55 x 66 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

by Titian. Like *Olympia*, Cézanne's painting is ambiguous. Is this a bordello, in which a prostitute is dramatically presented to a client or are we in a gallery, in which a painting of a nude is shown to a potential buyer? Or—as one contemporary critic thought—are we witness to an erotic dream, induced by alcohol or hashish? Or, finally, is this a glimpse into the artist's private fantasy life, in which art and erotic dreams are fused together?

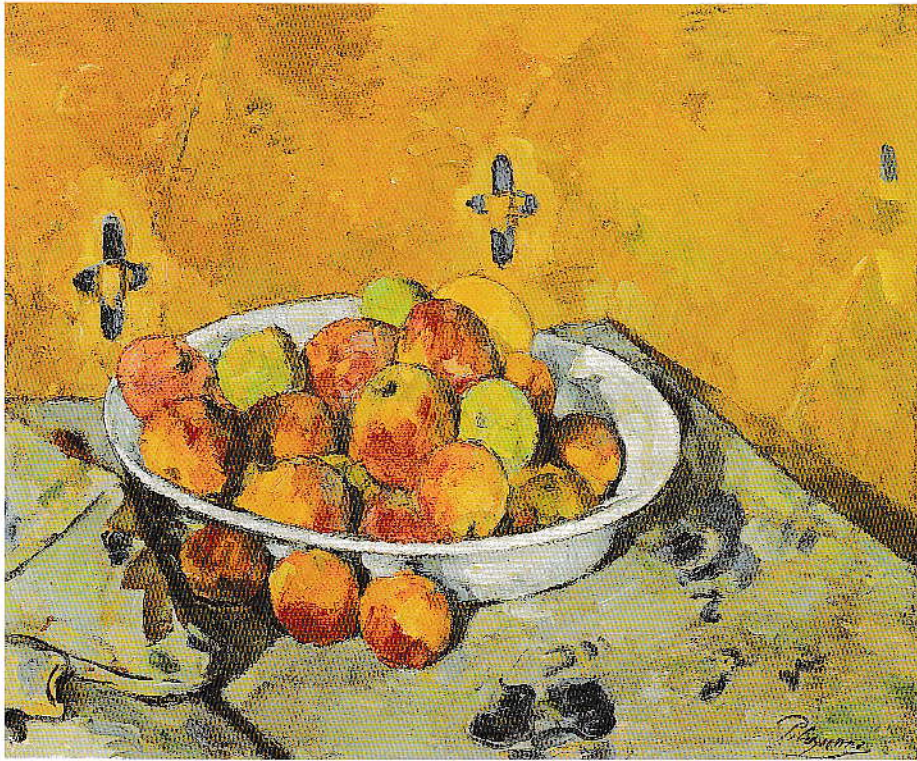
Speculation aside, it appears that in *A Modern Olympia* Cézanne attempted to position himself as a modernist, an artist wishing to go beyond previous generations by breaking the traditional rules of art. The deliberate awkwardness of the painting, its strangely proportioned figures, its distorted perspective, and the racy subject matter all outdo Manet's *Olympia* in flouting the nineteenth-century definition of high art.

At the exhibition of 1874 *A Modern Olympia* was accompanied by three landscapes, all showing houses in a country setting. They were done in an Impressionist style that owed much to Pissarro, with whom Cézanne had been

working the previous year. *The House of the Hanged Man* (FIG. 17-20) resembles Pissarro's work both in its subject matter and form (see, for example, figure 16-25). Like Pissarro, Cézanne applied the paint in short strokes, yet, while the former had a light touch, Cézanne applied it in heavy dabs, creating a thick, encrusted surface.

Cézanne did not show at the Impressionist exhibition of 1876, but he returned in 1877 with no fewer than 16 works. A number of these show the beginning of his growing desire to "renew" his art and "add a new link" to tradition. As he embarked on the realization of this goal, he increasingly turned to still life. Still life had long been a favorite subject for pictorial experimentation; lowest in the academic ranking of genres, it was most conducive to "messing around." Still lifes did not move, like models, or change, like landscapes. What is more, they could be arranged to suit the artist's pictorial purpose.

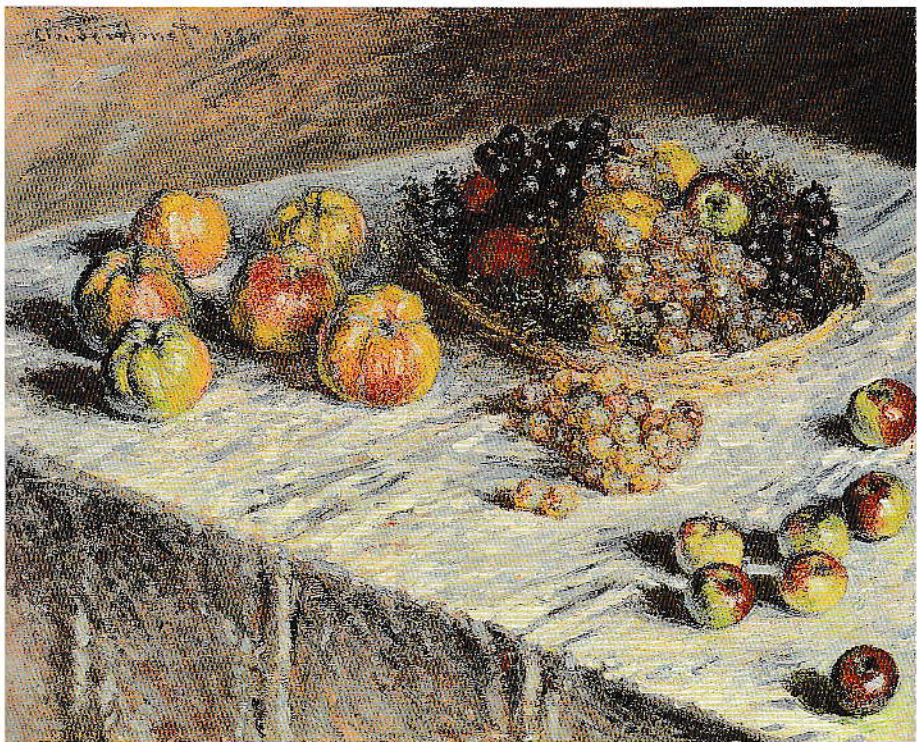
Three "still lifes" and two "studies of flowers" were among Cézanne's paintings shown at the exhibition of 1877. It is impossible to identify them with certainty, but one of them



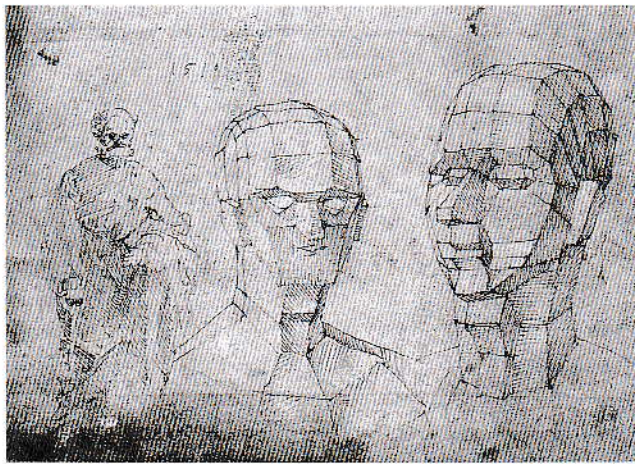
17-21 Paul Cézanne, *Plate of Apples*, ca. 1877. Oil on canvas, 18 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 21 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (46 × 55 cm). The Art Institute of Chicago.

may have been the *Plate of Apples* (FIG. 17-21) now in the Art Institute of Chicago. This is a simple painting which shows just the corner of a table with a white ceramic plate filled with red and green apples. Patterned wallpaper, a flowered tablecloth, and a rumpled napkin lend added visual interest to the picture.

At first, the broken brushwork of the painting recalls Impressionism, but a closer look reveals that it is not as loose and seemingly haphazard as the paint application in Monet's *Still Life with Apples and Grapes* (FIG. 17-22). One begins to notice that Cézanne's carefully organized brushstrokes serve an entirely new purpose—not to call to mind the



17-22 Claude Monet, *Still Life with Apples and Grapes*, 1880. Oil on canvas, 26 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 32 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (66.2 × 82.3 cm). The Art Institute of Chicago.



17-23 Albrecht Dürer, *Two Heads Divided into Facets and St. Peter*, 1519. Drawing, 4 × 7" (11.5 × 19 cm). Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Dresden.

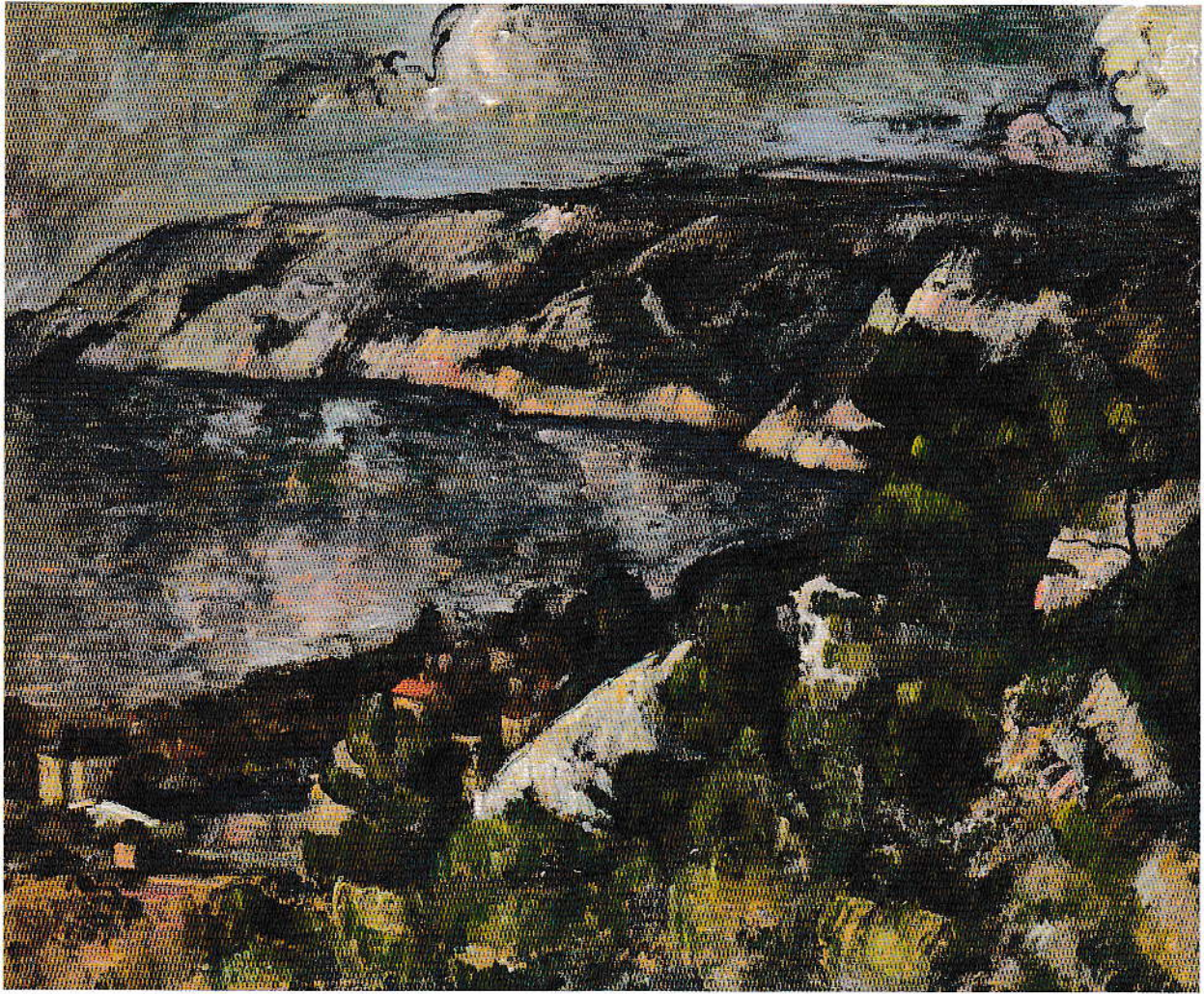
flickering reflections of light in an irregular, shiny surface, but to suggest the three-dimensionality of the apples. Rather than using traditional means of highlighting and shading to express form, Cézanne uses brushwork, in combination with color, to express volume and mass.

In the Renaissance, when the systematic pursuit of perspective began, the representation of rounded forms had been a major challenge. Artists such as Albrecht Dürer had broken down rounded forms into flat geometric surfaces (FIG. 17-23) to understand better how they appeared in perspective. Cézanne, similarly, applied paint in short parallel strokes (much like the hatching in Dürer's drawing) to form small, planar facets that together constitute the surface of the apple. Never before had facture (the way the paint is applied to the canvas) played such an important role in painting. Not only brushwork but also color was mobilized in the effort of conveying three-dimensionality without the use of traditional *chiaroscuro*. Relying on the perceptual phenomenon by which warm and saturated colors appear to be nearer than cool and unsaturated ones, Cézanne carefully chose colors to maximize the suggestion of the three-dimensionality of the apples and other subjects in his paintings.

Cézanne's interest in the renewal of traditional perspective was not limited to the representation of objects, but extended to the representation of space itself. *Plate of Apples* conveys a sense of instability; the plate looks lopsided and the tabletop warped (its excessive tilt causes us to worry that the plate might slide off). Critics of the Impressionist exhibition of



17-24 Albrecht Dürer, *Draftsman Drawing a Portrait*. Illustration in *Underweysung der Messung*, 1525. Woodcut, 5 1/8 × 5 1/8" (13.1 × 14.9 cm). Harvard University Libraries, Cambridge, Massachusetts.



17-25 Paul Cézanne, *Bay of l'Estaque*, ca. 1879–83. Oil on canvas, 23¼ × 29½" (60.3 × 74.3 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art.

1877 joked that Cézanne's still lifes were "not 'still' enough," and some were so shocked by their distorted representation of reality that they called them "detestable jokes."

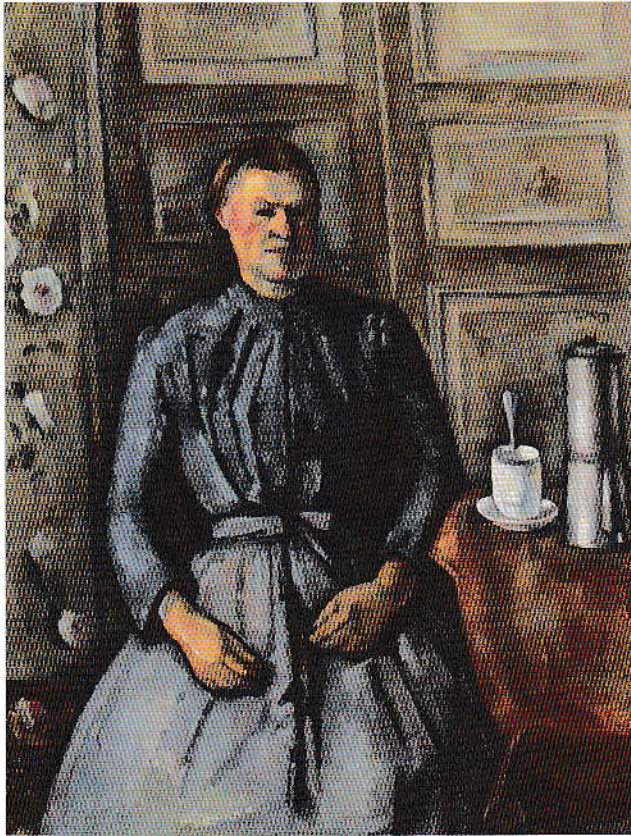
Few people realized that Cézanne's experiments in representing space broke, once and for all, with the rules of perspective that had been followed since the Renaissance. Traditional perspective construction was based on the premise of a single viewpoint, that is, an eye that does not change its position. In a woodcut by Dürer illustrating perspective (FIG. 17-24) we see an artist drawing a figure on a two-dimensional plane. The artist looks through a hole drilled in a flat little plate attached to a stick. This keeps his eye stationary, so that he looks at every part of the subject from the same, fixed viewpoint.

Dürer's artist sees the world, of course, in an artificial fashion. In reality, when one observes something, the eye moves back and forth to scan the subject. Sometimes the head and body move as well, to get a more thorough view. In *Plate of Apples* Cézanne tried to convey this eye motion. We appear at once to be looking down upon the table (as if we were standing) and straight at it (as if we were seated).

This mixture of viewpoints is bound to create pictorial problems. The dip in the horizontal edge of the table (hidden behind the plate) and the strangely irregular rim of the plate (similarly hidden behind three apples) mark the transitions from one viewpoint to another.

Cézanne's contemporaries found his pictures to be strangely distorted because they were so used to traditional perspective that they did not realize these works required a new way of looking. Truly to appreciate Cézanne's work, the viewer's eye must wander across the picture in the same way as the artist's eye once scanned reality. By using multiple viewpoints, Cézanne made time a prerequisite for viewing his paintings. One might say that he added a "fourth dimension" to his work.

Cézanne's new approach to perspective, only faintly visible in his works of the late 1870s, was further developed in the 1880s, not only in still-life paintings but also in landscapes and figure paintings. *Bay of l'Estaque* (FIG. 17-25) shows the Mediterranean Sea, seen from a village where Cézanne went to paint in the early 1880s. More than *Plate of Apples*, it shows the meticulous way in which Cézanne



17-26 Paul Cézanne, *Woman with a Coffeepot*, ca. 1890–95. Oil on canvas, 51 × 38" (1.3 m × 97 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

"built up" his paintings: short, diagonal strokes for the roofs, curved strokes for the trees, heavy lines for the sea, and fluffy brushstrokes for the sky. Unlike the Impressionists, Cézanne appears to have been unconcerned with capturing the effects of weather or the quality of daylight. Instead, he seems to have wanted to present a generic view, a condensation of all the various sensations the artist had felt in front of the landscape. "Art is a harmony parallel to nature," he once wrote to a friend, suggesting that art is not the representation of reality but its re-creation.

While *Bay of l'Estaque* demonstrates Cézanne's progress in the "structural brushstroke," *Woman with a Coffeepot* (FIG. 17-26) from about 1890–95 demonstrates the evolution of his use of the multiple viewpoint. Looking at this painting, we seem to sit "knee to knee" with a middle-aged peasant woman, probably in Cézanne's native region of Provence. Our eyes are at the same height as hers, so that we are looking straight at her face and torso. If we want to see her apron, however, we have to look down upon her lap. If we refuse to take the time and effort to do this, the woman looks strangely suspended in midair, neither standing nor sitting but hovering next to the table. The same observation holds true for the table. If we take the time to scan the table slowly, from the cup and saucer at the other end to the empty corner at our own, it all makes sense. It is only when we want to capture the picture in a single glance that the

table looks weirdly distorted, like a floppy tablecloth floating in the air.

What does all this have to do with Cézanne's wish to "make of Impressionism something solid and enduring, like the art in museums"? Although Cézanne (like Seurat and like Renoir) admired Impressionism for its emphasis on direct observation, he felt that simply recording scenes was not enough. He once said somewhat disparagingly that Monet was "nothing but an eye," though he added, "but, my God, what an eye!" For Cézanne, an artist had to create something solid and permanent from the flood of visual sensations to which he was subjected daily, from the moment he woke up to the time he closed his eyes. "Treat nature by the cylinder, the sphere, the cone," he once wrote to a young artist who had come to him for advice, encouraging him somehow to find order in the chaotic spectacle of nature.

Vincent van Gogh

Among the numerous visitors to the eighth Impressionist exhibition was a 33-year-old Dutch painter by the name of Vincent van Gogh. Newly arrived from the Netherlands, he was staying with his brother Theo, who lived in Montmartre, where many artists had their studios. Theo worked for the art dealer and print publisher Boussod-Valadon and was put in charge of the sale of "new" paintings.

Van Gogh had come to art late and was largely self-taught. Until his arrival in Paris he had practiced a form of peasant painting that was inspired by Millet, but which was rawer and more uncouth than that master's work. *Potato Eaters* (FIG. 17-27) was the most ambitious painting he had produced to date. He had completed it just before he came to Paris and hoped it would make his reputation, which was as yet nonexistent.

As he became acquainted, in Paris, with the art of the Impressionists and Neo-Impressionists, Van Gogh quickly realized that, though his work was highly original, it was out of step with modern trends. His *Potato Eaters* was a tonal painting, in which the color was kept within a narrow range of browns and blue-greens. The painting's subject was simple: Inside a grimy cottage, five peasants from his native region of Brabant are gathered around their frugal evening meal. The light from the oil lamp above the table moves across their tired, gloomy faces to settle on the platter of potatoes, the humble fruits of their hard labor. With their round, coal-black eyes, their huge noses, and their protruding jaws they look like caricatures, and they would be laughable were it not for the serious, even solemn, mood of the picture. By distorting the faces of his subjects, Van Gogh wished to convey that poverty and hard physical labor stunt the human mind. What is more, he wished to express his indignation that society allowed its members to live such stultifying lives. At the same time, however, he tried to express his respect for the integrity of peasant life and work, which he



17-27 Vincent van Gogh, *Potato Eaters*, 1885. Oil on canvas, 32 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 44 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (82 cm × 1.14 m). Vincent van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

opposed to the artifice and corruption of modern capitalist labor. "I have tried to emphasize," he wrote to his brother Theo, "that those people, eating their potatoes in the lamplight, have dug the earth with those very hands they

put in the dish, and so it speaks of manual labor, and how they have honestly earned their food."

Van Gogh's painting may be called expressive, in that the artist consciously tried to convey his emotions to the

The Letters of Van Gogh

Between 1872 and 1890 Vincent van Gogh wrote nearly 700 letters to his brother Theo, who lent him lifelong financial and moral support. Twenty-four years after the death of the two brothers in 1890 and 1891 respectively, Theo's widow, Johanna Bonger, published these letters in a three-volume edition in their native Netherlands.

Translated into many languages (and published online, in 2009, by the Van Gogh Museum), Vincent's letters are perhaps the most moving and evocative documents that we have about any nineteenth-century artist. Vincent described his day-to-day life and shared his most intimate thoughts about life, death, love, and art. He not only expressed his thoughts about art in general but also described in detail the creative trajectories of particular works and the meanings he intended to convey in them.

Beautifully written, the letters of Van Gogh are an

important work of literature in their own right, one that has given rise to at least two major movies: *Lust for Life*, 1956 (with Kirk Douglas and Anthony Quinn), and the more recent *Vincent and Theo*, 1990 (Tim Roth and Paul Rhys). Both films would have been unthinkable without the letters, which inspired their main themes as well as much of the storyline.

The publication of the letters of Van Gogh was important not just for their own sake but also because it alerted scholars to the enormous wealth of art-historical source material that was contained in artists' letters and other written materials, such as diaries, notebooks, and the like. In the course of the twentieth century, much of this material was collected and published. Today we have access to published diaries, notebooks, and letters of Constable, Friedrich, Runge, Ingres, Delacroix, Courbet, Degas, Cassatt, Pissarro, Gauguin, Cézanne, and Toulouse-Lautrec, to mention only a few.

viewer. In some sense, one may say that all art is expressive because through the very choice of medium and subject matter the artist reveals something about himself. But whereas previously artists had expressed themselves primarily through their choice of subject matter and their careful selection from, and manipulation of, reality, they had not distorted reality for the purpose of enhancing art's expressive possibilities. Distortion of reality, until this time, had been the prerogative of caricaturists (who were expected to draw a laugh) and of artists specializing in the imaginary and fantastic.

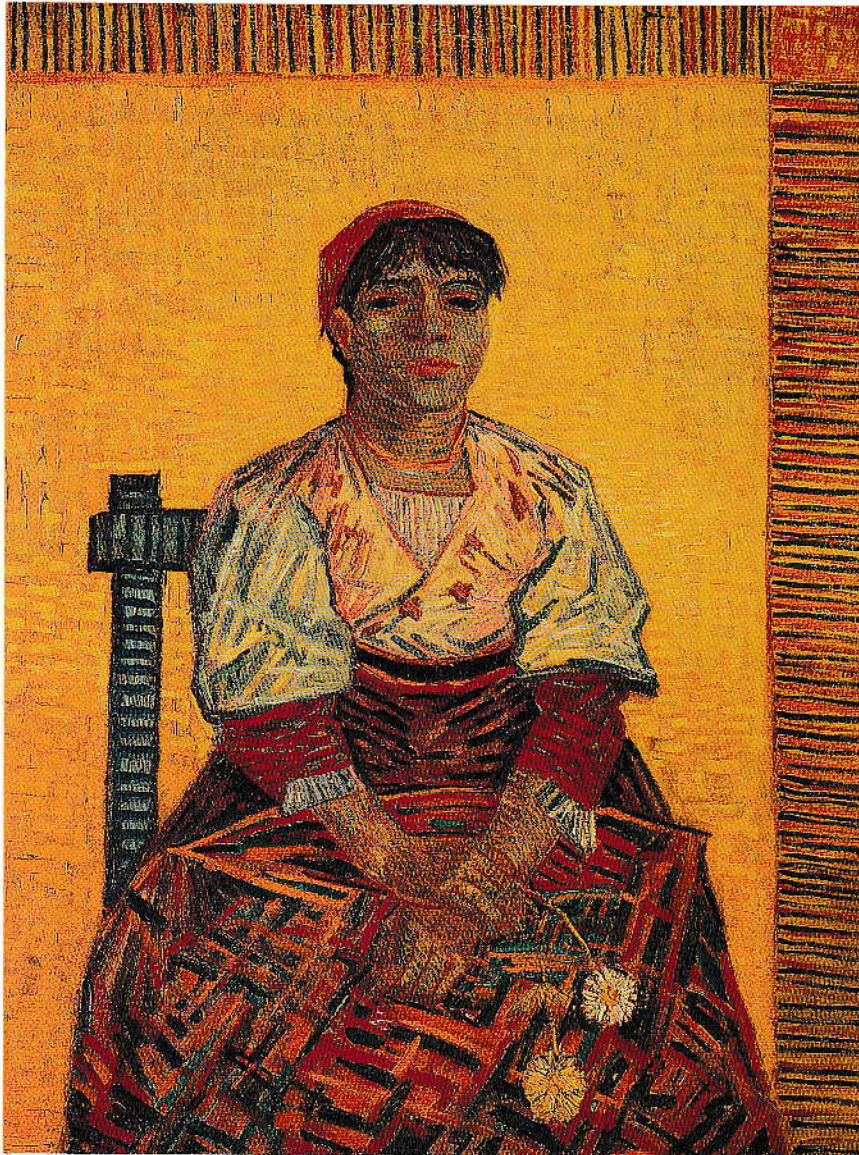
In *Potato Eaters* Van Gogh's chief vehicles of expression were contour and tone. But his stay in Paris taught him that brushwork and color were equally, if not more, effective in conveying emotions. In the avant-garde artists' milieu in which he moved, he must have become acquainted with the ideas of Chevreul and Henry concerning the psychological impact of colors, which had so impressed Seurat and Signac. In a number of paintings produced in Paris, Van Gogh actually adopted the pointillist method of the Neo-Impressionists. *Interior of a Restaurant* (FIG. 17-28), painted in the late spring

of 1887, is a prime example. The painting could hardly be further removed from *Potato Eaters*. Color has been substituted for tonality, and a light pointillist brushstroke has replaced heavy smearing. Instead of a pitiful peasant repast, we have the promise of a genteel meal in a cheerful bistro, complete with starched linens, sparkling crystal, and fresh flowers on the table. Unlike *Potato Eaters*, this painting is full of cheery anticipation, a sense that is conveyed by subject as well as form. Warm colors and an abundance of diagonal, upward-moving composition lines contribute to that feeling of cheerful relaxation that Henry had dubbed "dynamogeny."

The Italian Woman (FIG. 17-29), painted some six months after *Interior of a Restaurant*, represents a further stage in the evolution of Van Gogh's style of painting during his two-year stay in Paris. Here we see a woman dressed in a colorful regional costume, her form sharply silhouetted against a garish yellow background. No longer pointillist, this painting is built up of short, straight strokes that suggest volume and texture. This method calls to mind the paintings of Cézanne but, whereas that artist used exclusively local colors, Van

17-28 Vincent van Gogh, *Interior of a Restaurant*, 1887. Oil on canvas, 18 × 22" (45.5 × 56.5 cm). Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.





17-29 Vincent van Gogh, *The Italian Woman*, 1887. Oil on canvas, 32 × 23½" (81 × 60 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Gogh here juxtaposes contrasting colors. In the face, arms, and hands of the Italian woman, for example, strokes and touches of reddish-pink alternate with turquoise (or aquamarine) to suggest effects of light and shade. So convincing is his use of color that it seems the woman is seated in front of a sunlit window, her face seen against the light.

Contour plays an important part in this painting: Many forms are emphatically outlined. This emphasis on contour may be attributed to Van Gogh's renewed enthusiasm, in Paris, for Japanese prints (FIG. 17-30). (Around this time he wrote to his brother that the Japanese printmaker Hokusai could bring him to tears by "his line, his drawing.") Like Japanese prints, too, *The Italian Woman* lacks perspective, and consequently has a patterned, decorative character.

Van Gogh's move to the south of France in 1888 was motivated as much by his distaste for the Parisian art world as by his desire to find a place that would resemble Japan, which to him seemed a sort of utopia. In the small town of

17-30 (below) Kitagawa Utamaro, *The Courtesan*, mid 1790s. Woodblock print, approximately 10 × 15" (25 × 38 cm). Private Collection, London.



Arles, in the sun-drenched region of Provence, he hoped to found an artists' colony, where he and friends would live and work together. Although this never came to fruition, and although Arles turned out to be just another small French town, Vincent's stay here coincided with the most creative period in his short life—two years in which he produced one masterpiece after another.

Arles: View from the Wheat Fields (FIG. 17-31) is a representative work of this period. In the foreground of the painting, on a stretch of field that has already been reaped, sheaves of wheat are leaning against one another; in the middle distance, a farmer is cutting grain with a sickle. Farther back, against a sulfur-yellow sky, we see the silhouette of the town—a mixture of municipal gasworks, medieval buildings, and new

17-31 Vincent van Gogh, *Arles: View from the Wheat Fields*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 28 × 21" (73 × 54 cm). Musée Rodin, Paris.



bourgeois homes, all partly hidden by a train chugging along the edge of the field. With its juxtaposition of country and city and of old and new, and with the prominence of the reaper, traditional symbol of death, Van Gogh's painting calls attention to the passing of time—the changing of seasons, the gradual disappearance of nature at the hand of industry, the human cycle of life and death.

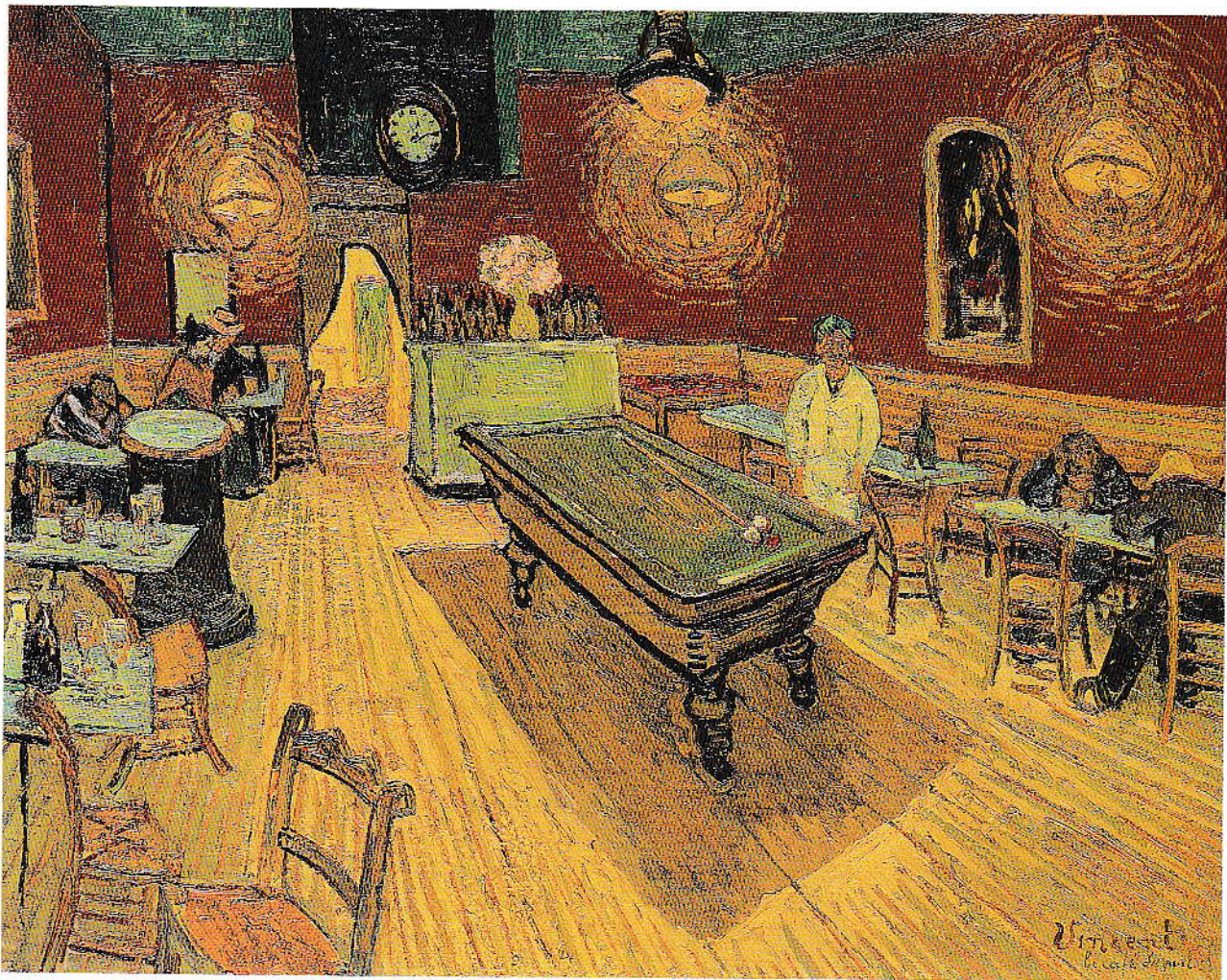
Van Gogh adopted the short choppy brushstrokes of the Impressionists, but he adjusted their thickness and length to make them express the affective value of each object. Thus the hay stubble in the foreground is depicted with thin, furious strokes, conveying something about the violence done by the sickle. By contrast, the wheat still standing is painted with thicker, slower strokes, suggesting the heaviness of the overripe ears. In the sky, the thick clouds of exhaust gas that billow forth from the gasworks are rendered with a heavy, almost suffocating impasto.

Color too plays a crucial role. The overwhelming amount of yellow speaks of the power of the sun as the giver of light and life. It also suggests the brutal, relentless heat that envelops the field. Finally, the painting's composition, in

which the wheat field takes up almost the entire picture plane, alludes to the endless task of the reaper.

To Van Gogh brushwork, color, and composition all worked together to lend meaning to his paintings. He saw these formal elements as so crucial to the production of meaning that, increasingly, he felt justified in departing from actually observed reality. In *Night Café* (FIG. 17-32), for example, the colors are exaggerated, even "untrue" (note the green hair of the bartender, for example), and the perspective is strange. The heavy contours around figures are crudely drawn, distorting their proportions. In one of his many letters to his brother Theo (see *The Letters of Van Gogh*, page 431), he explained what he had tried to do in this painting: "So I have tried to express, as it were, the powers of darkness in a low public house, by the soft . . . green and malachite, contrasting with yellow-green and harsh blue-greens, and all this in an atmosphere like a devil's furnace of pale sulphur." In another letter he wrote: "It is color not locally true from the point of the delusive realist, but color suggesting some emotion of an ardent temperament." Van Gogh was well aware that his paintings

17-32 Vincent van Gogh, *Night Café*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 27 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 35" (70.2 × 88.9 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut.





17-33 Vincent van Gogh, *Starry Night*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 28 × 36" (73 × 92 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York.

might shock the contemporary public. He admitted that *Night Café* seemed to him "atrociously ugly and bad." But paintings like that, he wrote to Theo, "are the only ones which appear to have any deep meaning."

Van Gogh's expressive exaggerations are perhaps most clearly seen in his last works, painted after a series of seizures that led him to commit himself, in 1889, to an asylum in Saint-Rémy, near Arles. There he painted his famous *Starry Night* (FIG. 17-33), during one of the extended lucid periods between his intermittent attacks. *Starry Night* was a view from Vincent's window, modified to express the artist's feelings about life, death, and infinity. The modest-size canvas shows a small village nestled among hills, underneath a glorious starry sky. What is most striking about the painting is that, with the sole exception of the village, everything appears to be in motion. Mountains, like waves, wash up and recede, and cypress trees, like huge flames, lick the sky. The bright stars in the sky rotate rapidly, leaving long, coiled trails. A huge serpentine form, looking like a

spiral nebula, unrolls itself. We are confronted with the stirring, animating force of nature that some call "God," others the "Creator."

Starry Night contains several images that Van Gogh associated with death. Dark cypress trees typically surrounded graveyards in southern France, and Vincent referred to them as "funereal." As for the stars, he once wrote to his brother Theo that he thought they were the final destination of man after death. We may see *Starry Night*, therefore, as a meditation on death, but one in which death is not seen as an ending but as the reabsorption of the individual into the universe.

Post-Impressionism

Although it is obvious to us today that Seurat, Cézanne, and Van Gogh moved away from the Impressionists' core concerns, these artists, with the possible exception of Seurat, still thought of themselves as Impressionists. Few contemporary

critics argued otherwise, especially since Cézanne and Van Gogh were little-known artists working outside Paris.

It was not until the early twentieth century that a true interest in Seurat, Cézanne, Van Gogh, and contemporaries such as Paul Gauguin (see Chapter 19) and Emile Bernard developed and that their works began to be widely exhibited. At that time critics felt the need to coin a name for their art, which, they now realized, was distinct from Impressionism. In 1910 the British critic Roger Fry (1866–1934), asked to write an essay for a gallery exhibition of the works of Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, and others, coined the term “Post-Impressionism.” Fry defended the term—which means little more than that these artists came after the Impressionists—by arguing that it was impossible to define the disparate works of these artists “by any single term.” “In no school,” he wrote, “does individual temperament count for more. In fact, it is the boast of those who believe in this school that its methods enable the individuality of the artist to find completer self-expression in his work than is possible in

those who have committed themselves to representing objects more literally.” To Fry, the only common denominator among the Post-Impressionists was that they “consider[ed] the Impressionists too naturalistic.”

The term Post-Impressionism, today, is used in two ways. Some art historians use it broadly to refer to all art created in France in the last 15 years of the nineteenth century, including the works of Seurat, Cézanne, and Van Gogh, the late works of the Impressionists, and the works of the so-called Symbolists (see Chapter 19). There are those who would even include in the term the works of contemporary artists working outside France. Others, however, reserve the term, more narrowly, for the art of Seurat, Cézanne, and Van Gogh—artists who, like the Impressionists, remained faithful to the idea of working from nature. They contrast the Post-Impressionists with the Symbolists, who allowed imagination to enter into their art. In this book, the latter usage is followed, with the proviso that the terms “Post-Impressionism” and “Symbolism” are both fluid and interactive.