Topic
Music & Fine Art

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Art History

Post-Impressionism
The Beginnings of Modern Art

Course Guidebook

Ricky Allman

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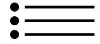

1
WHERE POST-IMPRESSIONISM BEGAN

Over the next 24 lectures, this course will take you up close into the world of the post-impressionists. You will see how they experienced the incredible change happening all around them: Science, technology, politics, religion, society, and philosophy were all being completely reimagined. This is exactly what the post-impressionists did with painting. You will learn about what caused these artists to think and feel the way they did, how it affected their artwork and the content of their paintings, and how they altered the trajectory of art forever.

THEMES CONNECTING POST-IMPRESSIONISTS

On December 1, 1884, the first exhibition of the Société des Artistes Indépendants was opening with a young group of rebellious artists. One of the largest and most radical paintings in the show was the *Bathers at Asnières*. Nearly 10 feet wide and 7 feet tall, it was the first major painting by Georges Seurat. It was essentially a large science experiment. Seurat carefully constructed his picture with highly disciplined brushstrokes that, from a distance, fool your eyes into seeing colors and tones than aren't there on the canvas. He used recent discoveries in color theory to select contrasting colors to influence one another. Moreover, his choice of subjects, and the way he depicted them, was daring. He painted working-class bathers in Asnières, a dirty industrial suburb of Paris.

The critics didn't know they were looking at the seeds of the next global revolution in art: post-impressionism. This wasn't a clear-cut art movement with a distinctive style. It was much more fluid, and it can be hard to define its boundaries. In fact, the term *post-impressionism* wasn't even used until 1910—several years after what some consider to be the end of the movement in 1905. However, it's not a term that the artists themselves ever used. Some considered themselves part of much smaller movements, such as the symbolists. Others had ideas that were so different they didn't fit with anyone else. Despite the large variety, there are several main themes connecting them.

The first is color—vivid, unnatural colors, many of them only recently possible through the wonders of modern chemistry. The post-impressionists loved color in all its forms, and many used new scientific discoveries in color theory to guide their work.

The second is abstraction. The post-impressionists rejected classical realism and looked for new, less literal ways to depict the world or to convey emotions and feelings. Some, such as Cézanne, played around with angles, optical science, and perspective to represent the world in a different way and opened the door to the later cubists. Others used symbols, bold lines, blocks of color, patterns, or even the physical qualities of paint itself to represent their subjects. Some, such as Toulouse-Lautrec, used these new simplified forms to become early graphic designers, creating artistic posters for the mass market.

The third is their interest in non-Western art. African, Asian, and Indigenous art from all over the world was far more developed than that in Europe in terms of abstraction, patterning, color theory, and symbolism. In the late 19th century, increased international communication and the start of globalization were exposing many to the art of other places for the first time. Japanese art particularly was a significant influence on many.

The last is experimentation. Many post-impressionists were self-taught, with fresh eyes and new perspectives and approaches. Seurat and the pointillists used tiny dots and intricate brushwork to construct their images. Van Gogh painted with brushstrokes so thick and heavy that the paint nearly fell off the canvas, creating incredible textures and effects. Everyone's technique was a bit different, but they were all trying to achieve the same end—to forget about the rules and find new ways to express their own personal vision. In fact, it's their individualism and unique approaches that make post-impressionism such a pivotal movement.

PRE-IMPRESSIONISM

Most people now are familiar with the most famous names of impressionism: Monet, Mary Cassatt, Edgar Degas, Renoir. Before their artworks became household images, they were radical. Their paintings made people uncomfortable and angry: For centuries, what art should be was strictly defined by a small cluster of official institutions.

In France, the various official art committees tended to be grouped together and known as the *académie*. They ran the important juries that judged artworks and sat on the panels that approved artists to get government or church commissions. They also ran École des Beaux-Arts, the premier art school that taught classes and held exhibitions and lectures. It was the hub of painting and sculpture in France and one of the most influential art centers in Europe.

By the early 19th century, the academy had students so disciplined that all of their work started to look the same. Everyone was taught the immutable rules of perspective, color, and form; how to do the perfect brushstroke; and how to paint the sky, people, and buildings. Students would train until they could create nearly perfect reality on the canvas. It was stifling, but there weren't many other options if someone wanted to become a painter in 1800. Art was also an exclusive and expensive profession, and nearly all art was commissioned by the state,

the church, or the rich. Naturally, the result was that most of these academy-trained artists made art for the rich and powerful as displays of wealth, power, God, or the state.

Artists who were steeped in the academic tradition would set up costumes on mannequins and would often be painting a scene of a large group of people. However, they would do it one person at a time, lighting each one perfectly and intricately, having an apprentice spending a month painting a fancy lace collar. In this way, they were like theater directors as they constructed a new reality. The details would be incredible—a 10- or 20-foot canvas with every inch painstakingly painted and blended. They had perfected the fundamentals of art, such as perspective and light, that began in the Renaissance. In doing so, they made art more like engineering than any kind of personal expression.

THE ROMANS IN THEIR DECADENCE by Thomas Couture

THE RISE OF IMPRESSIONISM

In the 1800s, things were changing. The First Industrial Revolution had started a fundamental transformation of society that would continue across the 19th century. Paris was attracting people from all around to work in new industries. A new wealthy consumer class was being born from the prosperity of all this new industry and trade as well as the exploitation of the colonial world by the European powers.

The cost of making art was going down. New industries and manufacturing techniques were also making art supplies available en masse for the first time. Stores were popping up where you could buy all kinds of supplies. Advancements in the chemical industry meant they were mixing up new, more vibrant colors in the lab and putting them in paints. New pastels on the market helped keep colors bright and vibrant, too.

The industrial revolution was bringing thousands into cities to work; the population of Paris exploded. More artists were moving there, too. Painting knowledge wasn't so guarded anymore. Before, the only way you could learn was to apprentice with a master for years. Now, artists could easily visit each other's studios and the art supply store. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of artists working in Paris.

These conditions created the perfect atmosphere for a groundbreaking new art movement. By the 1860s, a young new group of artists was starting to make waves. They wanted to break free of the rules of the academy. They wanted to go out into the open air and paint the world around them here and now. They wanted to use all of the new colors they could buy and capture the beauty of nature and the light around them. These up-and-comers became known as the impressionists.

You can imagine what the academy thought of this kind of art: low-brow, pedestrian, and lacking the majesty and power of more traditional subjects. It considered this new painting some kind of class warfare. In 1863, the rebel artists bitterly complained to Napoleon III, emperor of France, about how they couldn't get a chance with the jury officials at the Paris Salon. As a result, the emperor agreed to exhibit the rejects from the official Salon, and they would get a gallery for their work as well. Known as the Salon des Refusés, it might have been the first state-sponsored artistic counterculture movement.

The critics and the public had a field day at the Refusés salon. However, some of the largest names in art history were in that show, including Édouard Manet, Camille Pissarro, and James McNeill Whistler, to name a few. Although many people hated the art, plenty legitimately loved these

ÉDOUARD MANET

new paintings. The impressionists began to band together and started exhibiting on their own outside of the Salon, challenging the popularity and the dominance of academic art.

The rebels soon started getting bolder with their work and kept pushing the envelope. By the 1870s, a distinctive new style was starting to emerge. In 1872, Claude Monet painted *Impression: Sunrise*, which became the namesake and unofficial mascot of the new movement. Rumored to be finished in a single night from a hotel balcony, he titled it only when someone asked. To him, it was simply an impression of the sunrise, not the actual or full picture realistically depicted. Critic Louis Leroy used this term against him; *impressionism* was meant as derogatory. However, the term caught on.

Compared to academic art, *Impression: Sunrise* must have looked like a child's painting. However, there is something compelling about it. The sun is painted using complementary color contrast to shine and glow. If you compare them in black and white, the sun in the painting has the same brightness value as the sky. Monet didn't lighten it or darken the sky around it. The effect is created purely by color contrast. The brushwork is loose and rough, but he used layering to create subtle and clever effects in the background to create the feeling of haze and fog in the sky.

THEMES IN IMPRESSIONISM

The impressionists were inspired by the weather and atmospheric effects that gave them permission to create a strong improvisational feel. Although their paintings were made relatively quickly, they still needed many hours to complete. Impressionists started painting things as they appear to be. We don't all have perfect, clear vision, and we can focus only on a single spot at a time. The impressionists were taking an impression, a snapshot, a glance.

Yes, they may have been exaggerating the colors. How could they resist with these new vibrant pastels and paint tubes? Omitting blacks and ochres from their color palette, artists were looking for color even in the darkest of shadows. Additionally, that's how the color feels in the moment—a completely secular and private moment that could be shared on a more intimate, smaller canvas, perhaps in a new café or an artist-run gallery.

Another hallmark of this modernism was fear, entrapment, and ennui—people looking beaten down by the fast pace of modern life. All of the change was exciting, but it was also scary and awful for the working class, working longer hours in more dangerous environments. Forbidden drinks such as absinthe, which proved to be a popular antidote to the pain of modern life, show up in paintings such as Degas's *In a Café*.

MARY CASSATT

Another revolutionary aspect to this movement: women, including Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt, Eva Gonzalès, Marie Bracquemond, Cecilia Beaux, and Lilla Cabot Perry. Now, there were fewer barriers for them—if they had money. Women began making paintings depicting women and women's lives and the lives of children. These were themes and subjects rarely seen in the museum or the Salon. The woman's perspective was almost completely absent in European art making for centuries.

Another thing that the academy didn't like was all the new subjects artists were painting: trains, railroads, cafés, regular people hanging out and having a good time. Pissarro's *Boulevard Montmartre* paintings are a good example of impressionism showing modern life: bustling streets, streetlights, traffic, and all kinds of people walking around and interacting.

BOULEVARD MONTMARTRE by Camille Pissarro

Impressionism also benefited from the fact that it was the first

art movement in the age of the popular press and had a specific name that people knew it by. Love it or hate it, people were talking about it. The paintings were relatively cheap and accessible to the new middle class. They weren't intellectually demanding, with complex themes and hierarchies. They weren't about grand narratives. They were beautiful landscapes, cityscapes, night scenes, and sunsets.

The impressionists as a group had a total of only eight exhibitions. Moreover, 1886 would prove to be their last exhibition together because the impressionists opened the floodgates. A whole new generation of artists, also looking to break free of the academy, had appeared on the art scene. Once the impressionists began questioning the rules, some of them never stopped. A few impressionists, such as Pissarro, wanted to keep changing and experimenting with their style. Others, such as Renoir, were happy where they were. The impressionists began to split apart into different directions to explore the possibilities being opened up.

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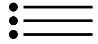

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THE FOUNDER, PAUL CÉZANNE

This lecture explores the work of Paul Cézanne, whose art opened up a new way of thinking and looking. Cézanne was often as crude and deliberate as the brushstrokes on his canvas—innovative and brilliant, yet stubborn and plagued by intense frustration, anxiety, awkwardness, and isolation. These feelings and shortcomings are likely what propelled him to so doggedly pursue his unique and unapologetic vision of the world. Cézanne saw his art as a bridge between the natural world and the world of his mind. Each of his works brought him ever slightly closer to that synthesis, which he never seemed to quite arrive at.

CÉZANNE'S EARLY LIFE

Paul Cézanne was born on January 19, 1839, in Aix-en-Provence in the south of France. His birthplace would prove to be the most important, pivotal, and central theme in his work. All of his later ideas and paintings seemed to be in support of his vision of this rural region.

PAUL CÉZANNE

BAPTISTIN BAILLE

Young Cézanne started boarding school at the age of 11. In 1852, at the age of 13, he attended the local Collège Bourbon in Aix. There, he developed a close relationship with two friends that would become the emotional, intellectual, and inspirational foundation of his life and career as an artist: Émile Zola and Baptistin Baille. Cézanne was always nostalgic for these formative years, and they would serve as inspiration for his most ambitious artworks toward the end of his life.

In his most groundbreaking work, Cézanne sought to depict a reality in his art that was deeper than what was seen on the surface. You can see elements of Zola's ideas as he tried to grasp onto an underlying structure and, perhaps, tried to discover what this world was made of. Cézanne's relationship with Émile Zola often overshadows the influence of Baptistin Baille and his study of optical science and binocular or stereo vision. Baille's work had a significant impact on how Cézanne thought about the way the eyes and the brain construct our image of reality. Baille helped Cézanne see that the natural world was holding secrets that we were only just beginning to access through new scientific data and discoveries. In his still lifes and landscapes, you can see the direct way this knowledge of optics altered the way Cézanne understood and constructed the world.

When Cézanne was 19, Zola left for Paris, and Cézanne, feeling lonely and depressed, enrolled in the free local drawing school in Aix. Zola was begging him to come to Paris. However, Cézanne was acutely aware of his father's wishes for him to follow in his footsteps and become a powerful player in the world of finance—but he had no interest in law

or finance and little interest in conventional academics. Despite his poor grades and complete lack of interest in the law, at his father's insistence, Paul went to law school in Aix for the next two years. He couldn't suppress his true passion to study art, though.

Meanwhile, Zola in Paris had fallen in with some of the most cutting-edge impressionists of the time: Manet, Renoir, Pissarro, and many others. He'd been writing back to Paul in Aix about how he had to come join them. Thus, Cézanne abandoned his studies to go to Paris and be a part of the burgeoning art capital of the world.

CÉZANNE IN PARIS

In Paris, the stark difference between the sophisticated, mannered, and well-dressed Parisians and Cézanne became one of the defining moments of his life and his identity. He doubled down and fully embraced his oddball demeanor. He stood out wherever he went in Paris.

Moreover, Cézanne struggled with other people. There were few people, it seemed, he could tolerate. The older he got, the more he isolated himself. Not fitting in and getting terribly anxious, Cézanne came back to Aix defeated and started working at his father's bank. However, he went back to studying art at night at the municipal school, keeping up his passion while making a new plan. He eventually headed back to Paris in early 1862, determined to make it work.

Cézanne spent much time at the Louvre, copying figures from the masters and ancient Roman sculptures. It was at the Louvre where Cézanne's most important art training happened; he began to imagine himself and his paintings hanging alongside this historical record of artistic achievement. The strength and power of the works in the museum drove Cézanne to make something permanent that had a fundamental structural truth that could withstand the erosion of time.

Cézanne knew that the gatekeeper to the world of curators and galleries was the Salon. However, only artwork meeting the strict standards of its jury would be accepted. Cézanne was rejected six years in a row. His early work revealed a bit of a dark and troubled mind.

Perhaps he felt trapped by the expectations of his father and family, religion, and community. Perhaps he was beginning to realize that not only was he an outsider in his hometown but he was also a misfit in Paris. It also seems that he had no intimate partners until age 30. Thus, it wouldn't be too surprising if these feelings led to anxiety about his own mortality and sexuality.

THEMES IN CÉZANNE'S EARLY WORK

Cézanne was working through deep and intense emotions not only with the subject matter but also with the way he put paint on the canvas. He was inspired by many of the classic Greek tragedies with themes of violence and eroticism. *The Abduction*, from 1867, is a good example, depicting a beautiful maiden being kidnapped by a powerful masculine figure. The painting is dark, sinister, and brooding—a window, perhaps, into Cézanne's mind at this time. However, paintings like these may also have been motivated by his desire to gain acceptance at the Salon, which tended to favor classical and historical subject matter.

Cézanne's early paintings have echoes of other artists who famously explored the dark that he would have seen at the Louvre, such as Théodore Géricault, Eugène Delacroix, and Caravaggio. He was also inspired by artists in Spain such as Francisco Goya, Diego Velázquez, and El Greco. One can see quite a few visual parallels to these artists, from the obvious color palette similarities to the quick and gestural way many of the figures and their clothes are painted. Themes of death and pain were prevalent from these artists who had witnessed the horrors of war firsthand.

In some of Cézanne's early paintings, there is a tremendous amount of thick black paint all over the canvases and mixed into most of the colors. Cézanne was going for emotional impact—nothing subtle or nuanced. In these early paintings, the light is limited to a few midtone highlights. Consider *The Murder*, thought to have been completed around 1868 after Zola's novel *Thérèse Racquin*—where the heroine murders her husband. Zola's and Cézanne's ideas were in sync, no doubt inspiring each other around similar themes.

The space is shallow. There is an upfront foreground and a background almost like a curtain behind it. There is a strong and nearly symmetrical triangle formed from the three figures. The victim is barely visible, and all the focus and attention are drawn to the two arms doing the killing.

THE MURDER by Paul Cézanne

Cézanne is already focusing on structure, permanence, and eternal and serious themes. This is Cézanne trying to make paintings that could hang in the Louvre alongside those of the masters.

Perhaps Cézanne couldn't paint like the old masters even if he'd wanted to. There's little evidence that he ever had the technical skill to paint traditionally realistic subjects the way his peers could. He certainly didn't have the proper education or the training. Could part of his anger and anxiety come from his lack of ability in this sense? Did he even care? Perhaps a little of both.

However, he still had the confidence and surety that his rough, unlearned style and idiosyncratic approach were valid, important, and innovative. Moreover, he was smart. He had a better academic education and was more well-read than any of his peers. He had a tremendously deep understanding of the world and of science, and he was educated about art even if he lacked the traditional technical skills.

Being exposed to the great museums and the most innovative artists in Paris gave him both a solid art historical foundation and an intimate familiarity with the new ideas and techniques percolating in Paris.

After some years in Paris, his father realized that Cézanne was absolutely committed to his artistic practice. Eventually, he began supporting his artistic career with a monthly allowance. Cézanne would gain the freedom to pursue painting full-time without having to worry about rent, food, and the necessities of life.

CAMILLE PISSARRO

If Cézanne's work had stayed in the dark phase, it is highly unlikely anyone would know his name today. He needed someone to inspire him to new heights, new techniques, and a new way of seeing. It was during this phase of his career that he met the older and more experienced realist-turned-impressionist painter Camille Pissarro. Pissarro had been painting in far-off locations around the world, learning techniques and approaches from a wide variety of landscapes, artists, and cultures.

The elder Pissarro took many artists under his wing, mostly impressionists and other Salon rejects. To Cézanne, Pissarro offered sympathy, support, and encouragement. He believed in Cézanne as an artist. Although Pissarro's work was accepted at the Salon and Cézanne's rejected, Pissarro was a kind and sympathetic friend and shared his frustration and dissatisfaction with the academy despite his own success.

Cézanne's genius soon became apparent to Pissarro, and the relationship matured into more of an equal friendship in which both artists respected, learned from, and encouraged each other. They famously traveled together on landscape painting excursions. One of the 19th-century technologies that was revolutionizing the world of art was the paint tube, which had been invented by the American painter John Goffe Rand in 1841. Rand's metal paint tubes allowed oil paint to be stored and transported like toothpaste and simply squeezed out when it was needed. Moreover, now, paint could be mass-manufactured and sold ready to use, ending the need for artists to grind up pigments and mix them with oil.

Carrying their paints with them in ready-to-use tubes, Cézanne and Pissarro would often venture out to draw and paint the local landscape of the Oise Valley, usually the same subjects: country paths, villages, houses, and the landscape. Pissarro was drawn to the everyday and the

THE FISHERMEN by Paul Cézanne

common man. He opened up Cézanne's eyes to the beauty of the world around him. After Cézanne's black and lightless studio paintings, it seems Pissarro literally brought him out into the light and showed him the colors of the landscape, the trees, the mountains, and, occasionally, the people. Cézanne's paintings became brighter, lighter, more colorful, more hopeful, and more beautiful. As they worked together, both artists started adopting aspects from each other's techniques.

There is also evidence of Cézanne starting to deliberately manipulate the space and the shapes he was looking at—moving things around, shifting the side of a house onto the front. One way to look at this is to say that he was showing viewers more of the thing than they could see from a single vantage point. Cézanne was also getting into the palette knife during these landscape painting trips, which was an odd choice. A palette knife is for mixing paint on your palette, scraping paint off, and moving paint around. However, Cézanne didn't care; he made large, thick, flat marks, as if he were building something.

This makes sense when you consider that Cézanne longed for structure, permanence, and stability in his paintings. He was convinced that was what would put his paintings on par with the serious paintings he saw in the Louvre. At the time, Cézanne's approach would have been the weirdest, most backward way of accomplishing this goal—rejecting all of the refined skills of the great masters and painting more like a clumsy bricklayer with deliberate and unsophisticated slabs of paint on the canvas.

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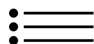

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PAUL CÉZANNE'S NEW WAY OF SEEING

The previous lecture talked about Cézanne's personal life—first, because it plays a significant role in understanding his artwork and post-impressionism in general; and second, because he was a late bloomer. He didn't have his first solo show until he was in his fifties. In the mid-1870s, Cézanne, under the influence of his friend and mentor Pissarro, was leaving his dark phase and embracing light, color, and the plein air landscape. Pissarro had dragged the grumpy and hermit-like Cézanne out of not only the darkness of his studio but also the darkness of his mind.

MONT SAINTE-VICTOIRE

Cézanne would spend days, weeks, and months making a painting that perhaps had only about 90 minutes of actual brush-on-canvas time. He was laser-focused on the same subject for up to years at a time, painting the same thing over and over from every possible angle. When he painted outside in nature, the composition and color palette were right in front of him. Thus, he was able to more fully focus on what the painting was about. He would intensely study the scene before him, thinking about the ways he wanted to paint the elements of the composition.

Consider how he depicts Mont Sainte-Victoire, one of his most beloved and frequently painted subjects. A famous mountain near his hometown of Aix, it stuck out dramatically from the mostly flat land around it. In a way, this symbol of stability, strength, and endurance was the perfect armature for Cézanne to hang his ideas on. One of Cézanne's earliest paintings of the mountain, *Mont Sainte-Victoire and the Viaduct of the Arc River Valley*, includes a nearby viaduct. Perhaps in a nod to Nicolas Poussin, this painting has more of a traditional classical feel than his later works. It stands out because of the atmospheric perspective and deep space, especially contrasted with the trees up front and center.

Even in this early painting, you can already see some of Cézanne's ideas percolating. He brought attention to the geometric shapes, especially in the valley, and grouped his colors. He gradually flattened that space over the years and brought the mountain closer to the viewer. About 10 years later, when he returned to the subject, the layers of depth were disappearing, details were starting to merge, and, with darker shadows and thicker lines, there was a stronger sense of the geometry of the scene appearing.

A few of the thoughts that were running through his mind as he was analyzing the landscape were about the classical paintings in the Louvre. Cézanne was looking for permanence and the strength of geometric shapes: squares, cubes, triangles, the shapes cathedrals and museums were made from, the shape of bricks and stones cut for building. As time goes on, Cézanne continued to highlight geometry, ignore the details, and simplify the edges of objects or blur several together to create larger shapes.

The shapes he was painting were often about an inch square in width. The quickest and most efficient way to paint a shape of that size would be to use a one-inch flat brush. However, these shapes are a little wavy

on the edges and have little striations. This means he was using a smaller brush and, on average, 10 strokes to build that one-inch square. This could suggest that he was not interested in speed or economy. What was he doing when he was standing there staring and thinking for 30 minutes between each brushstroke? Perhaps much of it was looking at an area and trying to reduce it down to its most basic shape, color, and value. The way that Cézanne was condensing the information is what spoke to so many. Whether he was capturing something about the way our eyes or minds work or messing with our expectations, it was original and new.

In *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (1902–04), the foreground, midground, and background are composed with similar-sized brushstrokes and marks. Moreover, the brightest highlights are muted midtones, giving a much more limited range in value and making the space more difficult to decipher. It is hard to distinguish between the houses, fields, and trees, especially compared to his earlier paintings. The houses almost become

MONT SAINTE-VICTOIRE (LA MONTAGNE SAINTE-VICTOIRE) by Paul Cézanne

indistinguishable from boulders or fields. The trees and bushes have also started to take on similar shapes and colors to the clouds and farms, which again tells the eye that these things exist on the same plane. Even the mountain is almost merging into the sky here.

Cézanne's abstraction goes even further in some works. In *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (1904–06), the mountain almost disappears. Except for the distinctive profile of the mountain, you'd be hard-pressed to tell that this was the same familiar subject. In this painting, it's almost like looking through a blurry kaleidoscope or a fractured looking glass. There are no details to be found in this painting. It's a complete dissolution of the landscape, where only fragments of color and value loosely jumbled together remain.

OBJECT PERCEPTION

Apples were a subject Cézanne would paint for decades. Consider the science behind his apples. Binocular or stereoscopic vision was another preoccupation of his. Remember, he was inspired by the work of his friend Baptistin Baille, who was a professor of optics in Paris. Today, most people are aware that we see the world in stereo, where the left eye sees a slightly different angle than the right eye. The two images are fused together in our brain to give us a sense of depth and dimensionality. In the 19th century, this was fairly new information, and Cézanne was fascinated with its implications for art.

With a still life a few feet away, you can lean two feet to the left and see the exaggerated effect of one eye. You can then lean over to the right and see the opposite angle. When an object is inches from your face, even switching the eye you use to look at it can give you a different view.

There is something odd about the space in Cézanne's still lifes, which served as explorations of his fascination with optics and perspective. In *The Plate of Apples* from 1877, the background appears right up close behind the table, almost as if it's wrapped or bent around the table corner, but remains flat, creating a liminal space for the table to exist.

Cézanne was also changing perspective vertically, looking up and down. Imagine you walk up to a table until you are standing over it, looking down at a plate. You're seeing the whole top of the plate as a circle on the tabletop. As you begin to sit and your eye level moves downward,

THE PLATE OF APPLES by Paul Cézanne

the shape of the plate will begin to flatten from a circle into an oval or an ellipse. You can see Cézanne playing around with this concept in his still lifes.

In *Still Life with Apples and a Glass of Wine*, the base of the glass is much flatter than the opening. Cézanne painted the glass simultaneously from two angles: one from down low, closer to the table, and one from up higher, standing up. What he painted with the glass is happening constantly to our perception. Every time we approach a table with some objects on it and sit down, we are seeing all of those objects from multiple perspectives within less than a second. If we were lying on our side looking at that table, then our eyes would be seeing both of those angles of the glass simultaneously. Our brain merges those perspectives together to give us a consistent view of the object and reinforces that

with object permanence. Thus, we can hold a basic shape in our minds regardless of perspective. Cézanne has painted a version of the glass that our brains would never allow us to see.

Cézanne liked to use coins or blocks to prop up certain objects, such as plates and jars, or he might make things lean over to the left or to the right. This was all about showing different angles of the same reality. In this way, Cézanne's paintings don't capture a snapshot but a longer moment. Many of these gestures are subtle in Cézanne's work. However, even in a simple still life such as *Apples* (1878–79), there is something curious about these apples that differ from more traditionally painted apples. For one, the outlines make them flatter than they would otherwise appear. They almost appear pixelated in some areas, with some flat shapes on the round surfaces, almost like a digital glitch.

As Cézanne later gained popularity and his paintings began to sell, his dealer Ambroise Vollard thought he could make more money if he had more paintings. Since Cézanne wasn't a fast painter, he decided to start cutting up his apple paintings and selling a few apples on a few inches of canvas at a time. This is why there are some small, oddly cropped apple paintings of his floating around.

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

Sometimes, viewers are privy to a more meta composition and can see the room and the furniture around the still life. As calm and lovely as *Stillleben mit Kommode* is, it's still a bit off-kilter: The bowl of apples is leaning to the left; the linen is oddly stiff and looks like it's trying to dump the bowl off the table. Moreover, the front of the table doesn't line up behind the cloth. There are a few different perspectives happening simultaneously. However, it also seems like Cézanne has deliberately oversized the linen and distorted the furniture to even out his composition.

Playing around with perspective as Cézanne does was against the classical rules he would have learned had he attended one of the major French art schools. However, to his supporters, it was revolutionary. This is partly why art historians see Cézanne in the vanguard of post-impressionism. Cézanne was engaging with a different kind of project to the impressionists—a careful and meticulous deconstruction and reassembling of reality.

Still Life with Apples and a Pot of Primroses from the 1890s is one of the few examples where Cézanne used a live plant in the composition. However, he liked to paint slowly. Plants will change and wilt or grow. However, given the detail and focus and ambition of this painting, it seems he may have been saving this plant for the right moment in this important work. This is a nicely rendered piece, smoothed out and blended, with a nice variety of light and shadow. It's still combining views. The gray vase in the middle sits on the table, but the plate of apples is lifted up as if it were sitting on a display stand. You also see a different perspective on the opening of the green jug. There's even a sense of movement or anticipation in this painting: The little pot in the middle feels like it's about to topple over from the apple hitting it, or slide down the fabric.

What makes Cézanne so unique here is that he was thinking like a scientist. He spent decades painting apples over and over, repeating the experiment, testing new angles and perspectives he could find to paint. He was showing us that even a simple object such as an apple has almost infinite realities we can capture.

BATHERS

Cézanne was especially focused on bathers in his final years. This is a somewhat odd choice considering his passion for inanimate objects and landscapes and the fact that he was often uncomfortable working with models, especially female models. Some have speculated for these reasons that he was secretly gay, which they also attribute to his dark moods and isolation.

Some things start to make a little more sense when you see how these women were painted. These are not the sensual, soft, and curvy women one might see in a Rubens painting. The most frequent female model for these pictures was his wife, Marie-Hortense Fiquet. There are 29 in all, most of which maintain Cézanne's boxy and flat style. In his late works on bathers, there is some life and sensuality in his depictions, and his models at seem to have at least some curves. These women were anonymous, boxlike, often faceless props. He still constructed these soft, delicate subjects with his trademark style of heavy lines and solid blocks of color.

Some art historians conjecture this could be a throwback to "the only happy time in his life," when he and Émile Zola and Baptistin Baille would spend hours together. In 1886, Zola published *L'Œuvre*, a tragic story of a groundbreaking artist who struggles to live up to his potential

and create a true masterpiece. Clearly inspired at least in part by Cézanne's career as a misunderstood artist, the book led to the two falling out, and their friendship sadly never recovered. Cézanne's latent switch to bathers might have been motivated by wanting to prevent his life from turning out like the book.

Consider one of his last works and also one of his most ambitious, *The Large Bathers*. This last painting is around seven by eight feet. The women are unnaturally posed, in a large triangle formed by the trees with the women at the base. These are oddly shaped people, with long torsos, pinched necks, and small heads. Faces, if they have them, are a mere shadow of a brow or a nose. These bathers were more like architecture than flesh and bone. Yet even in its partially unfinished state, there is a grandness and pretense to this work that isn't seen in Cézanne's apples and mountains.

Ironically, Cézanne, the man who rejected impressionism's fleeting light and instability in favor of strong shapes, power, and structure, ended his career by making some of the most delicate, ephemeral watercolors, which were

THE LARGE BATHERS by Paul Cézanne

beautiful impressions of light and shadow. His eyesight began to get worse after he was diagnosed with diabetes in 1890, and it rapidly deteriorated over the last few years of his career, which his late watercolors reveal.

His interest in stereoscopic vision must have given him much insight as his eyesight faded. If your eyes move out of alignment or cannot adjust to focus, as they tend to do with age, the edges of objects start overlapping. Contrast is muted as the edge of one thing bleeds into the edge of the other thing. When you look at some of his late watercolors, this is exactly what he was doing. Things look blurry; it is a strange sensation. The switch from oil to watercolor seems deliberate here. The watercolor strokes are much more naturally transparent, and in this way, he can mimic the semitransparent layers of our vision overlapping.

Cézanne refused to follow the traditional rules of watercolor, where an artist would make a graphite drawing first and then fill it with transparent watercolor. He left his surface white. This made it much easier to see the transparency of the color and make it more vibrant. Thus, while still focused on geometric shapes, Cézanne finished his career surprisingly close to the impressionists. Yet he never did what was expected.

Art historians have long debated how to summarize his work, in part because he was a transitionary artist. He echoed impressionism and yet engaged in an entirely different artistic project, using techniques and constructions that would eventually find full form in cubism and early modern art. Cézanne started this whole new movement called post-impressionism that changed the course of art history forever.

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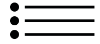


HOW SCIENCE AND INDUSTRY ARE CHANGING ART

The period between 1867 and 1914 is sometimes called the second Industrial Revolution. It would see the rise of electricity, telephones, automobiles, subways, typewriters, gramophones, aluminum, tractors, mass production, and flight. New theories about evolution, heredity, radioactivity, germs, thermodynamics, and atomic theory were transforming how we understood the world around us. The post-impressionist movement came at the crux of this transformation and was possible only with the totality of scientific advancements and economic transformation. This lecture will try and give you a brief sense of how technological change was transforming the life of the average artist and how that flowed into their work.

THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTIONS

The first Industrial Revolution had brought factories, railroads, and modern finance to Paris. Entirely new industries sprung up, such as chemical refineries and mass manufacturing plants. These created a steady stream of entirely new materials and products and an unquenchable thirst for human labor. The new railroads that crisscrossed France brought a constant and steady stream of people into the city.

With industry came new jobs, new wealth, and new products. However, it also created new problems. Rivers were contaminated with garbage, pollution, toxic chemicals, and heavy metals. Even worse, sewage was often thrown into the street or collected in underground cesspools that were prone to overflow. These same rivers were the source of the city's drinking water, and widespread outbreaks of cholera and many other diseases soon occurred. Poisoning was common as heavy metals such as lead and arsenic seeped into the waterways. New medical conditions emerged, such as "phossy jaw."

Thankfully, the rapid progress of technology created medical advancements in germ theory, hypodermic needles, and anesthetic surgery. Hygiene was going mainstream; flush toilets became popular. Pasteurization, vaccination, and antiseptics emerged and saved untold lives from diseases that had been deadly a generation before.

To accommodate the growing population and deal with new issues, including lack of basic infrastructures, Baron Haussmann was appointed to carry out a massive program of urban renewal in Paris. His renovation completely transformed the city, with wide avenues, new parks and plazas, expanded waterways, and a modern sewerage system. Much of the crowded medieval inner city was demolished and replaced with modern mid-rise apartment blocks. Grand new monuments were constructed. The city's roadways and bridges were rebuilt around expanded train stations. Many of the city's most iconic sights were constructed or expanded in this period.

It's important to acknowledge that France's rapid economic and industrial growth was built on the back of colonization, the slave trade, and plundering natural resources from new foreign territories, particularly in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific. These French colonies provided raw materials for the factories and markets for new products. Millions of lives, families, and communities were ruined,

enslaved, killed, and lost forever to history in the process. Protests, strikes, riots, and revolutions in France expressed the disenchantment of those who were being crushed by prosperity.

A DAY AS A POST-IMPRESSIONIST

Most of the post-impressionists were born between 1840 and 1870, and they would have witnessed many of these incredible transformations firsthand. Thus, imagine a day in the life of a post-impressionist painter. When you wake up, you will be living in Montmartre in the mid-1890s. Montmartre was the place to be for a post-impressionist artist. Most of them lived or worked there, at least for a short time.

It's rainy and early, meaning it's still dark. You reach over and turn on the sconce on the wall to light your gaslight. Outside your window, you see the glow in the distance of gaslights in the streets. The bed you're in is made of plywood, machined nails, and screws. New adhesives and power saws have made affordable furniture possible. Middle-class people can buy desks, chairs, cupboards, and tables. You've also got a modest dresser where you can pull out a change of clothes. New sewing machines, looms, and modern clothing manufacturing let you go to the store and pick out something that might fit you.

You now go to the bathroom, and it's inside your apartment. You flush the toilet when you're done. Then, you go to your wardrobe and grab a clean shirt. Once you've got your hat and your boots on, you leave your apartment. It's in a newer building that looks sleek. The architects have used plenty of concrete, glass, iron, and steel, which are the architectural wonders of this new age. Buildings like this have changed the way people experienced space and revolutionized architecture. Such discoveries allow people to live in tall buildings comfortably for the first time. Iron and then steel frames have allowed buildings to climb higher, altering the skyline and landscape. Elevators, and eventually electric lighting and heating, have allowed people to comfortably live at these new altitudes.

You get out of the elevator and walk down to the coffee shop, an 18th-century innovation. These cafés are the social and intellectual life of the city—they are a place to be seen. Along with bars and clubs, they become a favorite subject for artists of this period. You join a few friends at their table. You're getting caffeinated, sharing stories and painting tips, and showing each other photographs. Communication is speeding up. If anything new is happening in London, they will know about it in Paris the

next day, then in Berlin and Amsterdam, and then in New York City the next week. News and entertainment are printed and disseminated rapidly by newspapers, books, magazines, and even telephone and telegraph.

Your plein-air-obsessed friend tells you of a spot about five miles outside of town that would be the perfect scene for the landscape painting you've been planning. You need to stop by the art store that just opened around the corner. Every day, it seems like new pigments are being synthesized by chemists. Colors once extremely rare in nature are now at your fingertips. You can now buy the paint, premixed in metal tubes, and carry it anywhere. You also have choices of pre-stretched canvases to paint on. You can even buy canvas that was pre-primed with rabbit-skin glue and/or gesso.

You grab your new supplies and place them in your plein air kit. You've got this clever little fold-up easel that you can carry in one hand. You've got your palette in a little box with your tubes of paint and a few spill-proof metal containers for your turpentine and linseed oil. Moreover, like paint tubes allowed for portable paint, similar developments made many more foods available in cans and jars. You throw a can of peaches in your bag alongside your brand-new portable box camera from a new American company called Kodak. If you don't finish your plein air painting today, you'll be able to take a photograph of the place and finish the painting in your studio using your photograph as a reference.

You make your way to the busy train station. Trains, steamships, and soon even cars are making long-distance travel a possibility for more people. Products and culture from as far as Japan and India are now commonplace in French stores and museums. You get your ticket, board the train, and arrive at your stop before noon. A brief walk from the train station and you've finally arrived at the spot.

Once you return home by train after some time, you decide to head out into the night to see what's happening. Electricity is beginning to transform the concept of nightlife, as it becomes cheap and easy to stay open at all hours. This energy was captured in countless ways by the many artists who found themselves drawn to this exciting new nocturnal world.

As you're walking, a poster captures your eye. The Lumière brothers are exhibiting a motion picture at the Grand Café. This would be the world's first commercial movie screening. A few years earlier, the Lumière brothers were running a photoplate factory in Lyon. Their dad, Auguste, saw a demonstration of Edison's Kinetoscope and was wowed. One year later, the brothers patented the Cinématographe, a combination movie

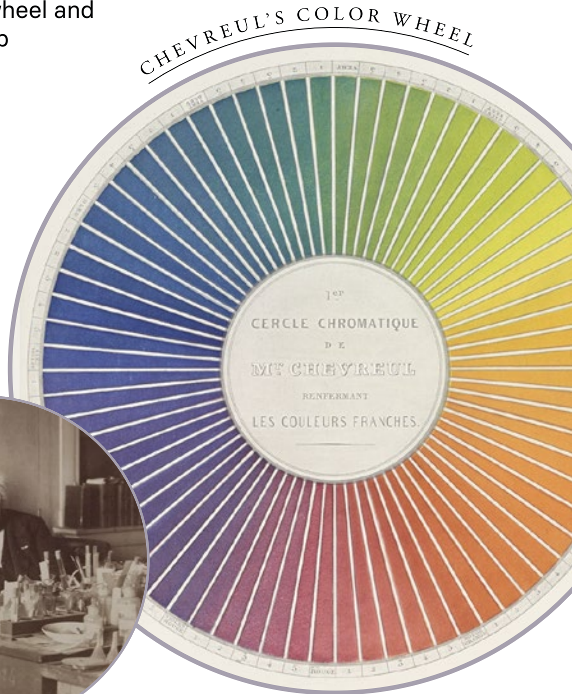
camera and projector that could display moving images on a screen for an audience. It was smaller, lighter, and used less film than what Edison had come up with. Each film was 17 meters long. When you hand-cranked it through the cinematograph, the movie took about 50 seconds. In 1896, the Lumiere brothers opened cinemas to showcase their new technology.

THE COLOR WHEEL

Michel-Eugène Chevreul was one of the most celebrated chemists in France. He wrote fascinating articles and books about the way the human mind perceives color and light and space. Artists were naturally intrigued with these new ideas and were reading and experimenting and circulating them. Chevreul noticed something interesting about color: It could appear quite different depending on the color that was next to it. This affects how we process and interpret color. Our brain is liable to project colors onto others, particularly neutral gray tones.

Chevreul developed the color wheel and began exploring the relationship between colors. In doing so, he noticed some strange effects created by opposing, or complementary, colors (red and green, purple and yellow—the colors that sit across from each other on the color wheel). When you place them side by side, they appear richer and more vibrant. The combination influences how we see them.

CHEVREUL'S COLOR WHEEL



MICHEL-EUGÈNE CHEVREUL

All this was happening alongside the advent of new artificial pigments that were brighter than anything you could get before. Artists were learning about the way people's eyes and minds worked and wanting to put this into their own work. Chevreul spoke to artists directly about how to use contrast and complementary colors to achieve dissonance and harmony. He was interested in ways artists could make use of the new science.

OPTICAL BLENDING

Optical blending was another important scientific discovery of this era. If you have two points of color small enough and you stand at a reasonable distance away, then the colors will be mixed by your eyes losing focus as the two dots overlap. Your mind interprets these two colors as one. The theory was that the color your brain created from this mixture would be more luminous and colorful than what you'd have seen if you simply mixed two pigments together.

Charles Blanc was another color scientist, and he wrote directly to artists about color's emotional significance. He said something that was helpful to young artists: Color should not be based on the "judgment of taste," but rather, it should be close to what we experience in reality. Blanc wanted artists to consciously plan and understand the way each color influences the others in creating a whole. His writings on color were widely read and passed around by the post-impressionists.

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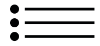

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CAMILLE PISSARRO'S EXPERIMENTS IN STYLE

As you will learn in this lecture, Camille Pissarro may be the most underrated painter of the post-impressionist era, especially considering his influence on the other painters of the period. He was an extraordinary artist because he never stopped growing and changing. He kept a curious and open mind, and he was always interested in learning the latest techniques and styles. He constantly pushed himself into new and uncomfortable territory. However, that also means he never settled into a signature style.

PISSARRO'S EARLY LIFE

Being born on the Caribbean island of St. Thomas in 1830 gave Camille Pissarro an interesting perspective. His father, Frederic Pissarro, was of Portuguese-Jewish descent, though he held French nationality. His mother, Rachel, was from a local Franco-Jewish family. Frederic's four children attended an all-Black primary school, showing, again, that this was not the typical colonial family. The family had their feet in several different communities, which seemed to give Camille a deeper understanding when it came to relating and empathizing with a wide number of artists.

When Camille was 12, his father shipped him off to a boarding school near Paris: Savary Academy. There, he was exposed to the work of the French masters, and he started to get excited about painting. The headmaster and namesake of the school, Monsieur Savary, happened to be an artist as well and tutored Camille personally. He wisely encouraged Pissarro to go outside and paint *en plein air* when he was back home in St. Thomas.

Pissarro was 17 when he came back home to St. Thomas, and he started painting as much as he could. The light in the Caribbean is different from the light in France because so many things go into the way we experience sunlight—atmosphere, temperature, humidity, smog, weather, latitude, clouds, and elevation, to name a few. Painting outside in St. Thomas would have given him a wide exposure to the subtleties in the sky, the lighting, and the water all around the island.

Frederic wanted Camille to help with the family business. Camille complied and worked as a port clerk for the next four years, but he was still painting and drawing every chance he got. By a great stroke of luck for him, there was a Danish artist also living on St. Thomas named Fritz Melbye. With Melbye's encouragement, Camille decided it was time to become a full-time painter. His heart was telling him to move to Caracas, Venezuela, where Fritz was heading next.

CAMILLE PISSARRO

While in Venezuela, Pissarro drew everything he could, particularly landscapes and scenes of local life. Everything he wanted to remember visually, he had to draw or paint. Some of the drawings he made he would later turn into watercolors or oils.

PISSARRO IN PARIS

After two years in Venezuela, Pissarro moved back to Paris in 1855. Fritz's brother Anton was looking for an assistant there, and Camille took the job. He also enrolled at École des Beaux-Arts, but like most of the impressionists and post-impressionists, he found it kind of stuffy and boring there. However, he liked some of the artists he was studying there, especially Camille Corot and Gustave Courbet. He even managed to get Corot to start giving him private lessons on the side.

CAMILLE COROT

Corot and Courbet were influential among impressionists and post-impressionists. Courbet was known for his radical politics and his depictions of peasants and workers. Corot was a great advocate of painting *en plein air*, and his beautiful landscapes were pointing the way toward impressionism. Studying with these two masters gave Pissarro an excellent education for his own career.

Pissarro entered a painting in the Salon for the first time in 1859, and he got in. Many of the most famous artists of this period would have their work rejected, especially as young artists. This is especially impressive because Pissarro hadn't had consistent academic training like some of his peers had. Under Corot's tutelage, Pissarro's work of this time was still considered acceptable by the strict standards of the Salon. There was just enough somber realism in the eyes of the Salon judges to pass muster. Many of Pissarro's paintings from this era depict placid, rural landscapes right outside Paris. However, he was interested in pushing the boundaries further.

Small acts of rebellion started to appear in his work. For instance, *Landscape* (1865) is unconventional. The painting features nothing in particular. The focal point is a cloudy sky, with some unremarkable

trees and a basic house off to the side. However, the sky is thick and pasty and gestural, not soft, thin, and lovely. This area has been loaded up with impasto layers—a technique where the paint is layered on so thickly that you can see the brushstrokes from a distance. Using this method almost emphasizes the emptiness of the sky. Pissarro expertly captured the way a backlit subject becomes smaller as the light crowds out all of the edges of each branch and leaf, rendering some of them invisible. A few leaves are left floating, but we understand them to be attached but obscured by the light. It's almost a photographic effect. A somber, somewhat depressing rural scene like this one was not playing for the approval of the Salon crowd.

Pissarro met Paul Cézanne in 1861, and they were each drawn to the other, as they shared the same dissatisfaction with the academy. Cézanne hadn't gotten into the Salon and hadn't had a great deal of training. The somewhat older Pissarro could see how naturally talented he was and took him under his wing. Pissarro was also fascinated by Cézanne's process and ideas. Cézanne in turn clearly admired Pissarro's unorthodox approach to his art.

PISSARRO'S ARTISTIC EVOLUTIONS

By 1866, Pissarro had moved to Pontoise, a town about 20 miles out from Paris. In *Jalais Hill, Pontoise* (1867), you see a landscape Pissarro painted near his new home. There is a strong horizontal composition, with two-thirds land and the top third sky. It's geometric for a landscape, with rolling green hills and full, lush trees. These strong thirds are broken up by the nice, sweeping curves of the road. Even the clouds and the left hillside point back toward the center, where the focus is on a density of smaller shapes. Almost like a vortex, where the large shapes are on the outside and progressively get smaller toward the center, it pulls you in. You might call this a classic Pissarro technique because it keeps the focus on the landscape while including the smallest of figures. This was a popular painting, and it made it into the Salon, where Émile Zola praised its modernity.

Things were starting to take off for Pissarro. He started seeing his mother's maid, Julie Vellay. A few of their children came before marriage—another taboo. However, they would raise seven children together and have a long and loving marriage. The couple moved to Louveciennes, another town just outside of Paris. There, Pissarro experimented more with new artistic approaches. By then, he had

met other like-minded experimenters, such as Monet, Rodin, and Seurat. Ideas were flowing between them. Pissarro started to try new techniques, such as using loosely placed brushstrokes to break up the surface and create textures that gave a sense of energy and movement. These were some of the hallmarks of what would soon be known as impressionism.

In 1870, the Franco-Prussian War began, and the Pissarro family fled to London for a couple of years. While Pissarro was gone, his house was ransacked, and nearly 1,500 paintings were destroyed by Prussian soldiers. In the end, only about 40 paintings were salvaged, which is why there isn't much to go by for the first decades of Pissarro's career. However, losing so many of his paintings in the war seems to have freed Pissarro artistically. Unlike many other impressionists, he took many years to completely loosen up his brushstrokes. This accelerated when he returned to France after the war.

CORNER OF THE HERMITAGE by Camille Pissarro

Consider the painting *A Corner of l'Hermitage, Pontoise*, painted sometime in the 1870s after the war. It's still composed like the other Pissarro landscapes you've seen: There's rolling hills, a two-thirds composition, and some small people in the middle of the scene. However, you can start to see a looser and more immediate approach, and the brushstrokes become more apparent. Rather than blending from light to dark, Pissarro placed each value down separately. He was still working through the new techniques and trying to understand how they fit into his practice.

After the war, Pissarro reconnected with artists such as Monet, Renoir, and Degas and started to take a leading role in organizing this group into the movement called impressionism. They started holding their own annual exhibition as an alternative to the Salon, and Pissarro was the only artist to show in all eight of them. He split his time between Paris and Pontoise.

Though Pissarro was one of the oldest in this rebellious group of artists, it's clear that he was influenced by his young friends, as his style quickly shifted. In *Barges at Pontoise* from 1876, you see him loosening up his style. The paint is thickly layered and even muddy in parts, creating a richly textured scene where light and color are emphasized over precision. The boats, hazy with smoke, seem to merge into one another. The subject wasn't typical for Pissarro either: A smoky barge carrying goods was an unpleasant intrusion on his pastoral home, a subject that was considered too crass and common for the Salon. However, the impressionists and post-impressionists loved it. In *The Harvest, Pontoise* from 1881, Pissarro changed things up again. His brushstrokes became finer and more detailed, more in his comfort zone. The painting feels light, airy, and colorful, and the subject is back to his beloved depictions of rural life.

BARGES AT PONTOISE by Camille Pissarro

Pissarro's friends, such as Monet and Manet, were also playing around with new techniques, ideas, and approaches. This was what impressionism was all about, and Pissarro was in the middle of this revolution. By the early 1880s, Pissarro seemed to have embraced the effect that's created by using small, staccato brushstrokes to create colorful and beautiful scenes. He continued changing styles. In 1885, he met Georges Seurat and Paul Signac, who were both pioneering a new technique that used small dots to create colors by way of optical blending and using contrasting colors to create vibrance.

When you see a painting such as *Apple Harvest* from 1888, it's obvious Pissarro was inspired by Seurat. The composition is filled with light and space, with the large curve of the hill, the warm glow of the sun creating a vibrant purple, and the red and blue shadows of the tree. The figures are large and upfront, each in a different pose. Here, it's clear that Pissarro was moving toward post-impressionism.

BOULEVARD MONTMARTRE

This ability to reinvent himself and continue to develop and adapt is what made Pissarro great. He is the only artist who predated impressionism, became an impressionist, and then became a post-impressionist. He even went back to impressionism somewhat at the end of his career. He was influenced by and influential within each of these movements.

By his sixties, Pissarro had a recurring eye infection that made it difficult to work like he used to. By then, he was an established artist and financially comfortable. Thus, he began renting a room with a balcony at the Grand Hotel de Russie overlooking Boulevard Montmartre. With people of all kinds and from all backgrounds and a wide variety of transportation types, this street offered a sweeping vista of Paris during the Second Industrial Revolution.

There, toward the end of his life, Pissarro painted his most iconic series: 14 plein air paintings at different times of the day on Boulevard Montmartre, showing the city in different kinds of weather and different seasons. They are all from the same point of view on his balcony. The left sidewalk lines up vertically with the left side of the painting, and the large sidewalk on the right angles in toward the center, creating space in the corner for the people on the street. However, it takes only a few moments to see that all the characters, the light, and the colors are different. Each version tells a different story of the same place. This series is a mix of

impressionism and post-impressionism. There's the quick study of light and shadow and the bold contrasting colors of impressionism, but there's also the structural shapes and strong architecture grounding it in history, like the post-impressionists preferred.

These paintings showed the modernity of Paris. The city was bustling with significant crowds. Paris's population had nearly tripled in the past half century, and much of the city had been completely rebuilt into modern, multistory city blocks. The Paris Pissarro was seeing before him would have been virtually unrecognizable from the one he had first visited as a child in the 1840s. In *Boulevard Montmartre at Night*, the night scenes show off the glow of arc lamps and the newly appearing electric lights. Buildings blur into each other, inky, wet reflections on the sidewalks and streets. The glow of the city radiates out into the sky in a melancholic but strangely triumphant van-Gogh-like gesture.

Although not as iconic as his *Boulevard Montmartre* series, consider Pissarro's *Woman with a Green Scarf* (1893). This oil-on-canvas portrait contains several complex areas of varying colors and textures. Technically, this is the work of a confident and mature artist. It starts with a refined and beautiful glow of light coming from the top right that lands gently on the subject's face. There is contrast between the dark jacket and the light green scarf that is glowing in the light, revealing the fabric's translucency. The control over form, value, and volume, while employing such vigorous and active marks, shows an impressive skill balancing action and stillness. There is a tenderness in this painting that underlies its power. In the top right corner alone, this painting contains reds, yellows, blues, green, pink, and turquoise. You can find just as many colors in the other areas, carefully composed and proportioned out to create a balanced and alluring image.

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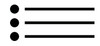

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GEORGES SEURAT'S VISION OF THE PEOPLE

This lecture discusses one of the most unique and popular artists of the post-impressionist era, George Seurat. Seurat basically invented an entirely new way to paint. He used small dots or blocks of pigment to assemble beautiful, detailed scenes bursting with color and light. He was inspired by the science of optics as well and did his own experiments in a completely different direction. This era is so fascinating because the artists who were inspired by new scientific discoveries used them in such different ways.

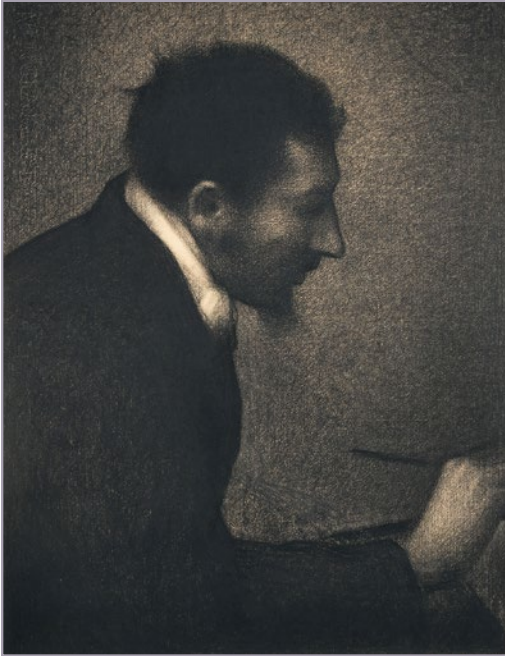
SEURAT'S EARLY LIFE

Georges Pierre Seurat was born in Paris on December 2, 1859. He inherited artistic talent and the wealth and means to study what he pleased with no distraction of a day job. When he was 19, he went to École des Beaux-Arts. There, he got the best art education money could buy. However, his education was interrupted in 1879 when he was called up for his military service.

Either before or during his military service, it occurred to Seurat that he no longer needed art school. When his time in the military was up, he decided not to return. Instead, he started his own training by getting into impressionism and learning about the newest, most exciting painting techniques happening around Paris. He started dabbling in the impressionist style himself, emphasizing light, color, and mood over the precise, perfect drawings he made at the academy. He was also devouring science books because he was a bit of a scientist when it came to his art. Like many impressionists, he was a fan of Delacroix and closely studied his use of color. He was fascinated by new scientific discoveries that offered the potential to understand and manipulate color on a deeper level.

Yet for the next two years, he mostly made monochrome drawings. He was isolating certain variables in his independent study by taking out color from his work as a means to understand it better when he returned to it. He understood that he needed to master how to create value and tone—that is, lightness and darkness—before he took on the full spectrum of color. He made a drawing of his roommate, and it was accepted into the Salon.

Aman-Jean (Portrait of Edmond François Aman-Jean) was both beautiful and subtly innovative. It's clear he was thinking about his later trademark style before he tried it out with color. He seemed to have a deep understanding of the optical effects he was learning about: In this drawing, he wasn't blending to create tone. He was using conté crayon, which is much harder than charcoal and doesn't blend much at all. He was creating darker and lighter areas by spacing his marks



AMAN-JEAN (PORTRAIT OF EDMOND FRANÇOIS AMAN-JEAN) by Georges Seurat

closer together to make darker areas and spacing them farther apart to create lighter ones.

This technique has a striking luminous effect. Seurat created a delicate aura in the portrait. He would continue to explore this technique in hundreds of drawings. Each one has a slightly different patterning of dots or lines or cross-hatching, and he made excellent use of the grain of the paper to make marks too. In some ways, he was decades ahead of his time. Each drawing appears to be at a slightly different focus level. Like Cézanne, Seurat was not simply doing the same thing over and over but giving himself assignments and tasks to learn how to control the light and space in his work. Some drawings appear out of focus but still convincing and lifelike. These create interesting optical effects, almost as if you are looking through some sort of lens.

Seurat also craved order and harmony. He studied artists such as Nicolas Poussin and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes. He shared with Cézanne a desire for permanence, for long-lasting and authoritative painting. The impressionists were on to something, but they were too quick, too hasty for Seurat. He loved tradition, he loved the classics, and he also was a significant fan of science. He was a firm believer in his ideas and believed that there was something important about his work and imbuing classical tradition with cutting-edge science and technology. After years of self-directed study, in 1883, he decided

he was ready to try out his new ideas and techniques in full color and on a grand scale. That's the year he began work on *Bathers at Asnières* at 23.

BATHERS AT ASNIÈRES

Seurat had been studying up on color theorist Chevreul's ideas intensely, particularly through the work of Charles Blanc, who interpreted many of these scientific discoveries for artists. For example, complementary colors used side by side can make each appear more vibrant and intense than they would be by themselves. A phenomenon called afterimage or retinal persistence is when, after looking at a color for a while and it's removed, you see a ghost of that color appearing as its opposite or complement.

The discovery that most excited Seurat was optical blending. For example, if you put blue and yellow close enough to each other and then stand back far enough, your eyes will do the mixing for you and see green. All of these discoveries underscore a vital truth: There is more to color than meets the eye.

Bathers was Seurat's grand experiment in trying to use these tools to create a new way to paint. Up close and small, he used strong contrasting colors, but as you step back, they blend and reduce their contrast. Seurat wanted to use contrast to create harmony and unity, to find the order from these underlying systems and structures. Light is additive, and colors get lighter as you mix different ones together. However, when you mix all of your paints together, you get black. In some areas, Seurat was trying to get the colors to mix optically.

This technique is known as divisionism or pointillism, depending on the type of brushstrokes used. However, *Bathers* isn't using either fully. Seurat was testing out this new technique in certain areas. For example, the trees in the background and the grass in the foreground have short, sharp strokes. There's green there, but up close, there are also blues, oranges, and yellows that blend together to create different tones of green when you step back.

Seurat was also trying out color contrast and pushing for more vibrancy. Why are there purples and yellows on red shorts? Purple and yellow are complementary colors; he wanted those shorts to shine out. Remember that many of these new chemical paints hadn't been

perfected yet and that many of the bright colors started to fade over time. Thus, when you see them photographed or in museums now, you are not seeing them nearly as vibrant as they would have been when first painted.

The painting has a thoughtfully laid out composition: It's almost mathematically precise how Seurat kept the same amount of distance between each subject. Each light area is paired with a darker part: the boots on the clothes, the hair on the body, the grass in light, the grass in shadow, large figures up front, tiny figures in the back. Moreover, the skin tone and the water are about the same value, but if Seurat painted them that way, then they would get lost and wouldn't stand out. Thus, on the light side of the body, he darkens the water, while on the shadow side of the body, he lightens the water.

Seurat submitted *Bathers* to the official Salon, but it was rejected. Thus, he turned to the Société des Artistes Indépendants. In 1884, he began exhibiting with them and making many new friends. Now, he was ready to start his most famous painting of all, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*.

A SUNDAY ON LA GRANDE JATTE by Georges Seurat

A SUNDAY ON LA GRANDE JATTE

It took two years and dozens of preparatory sketches and paintings to make this painting. This was the first fully divisionist work. In every section, colors are built up and contrasts augmented painstakingly by dots or small strokes of paint. Dots of complementary and contrasting colors show up everywhere, creating a unique optical effect.

There is a tightly woven arrangement of people, each one placed ever so carefully so that there is a nearly even amount of space around them. This and the strong silhouettes create an almost eerily still and isolated feeling. There are few indications of movement—particularly with the monkey, the dog, and the girl dancing. In fact, many of the studies for *La Grande Jatte* are eerily tranquil and quiet and show the park with barely any people in it. Most of the people Seurat captured in his studies end up in the final painting together. In a way, you are seeing multiple slices of time at once. Like Seurat used dots of paint to create the picture, he also used dots or moments of time to construct the composition.

This also gives a strange mood to the overall piece. Everyone appears to be absorbed in their own thoughts, looking straight ahead, unaware of their surroundings. Was Seurat intentionally showing them together but isolated like this as a critique of modern life? Not coincidentally, the setting here is the other side of the river from where *Bathers* is set in Asnières, drawing a contrast between his last painting and this one. The river was a sort of boundary in this period, and this park was on the wealthier side. It seems he was deliberately making a commentary on the contrast between the middle and working classes. Scholars have also noted curious motifs that could reference the fact that prostitutes frequented the park in this period—the lady with the monkey particularly. An archaic French word for a female monkey, *singesse*, was also slang for a prostitute.

There are beautiful and subtle uses of contrast happening all throughout the painting. As if to drive the point home, Seurat creates a curious border of contrasting colors around the entire painting, using the same divisionist technique. Despite all of its calm, this was a wild and polarizing painting, unlike anything anyone had ever seen before. Many hated it; many loved it. Young artists were excited about it. A critic seeing Seurat's technique called it pointillism. However, Seurat preferred the term *divisionism* or sometimes *chromo-luminarism*.

Today, *pointillism* usually means to specifically use dots to create optical blending, while *divisionism* is the more general term for any stroke or approach that achieves this.

SEURAT'S LATER WORK

After *La Grande Jatte*, Seurat was looking for contrast in subject matter. He loved depicting coastlines and boat and harbor towns and would travel to the coast nearly every summer. He made dozens of soft and calming pictures on these trips. In *The Lighthouse at Honfleur* (1886), from a distance, all of the grains blend together, and the sand looks like a solid golden color. It's only when you hold it close to your eyes that you notice how incredibly diverse the colors and shapes are. Seurat was touching on the extremely complex nature of reality: As you inspect it closer, you see that nature becomes exponentially more complex.

As a local celebrity in the art community now, after *La Grande Jatte*, Seurat moved to Montmartre where the artists, nightlife, and bohemians were. Things start changing in exciting ways in his paintings. The second half of his career was focused on the amped-up, exciting world of Paris in the belle epoque. Another exciting addition to Seurat's world was Madeleine Knobloch, an artist's model whom Seurat was immediately drawn to. She is unnamed in the painting *Young Woman Powdering Herself*. Seurat started this painting in 1888 and didn't finish it until 1890. Madeleine moved in with him in 1889.

While working on Madeleine's portrait, Seurat also started another ambitious painting. Perhaps to address the critics about his stiff and immobile figures, he went all out with movement. *Le Chahut*, or the cancan, was a sexy and scandalous dance in those days. Seurat went for the moment: legs kicked high, skirts flying around, the band in full effect. This is a fun and sultry painting. However, in Seurat's awkward way, each figure still seems incredibly stiff and immobile, like cardboard cutouts, enhanced by the flattened perspective of stacking each dancer centimeters behind the previous one. Curiously, he used mostly traditional earth tones, which he had previously abandoned.

Upon closer inspection, there is a bit more than meets the eye, including some fascinating uses of color and contrast. There are some strange glowing colors emanating and intermingling, and there are quite a few bright and saturated colors within the brown. However, it's

all optically blended so that you see mostly browns. There is a strange shimmer, though, and despite having a traditional overall palette, there is absolutely nothing traditional about this painting.

Around this time, Madeline became pregnant, and they moved out of Montmartre to a place more conducive to a baby. Little Pierre-Georges was born in February 1890. Seurat fled to the coast for the summer, continuing his annual tradition where he made many new paintings and drawings, including *The Channel of Gravelines, Petit Fort Philippe*. These coastal scenes are more in tune with an impressionist scene drenched in light, peaceful and tranquil. Interestingly, the studies Seurat made for some of his Gravelines works were also done in the divisionist style.

Seurat was 30 years old now. He was starting to garner attention, and he knew he was hitting his stride. For his next major work, he started another ambitious painting called *The Circus*, probably planning a few years as usual for a painting like this. In early March 1891, he unveiled it, though in an unfinished state, for the Salon des Indépendants. A few weeks later, he came down with either pneumonia or meningitis and died on March 29.

Despite being so young at the time of his death, or perhaps in part because of it, Seurat's work grew monumental in the minds of his fellow artists. He was one of the most original and dedicated of the post-impressionists, and, like Cézanne, he came up with a new way to see the world. His techniques and ideas inspired many young artists, especially Paul Signac.

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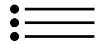

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POLITICS AND RELIGION ON THE CANVAS

The late 19th century was a time of incredible technological progress and social change. Thus, it was also a time of political turmoil, with war, revolution, and unrest sweeping over Paris and throughout Europe. Some post-impressionists sought to capture the tensions of the era in their art; others were outright activists and revolutionaries on the barricades. Three significant events in particular may have played the largest part in shaping the lives and thoughts of those living in France at that time: the Franco-Prussian War, the Paris Commune, and the Dreyfus affair. This lecture will explore these events from the perspective of the post-impressionist generation and discuss how it shaped their work.

FRANCE UNDER NAPOLEON III

After revolutionaries stormed the Bastille and guillotined Louis XVI in the 1790s, France became a tumultuous place. In 1852, Napoleon III, the nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, declared himself emperor. Despite his autocratic tendencies, he brought much-needed stability to France and oversaw some of the most important reforms in French history. For example, the massive reconstruction of Paris under Baron Haussmann was his vision. He was also progressive by the standards of the day, expanding female access to education and health care to the poor. Moreover, he tried somewhat to ease the growing social tensions of industrial France by improving workers' rights and subsidizing low-cost housing.

When it came to art, however, he wasn't so progressive. The emperor was old-fashioned. He liked his paintings academic. This was important because the large commission checks came from either the government or the church, which was extremely traditional in its tastes. The Paris Salon was also subject to imperial patronage and pressure.

Traditional academic painters many have never heard of, such as Alexandre Cabanel, were some of Napoleon's favorites. They got all the best jobs painting murals for the palaces and those grand new public buildings going up around the country. They were also put on powerful committees, such as the Salon jury, where they actively prevented avant-garde artists from being exhibited. Thus, in many ways, Napoleon III set the tone for life in France in his time, and nearly every post-impressionist painter grew up in his new empire.

PRUSSIA VS. FRANCE

In the 1860s, political mastermind Otto von Bismarck was steering Prussia to dominate the future of Europe. He wanted to unify all of the fragmented German states into a single German nation, and France was high on his hit list. Napoleon III saw them coming but terribly misjudged the threat France faced. Although the French economy was roaring, the army was not.

In 1870, Bismarck created a complicated scheme to humiliate the French. Once it was reported in the French press, public outrage and patriotic fervor encouraged Napoleon III to declare war on Prussia. However, he severely underestimated the strength of the Prussian army. Prussia had an enormous reserve of conscripted soldiers to call on. Within a few months, they had completely overrun the French army, and Napoleon himself was defeated at the Battle of Sedan and taken prisoner.

The Prussians started racing to conquer Paris and completely defeat the French. However, the French government had just spent more than 120 million francs fortifying the defense of the city. At this point, Paris was one of the most fortified cities Europe had ever seen. The French were prepared for an attack, but they didn't expect a siege. The Prussian army completely encircled the city, a 50-mile perimeter.

The city had saved about 80 days of food storage. After the people used that up, they started severely rationing food. They started slaughtering farm animals, domestic animals, horses, and even rats. The winter of 1870 to '71 was a three-month-long nightmare of cold, sickness, and hunger. Many of the post-impressionists were children in Paris during the siege. Some of the older artists, such as Odilon Redon, served in the army, while others, such as Paul Cézanne, skipped town and would later be branded deserters.

Paris surrendered at the end of January 1871. Prussia demanded 5 billion francs, the Alsace-Lorraine territory, and a military victory parade down the streets of Paris. The Parisian public was upset. However, the real trouble came from the national guard that had defended the city, which was a separate entity than the army. Most had been hastily armed and recruited from the working-class neighborhoods of Paris. Working-class tensions had been slowly bubbling up in the city for decades. Now, these workers were armed and pushed over the edge by the government's handling of the war.

After the Prussian army left, the national guard began wrestling control of the city away from the French army. Protests and riots broke out everywhere in support of the national guard. Rebel units formed their own leadership and began to take the city's cannons to the working-class neighborhoods in preparation to defend themselves. On March 18, the French government realized it could not hold on to the capital and retreated to Versailles. The national guard took control of the gunpowder stores, the railways, and government buildings and offices. Then, it gathered outside the Hôtel de Ville and raised a red flag in victory. It declared the independence of the Third Republic.

THE PARIS COMMUNE

The Paris Commune began. It was a radical governing council committed to overhauling the city, composed of anarchists, socialists, communists, republicans, and neo-Jacobians. It passed a raft of new

decisions. For example, education for all children was to be free and compulsory. Child labor was abolished. First aid stations were set up around the city for free care. All of the tools and household items given up during the siege were returned. The council also postponed commercial debt obligations and wiped the interest from those debts. Access to the legal system was free for all. The death penalty was abolished. Separation of church and state was strictly enforced.

However, soon, the leaders were fighting among each other over what the perfect commune should look like and how much to redistribute the city's wealth to pay for it. As government forces started rebuilding and surrounding Paris to retake it, major arguments broke out about how to prepare to defend the city. The anarchists quit the council, and the national guard began to collapse. By May, parts of the walls and gates were being left undefended. The French army returned when it discovered one of these undefended sections. A horrific week of fighting broke out in the city streets. Realizing after a few days that the cause was lost, the communards poured oil, turpentine, and gunpowder on the Tuileries Palace to blow up the entire building.

The government executed many of the soldiers it captured. The communards responded in kind: They executed the archbishop of Paris and most of the senior clergy. Low estimates say at least 17,000 citizens and national guard were killed during that week. After the dust settled, at least another 40,000 people were arrested. The ringleaders were executed, while thousands were imprisoned for years or sent into exile in the Pacific colonies. The commune's aftermath and influence loomed large for decades.

Many French artists of the era tended to be on the political left and were sympathetic to the ideals of the commune. Some, such as Gustave Courbet, directly participated as political leaders and would spend time in prison for it. Others, such as post-impressionist Maximilien Luce, were deeply impacted by witnessing it in their youth and would return to the subject often in their art. Indeed, many post-impressionist artists were compelled to engage with the significant political questions raised in this era in a way that most of their predecessors never had the chance to do. Some illustrated the events themselves, but most took a more subtle approach, using their art to depict scenes of the poor and the working classes. New radical ideologies such as socialism,

communism, and anarchism flourished during this period. Some post-impressionist movements, such as neo-impressionism, were also political movements.

However, the artists of this era weren't exactly in touch with the average person. Paris did not equal France. Although all cities were changing, in 19th-century France, most people still lived in the countryside. Those who did tended to be poorer, less educated, and deeply Catholic and conservative. The fall of Napoleon III and the Paris Commune was deeply shocking in the countryside.

It was fashionable for artists of this era to travel into the countryside and make beautiful depictions of the landscapes and people found there. In some ways, they were also depicting a different political world—a world where tradition and God were still paramount. Were they genuinely interested in that world, or were they exploiting and romanticizing the poor? Bucolic landscapes often hid the fact that these people spent excruciatingly long, backbreaking days with hand tools to bring in the harvest. Thus, there were deep divisions throughout the country, and small incidents could quickly explode into full-blown political conflict.

THE DREYFUS AFFAIR

In 1894, France was developing new weaponry to attack Germany, retake Alsace-Lorraine, and avenge the war. France discovered a leak in its intelligence. Someone was telling Germany about France's new technology. A handwritten letter from the leaker corroborated the accusations. The war department started searching for the culprit and came across Alfred Dreyfus, who was an army captain serving in the artillery corps. He was from Alsace and spoke German fluently. Then, they found out he was Jewish, which made him highly suspicious to the French command.

Armand du Paty de Clam was a major working for the French general staff who declared himself an expert on handwriting, even though he had no training whatsoever. He summoned Dreyfus to a meeting and pretended his hand was injured to convince Dreyfus to take dictation for him. He had him write out the same words they found on the letter of the leaker. With his "expertise," he claimed the two letters matched. Later forensic experts disputed this, but the damage was done.

Dreyfus was put in solitary confinement so that de Clam could force a confession out of him, but Dreyfus never relented. Eventually, the public got wind of the story, and anti-Semitic tensions were unleashed. A hasty military trial convened. Dreyfus was sentenced to life in prison on Devils Island in French Guiana. However, the news stories were starting to turn, thanks to the help of Dreyfus's brother Mathieu, who led a campaign for his innocence. The truth began to take hold with some moderates.

Eventually, new evidence and testimony came to light, proving the real culprit to be a bitter officer named Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy. The government had no choice but to put Esterhazy on trial in 1898, but the new trial was all staged. Esterhazy was coached by the military on how to defend himself, and forensic experts were lined up to say his handwriting didn't match and discredit the new evidence. Esterhazy was acquitted and immediately fled to England. There, he confessed to the London papers that he was indeed the spy.

Many of France's writers, artists, and thinkers were highly engaged with the case. The author Émile Zola used his fame to declare Dreyfus an innocent man and the victim of anti-Semitic hysteria. A significant petition of leading names, including Claude Monet, called for a retrial of Dreyfus. Many artists, including Paul Signac, Édouard Vuillard, and Camille Pissarro, were pro-Dreyfus. However, this was hardly a unanimous position, even among the artistic community. Edgar Degas, for instance, was a significant anti-Semite. Paul Cézanne was a more nuanced case: As he was growing closer to the Catholic Church in his later years, he sympathized with the anti-Dreyfus camp, though he was quieter about his opinions than Degas.

Anti-Semitic violent outbreaks were now happening all over France. Effigies of Dreyfus were burned in bonfires. Zola became public enemy number one. In an effort to silence him, he was prosecuted for libel and sentenced to one year in prison. Zola fled to exile in England for a year. He was eventually exonerated.

The whole thing dragged on for years. Under enormous public pressure, Dreyfus was finally brought back to France to be retried in 1899. Even with most of the evidence against him now discredited, he was found guilty yet again. In the aftermath, the French president pardoned and released Dreyfus in exchange for a confession of guilt, which Dreyfus

reluctantly agreed to. Eventually, the supreme court cleared his name and exonerated him in 1906. Dreyfus was reinstated in the army, serving in World War I and ending his career as a lieutenant colonel.

DECLINE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The wave of anti-Semitism the Dreyfus affair unleashed revealed the deep-seated divisions over Judaism in European society. Religion obviously ran at the heart of the affair. France was still a Catholic nation. However, the power and authority of the Roman Catholic Church in France had been in decline for decades. The French Revolution 100 years prior was a referendum on religious power in France, and the church lost much of its property in the aftermath.

Much of that status would be restored when Napoleon Bonaparte and the pope made a compromise known as the Concordat of 1801. However, the prestige of the church was never quite restored. As technology, progress, and the Industrial Revolution rolled on, the anticlerical leftists, socialists, anarchists, and communists gained much more power and recognition. There was a bit of a church comeback under Napoleon III, but it was much slower in urban areas.

As more left-wing politicians were elected to office, new laws were beginning to weaken the church's power again. For instance, religious language and symbols were removed from all government buildings. It's easy to see how the wrenching apart of church and state after centuries of deep entanglement had a significant impact on the psyche of the post-impressionists. Some artists were emboldened to make increasingly controversial or "blasphemous" work. One of the most notorious was by an artist in Belgium, James Ensor, who was a fellow traveler of the post-impressionists. *Entry of Christ into Brussels* from 1888 depicts a carnival parody of Jesus Christ's arrival into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

Classic themes were remade in new and shocking ways, and some artists of the generation were looking to get a rise out of the religious right. Many artists were depicting Jesus in ways no one had ever seen before. Often, there was a more human and complex side exposed, showing him as a strange and troubled fellow or simply an ordinary person. Moreover, depictions of the devil became a more popular subject, with depictions of Satan as a more complex character.

However, even as the growing urban areas were rejecting religion and pushing it out of public life, in other parts of the country, a spiritual revival was occurring. Moreover, rural folks were not merely sitting idly by while the urban elites transformed their France. Up until World War I, there were several major conservative backlashes. Additionally, note that though less numerous, some artists of the period did identify as patriots and sometimes even used their art to sweep up nationalist fervor and defend traditional values. The post-impressionist Henri Rousseau, for example, frequently incorporated flags and French national celebrations into his work.

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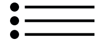

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DIVISIONISM: USING THE SCIENCE OF COLOR

In *Opus 217. Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones, and Tints, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon in 1890*, Paul Signac goes full-on abstract psychedelia, taking inspiration from Japanese kimonos, color theory, and a slew of boundary-pushing graphics. *Opus 217* is a great piece to kick off this lecture on neo-impressionism. This fascinating post-impressionist movement combined both the science and the politics of the late 19th century. *Opus 217* was revolutionary, both politically and artistically.

ANARCHY AND NEO-IMPRESSIONISM

Félix Fénéon is the subject of *Opus 217*, and he was a highly influential art critic and a dandy. He was also an ardent anarchist. He was once imprisoned for several months in connection with anarchist bombings, though he was eventually acquitted. Fénéon was close friends with the neo-impressionist painters, and he is the one who coined their name.

Anarchy was very much in vogue in some circles of late 19th-century Europe, and anarchists had played a significant role in the Paris Commune. The anarchist philosophy of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon had a strong following in French artistic circles, particularly Gustave Courbet, who had been a radical member of the commune and whose art had influenced many post-impressionists. Sympathy for the working classes, a desire for greater equality and freedom, and opposition to power and authority generally united them.

OPUS 217 by Félix Fénéon

How far they would go to pursue their views varied. Most artists weren't advocating terrorism like Fénéon did. But those who saw countless friends and family die in poverty felt complete justification in tearing down the system. The neo-impressionists felt that their art could help challenge the hegemonic order by presenting alternative perspectives of the world. However, artists were walking a tightrope: All of their patrons, curators, and collectors were from the upper class and were not fans of anarchy, socialism, or any of the other new political movements.

Unlike the original impressionists, the neo-impressionists had no problems with signs, symbols, and metaphors. Although using the same principles of witnessing the colors of light and exaggerating those with bold contrasts, they were repurposing this painting language for a more directed political message. Looking closely at *In the Time of Harmony* by Paul Signac, you can see people picking fruit, playing games, dancing, painting, and generally relaxing and having a good time.

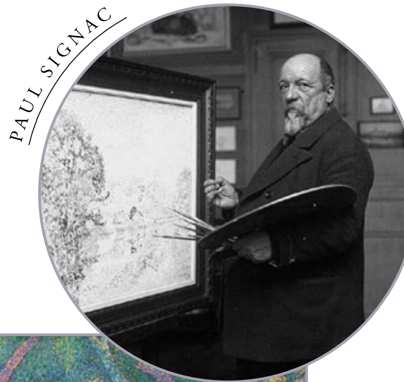
These are not random activities. The tree, for example, is on public property. Rather than benefiting the few, the abundance of nature provides for everyone. On the horizon, a tiny tractor sits unused as the farmers dance in the shade of the large tree. Machinery allows you to work more productively and, thus, much faster. When you don't have a capitalist boss forcing you to work 12 hours a day to increase profits, greater productivity means you can stop working when the work is done. The rooster in the corner is also a symbol. It was said that the rooster will fight until it wins or dies. This is the type of attitude neo-impressionists were projecting: They wouldn't give up until this was a reality.

Why use this painting style? What does this have to do with socialism or anarchy? The push for anarchists was collective emancipation. This was possible only through individual emancipation. Each person was valuable, each person had dignity, and each person deserved to live a free and happy life. Pointillism mirrors this idea, where you can compare a painting with society. It's a metaphor. From afar, you see the whole scene working together. When you get closer, you can see each individual dot, each individual citizen. The individual dot is emancipated in a way, free to be a different color or size or texture. The dots work together locally to form a shadow or a branch. Each local area works together to create a beautiful society.

PAUL SIGNAC

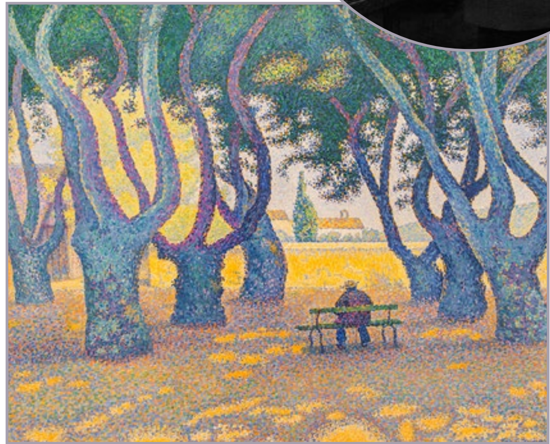
Paul Signac became the ringleader of the Seurat devotees after Seurat's death. He was born in Paris to a middle-class family, who pushed him toward architecture. However, he soon turned toward painting and impressionism. Then, he met Seurat in 1884, and everything changed. He saw *Bathers at Asnieres*, and he was instantly drawn to Seurat's new ideas. He got into Charles Henry, who was writing about the connections between color and emotion with new psychological theories. Signac himself would eventually write several treatises on art. In a way, he was the intellectual heart of the group, a promoter of new ideas. Soon, he was recruiting other artists, such as Pissarro, to join them.

Signac's own works started out fairly conservative, without too many crazy colors and with a more naturalistic sense of space. However, around 1888, he started to discover the works of anarchists. Soon, the neo-impressionists were talking political ideas as much as artistic ones. Seurat likely had a moderating effect on the group's politics because after he died in 1891, Signac steered the neo-impressionists into a much more radical turn. That's when things got interesting.



PAUL SIGNAC

Place des Lices, Saint-Tropez, for example, from 1893, in many ways is a wild departure from where Signac was. This painting is more like a dreamscape: It has glowing yellow grass and blue and purple trees, reaching up to the sky like long fingers.



PLACE DES LICES by Paul Signac

A small lone individual sits on a bench surrounded by this highly surreal scene, almost as if Signac is illustrating this person's psychedelic experience.

His beloved paintings of boats also started changing in interesting ways. The way water catches the sunlight and breaks up the reflections into smaller lines and specks interrupted by small waves and ripples makes water an ideal divisionist subject matter. Signac did scenes like these over and over in different types of mood and light. Although pointillism is difficult and tedious, Signac stuck with it for the rest of his career and mastered the technique like no one else.

The Port of Saint-Tropez is quite stunning. With his maturity and control over color and mark, Signac combined various complicated elements compositionally, spatially, and color-wise. The sky is particularly beautiful, with pinks and yellows on the left fading up to a greenish blue. On top of its beauty, this painting, finished in 1901, is still political. Across continents, anarchists were desperately and violently attempting to bring down the global order. Signac and the neo-impressionists, though, were advocating a more peaceful and gentle revolution, offering an alternative vision of the future and hope through anarchist ideas. Paintings such as *The Port of Saint-Tropez* feature workers and fishermen toiling away in the dark shadows—but the viewer can look beyond to the other side, bathed in light and hope: There's a better place to be.

CHARLES ANGRAND

One of the lesser-known neo-impressionists was Charles Angrand. The school he taught math at was near some of the hot spots for artists to hang out. He struck up some new friendships at the café to start learning and painting with them, falling in with neo-impressionists such as Signac and Seurat.

CHARLES ANGRAND

His drawings made people sit up and take notice. Paul Signac described them as "poems of light." For example, in *A Clearing*, there is an extremely soft delicacy to the transitions from light to dark. The transformation of the white of the paper into the convincing light of a sunny sky is not an easy task—the light subtly and

gradually creeps around the edges of the trees, a backlit object will soften and diffuse at the edges, and there is a full range of values. There is a deep, dark, black contrast in the foreground, making the light even more dramatic.

Compare that to *Path in the Country*. It's quite small and not delicate or sophisticated. However, there is something entirely convincing to the light on the plants and the road that is nearly photographic when looking at it. Up close, it's rather clumsy-looking, with large random dots and not much variation in tone—none at all in the sky. However, it captures that bright, flat light that you see at midday when the sun is high on clear days.

Moreover, the drawing *End of the Harvest* is incredible—so soft, so subtle, so surreal. It's ethereal. With the perspective leading you to the light, there's an almost heavenly, spiritual feeling to it. Comparing it to the previous painting, which couldn't be more different, is fascinating. Angrand had quite a range.

END OF THE HARVEST by Charles Angrand

You wouldn't know by looking at any of these that Angrand was a fairly committed anarchist as well, and he frequently contributed illustrations to the anarchist newspapers. Perhaps the best clue from any of his art is *The Harvesters* from 1892, which shows French peasants toiling in the fields.

THÉO VAN RYSSELBERGHE

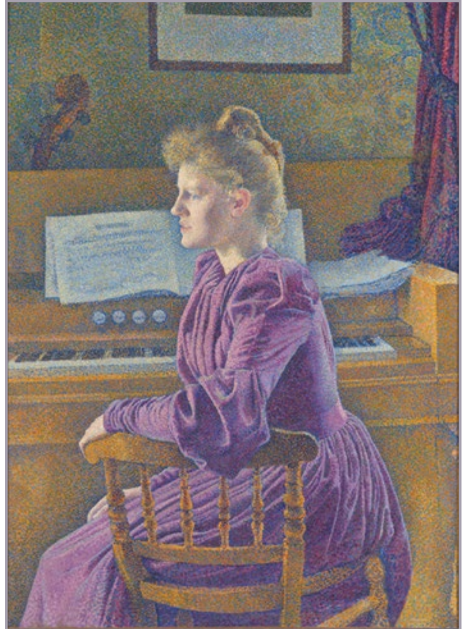
Théo Van Rysselberghe was born in Belgium to a French-speaking family. He went to the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. He did well and began exhibiting in the Belgian salons as a teenager. At the Académie, he was heavily influenced by Jean-François Portaels, who was famous for painting scenes from North Africa. He would subsequently travel to Morocco several times. As colonialism spread and cultural depictions became exoticized and commercialized, paintings such as his *Fantasia Arabe* (1884) became popular.

Van Rysselberghe was active in the art community, and he cofounded an artist group in Brussels called Les XX. They were radical, anti-academy artists that functioned like the Salon des Indépendants in Paris. However, because Belgium had a much smaller art community, they often invited avant-garde artists from America and around Europe to exhibit with them.

Van Rysselberghe at first was inspired by the impressionists and tried his hand at some portraits and seascapes in their style. When he saw Seurat's *La Grande Jatte* on exhibit in Paris, he was immediately enamored, and from then on, he focused all his attention on painting this way. Along with several other Belgian painters, he brought neo-impressionism to Belgium. He invited Seurat to show *La Grande Jatte* at the next Les XX.

Van Rysselberghe was able to use pointillism in a much more highly realistic way than Seurat or the others did. Perhaps it was his classical training or because he had the highest resolution—the most dots per square inch. This gave him the ability to show more precise detail and clarity. He also had a way of using the trademark oversaturated contrast, but his use of smaller dots created more natural colors. He used more traditional blending to achieve some intricate details, such as subtleties in the eyes.

In *Maria Sethe at the Harmonium* (1891), you can see his hyper-accurate attention to detail and nuance. The light on her face and dress is the star of the show, but there are some other great details as well, such as the swirling pattern on the walls and the impossibly rich red curtain in the corner. Van Rysselberghe was even able to maintain crisp, sharp edges, such as those on the piano. The other neo-impressionists were never able to get that level of clarity and detail.



MARIA SETHE AT THE HARMONIUM
by Théo Van Rysselberghe

Such painting requires a dedication and perseverance that few can maintain. As the years roll on, you can start to see some looser and less intricate paintings, where Van Rysselberghe was simplifying a landscape and reducing it to one or two colors. *Coastal Scene* is a nice example of his ability to work with a minimal composition and a minimal color palette. Moreover, as soft as this looks, some of the paint dabs are quite thick and rough.

He continued to paint more of the time-consuming, highly detailed, and rendered scenes as well. His painting *Sylvie Descamps Monnom* is an excellent example. She looks pristine and precise from afar. However, the closer you get, the more things start to get weird. The contrasting purples and greens around her eyes make it difficult to focus, as the colors are vibrating. In the background, Van Rysselberghe uses larger dots as the scene dissipates into blurs of color.

Van Rysselberghe’s grandest and most ambitious piece is probably *The Glowing Hour*. This painting is more than 10 feet long and 7 feet tall. He pulled the best from pointillist techniques. The rich, vibrant,

exaggerated sunset tones create a hyperrealistic sense of light and glow. He used larger, looser dots and marks for the ground and the water and then much smaller and finer dots on the figures themselves. He refined them even further until they were imperceptible from blending in the most nuanced parts, such as the facial features.

THE END OF NEO-IMPRESSIONISM

These were the final years of divisionism and neo-impressionism. Talented as the neo-impressionists were, nothing they produced created quite the sensation that Seurat's works did. Moreover, divisionism was a style that almost all who studied it eventually abandoned. It became almost a historical footnote. The ironic thing about divisionism is that it didn't do what it was meant to do. Seurat was using science to achieve vivid, hyperrealistic color that smacked you in the face. However, although the effect is innovative, interesting, and exciting, you don't see such color often in these paintings. It is a somewhat hazy and fastidious-looking art. The neo-impressionists didn't quite succeed in unlocking that portal in our minds to a direct color experience.

Adding to the irony, the larger legacy might be the political one. The fusing of an artistic movement with a political agenda became increasingly common in avant-garde movements over the coming decades. Some Italian artists, for example, were inspired by the neo-impressionists. In 1901, Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo unveiled *The Fourth Estate*, explicitly politicizing his subjects and using pointillism to show a workers' strike.

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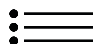

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JAPANESE INFLUENCE AND LES NABIS

The Nabis, or “the prophets” in Hebrew, were a group of painters from Académie Julian, a private art school in Paris, who felt they had received a special commission from God. Linguist Auguste Cazalis drew a parallel between the way these painters aimed to revitalize painting as “prophets of modern art” and the way the ancient prophets had rejuvenated Israel. The Nabis were an interesting offshoot of post-impressionism. For them, art was about the artist arranging symbols, shapes, and colors to create meaning. This lecture will look at the story of this interesting group as well as the distinctive influence Japanese art had on them and post-impressionism in general during this period.

ORIGIN OF THE NABIS

The movement got its start with Paul Sérusier, a student studying at the Académie Julian. He had gone for a visit to Pont-Aven to work with and learn from Paul Gauguin in 1888. During a walk outside, Sérusier began composing a study of the landscape. Gauguin sat behind him and coached him. What Sérusier produced was a bright, vibrant painting done on a wooden cigar box lid that captured his visual sensation of the scene rather than an accurate picture of what he saw.

Sérusier returned to Paris and showed the painting to his friends Maurice Denis and Pierre Bonnard at the Académie Julian. They all flipped out. This painting was likely more abstract, more avant-garde than most paintings they had seen. They called it *The Talisman*, and they were right: What Sérusier had made was somewhat of a prophecy of things to come.

THE TALISMAN by Serusier

The first shoots of modern abstract art would spring up in avant-garde groups like the Nabis. Soon, the little group was meeting regularly to discuss their work, what they'd been reading, and the future of art. They often met in secret. They would sign their letters with: "In your palm, my words and my thoughts." They had initiation ceremonies and code words.

One artist they all shared a love for was Cézanne. Cézanne's distinctive geometric style was a significant influence on cubism and the art of the next century. Another common thread was

an interest in the spiritual and mystical power of art, partly reacting against the rational, material, and scientific trend of the late 19th century that many artists were getting into. Some of the Nabis were attracted to the occult and esoteric. However, Maurice Denis, their unofficial leader, was a devout Catholic and had reservations about anything too weird or blasphemous.

The group was tied together by deep friendships, too—perhaps more than friendships. For example, Vuillard had an intense relationship with Bonnard. They wrote many letters back and forth in which they talked about how much they thought of one another and missed each other.

MAJOR THEMES OF THE NABIS' ART

The Nabis were typically most interested, ironically, in the ordinary. Often, their works captured casual moments between people. The buzzword they came up with was *intimism*. Intimism "allows us to divine the daily tragedy and mystery of ordinary existence," said Camille Mauclair. Bonnard said that intimism is "the ability to draw emotion from the most modest acts of life."

Cozy, rich, warmly lit interiors are at the heart of intimism. By going inside private spaces, the Nabis hoped to find the inside layer of reality. They made the ordinary moment somehow magical. Through brushstrokes that evoke energy, light, movement, and sparkle, they could set the viewer in the familiar but transport their minds to something beyond. Rich colors and complex patterns in wallpapers and textiles provided complex, multilayered visual experiences that could be nearly hypnotic.

However, a significant debt of inspiration for the Nabis, and most of the post-impressionists, goes to Japanese art. By the late 19th century, Japan was all the rage in Europe. Its popularity skyrocketed when a French art dealer named Siegfried Bing traveled to Japan and began collecting prints by Japanese artists. He started a monthly art journal called *Le Japon artistique* from 1888 to 1891 with full-color illustrations. He also organized more than 700 Japanese prints to be exhibited at École des Beaux-Arts. The discovery of this bold, refined, and disciplined artistic style was a revelation that excited a whole generation.

Most of the prints were primarily ukiyo-e wood-block prints, where the artist would painstakingly carve the image onto a block of wood and then carve a new block for each new color they wanted to add. The outlines

were clear, bold, and integral to the picture and precisely separated the hues, patterns, and spaces. There was no blending at the edges or into the background. These prints embraced the flatness of planes, spaces, and colors. Floral and geometric patterns added intensity and detail that rewarded a closer look. The space in these prints was often stacked vertically rather than pursuing a diminishing horizon.

Easily the most popular artist in this new wave of Japonism was Katsushika Hokusai, who lived from 1760 to 1849. He was a brilliant artist capable of a significant range of technical skill, observation, creativity, and artistry. His most iconic work is *The Breaking Wave off Kanagawa*.

The post-impressionists were inspired by their Japanese colleagues and began to experiment with large expanses of color, patterns, undulating lines, dark contours, diagonals, abrupt cropping, and unusual compositions like they had seen in these prints. Another influential aspect of Japanese art was its bestiary of bizarre creatures, ghosts, and fantasy themes that often manifested in this work. Works like these encouraged artists to be bold and crazy in what they made.

PIERRE BONNARD

Easily the largest fan of Japanese art in the group was Pierre Bonnard—so much so that they nicknamed him *le nabi très Japonard*, or "the very Japanese prophet." He got his start making lithographs for posters, usually on commission. His lithographs clearly show an homage to Japanese prints, as can be seen in *The Little Laundress*.

THE LITTLE LAUNDRESS by Pierre Bonnard

It has many of the hallmarks of a Japanese print: strong diagonals, limited color palette, mostly flat colors, and not much shading. There's a clearly delineated silhouette, the girl's body is one flat color, and there is only a little variation in her hair. There's also a cute little dog heading its own way. This is exactly the kind of quiet, intimate scene that the Nabis sought spiritual and emotional connection in.

Things became a little stranger and more colorful when Bonnard switched to painting on canvas. For example, in *Women with a Dog* (1891), the woman's dress is absolutely flat, with no depth or perspective. It's a garden scene, but there is little garden to be seen. The interlocking forms of the composition are like a jigsaw neatly put together, each shape supporting the other shapes.

Bonnard would eventually become one of the most prolific and fascinating painters of the group, using wild, saturated colors to create his intimate scenes of interiors or little human moments. Several of his most significant works play with the division of interior and exterior spaces and people living between the two. Windows were one of his most favored devices to divide up his composition and create scenes within scenes. Some of his works had a more muted palette, but he was still focusing more on shapes, contrast, and composition. Another common theme of his was the construction of interior spaces, using a mirror to create a different space in middle ground and foreground. Several of Bonnard's works feature mirrors as a device to explore things from a different perspective.

Bonnard would ultimately go for extremely loose and expressive brushstrokes. However, his prints reveal another beautiful characteristic to his work, in which he flattened the space and was more selective with his color—two of the constraints of printmaking, which artists used to their advantage.

ÉDOUARD VUILLARD

Édouard Vuillard was one of the most versatile members of the Nabis and perhaps all of the post-impressionists. Like Bonnard, he also created many rich scenes of interiors and private moments. Vuillard was progressive, and he painted many scenes of working-class women. Some scholars see hints of feminist politics in these intimate, domestic scenes.

LANDSCAPE: WINDOW OVERLOOKING THE WOODS by Édouard Vuillard

The garden as an extension of the home was another popular theme with the Nabis. Vuillard stepped it up with *Landscape: Window Overlooking the Woods*, a significant masterpiece at more than 8 feet tall and 12 feet wide. It has everything, including the house, a small figure in the window, and the wider landscape, with the church and the town and the roads, creating an epic landscape from dozens of different green tones. It's a nearly monochromatic painting.

Vuillard was an incredibly versatile artist, and he pushed the Nabis to be about more than painting. He felt that they should also break down the walls between the fine and the decorative arts. Bonnard, Denis, and Vuillard made plates, wallpapers, stained glass, screens, and even lampshades during their time. The concept of tying together all the arts would explode into the art nouveau movement in the late 1890s, though the Nabis artists didn't end up becoming a significant part of it.

MAURICE DENIS

Maurice Denis was the largest believer in the Nabis and did the most to try and keep the group together. Like his colleagues, Denis was also interested in the ordinary moment, filled with magic. As with Bonnard and Vuillard, intimate moments, particularly involving women and children, were a major part of Denis's early work. Motherhood and child-rearing were subjects that rarely, if ever, made it into the grand scenes of the academy.

Denis was a spiritual and religious man, and he was also interested in the mystery and spirituality of the religious mind. Taking cues from Gauguin, he created swirling, colorful processions, grouping bright colors that evoke more of a mood than a believable sense of light, taking the traditional Catholic narratives and scenes and pushing them into a heightened and more mysterious territory. For instance, the simplicity and abstract nature of *The Orange Christ* are intriguing. Christ is reduced to one orange tone, the crowd below all done in blue. However, despite the lack of detail or light source, there is a clear sense of space and drama in the way he's arranged the composition, almost like a dream or an afterimage.

THE ORANGE CHRIST by Maurice Denis

Denis had a long career. Like many post-impressionists, he moved into different styles and ideas in later decades. He was happy to take traditional and neoclassical commissions, and his murals adorn several major buildings and churches in France, including the dome of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.

FÉLIX VALLOTTON

Born in Lausanne, a French-speaking city in Switzerland, Vallotton, more than anyone else in the group, exploited the richness of emotional ambiguity. He excelled at the Nabis' mission of taking intimate scenes of domestic life and using a wide range of artist's tools to take us into an intuitively felt experience.

Consider *The Red Room, Etretat: Madame Vallotton and Her Niece*, from 1899. There is a significant expanse of blank wall in deep red, with all the focus of the composition pushed off to the bottom left corner, balanced only by a bright red square created by the light in the other corner. A subtly bemused Madame Vallotton casually watches her niece going to town on a piece of paper. The paper is the one moment of chaos that breaks through from the highly structured and organized scene. This is the magic these artists were looking for. Pretty much anyone can look at this scene and smile to themselves.

THE RED ROOM by Félix Vallotton

Vallotton brought a hard-edged flatness to the scene that was generally rejected for rough and loose brushstrokes by his colleagues. He was also a master of showing an emotionally charged moment with no sense of closure. For example, the domestic drama in *The Red Room* (1898) seems to be unfolding around a man and an upset wife or mistress. He's leaving complex clues to dissect: He uses a mirror, another Nabis device, to show a reflection of a Vuillard painting about adultery. The bust sitting in front of the mirror is Vallotton himself. He was engaged to be married the next year, which makes this painting start to look more confessional.

Finally, with a composition split at a slight angle, only four other subtle marks have been made to indicate the figures of the scene in *Box Seats at the Theater, the Gentleman and the Lady*: an orange blob for the face on the left, a brown blob for the woman's face, a lighter brown blob for her hat, and a tiny hand in a white glove that crosses the barrier with its cast shadow—subtle, yet effective. The mystery in its minimalism keeps the viewer engaged psychologically and emotionally.

The Nabis lasted only from about 1888 to 1900. The Dreyfus affair was the start of their parting: Vuillard and Bonnard were pro-Dreyfus, and Denis and Sérusier were anti. By 1900, they all went their separate ways. Many of the members had fairly long careers and would live long enough to see themselves become fairly old-fashioned and traditional painters when art exploded with full-blown abstraction in the 1910s and 1920s.

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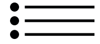

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HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC'S PARIS BY NIGHT

This lecture explores one of the most exciting and enigmatic artists of the post-impressionist era, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, who captured the newfound speed and beauty of Paris. He was drawn to grand spectacles of the Parisian nightlife, and he captured the excitement of modern urban life with a perspective that was entirely his own, taking advantage of the latest technology to disseminate his art far and wide. Toulouse-Lautrec posters were everywhere in the streets of Paris. His distinctive, modern style continues to fascinate 150 years later.

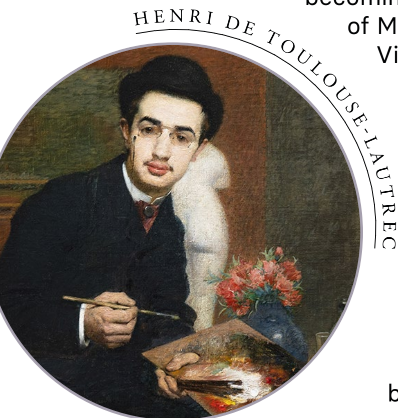
HENRI'S EARLIER LIFE

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was born November 24, 1864, as Count Henri-Marie-Raymond de Toulouse-Lautrec-Monfa. His parents were first cousins, and after generations of inbreeding, Henri was born with a number of health issues and genetic disorders. When he was 13, he broke one leg, and the next year, he broke his other leg. Both legs stopped growing altogether, but the rest of his body developed predictably. As an adult, he had short legs and was just under five feet tall but with an adult-size torso.

Henri was close to his mother, Adèle. A family friend with some connections helped Henri to convince Adèle to let him try his hand at art, as the friend had connections with Léon Bonnat. An academic painter, Bonnat was famous for his portraits and biblical scenes. Henri was a quick learner and learned much in the short time he worked with Bonnat.

Bonnat soon started a major new project, though, and didn't have time to tutor Henri anymore. Thus, Henri began to study with Fernand Cormon, another academic painter who specialized in imaginative scene paintings. Cormon did not think highly of impressionism, and he would say that the new art happening in Paris was dragging painting through the gutters. However, he also encouraged Henri to think for himself and to go out into those streets and find what inspired him.

The first thing Henri went out to paint was a prostitute. Allegedly, his friends put him up to it and paid for her services. Henri continued studying under Cormon for several years. However, he was also becoming good friends with the other young hipsters of Montmartre—artists such as Émile Bernard, Vincent van Gogh, and Louis Anquetin. Not only was he getting exposed to their bohemian Parisian lifestyle but he was also seeing them paint in ways Cormon wouldn't dream of showing him. Moreover, he was looking at paintings by Degas and Honoré Daumier: They were doing some experimental things in drawing and printmaking that would inspire him.


HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC

Henri was also getting into the hottest craze in Parisian society: Japanese wood-block prints. In particular, he loved *surimono.*

He was particularly interested in the way form was simplified into its most essential elements in these works. Some of them were made as part of a series, looking at the same subject but at different times of day, from different angles, or in different seasons, shown side by side to see the differences. A series could be thematically linked, tell a story, or simply complement the other prints in interesting ways. Henri, like so many of the post-impressionists, was significantly inspired by Japanese artists, both aesthetically and philosophically.

Henri was now ready to strike out on his own, but he was still living with his mom. Montmartre was a bohemian artist's mecca, full of artistic types who lived by their own rules. Moreover, the district was famous for its cheap wine and nightlife. Thus, Henri eventually moved in with friends there.

His new roommates took him around to all the bars, clubs, parties, and cabarets. He was enamored by the scene and loved capturing the excitement of the nightlife. By the age of 25, he was a popular fixture in the neighborhood's social scene. He was continuously painting and drawing during this time. By the late 1880s, his artwork started getting noticed by curators and appearing in some exhibitions. He started getting asked to do all kinds of work. He quickly accepted a commission from a fairly new cabaret that had all of Paris talking: the Moulin Rouge.

LITHOGRAPHY, POSTERS, AND THE MOULIN ROUGE

Part café, part nightclub, the Moulin Rouge was a symbol of everything that was modern, exciting, and new about Paris. Henri's poster for the Moulin Rouge shot him to fame, and it was a hit for the cabaret as well. The focus of the poster was a celebrity—a dancer named La Goulue.

This period was the beginning of the modern celebrity era. Before the late 19th century, if you lived in a city like Paris, there would be no way to recognize someone you didn't know personally. However, with the advent of photography and printmaking, there were actresses and singers and dancers whose images were suddenly all over town. In newspapers and magazines and on posters, people saw the rise of the celebrity, along with the rise of the individual, as someone who was somehow separate or detached from society.

MOULIN ROUGE: LA GOULUE by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

Moreover, the new and modern industrialized lithography process allowed artists to have their work reproduced hundreds or thousands of times and in color. Lithography involves drawing with a greasy crayon or other oily medium onto a stone plate and using water and ink in such a way that the ink only grabs on to the drawing. It's the only part that prints or transfers onto the paper. Thus, you could draw one layer and print it; do another stone for another layer in a different color, line it up on the first layer, and print that; and so on. By the post-impressionist era, large steam-powered presses were capable of industrializing the process to print larger, faster, and in significant numbers. Paris became absolutely covered with posters by the late 19th century, as every business now wanted to create colorful posters to promote their events and products.

On Henri's Moulin Rouge poster, the celebrity at the center, Louise Weber, aka La Goulue, was performing the cancan and blatantly flashing the viewer. The crowd was reduced to a silhouette in the background: bold, flat, and graphic, with only the mixture of hats on the audience hinting at the mixing of cultures and status here. This poster looked new and fresh at the time. The yellow lights in the background advertised that the cabaret had new electric lights. Moreover, Henri used all bold lettering in capitals. He was drawing on the Japanese influence of flattening space and using a limited palette, with cloisonnism giving outlines and new colors making it vibrant.

This poster was 6.5 feet tall and 4 feet wide. Looking up at it on a pole, you would also be looking up her skirt. The chance to see the flash of a lady's unmentionables was all part of the risqué excitement that drew people into the Moulin Rouge. Henri's posters were almost as popular as the cabaret. People were excited about celebrities.

HENRI'S ARTISTIC EVOLUTIONS

Posters had such a quick turnaround that they encouraged artistic innovation in a way that painting didn't. You could try new things because they were fast, they were cheap, and there was a constant demand for more. They were quickly spread to a wide audience, meaning you also got a nearly immediate reaction. You could also do all sorts of things to attract the eye, such as use tiny dots of color to make them shimmer. The salons happened only once a year and only a small fraction of the population went to them, but posters were for everyone.

Henri would go on to produce many more popular posters. They were masterfully simplified, emphasizing the shape and silhouette and flattening almost everything else—again emulating Japanese prints. He was also feeding a burgeoning market, where collectors were building large print collections of limited-edition artist-made prints. People started getting custom print cabinets installed in their homes to show off their new art.

Moreover, Henri was interested in caricature: the simplification and exaggeration of the face or the body to accentuate a likeness. He was extremely inspired by it and studied the way Degas did it because he was painting specific celebrities that he wanted people to recognize. Caricature was the best and clearest way to communicate that in a quick manner. This helped bridge the gap between high art and low art. For example, in a poster for the Divan Japonais, three celebrities—dancers Jane Avril and Yvette Guilbert and writer Édouard Dujardin—are shown. Yvette's head is cut off by the poster, but she's recognizable as caricature because of her exaggerated thin frame and iconic black gloves.

DIVAN JAPONAIS by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

Henri also made many paintings while hanging out inside night spots in Montmartre that captured the immediacy of the moment in a way that no other artist seemed to convey. These paintings show a mature and complex painting style, from the up-close and intimate compositions that bring you right into the scene to the carefully balanced figures and

their interlocking silhouettes. There is occasional frenzied and active mark-making and a harmonious color palette that is dark and muted but also punctuated by moments of bright, saturated color.

One of his most famous works is simply called *At the Moulin Rouge*. It is said that you can spot a seam on the right side of it where apparently he decided, three years later, that it was missing a hauntingly beautiful green-faced dancer. That is what makes this painting so iconic. The composition—with an angled bar in the foreground, the mirrored walls in the background, and the way the faces and features of the figures are lit up—helps Henri create a visceral sense of mood in a way that others who tried to capture the Paris nightlife couldn't.

HENRI'S LEGACY

Henri loved throwing himself into a controversy. In 1892, he made a colorful poster to promote the sensational novel *Queen of Joy*, which is all about a young femme fatale who seduces an elderly banker, based on the Baron de Rothschild. He also befriended and vocally supported Oscar Wilde when he was put on trial for indecency.

THE QUEEN OF JOY by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

Moreover, there was his association with brothels. In fact, Henri received a commission to paint a portrait series of brothel workers from a publisher of erotic books and posters. Thus, he moved into the brothel and lived with the women he'd been hired to draw and paint. Apparently, he got to know the women well—not only as clients but also as friends.

These paintings ended up being quite sentimental, mostly intimate portraits of the women in their everyday lives. It was kind of bold and respectfully ironic of Henri to not treat these courtesans as objects to ogle

but as people. He went a long way and risked quite a bit of money to humanize sex workers and show them with empathy and sentimentality rather than the expected male gaze. He also memorialized their individuality and their quirks.

During this time, he caught syphilis. He became increasingly paranoid, he was hallucinating, and his drinking was worse than ever. Thus, his mother had him committed to a mental hospital. After about six months, Henri had had enough. Once he was released, he was still depressed, drinking, and ill both physically and emotionally.

His aristocratic family was embarrassed and offended by his lifestyle and his artwork. His father disinherited him, and his uncle burned several of his paintings. Those who hadn't rejected him were worried sick about him. Thus, they hired a family friend to keep an eye on him. Henri was still trying to paint and draw, but not often, and his works during this time became increasingly moody. In 1901, he had a stroke and died shortly after at the age of 36.

Even in his short life, he made 5,000 drawings and sketches. He made more than 900 paintings and 363 lithographs. He also made theater cards, menus, invitations, and other graphic designs. Surprisingly, only 30 of his lithographs were posters. It was these posters that were mass-produced and seen all around Paris, and they continue to be reproduced on an even larger scale today. In Henri Toulouse-Lautrec's short career, he helped elevate advertising to high art.

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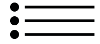

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HOW PHOTOGRAPHY IS TRANSFORMING ART

The second half of the 19th century saw the camera become a part of the everyday world that could capture people, places, and events with stunning realism for the first time in history. It liberated a generation of artists to explore and depict the world in new and exciting ways that went beyond observable reality. It also became an incredibly useful tool to help them understand and refine their own paintings. The post-impressionists were one of the first generations to embrace the camera and incorporate it into their work. This lecture will look more broadly at how the camera has long influenced art and where you can start to see modern photography's hand in the work of the post-impressionists.

THE CAMERA OBSCURA

Before modern photography began to appear in the mid-19th century, there was a simpler device in use for centuries: the camera obscura. *Camera obscura* is Latin for "dark chamber." If you have a teeny hole in a darkened room or box that allows just enough light in and you get the right distance away from the opening or aperture, the light will be concentrated in such a way as to show a real-time moving image on the opposite wall, albeit upside-down.

As technology progressed, the use of a glass lens over the opening allowed artists to use a wider aperture, take in more light, and focus the image. A camera obscura was more like a projector. The subject would be projected through the aperture onto a surface, such as canvas or paper, so that the artists could trace its outlines. Most often, the camera obscura was merely a time-saving device.

JOSEPH NICÉPHORE NIÉPCE

Various other devices followed over the years as aids to artists in composing their paintings, such as the camera lucida, which uses mirrors to show an artist what's in front of him while he looks down at his drawing surface, and the pantograph, a mechanical arm that can copy your movements. However, these devices were only aids in the creation of art. They couldn't create permanent images by themselves. All of that changed in Paris in the 1820s, though, with the inventor Joseph-Nicéphore Niépce.

EVOLUTION OF THE CAMERA

Niépce had become obsessed with figuring out how you could save the image coming from a camera obscura without having to draw or paint it. He began experimenting with light-sensitive materials that would react to the image being created. He began with silver chloride, smearing it on pieces of paper or bleached white leather and then exposing them to light. An image would form, but it would be dark where it should be light, and vice versa. In other words, it was the

negative he was creating. The moment he removed the plate from the camera obscura and brought it into the light, the entire image would darken over and be ruined.

Asphalt—or, more specifically, bitumen of Judea—is what next grabbed his attention because it hardens when it's exposed to sunlight. After years of experimenting, he found that thinning the bitumen, mixing it with lavender oil, and then smearing it onto pewter plates would, when exposed to a camera obscura image, burn the image into the plate permanently. However, it needed at least eight hours, if not several days, to get sufficient light exposure to make a clear image. However, Niépce did it and, in the process, created the first photographs.

However, he didn't have the time or the energy left to pursue and refine this invention. Thus, he found an artist, a well-known panorama painter named Louis Daguerre, to carry on his work. Daguerre experimented further with light-sensitive materials and found that using a copper plate with a silver coating exposed to iodine fumes would be light-sensitive like the asphalt pewter plates but develop the image faster. Depending on the amount of light, it would now take only hours to capture an image on the plate.

Then, Daguerre discovered that even after short exposures—seconds to minutes—an image was forming on the plate, almost invisibly. He now looked to see if some other chemical combination would help develop that faint image. Eventually, he found that if he burned mercury and let the plate breathe in the fumes for a few minutes, the image would start to appear like magic. Then, he had to wash off the unexposed silver to keep only the parts the light had touched and burned onto the surface of the plate. Thus, he developed a hot salt solution and washed off the unexposed parts. Finally, he could now see a moment of real life captured like never seen before—beautiful and clear, with details so lifelike it blew people's minds.

This finely coated plate was still incredibly fragile, and even the air could mess up the surface. Thus, he made a little sealed glass case to protect it from the elements, and that's a daguerreotype. This invention became significant. The French government bought the rights to this process and gave it away as a cultural good to any country that wanted to make daguerreotypes (except the British, who had to pay). In

1839, the first selfie was taken by the American photographer Robert Cornelius running in front of his camera after setting it up. By the 1840s, widespread use of photography began to occur worldwide.

EVOLUTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND ART

Up until this point in history, the only way to record something visually was to paint or draw it. Thus, for the longest time, artists were employed not only to create grand masterpieces but also to do the more everyday work of painting individual and family portraits, houses, businesses, and pets. As a result, most artists were treated more like craftsmen, hired to do a specific job to the customer's specifications. Most of their ideas, concepts, and theories were only able to be expressed covertly or as subtext behind the subjects they were explicitly hired to paint. If something looked too new, it would be rejected.

However, as daguerreotypes spread, the traditional, workaday portrait and scene painters became redundant. By the 1850s, mobile photo studios were popping up all over Europe. Photographers started showing up at these traveling fairs and even setting up their own studios in town. Now, portraits could be taken accurately, cheaply, and quickly, and even the middle class could afford them. Soon, the wealthy started to realize how cheaply photographs could be made and copied, and they began to have a new appreciation for painting as an even more rare and valuable form of portraiture. Those portrait artists that remained in business were now being prized for their ability to do something different from an ordinary photograph.

This is where you start to see the photograph's effect on the psyche of artists. With photography, there was no longer a need for an artist to record reality. From here on, artists started to shed the burden of capturing observable reality and focus instead on their own self-expression. How an artist felt was being acknowledged in the creative process. The impressionists, the ones who grew up with photography, were able to seize upon new avant-garde painting techniques. They would focus on depicting reality in all the ways the camera couldn't. They made their art what photography wasn't: way lighter, way more colorful, way more saturated, with more brushstrokes, more energy, more motion. The impressionists were proving that the artists hadn't been made redundant by photography. On the contrary, they were showing how spectacular and beautiful the artist's perspective could truly be.

Artists were also inspired by photography, particularly when it came to composition.

Traditionally, painters thought about composition and perspective in a standard way. If you wanted to paint a fancy building, you would have it centered and facing you squarely. Our brains are wired to present things to us in the most straightforward way possible, with the subject directly in the middle of our vision. This makes total sense in a world in which we want the clearest information possible. However, nailing down a perspective and a vantage point that is engaging, creative, and dynamic is a bit different. The camera simplifies this task because it takes a slice of the world from any angle you like, and then it flattens and compresses the world, providing everything from that vantage point into one handy perspective.

People started putting cameras where you would never set up an easel, capturing perspectives that once were only momentarily glimpsed. Photographs began to teach people more about composition, about angles, and about space that isn't didactic so much as it is felt—composing things by experience and emotion rather than factual analysis.

Historically, the more ubiquitous photography became, the more variety artists used to capture a scene. As a result, photography became an artistic tool. By the time of the post-impressionists, artists had not only been liberated from the tyranny of realism but were also increasingly embracing photographs as a means of doing their work. Now, photography could take an interesting composition or subject, freeze it at a moment in time, and allow the artist to explore it.

ÉDOUARD VUILLARD

Recall Édouard Vuillard, a member of the Nabis group. He was an enthusiastic photographer. Starting with a trusty Kodak camera in 1895, he made several thousand photos as studies for his paintings. Thus, his work provides some excellent examples of how photography influenced the post-impressionist style. Working from photographs can help create accuracy in form and shadow that doesn't come naturally when working from life. Thus, there is something that feels photographic about Vuillard's paintings.

The camera has its own logic of space. It's a bit flatter and more focused and frozen than we perceive with our own eyes. By using the photo to map out the correct proportions and perspectives, Vuillard had the chance to cut loose within those parameters. For example, in *Misia at the Piano*, his brush is loose, and his mark is expressive. The wallpaper that dominates this painting is sloppy and crooked, yet the piano is in perfect perspective, with the perfect color reflecting on the top.

Another thing photographs do is freeze light. How is that helpful? If you were sitting in a room painting a scene, the light and the shadows would be entirely different by the time you got only one of the chairs painted in. The light will look different day to day and even more so as weeks and months lead into different seasons. The only way you can record it all at once in an instant is with a photograph. Thus, Vuillard was also using that frozen and consistent light. Despite his loose and fuzzy brush marks, he was paying close attention to the values and colors that create convincing lights and shadows. Like the other artists of the Nabis, he could also use photography to help him capture charming, intimate scenes of everyday human life, exactly frozen in time.

PHOTOGRAPHY AS AN ART

Many post-impressionists, such as Maurice Denis and Pierre Bonnard, were also prolific photographers. Many scholars have found clear parallels between their experiments in the medium and their artistic works. Félix Vallotton, too, used photographs as studies as a basis for some of his paintings, many of which present scenes from unusual viewpoints.

At the same time, the rise of photography as a potential art form unto itself occurred. This, too, was controversial. Although impressionists and their successors were doing what they could to distinguish themselves from the photography craze, there were some virtual amateurs who were crossing the boundary and declaring the photograph an artwork on its own.

Henry Peach Robinson, for example, was an early English photographer who pioneered new techniques to create photomontages—elaborately staged scenes that told stories and expressed feelings and emotions. The camera did not require years of training in technique to use, meaning even amateurs could create highly aesthetic works. Julia Margaret Cameron only began experimenting with a camera at 48

JULIA MARGARET CAMERON

but had an extraordinary late career pioneering photography as an art form. She experimented with soft focus and close-ups, as well as unusual angles and creative compositions, and showed the world how creative portrait photography could be.

The influx of amateur photographers into the fine art world sparked a furious debate over whether photographers could be considered artists that, in some ways, still lingers. Regardless, the camera spawned various artistic revolutions. Rapid advancements in camera technology continued. From the 1870s to the 1910s, cameras went from being rare luxury items to part of everyday life. Soon, motion photography and multiple exposures were even allowing movement and multiple points in time to be captured in a single image, giving photographers more control over time in a way that painters always had.

All of this serves as a critical backdrop to understanding the post-impressionists. They had come into the world inheriting the freedom from copying nature created by the camera and pioneered by the impressionists. Yet, at the same time, they were being profoundly influenced by the ways in which a camera could capture the world. Indeed, they were using them as tools to create their art and sometimes even as art itself.

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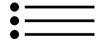

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THE SINGULAR TALENT, VINCENT VAN GOGH

There is a reason Vincent van Gogh is one of the most famous artists of all time. He was uniquely gifted and stands out even among the exceptionally talented group of post-impressionists. He had a different upbringing, different influences, different struggles, and, above all, a different type of mind. He was a perpetual outsider who craved love and friendship and community. However, he was rejected by everyone he didn't reject first. This lecture will explore some of the influences that shaped Vincent growing up, as well as some of his lesser-known works, which provide important clues to his development as an artist.

VINCENT'S EARLIER LIFE

Born in Zundert, the Netherlands, in 1853, Vincent van Gogh was the second Vincent born to the family; the first had died in childbirth a year before. His mother was a talented amateur artist, and she would frequently take her children out on walks to sketch and paint from nature. From the beginning, Vincent seemed to have an innate understanding of form, shape, light and shadow, and movement. Remarkably, he didn't receive much more training than this.

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST'S MOTHER by Vincent van Gogh

Financial pressure took Vincent out of school early and sent him into the workforce at the age of 16. His uncle, also named Vincent, had a great career at Goupil & Co. in The Hague, the largest art dealer in Europe. This is when Vincent was introduced to the work of many of the masters. He was good at his job, got promoted, and was sent to London. He had a knack for language and fluently spoke four. Thus, within six months of arriving in London, he was reading Dickens in English. It looked as if Vincent's career was off to a solid start.

However, Vincent's troubled mind began brewing. As we know today, many mental illnesses start manifesting in people in their late teens to mid-twenties. Vincent seems to have followed this pattern. There was a significant gap in his understanding of social norms and how to have comfortable and calm conversations. Vincent would argue with anyone, and he was extremely opinionated and stubborn. Most people couldn't stand to be around him. He also had terrible hygiene and became an alcoholic.

While in London, Vincent started collecting prints and was inspired particularly by the works of artists, such as Gustave Doré, who were illustrating dystopian scenes of Dickensian London in the Victorian era. He was deeply moved and felt a calling to these people and increasingly resentful of the system that oppressed them. Like all the

post-impressionists, Vincent was watching incredible change in the world, right before his eyes. Yet at the same time, incredible poverty and suffering were the side effects of all this change.

Along with the poor, he was also preoccupied with Eugénie, the daughter of his landlady. He asked to marry her, but she was engaged to someone else. He became such a pest that they told him to move out. He was deeply stung at the rejection, and this became a pivotal moment in Vincent's life. He started arguing with his employers, telling customers not to buy certain artworks, and railing against the company for being too commercial. He was eventually fired at the age of 23.

VINCENT VAN GOGH

He completely refocused his life. He wanted to do something meaningful and important, and he wanted to help people. He got into religion and enrolled at a Methodist seminary. However, he refused to take the final exam because it was in Latin, which he said poor people don't speak. He was denied ordination at several churches due to his stubbornness about Latin and various other rules he didn't want to follow. Determined to preach, he went as a missionary to an impoverished coal mining area in the south of Belgium in 1879. There, he gave up his home to a woman who was desperate and moved into a dirty miner's shack. He felt that his suffering relieved others of theirs. The church was horrified when they found out how he was living and rejected his contract. He felt completely destitute and depressed. Religion was too hypocritical for him if he couldn't be honest as a preacher.

He moved back to the Netherlands to live with his parents. He was still drawing as a hobby, though, and even in these early works, you can start to see sparks of who he would soon become. With no prospects and longing for companionship, he fell in love with his cousin Kee, who was visiting the van Goghs after losing her husband. Within days, he proposed to her. She fled back to Amsterdam. Vincent pursued her to her family's house there. According to him: "I put my hand in [a] lamp and said, 'Let me see her for as long as I can keep my hand in the flame.'" However, they turned off the lamp and kicked him out. He left and never returned.

BECOMING AN ARTIST

At 27 years old, with no formal training, Vincent decided there was only one way he could truly be free: He would become an artist. He directed all his focus and passion toward this goal. Of course, he needed to somehow support himself. This is where his little brother Theo came in. Theo had followed his older brother and uncle's footsteps and was doing well at Goupil & Co. If Theo lived simply and cut costs, he could send his brother enough each month to live off of. Theo would turn out to be the most important person in Vincent's life, supporting him in various ways and eventually being the keeper and promoter of his art.

Vincent went back to The Hague, and he started painting. He lived simply and kept his expenses low, besides art supplies. His work improved quickly. He had a great eye, and he gave himself a rigorous and focused education, drawing every day from life. While in The Hague, he received his first commission, from his uncle, to do drawings of different views of the city. Here, he discovered intriguing compositions. In *Nursery on Schenkweg*, you can start to see a wide variety of mark-making that gives the surface an uncanny texture and lifelike resemblance.

When Vincent wasn't being paid, he wanted to depict the ordinary people around the city: the laborers, the poor, and the peasants. He made sure to draw sharp attention to the backbreaking labor. Grandiose titles such as *At Eternity's Gate* remind you that his original conviction was religious, and here, he was looking for the divine in his artwork. The close-cropped composition forces the man's head back down within frame, giving a claustrophobic and trapped feel. Vincent empathized heavily with this feeling, although his was from mental anguish. The woman, while she has a young face, at first glance appears to be an elderly woman in a wheelchair. It's a wheelbarrow, but perhaps Vincent was emphasizing the premature aging this kind of labor will do to a person.

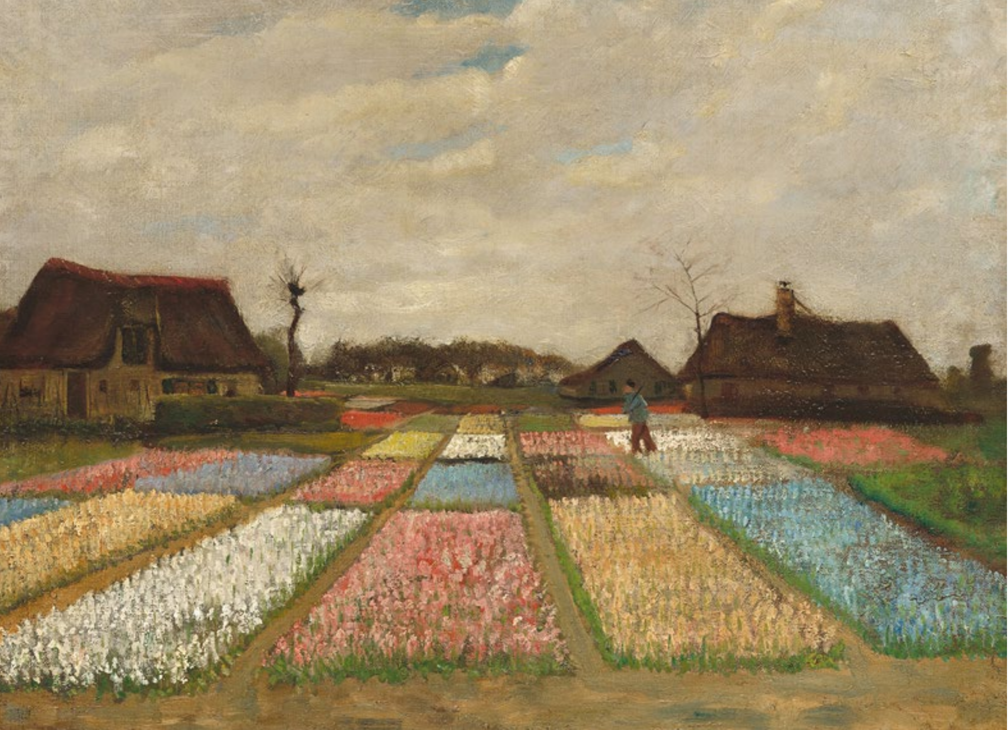
He kept returning to the hunched-over figure, crying, in pain, as seen in *Weeping Woman*. It's less important that we know who this woman is than that we can empathize with her suffering. It's an accomplished drawing even by a more traditional academic standard—beautiful contrast, excellent depiction of space, great use of light and shadow. He created a dynamic form propping up the slumping torso. Perhaps not as smooth or blended as a more traditional drawing, his linework broke through as his characteristic style.

WEEPING WOMAN by Vincent van Gogh

Sad women like these seem to be exactly the type of girl Vincent was into. While in The Hague, he fell in love with Clasina Hoornik, a seamstress who struggled with alcoholism and supplemented her income with sex work. She had a five-year-old daughter and was pregnant with another man's baby. Vincent felt sorry for her and wanted to save her. Thus, he took her in as his companion mistress and model. Then, he got gonorrhea and was hospitalized, and Clasina went back to work on the streets. Vincent's family was horrified and scandalized when they found out. His father cut off his allowance, and Theo threatened to cut off the money he was sending as well until he broke it off with Clasina. He complied and left town, and by 1883, he was back living with his parents, who were now in Nuenen, a rural area of the Netherlands. He stayed there for three years.

VINCENT'S ARTISTIC PROGRESSION

It was around that time that he started to progress quickly in his art, and he started working in watercolor and oil. *Flower Beds in Holland* (1883), from before he went to Paris, is about as colorful as Vincent got. It has a few redeeming qualities, but compared to where he would be a short few years from then, it is quite astonishing. It's like he heard a rumor of impressionism and made a hesitant and weak-willed attempt.



FLOWER BEDS IN HOLLAND by Vincent van Gogh

View from Montmartre (1886) is another piece you might never have guessed is Vincent, but you can see some important aspects of his style that he was still developing and working out. This painting has a strong emphasis of atmospheric perspective, classically rendered as the buildings get smaller, less in focus, and lower contrast. The city begins to take on the color of the sky as it goes back in space. The bottom of the canvas features more detail, stronger contrast, and larger forms—all as one would expect with traditional perspective painting.

This approach is completely at odds with the style he is known for. It's almost completely desaturated; the colors look dull and natural, as they would on a cold gray day such as this. There is also a density and level of detail to the city that is rarely seen from Vincent. Despite its looseness, he seemed to be committed to painting every single building he could see. Later, he would abandon such detail as he traded

it for simplification of form and exaggeration of color and mark. The simplification of the space would eventually allow him greater freedom to innovate and paint from his intuition.

THE POTATO EATERS

In 1885, Vincent started on his most ambitious painting to date, *The Potato Eaters*. He had grand intentions and ambitions for it. He wanted Theo to enter it into the Salon in Paris. He made dozens of drawings and lithograph studies and paintings of the individual portraits, trying to understand his subject.

With his final version in oil, it seems he wanted to hearken back to the classic and important paintings of the past and emphasize the darkness like Rembrandt and the other Dutch masters did. He used an extremely limited color palette. Although it does have bits of blue and green in certain areas, it is primarily a painting in brown and gray and black. There is a tiny and weak light source in the lamp. He wanted to show the honesty of the labor of these people, eating the potatoes that they planted and dug out of the ground with those same bare hands. They are rough and knotted, their faces a bit coarse and weathered. He wanted them to look like they, too, came from the dirt—that a lifetime of this work had turned their bodies into potatoes.

He was also probably creating a scene in which he felt like he belonged. He identified with these folks: He wanted to be a peasant himself, and although not official, he had basically taken a vow of poverty. He viewed himself as an outcast. This was a family he felt some kind of kinship with.

There are many fascinating things about this painting. First, the people are not quite realistically proportioned. Without the formal training, it's likely Vincent struggled to keep things proportional. It's also possible he was exaggerating for effect. The space is also quite awkward; it doesn't look like things fit within the space well or that they fit under the table. Moreover, on the person pouring the oil-black coffee, the arm closest to the viewer is about twice as long as the arm pouring the coffee. Perhaps it was the foreshortening that was throwing him off, but compositionally, it fits into the space quite well and makes sense that way.

Vincent sent this painting to Theo, and Theo stated that it fit better with the new impressionists to some degree. Theo had a point. At the time, the painting was sort of stuck between the two different art worlds, and no one else knew what to make of it. Vincent had, of course, heard of impressionism, but he didn't get it yet. Remember, nearly all the impressionists and post-impressionists came from France. Even though he was only 250 miles from Paris in Nuenen, it was like a totally different world.

This was also the time when his father passed away. Vincent painted a loving tribute to his father's faith by painting his Bible. He also included Émile Zola's book *La joie de vivre* next to the Bible, perhaps as a way to express his own beliefs and values sitting next to his father's. This would prove to be the major turning point in Vincent's career. He seemed to gain the confidence to become his own man. As he moved to Paris, with all the new skills he'd been learning and a more independent outlook on life, he was ready to transform into the artist you know today.

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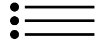

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VAN GOGH'S GENIUS AND TRAGEDY

Once Vincent arrived in Paris, he began to devour all the new art buzzing around him: impressionism, divisionism, symbolism, and Japanese prints. He was soon studying with Toulouse-Lautrec and Pissarro. He also hung around at Académie Julian with the likes of Bernard, Bonnard, Vuillard, and others. As you will learn in this lecture, within less than a year in Paris, his work was completely transformed. His new paintings were exploding and radiating with color, light, and movement. The strong emotional content was still there, but it was geared toward a brighter, more colorful, and broader range of emotions. They were also more nuanced and sophisticated; one could read multiple emotions and concepts playing out simultaneously.

VINCENT IN PARIS

Vincent went from painting works such as *The Potato Eaters*, where the mood is dark and depressing, to works such as the *Portrait of Père Tanguy* only two years later. Not only are the color and style radically different but also the subject and composition are too. The subject is Julien Tanguy, who ran a popular art supply store in Montmartre and would also sell some of the local artists' work there. He was one of the first to put Vincent's work up for sale.

How did this transformation happen so quickly? Although Vincent's new paintings retained many similar qualities, they were now engaging the color-processing part of his brain that, for the most part, had been lying dormant up to now. Learning a bit of pointillism or divisionism and the color theory behind it was all he needed to integrate beautiful, shimmering new color combinations. Also, now, he had access to those new saturated artificial paint colors that Julien Tanguy carried in his store. Moreover, he'd always had a strong line quality in his work. He preferred to break up his surfaces into a smaller series of marks rather than traditional blending or mixing.

Vincent quickly read all the books Seurat had been reading and incorporating into his work. He also started working directly with Pissarro, who was in the process of giving up his use of neutral earth tones and soft blending in exchange for vibrant colors and energetic strokes.

Vincent had a brilliant mind. He craved new information and new ideas and techniques. He also had the type of mind that was able to take in these vast amounts of information, synthesize it, and then create brand-new ideas from it. He was interested in everything. There was no subject matter he wouldn't paint; there was no technique he wouldn't experiment with. Although Seurat and Cézanne were brilliant, they had a more laser-like focus on particular ideas and subjects. Vincent, however, became an expert at all of them. Perhaps this is why, among all the incredibly talented post-impressionists, it's only Vincent who gets called a genius.

It's a myth that his genius wasn't recognized in his lifetime. It's true he sold only one painting in his life. However, the other artists in Paris, the young post-impressionists, were instantly enamored with his work and could see that he was in a league of his own. Their work would be influenced by him.

VINCENT'S INSPIRATION

Van Gogh was inspired by many painters from a variety of movements. He loved looking at Frans Hals, Goya, Velázquez, and Delacroix because they all had something in common with him: They painted fast. That was the only way Vincent knew how to paint. Perhaps most of all, though, he fell in love with Japanese art. He began copying prints straight by literally tracing them at first. Then, he started painting them into the backgrounds of many of his portraits. He also began adopting the compositional techniques he was seeing: strong diagonals, sudden cropping, and bright, flat colors.

You can see in *Terrace and Observation Deck at the Moulin de Blute-Fin, Montmartre*, for example, that his compositional skills had become much more dynamic. Japanese prints were teaching him about the effect of using stronger angles and unexpected cropping on an image. This was a slice cut from life, implying the rest of the world was continuing on beyond the frame. Letting some strong and important lines go right off the canvas with no resolution may have left Vincent feeling like he was teetering off the edge of that lookout, about to fall. It's precisely that feeling that makes this a dynamic image.

TERRACE AND OBSERVATION DECK AT THE MOULIN DE BLUTE-FIN, MONTMARTRE by Vincent van Gogh

When you combine these compositional dynamics with his newfound use of color, his whole style and approach start coming together quickly. Once he had settled into this new format, he produced literally thousands of paintings and drawings over the next five years.

It's amazing that Vincent had the shortest career of any major post-impressionist—barely eight years between his first oil painting and his last—and yet seemed to go faster and farther than any of his contemporaries.

Unfortunately, artistic inspiration was not the only thing he found in Paris. He was also introduced to absinthe, which was the last thing he needed with his fragile mental health. He was still dealing with terrible bouts of depression, anxiety, and paranoia. Despite his excitement and growth, he was dealing with a lifetime of feeling like a failure. He knew he was good, though, and he believed in his work and was proud of it. However, the rejection from the art world and a lack of any commercial success caused him a significant amount of doubt, stress, and depression. It was validation he wanted; it was confirmation that he wasn't crazy and that his paintings were good; it was approval and love that he was after.

VINCENT'S DECLINE

It didn't take long until Vincent became sick of Paris. He was arguing with Theo all the time, and he was not getting along with the other artists. From the moment he was introduced to Japanese prints, he had become obsessed and wanted to move to Japan. He had heard that down south in Provence, the light was beautiful like in Japan. He also heard that the town of Arles was famous for beautiful women. Thus, he decided to move there. For a brief time, Vincent was in heaven. This was just like the Japan in his imagination.

He took up residence in Arles, in what is today known as the Yellow House, and painted a now-famous scene of his bedroom there. He painted it to be much brighter and more colorful in *The Bedroom* than it would have been in real life. He was always thinking about different color palettes and combinations. He carried a box of yarn of different colors around with him so that he could intertwine different colors to study them and plan his next paintings.

However, despite the inspiring beauty and comfortable setup around him, he still had little money, ate little, and felt isolated. This started to take a toll on his declining mental health. He would often go days without speaking to anyone except to order coffee or a meal. His letters

reveal what most psychiatrists have since diagnosed as likely bipolar disorder, with occasional schizophrenic delusions. He might have also suffered from epilepsy, syphilis, and/or borderline personality disorder.

He would often eat his own paint. Whether he did this intentionally to poison himself or whether he enjoyed it is hard to tell. He'd often put the brush in his mouth after each stroke. In the 19th century, oil paints contained much more lead and other heavy metals such as cadmium and mercury. Thus, this would have only compounded his health problems. Moreover, he frequented the local brothel. Obviously, there wasn't much in the way of protection or STD education in those days.

He painted the famous *The Night Café* during this time, a fascinating painting that vacillates from bright and cheerful to dark and depressing. There are some pretty sad figures hunched around the room, likely alcoholics, while the owner, Ginoux, stands in the middle in white.

THE NIGHT CAFÉ by Vincent van Gogh

Vincent perhaps implies he's one of the sad figures in this scene, too, because he later gave this painting to Ginoux to help settle the bill he ran up there.

Vincent clearly longed for connection. One of the artists he liked at this time was Paul Gauguin, and so he invited him to come to Arles and move in. Theo thought it could be good for his brother and that Paul could keep an eye on him. Thus, they worked out a deal where Gauguin would send a painting to Theo each month and Theo would pay his expenses. Vincent was stoked. In defiance of his declining mental state, he was making bright, bold, and hopeful gestures. This is when he started painting his iconic yellow-on-yellow sunflowers. Never one to be overly optimistic, he painted dead and dying flowers. They are more interesting visually, with more of a variety of lines and angles as the plants shrivel and dry.

Paul and Vincent gave their mini commune a go. However, they quickly started getting on each other's nerves. After about two months, Gauguin decided that as soon as he sold a few paintings, he was out. The fights had escalated to a point where Vincent pulled a blade on Gauguin. Vincent ended up cutting off part of his own ear and delivering it to a maid working at the brothel down the street.

This is quite revealing about Vincent's mental state, but it doesn't define him. It was this wild act of self-mutilation, and gifting the ear to an unsuspecting victim, that would land him in jail and eventually committed to the hospital, where he was diagnosed with mania and delirium. He was sanest when he was painting. Painting is a mentally demanding activity, especially the way Vincent painted. He couldn't paint when he was having seizures or paranoid schizophrenic episodes, which could last for up to two weeks. These were awful and miserable spells that he suffered through.

VINCENT'S IMPROVEMENT

Vincent was in and out of the hospital at Arles for the next five months. He was at his lowest. When he did return home for good in early 1889, the people of Arles were so sick of the "redheaded madman" that they had signed a petition to throw him out of town. However, there were some in town who stuck with Vincent even at these low moments. One

was the postman Joseph Roulin. Vincent was appreciative, and Roulin's gift for his friendship was his portrait, now one of the most famous in art history.

Soon, however, it was pretty clear things were unsustainable for him in Arles. With the help of Theo, he volunteered to go the smaller and far nicer Monastery Saint-Paul de Mausole, in Saint-Rémy near Arles. This place was better set up to deal with mental illness and believed in the healing power of nature, art, and music. Theo got his brother special permission for him to go out and paint and made sure he got wine with his meals.

The arrangement at Saint-Rémy seemed to be exactly what Vincent needed. He was one of the most stable people in the asylum. He painted some of his best and most famous works there, including *The Starry Night*, and dozens of other similar landscapes looking out his window. Gauguin had been pushing Vincent to work more from his imagination while in Arles, which he'd resisted. However, while he was locked up in the monastery, it became a necessity. He didn't want bars in every landscape; thus, he learned to create scenes that weren't strictly from observation. He finished 150 paintings while in Saint-Rémy.

Vincent continued painting the disenfranchised, the laborers, the peasants, and the prisoners, though. The painting *Prisoners Exercising* is particularly haunting, in this odd scene of incarceration and humiliation. As is his nature, Vincent gave them an angelic glowing light in an attempt to elevate them from their lowly status. It's also at this time that he painted *Irises*. Although he didn't initially consider it one of his more important works, Theo loved it and submitted it to be shown at the Salon des Indépendants.

By early 1890, things were starting to break for Vincent. More people were seeing his work and were amazed by it. A reviewer in a top French cultural journal called him a genius. He was invited to exhibit at an influential avant-garde exhibition in Brussels. At the Salon des Indépendants that year, Monet said Vincent's work was the best in the show. With 150 new paintings in his portfolio, Vincent checked out of the monastery, and Theo organized for him to go to Auvers-sur-Oise, a village on the outskirts of Paris. Theo lined up a doctor there to look after Vincent named Paul-Ferdinand Gachet, with whom Vincent became friends. Dr. Gachet was an art lover and aspiring artist himself. He would copy Vincent's paintings to learn.

THE RED VINEYARD by Vincent van Gogh

END OF LIFE

Things were continuing to look hopeful. Vincent learned that after 700 paintings, he had finally sold one. Artist Anna Boch bought *The Red Vineyard* for 400 francs in Brussels. Moreover, in June of 1890 alone, he completed more than 40 paintings, more than one a day. But it wasn't enough. In January of that year, Theo and his wife had welcomed their first son, who they named Vincent. Soon, it was clear that Theo was struggling to look after both Vincents. Many believe that this revelation may have been the final straw for Vincent. The last thing he wanted to be was a burden.

On July 27, 1890, Vincent went out to paint as always. When he didn't come home after dinner, they went out to look for him. He had brought a revolver with him to paint and had shot himself in the chest but did not die. He'd made it back to his room, where he was found. When

doctors couldn't remove the bullet, they called Theo, who arrived and found Vincent sitting up in bed smoking a pipe. They talked through the evening, and the next day, on July 29, Vincent died in the arms of his brother at 37 years old. Theo had been in decline as well, thought to be suffering from progressive paralysis due to syphilis. Vincent's death weakened him beyond recovery, and he died six months later.

Vincent was on the verge of success and probably would have become significant in his lifetime if he had lived a little longer. Post-impressionist painting was coming into vogue, and all of the new painters were inspired by and emulating what Vincent was doing. Instead, it fell to Theo's wife, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, to take on the monumental task of cataloguing his hundreds of paintings as well as taking care her of her infant son, alone. She dedicated her whole life to making sure the world knew who Vincent and Theo were.

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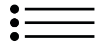


CLOISONNISM: BOLD COLORS AND DARK CONTOURS

The painting *Celtic Tale*, by Paul Sérusier, is divided into two groups: those in the dark on the bottom half and those in the top basking in the light. The trees and rocks create stylized little portals between the two worlds. The whole painting is made up of blocks of color clearly delineated by thick outlines and sharp edges. It is a classic example of what art historians call cloisonnism, which this lecture will discuss. The cloisonné style was adopted by several post-impressionists, including Paul Gauguin, Émile Bernard, Louis Anquetin, and Sérusier.

WHAT IS CLOISONNISM?

Cloisonnism wasn't a significant movement, nor was it a long one, ending by the mid-1890s. However, in the post-impressionist era, it was an important stepping stone to modern art and an example of how willing this generation of artists was to look for alternative sources of inspiration. *Cloisonné* means "partition" or "compartment" in French. It usually refers to a type of metalwork into which precious stones, enamels, or other brightly colored materials are inlaid, giving the shapes thick, distinctive borders. The result is bold, simplified color fields separated as outlined shapes and objects.

Many cultures adopted the cloisonné style, but perhaps the most accomplished examples come from China and Japan, where it was perfected into an incredibly colorful art form in precious dishware. In the late 19th century, Japanese cloisonné was becoming all the rage in Europe as new companies in Meiji-era Japan industrialized the enamel process and began marketing it overseas. At the same time, Japanese prints were flooding the European markets and were all the rage among the artistic community. Japanese prints also used that distinctive style of large blocks of color separated out by bold lines.

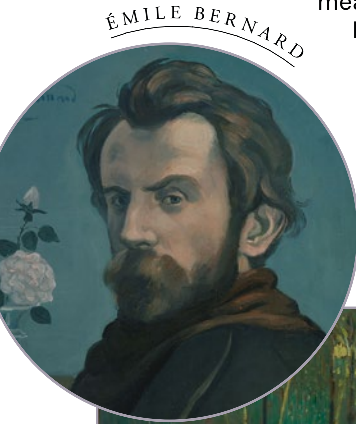
Thus, the cloisonnists took a simplified approach to their art, moving the focus off shallow, surface-level details to reveal deeper meanings from our inner lives and emotional perspective. In 19th-century France, this approach was in stark contrast to the hyper-blended and three-dimensional space of the academic paintings. European artists interpreted and used the cloisonné style in ways that reflected their own knowledge, culture, and sensibilities. One significant change, for example, was the medium these artists were working in. Cloisonnism's adaptation into oil painting made it almost unrecognizable from the source of inspiration.

Given that they both took inspiration from Japan, there was a fair amount of crossover between the Nabis and cloisonnists. Styles and ideas were moving quickly. Cliques formed around certain styles or ideas, and they all checked out what the others were doing. Many artists crossed between groups or, sometimes, were part of several circles at the same time. That's the story of Anquetin, Bernard, and Sérusier, who were the three main cloisonnists. All three made waves and a name for themselves early in their careers. However, after a decade, each had abandoned the type of painting they became famous for, and they practically vanished—or at least their reputations did.

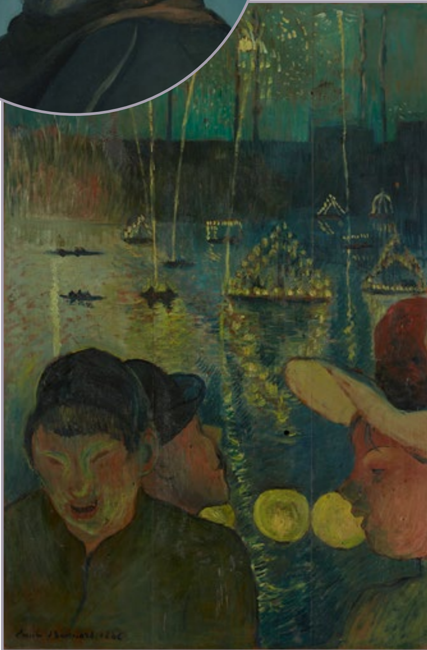
ÉMILE BERNARD

Bernard was a teenager when he started working with the other artists developing cloisonnism, synthetism, and symbolism. He made his best and most famous work in the first seven or eight years of his career. After that, he sort of faded from the spotlight. He couldn't stay still, he was easily bored, and his style became more eclectic. It meant his work wasn't able to be clearly defined. However, he continued influencing the next generation of artists through his early work and as a teacher at École des Beaux-Arts.

ÉMILE BERNARD



When he was 18, he met Gauguin at the artist's colony of Pont-Aven in Brittany. There, they would paint together, learning from one another. Bernard was a major influence on Gauguin's eventual style. The next year, Bernard started at Académie Julian, where he met Vincent van Gogh, Bonnard, Vuillard, and others. He also became close to Anquetin. The two had different approaches and styles. Anquetin tended to play it safe and preferred making beautiful and refined paintings. Bernard was much more abstract and interested in pushing boundaries in all different kinds of ways. He wasn't afraid to make highly simplified, rough, and naïve-looking paintings, such as *Breton Women with Seaweed*.



NIGHT FESTIVAL by Émile Bernard

Bernard had a wide variety of interests, and there was no style of painting he didn't try. However, his new works were often so different than his previous series that people

couldn't tell if it was the same artist. *Night Festival* is a great example. You see him playing with some divisionism here, breaking up his strokes into small dots, especially throughout the reflection of the water and the fireworks exploding overhead. There are some similarities to Vincent here, but the figures along the bottom don't look anything like Vincent's figures. They are much more rounded and simplified.

The strong emphasis on the hats in *Bretons in a Ferry Boat* is quite curious, and perhaps that's Bernard's secret signature in much of his work. The white headdresses are the traditional fancy dress wear of the Breton people, which he would have observed during his stays in Pont-Aven. The headdresses would be worn with an equally bright white collar over a long black dress. These were Bernard's favorite people to paint, and perhaps they played a role, too, in inspiring the cloisonné style. The flowing ribbons and crisp white fabrics and the never-ending abstract and negative shapes created by the hats and dresses would have made for a striking scene as they were gathered outside.

Bernard had a way of altering figures in surprising and sometimes humorous ways. *Women with Pigs* is a fascinating print, for instance. The woman in red is bent in half in a bizarre way, almost as to assume the position of the pigs, waiting for their feed from the woman in blue. This woman seems to have a paint smear for a face. On close inspection, you can make out the faintly drawn features, but the overall effect is not flattering by any means. Bernard says he was inspired by the Breton people, but it almost seems like he's making fun of them here.

However, he often treated these folks with a sort of reverence belied by his careful and delicate paint application. *Portrait de Madame Lemasson* (1891) shows the innkeeper of the place he stayed at while visiting Brittany. There seems to be a significant shift in the sense of dignity he was imbuing his subject with in this painting compared to the previous one. Even though it looks different from some of his other works, the flattened forms, blocks of color, and clear outlines make this an excellent example of cloisonnism.

PAUL SÉRUSIER

Recall that Sérusier had also worked with Gauguin in Pont-Aven and produced *The Talisman*, which became the icon of the Nabis group. However, he could not be contained by a single movement. The *Yellow Farm at Pouldu* painting is a striking example of a work that has a

cloisonné feel but many different influences. It's dominated by bold sections of yellow, and this is a difficult color to work with, especially if you are using it for most of the painting. You have a limited tonal range with yellow. You can only get so dark with it before it becomes another color.

In the painting, there is a complicated composition of interlocking yellow forms, each area slightly different, pushing that center roof back in space and leaving the brightest yellow up front and closer to the viewers. There is more use of light and shadow and less use of the outline than the more typical cloisonnist paintings. The scene is vignetted by some darker purples and greens, creating dynamic negative shapes with an interplay with the yellow and the figure-ground relationship.

In *The Downpour*, Sérusier took a different stylistic approach—the wide swath of a single color, punctuated by a few flat and dark shapes. He was committing much more to flatness and reduced tonality in the colors when compared to *Yellow Farm*.

Breton Women, the Meeting in the Sacred Grove is another painting with a limited palette—almost exclusively orange at the bottom and purple at the top. The most curious part is the huddled groups of women. The first two groups are pretty clear to see, but there are more going back, all the way to the distant top right corner, where they become vague shapes. The headdresses are painted a drab yellow to blend in and be less noticeable. Sérusier was treating these groups of women as compositional elements, using perspective with the trees to lead the eye back and up into the distance.

LOUIS ANQUETIN

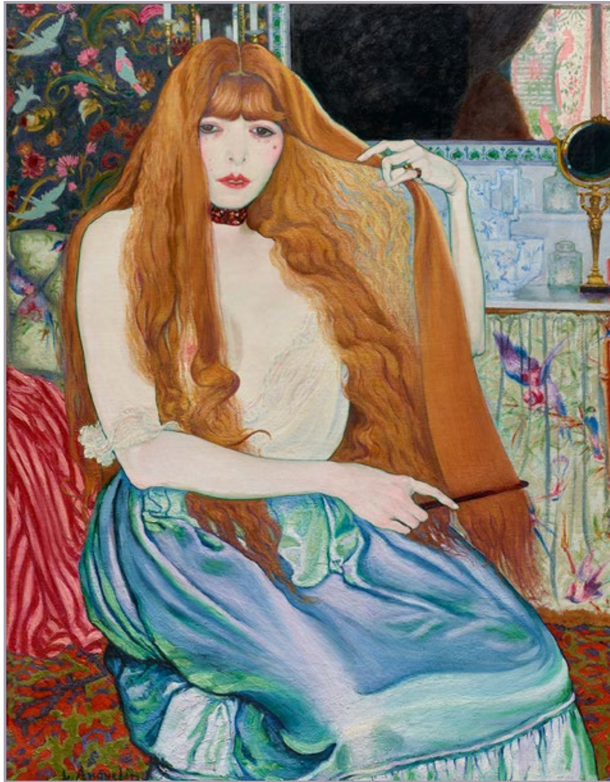
Anquetin was born in the small town of Étrépagny, but when he was 21, he moved to Paris and soon fell in with Toulouse-Lautrec, Cormon, and Bernard. Anquetin was one of the most exciting and innovative of the post-impressionists, but he's someone you rarely hear about because he went back to study and paint more academically in his later career.

Considering his early work, he was an extremely talented painter, as can be seen in the subtle detail and nuance of *Avenue de Clichy (Street—Five O'Clock in the Evening)*. There is evidence of concentrated focus in terms of blending, light and shadow, and detail work. With this more focused and realistic attention to certain aspects, he combined flat painting with black outlines—the hallmark of cloisonnism.

There is a strong simplification in color from the blue that dominates three-fourths of the painting. The sky is flat, broken up by the tree limbs, interlocking like a puzzle. Various shades of blue cover the sky, trees, buildings, street, and people on the street. The people are also simplified. There are a few eyes or mouths or noses or fingers. There are subtle leaves on the trees. The same goes for the windows on the buildings—a slightly darker shade of blue.

On the left is a much smaller area, glowing with a contrasting color of a deep orange that hits the crowd with a greenish yellow, becoming bluer as the light dissipates out into the night. On the woman on the bottom right that's closest to the viewer, her cheek catches a bit of that orange light. Bringing her up close helps bring the viewer into the scene. This creates an elegant and dynamic composition.

In *Woman at Her Toilette*, Anquetin leaned into a more traditional style. This is a striking portrait of a beautiful woman, and her face and hair usually steal the show. However, her skirt is beautifully silky smooth and blended. Surrounding her is a complicated blend of geometric shapes, each one with a delicate and complicated pattern. He combines a soft and blended part, such as the skirt, which commands a presence in its three-dimensional swirling pool of blue, with the flatter hard edges of cloisonné.



WOMAN AT HER TOILETTE by Louis Anquetin

In *Reading Woman*, an unearthly glow seems to emanate from inside of the subject, her face radiating and also reflecting the blue light of the paper she's reading. Each section of the painting gets its own treatment. For instance, there are large, broad strokes for the monotone green background but with varying thickness so some of the paper shows through. A psychedelic swirl of color and line is in the fabric on her elaborate hat, complete with semitransparent pom-poms. The multiple searching lines of the jacket are slightly lighter so that you can see them against the deep dark brown. The woman's features are simplified and slightly exaggerated into more geometric shapes. That, combined with the shape of her hair on her forehead, creates an exciting intersection of planes emerging from the dark earth tones of the coat and background. An unfinished look reveals the underpainting of orangey umber.

Anquetin wanted to paint like the old masters, not like a revolutionary. Many artists of this period were switching from oils to pastels to increase the brightness and saturation of their colors. However, Anquetin loved oil paint and its tradition. Thus, he went back to school and subsequently fell off the map.

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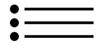

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PAUL GAUGUIN'S COMPLICATED LEGACY

Paul Gauguin has long been a controversial and problematic figure in post-impressionism. He was a painter who was both admired and hated by his contemporaries, and he never achieved superstardom in his lifetime. After his death, though, his art became popular. By the early 20th century, his paintings commanded high prices, and several of his works set sales records. However, the controversies over his life have never entirely disappeared. This lecture tackles a thorny and age-old question: How does one talk about great artists who did horrible things?

GAUGUIN'S EARLIER LIFE

Gauguin was born in Paris in 1848, a year in which popular revolutions were breaking out across Europe. The family was forced to flee France when his father's newspaper was suppressed by the French government. They left for Peru when Gauguin was a baby, but his father died of a heart attack en route. The family spent the next four years there. When they returned to France, they enrolled Gauguin in a traditional strict Catholic school. Later, Gauguin would use his formative years in Peru to claim that he was descended from the Inca.

PAUL GAUGUIN AND METTE SOPHIE GAD

When he was 14, Gauguin attended a naval preparatory school and, after graduating, became a sailor, traveling around the world for several years. While he was at sea, he learned of his mother's death. By 1871, he had returned to Paris and eventually got work as a bookkeeper at the stock exchange. He also began trading stocks. A couple of years later, Gauguin met a Danish woman, Mette Sophie Gad, and he fell in love with her instantly. They got married and started having children right away—five in total.

By now, he was making good money at the stock exchange, and he started buying and collecting paintings. Everything seemed to be going well. In 1873, when Gauguin was 25—completely self-taught—he started painting everything around him, analyzing his world with a critical eye and figuring out how to paint it. Many of his early paintings were gentle landscapes experimenting with color, light, and composition. His interest in and newfound passion for painting led him to start hanging out with other painters, especially Pissarro.

PONT-AVEN

In 1882, the stock market crashed, and Gauguin's income tanked. The family soon had to start cutting way back on their lifestyle. Mette wasn't too happy with the way Gauguin was treating her. She took the kids and went to stay with her uncle in Copenhagen for a break. The stay became permanent, and Gauguin moved up to Copenhagen too.

He hated it in Denmark, and he was unsuccessful at his new job selling tarps. To make ends meet, Mette started giving French lessons to wealthy upper-class children while Gauguin painted in the attic.

Mette's conservative family was embarrassed by Gauguin and asked him to leave. Mette wanted him gone, too. Thus, Gauguin went back to Paris, leaving the day-to-day care and economic support of all five children to Mette. Back in Paris, Gauguin turned his hand to pottery. He made around 100 pieces over the years, many of which he preferred to hand sculpt, giving them a rough, asymmetrical look. The inspiration for this style came in part from Peruvian pottery, which his mother had collected. While he was learning and experimenting, he started replacing ancient Peruvians with his own self-portrait. Many of his other pieces clearly emulate Incan styles.

In 1886, Gauguin moved to the art colony at Pont-Aven in Brittany, a rural community of farmers and fishermen. He immediately started inauthentically appropriating local culture both into his paintings and into his own style. Now, he was a Celtic Breton, and he started wearing the traditional beaded vests and clogs typical of Brittany.

He was painting scenes such as *The Field of Derout-Lollichon* around Pont-Aven. He was into impressionism, dabs of bright colors, and recording the coolness of the shadows and warmth of the light. The impressionists in Paris were aware of his talent and considered him a worthy colleague, and he exhibited in the last impressionist exhibition in 1886.

GAUGUIN'S ARTISTIC EVOLUTION

Soon, Gauguin hated how popular Pont-Aven was becoming. Thus, he left for Panama with friend and painter Charles Laval so that he could "live like a savage." Things didn't turn out as he'd hoped. Laval earned money doing portraits of canal officials, but Gauguin went to work on the canal, a miserable, backbreaking job. After an arrest for public urination, Gauguin decided it was time to move on. He settled on the Caribbean island of Martinique in 1887.

Gauguin stayed for a few months, living off the pity of local neighbors and scavenging for fruit. He started painting about fruit as symbols of temptation and did a series of paintings on the island capturing life in the tropics. He was also becoming increasingly preoccupied with the

FRUIT PICKING, AMONG THE MANGOES by Paul Gauguin

subject of temptation. Specifically, he was feeling tempted by teenage girls. However, he was still legally married to Mette with five kids back in Copenhagen, and he felt somewhat conflicted.

Before long, Gauguin returned to Brittany, this time to a smaller town that wasn't too touristy. From this point on, he started a more experimental phase in his work. His colors were getting bolder, his compositions stranger, certain parts flatter. Moreover, he was starting to use outlines. He was one of the early artists who were beginning to look to Japanese prints, stained glass, and cloisonnism for inspiration.

Some of his best-known pieces from this period fuse together religious and cultural symbolism with bold palettes and strong lines—for example, *Vision after the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling the Angel)* from 1888. This painting was a significant breakthrough for Gauguin both stylistically and conceptually. He completely flattened the ground and made it bright red. The subject is a vision the local Breton women in the

painting were having after church. It is a purely mental vision (hence their eyes are all closed), but what he painted in front of them is being seen in the collective minds of the congregation.

In this period, Gauguin made several new connections with other artists, which played an important role in the development of this new work. One of the most enduring was with Émile Bernard, one of the cloisonnists, and the two would inspire each other a great deal. Their friendship, though, might have been sustained in part by Bernard's 17-year-old sister Madeleine; Gauguin fell in love with her despite being more than twice her age. Another important friendship was struck up with Vincent van Gogh after Vincent's brother Theo had noticed and bought some of Gauguin's Martinique paintings. They corresponded for a couple of years and were equally excited about each other's work. They eventually would hang out together for a while in Arles, and Gauguin's work from this time was clearly inspired by Vincent.

Gauguin eventually went back to Pont-Aven in hopes of seeing Madeleine Bernard again, only to find his painter friend Laval was now dating her. The way Gauguin saw it, he was some kind of martyr and no one else had been betrayed like this since Jesus Christ was betrayed and crucified. Thus, naturally, he started painting himself as Christ. His own sense of mythology he had created about himself had grown. For instance, in *The Yellow Christ*, the local Breton women are painted as props, looking up at poor Paul Christ. Stylistically, this was another significant leap for Gauguin, with the gaunt, angular, and highly simplified figure, close-cropped composition, and flat red polka dots for trees. He'd also picked up a new yellow habit from Vincent.

Despite his bizarre turn into conceiving himself as the savior of mankind, it seemed to be working great for his creativity, experimentation, and boldness. He'd abandoned observational painting in favor of his imagination; a bright, bold color palette; and conceptual goals. Many young artists of the time were taken with Gauguin's work and would incorporate many of his ideas into their own.

TAHITI

Despite Gauguin's influence among the artistic community, he was still poor and unknown. In 1889, at the world's fair in Paris, there was a small exhibition showing his paintings, but it was not successful. However, he was inspired by what he saw at the fair, including architectural

recreations from Africa and Asia. He also learned about Tahiti. By then, Tahiti had been romanticized and mythologized in France for more than 100 years. Gauguin decided to leave modernity behind and go live in paradise and make his fortune. He convinced the colonial officials to give him 30% off his fare in exchange for a painting when he came back. Gauguin exaggerated this little deal into an official government business trip and managed to raise the rest of the funds necessary through some auctions of his work. He sailed for Tahiti in 1891.

Arriving in the colonial capital of Papeete, Gauguin found that Tahiti had changed dramatically since the French colonists had arrived. Within days, he was disillusioned. Thus, he decided to paint the Tahiti of his dreams. Those dreams seemed to focus on the women he thought he'd find there. Romantic European depictions of the Pacific tended to show women there as voluptuous, in skimpy clothes, and bare-breasted. Yet the church had since shamed Tahitian women into wearing long, baggy smocks. Thus, Gauguin started painting the girls in much less clothing, the way he expected and felt entitled to see them. To be fair, he also painted the baggy dresses.

Soon, Gauguin took a "wife," or a mistress, named Tehamana who was 13 years old. She moved into his hut with him and lived with him for several years. He claimed to know about traditional Tahitian mythology and stories from listening to her stories. In 1892, he painted *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, which is a difficult and problematic painting to sit with. The richness and variety of colors, the shapes, the lines, and the execution are captivating and well done. However, you also see 13-year-old Tehamana in what appears to be more like a rape scene than a scary ghost painting. Gauguin wanted to make her seductive. He attempted to complicate the narrative with the evil spirit, but it appears as an afterthought when the entire goal of the painting was to use the body of a child to titillate his audience.

Gauguin's portrayals of Tahitian mythology and custom were not traditional or historical. He had no problem swapping in different gods, religions, or stories. In *The Ancestors of Tehamana*, for example, you see his new wife in a modest colonial dress. However, the inscriptions on the wall behind her are meaningless, loosely inspired by a script he saw from Easter Island that has never been translated. The figure on the wall behind Tehamana is based on Hindu sculptures he saw in different places. Moreover, in *The Royal End* (1892), Gauguin depicts a grim but, again, utterly inaccurate scene, supposedly inspired by the death of the Tahitian king the year before.

Subject matter aside, Gauguin was hitting his stride artistically in Tahiti, and these years are considered one of the high points of his career. The sunshine and golden glow of the island had an impact on his color. He became increasingly bold with his palette, often abandoning any local tones in favor of highly saturated, flat, bright colors. That said, he usually showed natural features, vegetation, and beaches fairly accurately.

However, his own lust and desires seem to be the overarching themes of the majority of the work he made in Tahiti. The title *What! Are You Jealous?* seems to be bragging to his friends back home about his sexual conquests. These paintings are more about Gauguin than they are about Tahiti. Within a couple of years, though, Gauguin was bored once again. Tehamana had become pregnant and had his child. He'd run out of funds, and his health was declining. Thus, he left Tahiti.

Gauguin's luck was with him again when he returned to France: His uncle had died and left him a decent inheritance. Moreover, Sérusier and some of his old artist friends chipped in to support his return. He decided to use this money to mount a significant exhibition of his work. This exhibition, for the most part, was not well received. He was accused of artificial exoticism, and critics were rightfully suspicious of his authenticity.

END OF LIFE

In Paris, he started seeing another teenager, "Anna the Javanese," who was most likely part Sri Lankan, part Malaysian. He also started experimenting with wood-block prints, creating some groundbreaking work using figures from Tahiti and gods and idols from around the world and, sometimes, of his own invention. However, by 1895, it became clear that this was not the triumphant return to Paris he'd expected. Thus, he quickly scraped together whatever money he could and boarded a ship to return to Tahiti for good.

Tahiti, though, wasn't the place he'd left only a few years ago. For instance, there was electricity and a merry-go-round right there in town. He hated it. Gauguin was not the same either. He looked and felt awful, with open sores all over his body. He had syphilis; it's possible he'd had it before he left France. He started taking morphine and other painkillers.

However, he was still painting, and undeterred, he took a new mistress, another young teenager. Her name was Pau'ura, and she was 14. She would have a daughter who died days after birth, and later a son.

Gauguin, though, seemingly cared only for his white children. When he learned of the death of his favorite daughter, Aline, who died of pneumonia back in Denmark, he painted an epic mural-sized painting, more than 12 feet long, about the stages of life. Titled *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, it is considered one of his masterpieces. In it, you see a young baby on the right, an old woman on the left, and the stages of life in between them. He wanted it to feel like a gospel. It's a Buddhist narrative told through a Christian lens, with Tahitian actors and made-up deities. It's the life cycle of women that is depicted in the painting, with an Eve-like figure picking fruit and committing original sin right at the center. She's contrasted with the innocence of girlhood, represented by the child sitting and playing with kittens to the side.

By now, Gauguin was constantly in pain and on morphine and was making enemies in the small community of Tahiti. Soon, everyone hated him. Declaring that Tahiti had lost its cultural identity and authenticity—and that it was getting hard to find models for his art—he moved to Hiva Oa in the Marquesas Islands, today part of French Polynesia. The Marquesas were even more remote and tiny than Tahiti. When he arrived, he tricked the Catholic Church into thinking he was a believer to buy a piece of land to build a house on.

He took yet another teenage mistress; her name was Vaeoho. Moreover, he became embroiled in the local politics and generally created trouble on the island, quickly falling out with the church and the authorities. Some of his later art includes satires of his enemies. He lived out the last of his years there. At the age of 54, he died of syphilis in 1903. No one attended his funeral, and he had a rushed Catholic burial.

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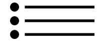

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SUZANNE VALADON'S REBELLIOUS VISION

Suzanne Valadon is still revered in France. However, in most of the art history books, her life and work have been nearly forgotten. This lecture will discuss Valadon and her paintings. She was a significant and important painter in the otherwise male-dominated Parisian art scene of the 19th century. Her exhibitions were popular and well attended, and she was greatly respected by her colleagues. In 1894, she became the first woman to be admitted to Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts.

VALADON'S EARLIER LIFE

Marie-Clémentine Valadon was born in the countryside in 1865, but her mother didn't know who the father was. When Valadon was five years old, they moved to Paris. Life continued to be difficult living in the city, particularly due to her mother's alcoholism. Valadon grew up in Montmartre, where all the avant-garde artists of this time worked and hung out. An important part of her childhood was going to the park to watch artists painting the sunset. She would join the other artists and draw on whatever paper or pencils she could get her hands on. She was an entirely self-taught artist.

As a young girl, Valadon had to take on various odd jobs, such as sewing hats, to help out her mom and bring in a little extra money. By around the age of 11 or 12, she dropped out of school and got a full-time job as a waitress and dishwasher at a nearby café that was frequented by Degas and Lautrec and other artists who would also paint there from time to time.

Moreover, Ernest Molier had founded an amateur circus in 1880 known as the Cirque Molier that soon became a sensation in Parisian society. Molier also seems to have been a patron of Valadon's café, and she convinced him to let her to join his troupe and train as a trapeze artist. However, after only six months, she fell from the trapeze and injured her back.

Valadon still had her striking good looks, and soon after returning to work, she started receiving requests to model for the artists who had frequented her café, which she started doing when she was 15. Soon, she was a familiar face in the art scene and a minor celebrity. She became a regular model for Renoir and is thought to be depicted in some of his more famous works, such as *Dance at Bougival*. Around this time, she became pregnant. The identity of the father of Valadon's child has never been determined, though. She was known to have had affairs with several major artists, including Degas, Renoir, and Puvis de Chavannes.

Valadon did write to Renoir several times claiming that he was the father. She only wanted him to at least give the baby, Maurice, his last name so that he wouldn't be a legal bastard. Renoir never accepted her pleas or acknowledged his son. Valadon was also romantically connected with the Catalan artist Miguel Utrillo in this period, and she eventually convinced him to give her son his name via legal adoption. They finalized the details in 1891, when Maurice was eight.

Another artist Valadon would model for was Toulouse-Lautrec, who moved into the same studio building where she had been working. They quickly became friends and lovers. Up until this time, she had been going by her given name, but Toulouse-Lautrec started calling her Suzanne as a nickname. She thought it sounded more professional. Thus, she took it on and started going by Suzanne and signing her paintings that way for the rest of her life.

A TIME OF TRANSITION

While modeling in various studios, Valadon would closely study the artists' paintings in progress during her breaks, and she would draw as often as she could, copying the styles and methods she was seeing. Edgar Degas had a particular interest in her development as an artist and took her on as somewhat of an apprentice. He was a significant financial supporter of her work as well and bought many of her paintings and drawings over the years. He also introduced her work to other collectors and curators. A mentor like Degas was critical because female artists had little access to art education, and thus, they also missed out on many of the connections students would make in school.

It's extraordinary that by the mid-1890s, Valadon had learned enough to start making a living as an artist rather than a model. She primarily produced drawings, and through etching and printmaking, she was able to sell enough prints of her work to support her family. In 1894, sponsored by her friends in the art community, she exhibited her work at the Salon.

After many years dedicated to honing her craft of drawing and printmaking, Valadon finally started painting. It wasn't long before her paintings were getting recognized by other legendary artists. She loved to draw and paint other women, particularly in domestic scenes while they were nude or bathing. She would receive some early commissions to draw a series of women in the bathroom. Painting in oils, though, is expensive, and oil paintings can't be copied and sold like drawings can. Thus, her early oils were done for her own development rather than the gallery.

Valadon yearned for the freedom to pursue art unrestrained by the need to make money. In 1896, she came to an agreement with a rich businessman named Paul Mousis, who bought a nice house for her, her mother, and her son in the countryside. With her mom looking after Maurice, this now gave Valadon the opportunity to focus on developing her work full-time. However, she was also now isolated from her friends and opportunities to grow and work as an artist in Paris.

Young Maurice hated Mousis and hated living in his house. As he grew older, he became uncontrollable. Eventually, Valadon committed him to the asylum with alcoholism at age 18. Upon his discharge, the doctor diagnosed him with an oedipal complex. Needless to say, Valadon and Maurice had a fairly dysfunctional and problematic relationship but one that would endure. Valadon wanted to do something healthy and productive with her son, though; thus, she taught him how to paint. Maurice got good fast and started painting outside.

GAINING RECOGNITION

Valadon's paintings are characterized by bold strokes and strong lines, laced with emotion and empathy. Valadon reinvented the treatment of the female nude with frankness and energy. Being nearly the only woman working alongside the post-impressionists, she had the lived experience, the empathy, and the emotional intelligence to understand and paint women in a way that no man could.

In 1909, she moved out of her arrangement with Mousis, and the family went back to Montmartre to resume the artist life. She kept painting, and she kept getting better. More people were starting to take notice.

Maurice introduced his friend and model André Utter to his mother. André started modeling for Valadon. Although she was 44 and he was 23, they soon become friends and lovers. That year, she painted them together as Adam and Eve, tacitly commenting on the perceived scandal and sin of their relationship and the temptations the two gave into. Interestingly, it was claimed that this was the first painting by a female artist of a nude couple to be publicly exhibited, at least in Europe. In the original version of the painting, André was indeed totally nude. However, about a decade later, when it was to hang in the Salon des Indépendants, they asked her to cover up his genitals. Upon learning that Maurice's painting would hang next to hers—this would be the first time exhibiting with her son—Valadon relented and added the leaves.

Suzanne and André eventually married, and he became her manager and stepfather to Maurice. This was not a happy family, though, and the three got nicknamed "the Cursed Trinity." Maurice's alcoholism became a frequent battle. However, despite his setbacks and frequent hospitalizations, his painting career blew up.

This new family arrangement finally seemed to provide some stability in Valadon's life, and she continued working and painting through each difficulty she faced. Her work began to draw more on her own intuition. In her late forties, she entered into a more prolific and mature period in her work, a post-impressionist every bit as equal as her colleagues. For example, her painting of bathers, called *Joy of Life*, from 1911, is a fascinating response to Cézanne's bathers. There is a lush green landscape and a curious composition. Four women on the left, one woman clearly feeling herself—it is rare to see that kind of confidence displayed by a woman in a painting in this era. Off to the side is a single, solitary man, looking sheepish and embarrassed. This is a remarkably progressive painting.

Suzanne loved to paint women of all ages. She had a unique perspective and often painted elaborate interior scenes that used tapestries, patterns, and colors in a crowded composition. However, she was able to balance the chaos with her careful attention, harmonizing color, and contrast. These works reveal a strong command of her craft and her maturing style combining bold patterns and fabrics. Strong contrasts interweave them into a beautifully painted scene, with exaggerated colors and angles and a barrage of patterns. They remain cohesive, with an interior logic defining peace and serenity in them. Valadon was an expert at combining multiple complex themes.

In 1923, when she was 58 years old, she painted *The Blue Room*, which solidified her reputation as an important post-impressionist and is hailed as a masterpiece. This is a fantastic painting for many reasons. This woman looks contemporary even by today's standards: comfy striped pants and a pink tank top, a cigarette in her mouth. The beautiful composition is flanked entirely in a blue tapestry with white leaves, and her pink and green attire contrasts brilliantly with the blue. Those tones are repeated but in a more muted way in the earth tones behind her, almost as if she is emerging from the dirt and the dust of the earth. It was a direct challenge to a popular trope in Western art that has been around for centuries, and still persists, of a beautiful woman depicted Venus-like in a reclined position, with a

BLUE ROOM by Suzanne Valadon

perfect physique and stunning purity. Valadon here boldly presents an ordinary middle-aged woman of the era in this vein. *The Blue Room* was a massive hit, and the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune put Valadon on retainer for 1 million francs, a totally unprecedented contract.

VALADON'S LEGACY

Valadon's paintings were gaining widespread acclaim, and she was finally getting recognition in her own right. The money started rolling in. She was in her prime now, and success would not deter her focus. She was in full command over the composition and color palette.

In *Two Bathers*, Valadon was bold with her marks, even in the face, which is where one usually expects artists to paint much more softly and subtly to capture the nuance of a likeness. However, she was able

to identify those key facial features and colors and simplify them so that a single broad stroke of pink could make up the cheek. In the painting, she used a mint green color that often hovers in between yellow and blue, sometimes gray, reinforcing the green tones in the skin—a classical academic tradition, in which she pushed into bolder and more confident gestures.

You can see her in this golden age of her life with another frank and honest self-portrait. She was recording the change age was having on her appearance. *Self-Portrait* (1927) is mediated by various objects placed between Valadon and the viewer. She is reflected in a framed mirror. It's not a glamorous portrait, but it is expertly composed, with a bold patterned fabric and even a bowl of apples. There seems to be a vase reflected in the mirror, but it is blurry and out of focus. There is much more focus on her face, which is curious because the large, patchy colors there look much more carefully constructed compared to the foreground. Her paintings reveal a clever artist who would play with and manipulate space in new and exciting ways throughout her entire career.

SELF-PORTRAIT by Suzanne Valadon

Late in her career, she also did numerous still lifes. Although seemingly less complex than her portraits, in *Bouquet of Flowers* (1928), there is free-spirited chaos and energy moving back and forth between the subject and the background, with light bouncing and glowing in many directions. The painting throws you off-kilter while simultaneously soothing you and bringing you a beautiful moment—one that seems born out of pain, experience, and wisdom.

In 1932, a retrospective of Valadon's life's work opened at Galerie Georges Petit. A couple of years later, André moved out, but the couple never officially divorced. In 1935, Valadon went to the hospital for diabetes. She lived long enough to see museums begin collecting her work, though, fulfilling the last of her lifelong ambitions. She had a stroke and died two years later at the age of 72.

She made 475 paintings in total and 275 drawings. Unfortunately, she soon became better known as the mother of Maurice, which began to erase her identity. Yet despite her unjust historical treatment, Valadon was an important post-impressionist. Her relative youth and personal circumstances delayed the climax of her career to the end of the post-impressionist era and a bit beyond it. Stylistically and thematically, though, she belongs alongside Cézanne and Toulouse-Lautrec as part of this extraordinary generation of painters.

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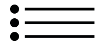

HOW PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURE ARE SHAPING ART

Recall how politics, religion, science, and technology transformed Paris during the belle epoque and influenced the art of the post-impressionists—not to mention the exciting and important social changes that were going on through the works of some of those artists you've been studying. This lecture will dive a little deeper into some of the significant ideas in philosophy, literature, and psychology that became infused in the psyche of artists in this era. You'll finish with some fascinating social and pop culture trends that were also informing what artists were up to.

BETWEEN ART AND NATURE by Pierre Puvis de Chavannes

PHILOSOPHY, SYNTHETISM, AND ART

The post-impressionists engaged with the significant philosophical ideas of their time. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes painted them in *Between Art and Nature* amidst many influences—between both nature and the man-made world, the past and the future, both observers and participants in the scene. In fact, finding harmony between these competing influences was what some post-impressionists strove toward. Some of this was inspired by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who identified and explained the dialectic. In a dialectic, you develop an argument or thesis. Inevitably, an argument against that thesis—the antithesis—will arise. Finding the truth of the matter requires you to create a synthesis between the opposing arguments.

Before the term *post-impressionism* was ever mentioned, one of the first terms some post-impressionists used to describe themselves was *synthetists*. If academic art focuses on the traditional appearance of things and impressionism captures the way an artist feels and experiences, then the post-impressionists, through a bold aesthetic style using science, technology, and mythology, were creating a synthesis of nature and emotion.

Paul Gauguin liked to debate ideas like this with other artists and some of his younger proteges, such as Émile Bernard and Paul Sérusier, who used this philosophy to help construct their ideas. Émile Schuffenecker got excited about these ideas—so much so that he organized a show in 1889 with a group of artists he called synthetists. However, his show was a total flop. Part of the problem was that Schuffenecker was not a great artist. Gauguin was brutal about Schuffenecker's work, calling him a mediocrity who was born to be a janitor or shopkeeper rather than an artist. The Schuffeneckers often let Gauguin stay with them as a poor

artist. Later, Gauguin repaid the Schuffeneckers' kindness to him with a painting depicting their marital problems. That seemed to end the friendship and synthetism as well.

The philosopher Hegel also believed that art's major job is to convey the sensuous presentation of ideas—to take the good, helpful, and important thoughts and make them stick in our minds and resonate in our hearts. Art does that by being a synthesis of both aesthetics and ideas—real and eternal truths, morals that reveal the best in us. Many 18th- and 19th-century philosophers echoed the same belief: that the purpose of art was to ennoble us and make us better people. If it didn't lead us to a deeper truth, it wasn't worthy of being called art.

Much of academic art rests on this philosophy. From the Renaissance onward, a hierarchy of genres emerged, which ranked the worthiness of art according to its underlying purpose. Still lifes, animal paintings, and landscapes were at the bottom of the pile: They had no significant truth to them. Historical paintings were at the pinnacle of the hierarchy—works that showed humanity at its best and inspired us and could reveal something essential about ourselves.

Thus, artists looked to the classics. Gods, myths, and legends were eternal and would instill permanence in one's work. Operas, literature, and symphonies often had the same goal. Thus, it flew in the face of the established philosophy of art when artists embraced lower forms of art—landscapes, genre paintings, still lifes. Artists reject the criticism that they are simply creating decoration. They had much larger ideas; they were not simply being contrarian.

DESCARTES, NIETZSCHE, AND FREUD

The realist movement, in the 1840s and 1850s, was the first major philosophical rejection of the establishment. Artists such as Gustave Courbet, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, and Jean-François Millet influenced and inspired the post-impressionists. It was their larger mission—to shine a light on deeper truths without resorting to grand historical narratives or allegories—that resonated. They believed even deeper and more important truths were found depicting everyday life. Thus, the post-impressionists, who also liked to depict ordinary scenes of people, places, and things with deeper meanings, shared this philosophy with the realists. However, some post-impressionists started to ask: Was there any truth in painting at all?

Centuries earlier, René Descartes was tackling this idea. He wanted to ground the framework of ideas and what we know in personal experience and reason. In 1637, he coined the infamous concept *Cogito, ergo sum*: "I think, therefore I am." Descartes felt most physical sensations could be explained away by a trick of the mind. The only thing he could be sure of was that he was thinking. He concluded that he could not be thinking if he didn't exist; therefore, he must exist. He also believed that through our minds, we could master ourselves and nature around us. He thought passions and emotions were the enemy of rationality and, therefore, the truth.

RENÉ DESCARTES

In some ways, his thinking foreshadows the explorations of the post-impressionists. That the senses can be fooled and the mind is supreme is an idea the divisionists embraced. However, Descartes shifted the primacy to one's own thoughts rather than to meaning inherited from authority or tradition. This also tracks with the post-impressionists; their art was about what they felt and knew personally. The idea that one's own thoughts could be a foundation for fundamental truth and that reasoning and rational deduction could create a framework of knowledge is the most potent legacy of Descartes that the post-impressionists latched onto.

However, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche may have been the perfect hero for the post-impressionists. Famously, he claimed God was dead, and one of his major contributions is to reject the idea of objective truth entirely: There's no set of morals or values better than another, no perspective that is truly objective. In that sense, you're fooling yourself if you think that art can capture eternal truth. Maurice Denis, one of the most philosophical of the post-impressionists, wrote several long treatises on the nature of art that channel Nietzsche's thoughts. He essentially said that no matter how realistically one thinks they're painting, an artist isn't a camera.

Although Nietzsche didn't believe in eternal truth, he believed in being true to yourself as the next best thing. He encouraged people to face up to their true desires and put up a fight to follow them. He believed that the highest form of being was the Übermensch, or "overman," a person who transcended the order of their day and created the world anew. Nietzsche thought artists were exactly the type of people society needed, both as unique individuals who embraced creativity and as people who constructed new ideas via new works of art. He thought culture should take the place of religion. As a properly valued cultural product, art could become our source of answers, meaning, and catharsis. Plenty of post-impressionists loved Nietzsche for this. They were breaking out of the academy's chains and creating a new world as Übermenschen.

Sigmund Freud's ideas were perhaps too new to be as influential to post-impressionism as others, but they are relevant because they were developing in this same milieu. The field of psychology generally was exploding in the late 19th century. A major early pioneer was Jean-Martin Charcot, one of the most famous doctors in France, who greatly influenced the development of psychiatry into a modern medical field. Charcot was an early advocate of art therapy, giving scientific credibility to the idea that art could reveal hidden truths about ourselves.

Freud had studied with Charcot in Paris, and he took things to the next level. The field of psychoanalysis that he developed was more sophisticated than hypnosis but tried to do the same thing: unlock the hidden areas of the mind so that we might access and cure our neuroses. Freud was getting people to think deeper about themselves and the importance of analyzing our psyche. He wrote extensively about dreams, the unconscious and hidden. Moreover, he was fascinated with what art revealed about the artist.

THE BELLE EPOQUE

Psychological examination of the self and others was popular in the 19th century. Novels such as Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* took deep dives into what made people do the things they do and explored the interior of the mind. Post-impressionist art and portraiture often sought to do the same, asking deeper questions about identity and the self rather than merely presenting the visible truth. Thus, the post-impressionists had more on their minds than being rebellious.

There was plenty that artists disagreed with philosophers about, too, such as not drinking alcohol. Nietzsche didn't like that it numbed pain; he said that pain was pushing us to be better and that alcohol was sapping us of the will to improve our lives. However, many post-impressionists worshipped the Paris nightlife. The key ingredient, of course, was alcohol—especially absinthe. Absinthe, an anise-flavored spirit derived from the wormwood plant, was strong and reputed to have psychoactive effects. Artists and writers often deliberately drank it in large quantities, chasing that creative inspiration.

Paris in the belle epoque was carefree and open like it had never been. Wars had dominated France for decades; people wanted to enjoy life. More types of entertainment were becoming more accessible to more people. Public parks were sprouting up all over the place after the Haussmann renovation. Gas and electric lighting made walking the streets much safer at night. The bouillon, a type of simple restaurant that served inexpensive food, made eating out affordable even to artists.

Middle-class fashion and luxury turned shopping into a cultural phenomenon. Department stores opened across the city. It was their golden age in Paris; they were pioneering advertising, posters, mail-order catalogues, and discount pricing to draw in Parisians. Fashion became faster. There were now large shows every season with the latest designs. Cheaper versions of the latest fashions found their way into stores that the middle-class women could afford.

PARISIAN SPECTACLES

However, 19th-century Parisians also entertained more morbid ideas. As Christianity's dominance was in decline, there was a surge of interest in spiritualism and the paranormal, particularly the occult and the afterlife. Seances, mediums, and magic shows were embraced by the upper classes. Ghosts, spirits, and souls were all exciting and interesting topics for artists because many wanted to reject the rational perspective on life and embrace the spiritual and supernatural.

There were surprising social trends that reflected this, such as the Paris morgue becoming a significant tourist attraction. Death photography also became popular for recently passed relatives. The newly deceased family member would often be shown relaxing in a chair or perhaps

lying in bed. Another unexpected trend from the interest in the afterlife was taxidermy. A lesser-known trend was taking a few locks of hair from your recently deceased loved ones and turning it into jewelry.

People were also super interested in medical abnormalities. Freak shows became popular as another element to the traveling circus or fair. The circus was an iconic institution of the late 19th century and a popular subject for post-impressionists.

The theater was popular in this period as well. Boulevard theaters introduced the melodrama. This type of entertainment would dominate pop culture because it gave the people what they wanted: natural disasters, violence, murder, blood, hell, and even ghosts using proto-hologram special effects. They had some brilliant and creative innovations throughout the century. However, live theatrical special effects became a lost art with the advent of film and movie effects.

Perhaps the largest spectacles of all in late 19th-century Paris were the world's fairs. These were a defining institution of the age, where people and ideas from all over the globe were all on display in one place. Many of the great inventions of the time, from phonographs to x-rays, made their debut at the fairs. Architecturally, they were enormous, taking up entire sections of the city. France would have three major fairs, in 1878, 1889, and 1900, and each one tried to outdo the last.

The world's fairs played a significant role in the background of the post-impressionists. They always had a major art and design component. Large art galleries were built, exhibiting artists from around the world. The post-impressionists usually didn't get a chance to exhibit, but they visited frequently and were excited about what others were creating. The Paris fair of 1900 embraced the emerging art nouveau design movement in France and launched its popularity across Europe.

Most importantly, the fairs were major sources of international inspiration in an era where knowledge of other cultures was pretty poor. Pavilions from international destinations showcased art, culture, and products from overseas. Although they were racist and xenophobic in their fetishization of the exotic and their assertions of cultural superiority, this was still far more than anything artists in the previous century had been exposed to. Japanese, African, and South American aesthetics were especially popular with post-impressionists, cubists, and fauvists, who borrowed, stole, and reimagined their motifs, techniques, and ideas into their own.

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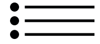

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SYMBOLISM: DREAMS AND METAPHORS

During the post-impressionist period, *symbolism* referred to a specific movement where artists wanted to paint larger truths through symbols and metaphors. It was a reaction to the realist movement of the early 19th century. At this time, some of the most fascinating symbolist art was being made in Belgium. The most widely known of this group would have to be James Ensor. This lecture will also look at some other fascinating artists, such as Fernand Khnopff, Evelyn De Morgan, and Félicien Rops. Symbolism was an international movement, and allegorical and symbolic art continues to be popular today.

SYMBOLISM

Symbolism got its start in literature but quickly moved into art. Jean Moréas wrote its manifesto in 1886: "Thus, in this art movement, representations of nature, human activities and all real-life events don't stand on their own; they are rather veiled reflections of the senses pointing to archetypal meanings through their esoteric connections." The driving force for these symbolists was their disenchantment with modern society. The industrial age had, in many ways, created new problems, which were perhaps even worse than before. The symbolists were fighting against the grim reality of the industrial age to rediscover humanity.

Dreams were a particularly important motif for the symbolists because only in our dreams can we be truly free from the stifling realities of modern life. Moreover, the growing field of psychoanalysis had everyone obsessing over the meaning of their dreams. Eduard von Hartmann wrote a book called *The Philosophy of the Unconscious* that argues that art should penetrate our unconscious so that we better understand ourselves. Thus, writers and painters alike sought to use color, emotion, and metaphor to show the inner life of the individual and the concealed aspects of our world, to uncover deeper truths.

However, not all dreams are good dreams; some are nightmares. Fear is a raw and powerful theme in symbolist art—fear of death, disease, loss, and pain. It's also a primal driver of human behavior. The symbolists loved painting dark, moody night scenes or fantastic horrors and evil creatures, activating that fundamental fear response lying just below the surface. Love and sex were another significant theme for symbolists. In fact, they were preoccupied with the taboo. Perversion, temptation, sin, and Satan were the perfect impetus for the symbolists. The allure of the female form and the struggle between lust and propriety got these guys going, literally and figuratively.

Symbolism showed how art could contribute to philosophical debates. In the 18th and 19th centuries, philosophers such as Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill had started to describe humans as ultrarational beings whose behavior could be predicted by self-interest. Thus, new disciplines like economics started making all sorts of clever models on how to maximize productivity and set prices and wages based on the idea that humans are all predictable and rational. However, the symbolists rejected the idea that science and reason can explain everything about people.

Symbolism doesn't necessarily mean everything depicted is a symbol. Ironically, having a symbolic meaning behind every detail in a painting was more of the classical academic way, and there was an established set of symbols and colors that served as metaphors for morals and ideas. The new symbolists rejected these tired and emotionally detached depictions. They wanted to create new worlds—worlds that no one had seen before, full of wonder, that could take their viewers on a spiritual and emotional journey.

It was mostly the poets who got symbolism going. They were sympathetic to the free verse movement and advocated for poems with more fluidity. One example, *Les Fleurs du mal*, or *The Flowers of Evil*, by Baudelaire, includes graphic depictions of sex and drug use. He even wrote a poem about the magnificence of a rotting corpse. The symbolists unleashed a wide world of dark and troubling art that had never been seen before.

JAMES ENSOR

James Ensor was born in Belgium to an English father and Belgian mother. He left school at 15 to study with two local artists. Eventually, he went to Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. He started out the way many painters do, with dark and dull colors, mostly earth tones, many browns and grays. It took only a few years, though, before Ensor was painting in a radically different way. As he became exposed to emerging styles in Paris, he began to get bolder, and he wanted to make paintings that would be shocking, troubling, and controversial.

For example, *Still Life in the Studio* (1889) starts out normal enough on the bottom with a table, a palette, a little figure, and some plates. Ensor's family owned a souvenir shop that sold masks, but he took these theatrical masks and turned them into some sort of psychotic nightmare: three floating faces on the right hovering in a field of bright green, opposite an even more disturbing collection of faces and masks, mashed up and fusing together, in a glowing yellow field.

Ensor was quite experimental with his painting style as well. In *Theatre of Masks*, he used layers of semitransparent paint, building up and scraping away, creating some sort of glowing force field. You can make out two figures encountering each other in the orb. One looks like a soldier and the other a clown. There is also some sort of jester on the bottom turning his menacing face toward you, breaking the fourth wall.

Hop-Frog's Revenge is based on a bizarre short story by Edgar Allan Poe from 1849. The story goes like this: There is a court jester named Hop-Frog, and he's had enough of the king and his seven ministers, who routinely humiliate him. Thus, Hop-Frog devises a plan. He says to the king, "Wouldn't it be hilarious if you and the seven ministers dressed up like orangutans during the grand ball?" They all think it's a great idea and proceed to make costumes out of tar and flax. They're chained together to pretend they are wild beasts in front of the guests. Hop-Frog uses a pulley to hoist them up before the crowd. Ensor illustrates the final scene, when the king and his ministers are then set on fire by Hop-Frog as his act of revenge.

HOP-FROG'S REVENGE by James Ensor

Ensor was also not afraid to take on the power structures at the time: the ruling class, the government, and religion. He increasingly focused on Christianity and the hypocrisy and evil he saw in the church. His most ambitious piece was a giant canvas 8 feet tall and 14 feet long that includes hundreds if not thousands of people in a wild and chaotic composition. *Entry of Christ into Brussels* is a painting of Christ returning to Brussels and being ushered into town with a parade. Thousands are jammed in together, each with bizarre and funny faces. The paint is heaped on in many areas with thick strokes and chunky gestures. Oddly, but purposefully, Christ is not at the center of the composition. Instead, he's lost in the crowd.

Most people are too caught up in the festivities to care or notice who it's all for. Ensor was essentially mocking everyone in town. No one was spared from looking ridiculous.

FERNAND KHNOPFF

The Belgian Fernand-Edmond-Jean-Marie Khnopff was born in 1858. Khnopff was from a wealthy bourgeois family that went back generations. He went to law school to appease his parents, but then he got into poetry and started reading Baudelaire and Flaubert. Soon, he was hooked and wanted to read more stories and see more pictures of the dark and seedy underbelly of humanity that he'd been sheltered from in his comfortable upbringing. He decided he wanted to create art like this and enrolled at Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. He also started traveling to Paris, becoming familiar with artists such as Eugene Delacroix and Gustave Moreau.

FERNAND-EDMOND-JEAN-MARIE KHNOPFF

Like many of his contemporaries, Khnopff started off painting rather conservatively. He had a more traditional style—smoother, more blended, more precise. He was obviously talented. However, there didn't seem to be much emotional or psychological content. Then, he became inspired by a wider variety of art that was happening in France and around Europe. He began to combine unexpected imagery, creating unexpected compositions.

He was beginning to stylize his figures, who seem to invite psychological interpretation. For example, in *I Lock My Door upon Myself*, the lilies popping up in front are meant to be symbols of purity and the arrow on the table a symbol of love or pain. Khnopff constructed a bizarre, spaceless background, pinned between the wall and the table. He was also using multiple textures from multiple walls and surfaces, and he conjured a flat, abstract geometric composition, made from a variety of convincing wood and aged textures.

The idea of a chimera, or a being composed of different animal parts, was another common theme for Khnopff. He took this idea to a new level with the bizarre and unsettling painting called *The Caresses (The*

Sphinx). The woman has the body of a cheetah, a large and dangerous animal that looks poised and ready to shred the boy to ribbons should the situation arise.

Khnopff would continue to experiment and push the boundaries of his compositions and stylizations. He would zoom way in and bring his subject's head up so close that they took up half of the canvas and went off the edges. This is hyper-intimacy, bringing the viewer face-to-face with these women. In *Who Shall Deliver Me?*, his work was looking increasingly similar to that of Gustav Klimt, and it's easy now to see the influence he had on Klimt.

What do all his works mean? With Khnopff, it's difficult to say. Many of his works are open-ended and invite personal responses, evoking your own memories, dreams, and imagination. Khnopff was content letting his viewers draw their own conclusions.

EVELYN DE MORGAN

Evelyn De Morgan, born Mary Evelyn Pickering in 1855, is a rare example of a female English artist in this period. She is a good example of how hard it is to classify artists: In a strict technical sense, she wasn't a post-impressionist at all. English art in this period drew from different traditions and was going in quite different directions from what was happening on the continent. Yet she was a symbolist and had a unique perspective that her paintings present to the world.

Evelyn was more fortunate than most female artists, though, as she was able to attend the Slade School of Fine Art in London, which had just begun to admit women. She was a talented and successful student. She was able to learn and master the traditional techniques that they were recreating from Renaissance paintings. She went by her middle name, Evelyn, as that was still used as a man's name in this period; this helped her at least get her foot in the door without being dismissed outright.

Unlike many of her colleagues and nearly all the post-impressionists, she never experimented with impressionism, divisionism, or any of the other trends that were sweeping the continent. Instead, she utilized her classical training to create new symbols and new narratives. Other English artists would do this too, creating a Renaissance-looking style that was called Pre-Raphaelite. For example, consider the painting *The Kingdom of Heaven Suffereth Violence and the Violent Take It by Force*.

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN SUFFERETH VIOLENCE AND THE VIOLENT TAKE IT BY FORCE by Evelyn De Morgan

There is a procession toward heaven, with the protagonists identified by different-colored robes. Some are losing their way, and through the mists of darkness, the colors are grayer and more muted at the bottom. As one ascends to the spiritual heights at the top, they are whisked away with the angels and their glowing white robes and choirs.

In *The Storm Spirits*, the spirits are controlling the water, wind, and lightning, with their billowing robes intermingling with the clouds and their giant wings. The lightning spirit has insanely bright and rich pink wings, and her lightning is like delicate gold jewelry, thin and intricate. It's fascinating to see the way that these women are portrayed as much more powerful than the forces they are guiding. This seems like an ultimate feminist painting—women shown as strong and powerful, all while looking cool.

FÉLICIEN ROPS

Félicien Rops made people sit up and take notice by doing illustrations for the symbolist poets. He was a contrarian, and he took delight in upsetting people, especially the stuffy and the prudish, the religious, and anyone else he saw as part of the establishment. He stirred many controversies with his work.

Rops's favorite theme was blasphemy, and he was quite clever at finding new ways of flipping religious narratives around for his own devices. He would frequently suggest himself as Satanic through his self-portraits. He would often exaggerate his features to give himself a large head narrowing to a triangular point on the chin, long pointy nose, devious goatee, and villain's mustache.

He was into Satan generally, though. In a blasphemous work that would be sure to incense the church, *Study for "The Temptation of Saint Anthony,"* Rops took the familiar theme of the temptation of Saint Anthony of Egypt and offended as many as he could. You don't even see Anthony; all you see is his seductress, who appears to be a scantily clad, crucified sex worker. Her shawl is spread out similarly to the demon wings seen in Rops's previous work.

Gustave Guiches commissioned Rops to illustrate the cover of his third book, *La Pudeur de Sodome*, or *The Modesty of Sodom*. Sodom was the perfect topic for Rops, and he draws what appears to be another sex worker. She is shielding the genitals of the statue of a male god.

Meanwhile, her eye mask is down around her butt, and she is coyly waving a fan next to it, drawing all of your attention right there. It's quite funny, clever, and irreverent.

Rops's most famous painting of all has the hilarious title *Pornocrates* and features a sex worker. She's dressed in a hat, blindfolded, with black gloves, long black stockings, and high heels. There are three putti flittering about. There are some intriguing small features that almost make the painting a guessing game. Why does the pig have a golden tail, for example? Rops may not have been entirely clear in his message, but he was certainly provocative. Even though he hung out in the most avant-garde of artistic circles, paintings like this one still managed to shock his bohemian friends a bit. Whatever he was doing, it was way ahead of his time.

LA PUDEUR DE SODOME
by Félicien Rops

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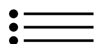

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ODILON REDON'S FANTASTIC WORLDS

This lecture will present Odilon Redon for your consideration as one of history's great weirdos. As you will learn, he had a deep understanding of color, composition, and design and a vision that forced people to take notice despite being confused or uncomfortable with what they were seeing. Even though he was creating strange monsters, he also had a strong command of how to make things look beautiful, inspiring, and mystifying, even while occasionally giving viewers nightmares.

ODILON'S EARLIER LIFE

Bertrand-Jean Redon was born in Bordeaux, France, on April 20, 1840, to a wealthy family. At some point, he decided that his name didn't fit him and opted instead for Odilon. His mother was a French Creole woman from Louisiana. Thus, from birth, Odilon had a richer and more diverse family life, with parents who had perspectives and experience beyond your average Parisian.

Odilon struggled with his health as a young boy. The exact nature of his condition was never completely diagnosed, but it did include epilepsy. While still a small child, he was sent to live with his uncle out in the country on the family wine-making estate. As a young boy, when other kids his age were playing outside, he was sad, scared, and alone.

When Odilon was 11, he moved back home with his family in Bordeaux and started school for the first time. Right away, it was clear to his teachers and family that he had an artistic talent far above his peers. While alone at his uncle's winery, he had been paying close attention to light and shadow, the way that the position of the sun can change the temperature of a color, and the angle of shadows. He had a unique ability in his drawings to conjure up the fantastic and impossible from an early age. After he won a prize for drawing, Odilon's parents signed him up for private lessons at the age of 15 with a professional artist known for his watercolors: Stanislas Gorin.

SIREN COMING OUT OF THE WAVES, DRESSED IN FLAMES by Odilon Redon

Though a much more conventional artist, Gorin was nonetheless a talented painter and a perfect match for Odilon at this stage. Gorin's advice to Odilon was to embrace his inner weirdo. Moreover, he said that feeling and reason should be behind every mark. He also introduced Odilon to the work of other artists that most of the post-

impressionists were taking their inspiration from, such as Delacroix, Goya, and Corot. However, there was another artist who moved Odilon: Gustave Moreau. Moreau was a significant inspiration to symbolism, especially the dark and magical moods he created and the fantastical beasts he drew that totally transcended reality.

Odilon's father was pushing him toward architecture. Thus, Odilon went to Paris and applied to architecture school at the École des Beaux-Arts. However, he failed to get in. In Paris, he was quickly exposed to all sorts of exciting new ideas and influences, such as the symbolist writers Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé. Edgar Allan Poe's writing also influenced his early dark aesthetic. He was interested in the spiritual side of the world, too, like many of the symbolists, and was also reading about Hinduism and Buddhism.

Needing a creative outlet for all these new ideas, he signed on to study with an artist named Jean-Léon Gérôme. This was not a good fit at all for Odilon. Gérôme was an academic painter. He insisted on copying exactly what you see and focusing on only what is visible with your eyes. Moreover, his subjects were all rooted in realistic depictions of history or traditional depictions of classical mythology.

Odilon's early work from this period is beautiful, detailed, and accurate, though. He had the skills to become a Salon artist had he wanted to, but he didn't want to. Thus, he left and started to make sculptures instead. While he was back in Bordeaux making sculptures, he crossed paths with a printmaker named Rodolphe Bresdin, who made etchings and engravings. This eccentric artist taught him not only how to make etchings and engravings but also how to free his mind from the tortured copying that his teacher in Paris had him do. Bresdin gave him the permission to get weird. Around 1870, Odilon was finally ready to take on the world with art unlike anyone had ever seen.

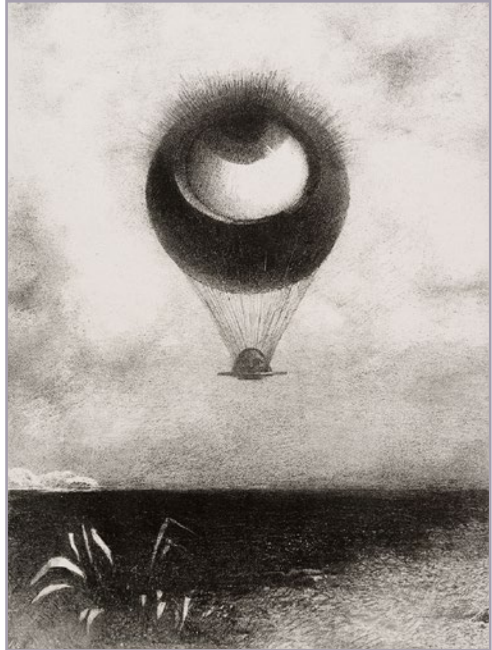
However, his life took a sudden detour, and he was drafted in the Franco-Prussian War. Humiliated a year later when France was defeated, he returned to Paris. After that, Odilon began working earnestly in charcoal. It's here where his love affair with the color black began. He was depressed and disturbed, and after seeing war firsthand, who knows what trauma stayed in his mind. Thus, he embraced the darkness. He was completely smitten by charcoal and black ink. He called these works his *Noirs*. These drawings and prints are filled with floating heads, heads with large eyes, heads as the sun, heads as balloons, and giant eyeballs.

ODILON'S ARTISTIC EVOLUTIONS

Just as Odilon started making all these charcoal drawings and prints, he faced another catastrophe: His once-wealthy father had a massive and fairly sudden change in fortune and soon died penniless. Odilon was left to fend for himself. He turned most of his attention to printmaking to reproduce his drawings and sell them to a wider audience.

Curiously, every once in a while, he painted something pretty, nice, and normal. For example, *Village by the Sea in Brittany*, painted in 1880, is a nondescript work you would be hard-pressed to recognize as Odilon's. However, he likely faced this dilemma often in his life: whether to paint the dark and discomforting images of his mind or whether to paint charming seascapes that would be more likely to sell. By this time, his works were starting to get noticed by critics, and things were looking up again.

While he was riding this wave of new success, he met Camille Falte, also Creole like his mother. He fell madly in love, and they got married. He was extremely happy, perhaps for one of the first times in his life. He was still making weird black-and-white drawings, but this strange eye-shaped balloon in *The Eye, Like a Strange Balloon Moves toward Infinity* is worth noting. Despite its weirdness, it does seem to have a more upbeat feeling to it. Against a backdrop of fluffy, light clouds, the eye and the face it's carrying aloft seem happy and contented somehow.



THE EYE, LIKE A STRANGE BALLOON MOVES TOWARD INFINITY by Odilon Redon

Religious themes were ever-present at this time, and it's fascinating to see Odilon's take on Jesus. His version in *Christ* looks oddly similar to his other floating heads; this does not seem like a powerful savior figure. The crown of thorns feels particularly violent here, flailing in all directions and almost stabbing into his forehead and neck.

Unfortunately for Odilon, these ups and downs of feeling in his art mirrored a consistent pattern in his life. Following the elation of meeting the love of his life, they would lose their firstborn son at the age of six months. Once again, he was plunged into darkness and despair. He kept working, however, as he had no choice but to support himself and his wife. He made a series of illustrations and lithographs that were meant to accompany poems and stories. Poe's works had been translated into French a decade earlier, and some of Odilon's drawings would serve as fan art for his favorite Poe poems and stories. *A Mask Sounds the Funeral Knell*, from 1882, recalls the Poe poem "The Bells."

Works like these became quite popular and were well received by critics and the public. Then, Odilon got a shoutout in a popular new novel called *Against Nature*, and pretty soon, his name was the talk of the town once again. He met Paul Gauguin, and he started hanging around with impressionists and post-impressionists. He even exhibited during the last impressionism show in 1886. A few years later, Odilon and Camille's son Ari was born, and there was a significant mood shift and an explosion of color in his work. At this time, he was also checking out the younger artists: the Nabis and those working with Japonism and decorative painting. He was always absorbing everything that was going on and synthesizing it through his own unique vision.

Breton Village from 1890, with its bucolic and sunny scene, was not necessarily in his comfort zone, but you can already see a beautiful glow of warmth from the sun with shimmering highlights that have depth and richness. He seemed to be stepping out of the shadows and feeling hopeful. However, he had been starting to make a name for himself as a dark and mysterious artist. Could he abandon black and embrace this hopeful optimism he was now experiencing?

Before diving headfirst into the super colorful, sparkly, luscious oil paintings he would eventually become recognized for, Odilon worked mostly with pastels, getting more comfortable with color. After so many hundreds of black-and-white works over the years, the color explosion to come could not have been predicted. Consider the portrait titled *Béatrice*. There is a

yellow silhouette contrasted by a darker green behind the subject and then a tiny touch of blue in the corner. This is a design common today that has been inspired by artists such as Odilon for the last 100 years or so.

ODILON'S UNIQUE STYLE

Odilon wasn't like the rest of the painters in Paris. While they were each forging their own path, he was going in a different direction, even as he embraced the colors and oils of the impressionists. More accurately, he was a symbolist somewhere in between impressionism and post-impressionism. However, regardless of the ideas behind his art, his gamble with color paid off. People loved his new style of work, and he gained more and more recognition for it. Portrait commissions started rolling in.

Trees on a Yellow Background is incredibly beautiful: It's abstract but also representational; the palette is muted and dominated with only a few shades of yellow. However, it twinkles and sparkles with all the different-colored flowers sprinkled throughout the middle. The flowers appear to float weightlessly in classic Odilon fashion, with their stems hidden or missing. There's also something interesting happening with the relationship between the figure and the ground. The trees are left almost bare, and the bright yellow of the sky takes precedence. There is an interesting reversal of form and space, which may add to the dreamlike fantasy quality. There appears to be a sun on the left, but with Odilon, it could be a floating head. Perhaps the genius in this painting is the restraint. Oftentimes a maximalist, Odilon held back this time and created a warm, soothing, sparkling, and magical painting.

EVOCATION OF BUTTERFLIES
by Odilon Redon

For whatever reason, flowers belonged in the sky for Odilon. He was always looking for excuses to

paint flowers or flowerlike bursts of color flying throughout the canvas. Thus, it makes sense that he would also be into butterflies; they are basically flying flowers.

In *Evocation of Butterflies*, the background has an organic feel, and you can see layers of other colors creating an atmosphere around the butterflies. The orange appears to be impacted by the flapping of the butterfly wings. It's like Odilon is showing you the air currents or subtle heat waves. The imagery is referencing the much wider world going on around us, beyond our senses—the things that scientific instruments can detect to show us the deeper nature of the world.

Finally, there is *The Cyclops*, Odilon's most famed painting. Bringing all his skills together, he creates a beautifully lush landscape, with every type of plant you can find. The sheer variety of colors and marks and shapes is stunning. With the stability of a two-thirds horizontal landscape, he cuts in with a cyclops that is cuter than it is scary. He's massive compared to the woman's body you see in the foreground, but somehow, he doesn't look terribly menacing—more inquisitive.

Odilon received the Legion of Honor from the French government in 1903. In 1913, he was included in the Armory show in New York, and he exhibited more work in that show than any other artist. The fact that he was so well accepted by the end of his life, despite his highly idiosyncratic style, reinforces how broad post-impressionism is. Odilon died tragically while his son Ari was fighting in World War I, his anxiety over his son perhaps contributing to his death in 1916. He was 76.

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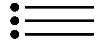

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HENRI ROUSSEAU'S JUNGLES OF THE MIND

A few artists embrace their shortcomings and celebrate them, painting the awkward things over and over. They develop a love for them and begin to own them as part of their idiosyncratic style. As you will see in this lecture, Henri Rousseau painted the best he could, focusing on what he wanted. His ability to stay focused and believe in himself brought one of the most fascinating and unique painting styles around. That's probably why the post-impressionists took him into their circle.

THE BEGINNINGS OF ROUSSEAU'S ART CAREER

Henri Julien Félix Rousseau was born in 1844 in Laval, in the northwest of France. His family was in the tin smithing trade, and they were able to afford to send Rousseau to high school, where he did well in his art and music classes. However, Rousseau didn't get started painting until he was in his forties. He worked regular office jobs for most of his life, starting in a law firm. Then, he joined the military for four years, and after that, he moved to Paris to work as a tax collector. When he was 24, he married his landlord's 15-year-old-daughter Clémence Boitard.

Soon, he was bored of his job, and he much preferred visiting the Louvre. Most of his life was spent working in a tollbooth, collecting taxes on the goods people entered the city with. He was later given the nickname *le Douanier*, or "the customs officer," which is a more elevated title than he held.

CARNIVAL EVENING
by Henri Julien Félix Rousseau

After a couple of years of teaching himself to paint after work, in 1886, he was given a chance to exhibit some of his paintings at the Salon des Indépendants. He showed *Carnival Evening*, which was his entrance into the Paris art scene: a gorgeously detailed forest against a beautiful sunset, with two small and awkward figures standing in the middle. However, the painting was quite different than what people were used to. Although nice, it exhibited all sorts of technical errors that the critics immediately picked up on.

Despite Rousseau's lack of painterly sophistication in the eyes of the critics, he started to develop a small cult following. He would exhibit in nearly every Salon des Indépendants show for the rest of his career. He

wasn't selling much art, though. It would be seven years after his first Salon des Indépendants show before he was finally able to retire from collecting taxes.

At the 1891 Salon show, he unveiled *Tiger in a Tropical Storm (Surprised!)*. A large and dynamic painting, it was his first jungle scene, and it rightfully created a stir. This is the type of work he would become famous for later in his career.

ROUSSEAU'S AWKWARD PROGRESSION

Rousseau was entirely self-taught; he was never tutored or mentored by another artist. The Louvre was his only teacher. His work bears a strong resemblance to a style of folk art and portrait painting that was common in France at the time. People would go to a fair and pay a few francs to have their portrait painted. It was a codified and simplified process, kind of like a template that was used to paint quickly. In these portraits, people looked the same, with similar features and the same method of painting used each time. They were flat, with little shading and modeling and no real sense of light and shadow.

Rousseau had access to one of the greatest museums of fine art at the Louvre. However, he didn't seem to have much interest or skill in learning more sophisticated techniques or how to paint more naturalistically. Despite the technical shortcomings of his style, it's easy to see how innovative and brilliant the other aspects of his work are. His later work comprises extremely intricate and difficult paintings, with so many fine details and layers to his paintings to explore.

Thus, was this folksy, unsophisticated painting style because he lacked the training and knowledge to do anything different? The latter case is called naïve art, and there's plenty of examples of it in history. It's also possible he deliberately painted this way. Primitivism was a bit of a trend in the late 19th century, where artists would try to emulate the simple artistic styles of so-called primitive societies in a nostalgic way. It's a trend that had troubling racist overtones and cultural appropriation, but Rousseau might have liked it because it gave his paintings a raw, dreamlike feel to match his exotic settings. Whatever the case, it would be more than 10 years of painting other things that he was not good at before he would paint another jungle scene.

He went on to make some awkward paintings, such as *Sawmill, Outskirts of Paris*. Although it has its charms, it took him two years and has none of the innovative and sophisticated types of painting that he became known for. It's flat and stilted, like the scenery in a play, and kind of dull and boring.

Rousseau had a strong interest in flags and bold shapes and flat colors. They are easier to paint, and they seemed to make more sense to him than people. He claimed to have invented the portrait landscape with *Myself: Portrait-Landscape*. That is a bold claim, especially for a genre that had been around for centuries.

The largest and most exciting painting he made in this decade-long painting school he was putting himself through is *War*. After retiring from the tollbooth the year prior, Rousseau was finally able to dedicate all his focus to a painting, and the result was stunning. There is an intense intersection of deep black angles, the horse poised like a bullet speeding over a field of dead bodies. A closer look reveals a handful of crows pecking out the eyes of the dead, the trees breaking and succumbing to the destructive moment. There are some curious and unexpected parts, too, such as the beautiful pink clouds and soft blue sky. What's particularly odd, though, is how the rider is not even sitting on the horse; she is hovering in front of it. Regardless, the painting was a hit with critics and other artists. With it, Rousseau significantly raised his public profile.

WAR by Henri Julien Félix Rousseau

However, paintings such as *War* also raise more questions about Rousseau's intent as an artist. By now, he'd had years of practice and exposure to fine art and critics pointing out the technical flaws in his work. Yet he almost seemed to up the ante with head-scratchers such as *Boy on the Rocks*, which looks like a printed wood cutout in the sand. Sometimes, it seems like he forgot how to paint. He didn't seem to be making much progress in showing a human in a natural pose. However, breaking the rules was what the post-impressionists were all about, and it was easy for Rousseau because he didn't learn the rules in the first place.

ROUSSEAU'S JUNGLES

Tragically, Rousseau's young wife passed away in 1888, and 10 years after that, he would marry Josephine Noury, who was also a widow. Rousseau decided to commemorate their wedding with a painting called *The Past and the Present, or Philosophical Thought*, a wedding portrait with their tiny little hands holding a tiny little bouquet. The heads floating over them are their deceased spouses. It's truly a bizarre, charming, and intriguing painting.

At this stage of his life, Rousseau finally returned to painting the jungle. There had been a French expedition to Mexico in the 1860s, and that was where he said he casually encountered many of the fantastical scenes that he was now painting. However, the evidence suggests that the furthest his army service took him was Angers, about an hour away from his hometown. He quite possibly did hear stories, though, from the returning soldiers. He also visited the botanical gardens and the zoo, which were being transformed into grand spectacles. Thus, Rousseau's jungles were a conflation of what he saw in Paris and a book he had of photographs of animals.

If you look closely at his jungle paintings, you'll start to notice some strange things: He didn't know what kind of plants and trees were in the jungle, but he did know that there were many and that they were large. Thus, he painted the plants he was familiar with and made them giant.

Rousseau's greatest talent was for painting leaves, grass, branches, and trees. When you are looking at that level, you can see expertly blended highlights and shadows and many types of greens. Over the years, he developed an intricate system of layering. He often started with a loose and lighter green base for the foliage. He covered up the sky color with this base green, ensuring that the jungle would look thick and impervious.

Then, with each layer, he painted a little bit darker, with a bit more contrast and detail, bringing the trees forward in space with each step. All the while, each plant seems to be a slightly different temperature of green. However, there is little foreshortening or angling of the leaves. It's like he flattened the jungle between the pages of a book.

Rousseau got pretty good at modeling his lights and shadows. Modeling is basically when you make up volume by adding a light on one side and a shadow on the other. It's one of the simpler techniques to achieve this, but it can be convincing. That was Rousseau's secret weapon. The highlights never look like they are coming from the light source; they are arbitrarily on one side of each leaf.

Virgin Forest with Sunset has a large, heavy, deep orange ball as the sun, hovering slightly above the jungle, repeating the color in the cactus flowers. There's something beautifully foreboding about it. However, you can also see a more problematic element of the "exotic" that Rousseau used in his art. The central figure, rendered completely in black, is reduced to a silhouette or merely a shadow. He's a prop for the

VIRGIN FOREST WITH SUNSET by Henri Julien Félix Rousseau

action of a leopard attack. This scene would have played into French chauvinism of the time about faraway places, where primitive men were savagely eaten by wild beasts. Underscoring much of this is the theme that these were wild and uncivilized areas that were lucky to have Europeans come and take over.

However, you see in this work, too, that Rosseau's artistic skills were sharpening. Consider the yellow trim grass in the bottom right corner and the rest of the grass along the bottom. His sense of light and shadow was getting stronger. There is a subtle gradation of the yellow into the orange, creating a nice warm glow.

ROUSSEAU'S LATER WORK

Another cultural touchstone Rousseau was borrowing from, whether intentionally or imaginatively, was the aesthetic of the arts and crafts movement. This was an English design movement that was popular in this period. Rousseau would have been familiar with the movement's wallpaper from its leading proponent, William Morris. It featured ornate and intricate patterns of leaves and flowers and fruit—expertly drawn, well defined, and well spaced out, perfectly layered to create harmonious balance and rich design. Rousseau's forest scenes show this influence, as his focused approach to the forest greenery was similar to what he did in his jungles to create detailed and intricate scenes.

Throughout this later period, he continued to paint portraits as well. However, the grandest and most ambitious painting of his career was also the final painting he exhibited. Called *The Dream*, it demonstrates that he had finally embraced the fiction of his paintings. He includes a sofa in what may be the first and only intentional surrealist element. He let everyone know he put it there only for the use of that particular color of red.

There are many hidden gems throughout the painting. There's a figure in an orange skirt emerging from the background, playing some kind of flute. There are flowers, fruit, and a bunch of animals: a snake, an elephant, a bird, and monkeys. Under the lion's goofy-looking eyes are two green plants, one with dark veins. They look remarkably photorealistic—as if Rousseau was painting some fake painted plants made out of wood. Moreover, there is something uncanny about the meticulous way he painted the light in this scene, as the whole bottom of the painting has this flat yet three-dimensional dynamic.

Rousseau died from gangrene in his leg. He was poor, and his friends were forced to sell some of his paintings to cover the funeral costs. His career left a wide range of responses, from passionate adoration to mocking dismissal. However, he did have some notable admirers. One of his largest fans was Picasso, who acquired many of his works.

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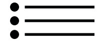

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POST-IMPRESSIONISM BEYOND FRANCE

The post-impressionist era's influence spread quickly throughout Europe and the Americas. Science, technology, religion, politics, and culture were rapidly transforming in these places too. Each country inevitably interpreted these ideas in their own way, and their art reflected the issues facing their own societies. Therefore, in this lecture, you will learn about some of the more interesting post-impressionists beyond the French-speaking world. Incredible artists around the world took the styles, concepts, and spirit of the post-impressionists and made them their own.

WALTER SICKERT

Culturally, philosophically, and aesthetically, there was a significant divide between England and the rest of Europe. However, like in France, the British Royal Academy of Arts had a conservative stranglehold on the art world in England, and the art scene began spawning a number of experimental factions. One of these was the Camden Town Group, around 1908. They were closely watching post-impressionism in France. Camille Pissarro's son Lucien was even in the group.

The most interesting painter of the group is probably Walter Sickert. He was perhaps the most important English artist in the transition between impressionism and modern art. Sickert moved to England from Germany as a boy, and his dad was a prominent painter himself. Young Sickert's first career, though, was acting. However, he craved novelty and variety; he was only getting small parts. Looking elsewhere for fulfillment, he found himself drawn naturally to painting.

Sickert painted what he was familiar with: the theater, actors, and the stage. This was his world. Of course, he had a flair for the dramatic. *The Acting Manager or Rehearsal: The End of the Act* is a beautifully painted scene: There are subtle shifts in color and value from the dress to the back of the couch to the background, which almost seems to be a combination of the dress and couch colors. A strong highlight divides the composition into thirds and is reflected in the strategically placed mirror that divides the composition in thirds in the other direction, horizontally. Sickert was a natural talent.

He would also travel to Paris during this time, where he met Edgar Degas and encountered impressionism. Degas encouraged Sickert to paint in the studio from sketches and imagination to avoid the "tyranny of nature." Impressionism's influence on Sickert was slow and subtle, as he took years to gradually begin to loosen up and be more playful and experimental. He began to develop his own sense of light and color and methods of abstraction that didn't quite look like what was happening in Paris.

His use of color became bolder and more experimental, as in *Minnie Cunningham at the Old Bedford*. The muted greenish background is quite interesting, but it's completely overwhelmed by the intense red glow from the dress. Sickert's work got more interesting when he began to abandon local color and traditional light techniques.

LAZARUS BREAKS HIS FAST (SELF-PORTRAIT) by Walter Sickert

It seemed to take a few decades for Sickert to find his groove. He experimented with various aspects of his technique. As he simplified his shapes and colors the way other post-impressionists were doing, he started coming up with these bizarre palettes that have their own sense of time and space. In *Lazarus Breaks His Fast (Self-Portrait)*, the color in the man's face, for example, is composed of bright red-orange, minty green, and various lighter orange tones. Lacking any definitive details, the blurring and simplification of the background draw a sharp contrast to the facial features. There is a sharpness to the line and color that hints at the detail that must be there, meaning your brain fills in the gaps. The man's gaze and the highest contrast lead you to the spoon, which points to the bowl of what may be blueberries, simplified nearly to black and white. It seemed as though the older Sickert got, the less color he used.

Whatever his motivation, it's clear how much he liked to experiment—changing techniques and approaches throughout his career, pushing the boundaries of color, light, and space. However, Sickert became famous for a different reason. The English post-impressionist collective was called the Camden Town Group because of a 1907 series of paintings Sickert did after the so-called Camden Town Murder, where a sex worker had been brutally murdered by an artist. Sickert's paintings were unusually emotional and sympathetic to the victim. He wanted to counterbalance all the sensationalist reporting in the papers on the story. Due to the sinister subject, many people were curious about the paintings, and they helped get Sickert and his movement into the public eye.

He was into crime generally, though. He even stayed for a while in what he believed was Jack the Ripper's apartment and painted it. Because of the sensational subject, these crime paintings make him a household name in the early 1900s. Sickert was the only artist of the Camden Town Group who got much attention, partly because the group was already behind the times. You don't start seeing their mature post-impressionist works until around 1910.

AUBREY BEARDSLEY

Aubrey Beardsley is more clearly identified as an art nouveau artist. When Beardsley was 20, he went to Paris to begin working on a commission and discovered Henri Toulouse-Lautrec's posters around the city. He was taken by their beauty and simplicity, as well as by the Japanese wood-block prints that were taking the city by storm. He borrowed heavily from their conventions, including flat graphics, strong contrast, strong contour lines, dense patterning, and dynamic cropping. However, he took these inspirations in an entirely different direction than Vincent van Gogh or the Nabis did: He made stark black-and-white images from pen and ink. These were often filled with allusion and drama. He was a symbolist at heart.

AUBREY BEARDSLEY

Like Toulouse-Lautrec, he got into the burgeoning market for mass-produced prints. One of his early famous illustrations, *The Peacock Skirt* from 1893, is from a series he did for Oscar Wilde's salacious new play *Salome*. These were bold and fresh. They made a significant splash, and suddenly, he was in high demand.

What made Beardsley so fascinating and an international celebrity were his racier drawings, such as the illustrations he did for *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes. He was commissioned to make eight drawings for an accompanying publication to this play. He took erotic drawing to a whole new level but did it with such care and sophistication that his genius couldn't be denied. Even while being shocking, hilarious, and provocative, they are still undeniably extremely well-done drawings.

Just as Beardsley was becoming famous, he suddenly converted to Catholicism, renounced his work, and tried to stop it from being published. A year later, he died tragically early of tuberculosis, at only 25 years old. Modern printing made him an iconic artist in a fraction of the time it took most painters to get that level of recognition.

THE PRENDERGASTS

American tastes in art tended to be conservative in the 19th century: The rich wanted to emulate the old money of Europe and commissioned stately portraits and grand scenes to reflect that. Around the time the post-impressionist movement hit is when American artists started forming their own avant-garde movements anyway.

MAURICE PRENDERGAST

There were, however, a couple of American artists who did get into post-impressionism, including Maurice and Charles Prendergast. Maurice was born in 1858 and grew up in Boston. He apprenticed as a commercial artist when he was young. He had a naturally much looser and more energetic style than the typical flat and graphic style that sign painting and lettering would allow. Thus, when he was introduced to impressionism and post-impressionism, he found a style that would resonate for decades.

Maurice is one of the few post-impressionists whose primary medium of choice was watercolor. He was clearly adept with it. Making changes, blending, and adjusting are far more difficult with watercolor. Rather than using white paint, you use the white of the paper to show through to various degrees to control brightness. Maurice's watercolors had a beautiful, jewellike quality, with many little bits of bright, colorful moments.

His compositions were usually picked from a specific vantage point where he could be zoomed out from a crowd to see all the intermingling of colors and shapes. Many of his paintings are quite dense, with a horror vacui feel to them—a fear of open space—and almost every little area filled up and sparkling with tiny colorful details. He was less

interested in atmospheric perspective and conveying deep space. Even shapes in the far distance still have a rather up-close feel, as the whole surface of the painting appears to be vying for your attention, as in *The Terrace Bridge, Central Park*.

He used the precise and tight graphic painting skills he got from his commercial days in certain areas such as the architecture and the umbrellas here. Under the architecture, which gives structure to the composition, the umbrellas create the movement as you follow them down and the color stream empties out onto the bottom of the canvas. The shapes and colors dissipate into loose, impressionistic brushstrokes.

He painted with oils, too, particularly later in his career. In *Landscape with Figures*, you see him employing more layering, with a dark background under the blue sky, providing a depth and richness to the surface. It also seems like smaller details were more difficult for him with oil paints, as his strokes are larger and looser, the people reduced to a few gestures, and there are no faces.

LANDSCAPE WITH FIGURES by Maurice Prendergast

Maurice's younger brother Charles was also an artist. He incorporated many of the intriguing elements of his older brother's work into his own: the playfulness, the bright colors, the density of the compositions, and the horror vacui where stuff is happening everywhere all over the canvas. However, Charles was more interested in experimenting with media and developing his own techniques.

He didn't start making art until his fifties. Before then, he was a woodworker and made elaborate custom frames for artists such as John Singer Sargent. Therefore, he approached his paintings much in the same way he would a picture frame. Starting with a gessoed panel, he would carve his composition out of the wood as if he were making an etching or woodblock print. He would then add things such as gold leaf, silver leaf, graphite, and tempera paint. His works are more of a colorful explosion of design, creativity, playfulness, and explorations rather than observations of reality.

EUGÈNE JANSSON

The Swedish artist Eugène Jansson deserves way more attention than he has received. The quality of his work is on par with that of van Gogh, Cézanne, and any of the other post-impressionists. Eugène was born in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1862. He came from a working-class family who loved art and music. When he was 14, he came down with scarlet fever, which ended up giving him lifelong complications, including damage to his eyesight, hearing, and sense of smell. He took private painting lessons from a well-known local painter and eventually began studying at the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts. Obviously, he was talented, with strong observational skills. His early work was nearly photographic.

Eventually, all of his classmates began moving to Paris. However, Eugène's family couldn't afford to send him. It's impossible to say how his work would have evolved if he had gone, but one thing is for sure: By staying in Stockholm, his art was strongly shaped by the darker, more evocative lightscapes that pervade Scandinavia. They gave him a unique style that set him apart from all the other artists who went to Paris and learned from one another there. Another significant difference is that he also painted much larger than most of his colleagues. *Sunset* is nearly nine feet long.

He became famous for his moody nighttime paintings. Almost all his paintings were dark and blue, with subtle glimmers of light and reflection. People often referred to him as "the blue painter." In *Riddarfjärden,*

Stockholm, he took a unique mark-making approach, painting the clouds with those long sweeping and crossing lines. The lights at the bottom are swirling and swimming, similar to van Gogh's. Jansson had a way of combining a unique perspective with an intriguing yet limited light source, combined with active and loose brush marks—all the while maintaining an accurate sense of perspective, both linear and atmospheric.

Despite the success and notoriety of his beautiful nighttime paintings, Eugène would eventually collapse. He got to a point where he said he felt completely exhausted, sick, and like he had nothing left to give. He stayed out of the exhibition circuit for several years. Fortunately, he bounced back. The vitalism movement was all the rage in Europe.

Moreover, seeing how homosexuality was illegal in Sweden until 1944, his *Self-Portrait* (1910) was as public of a coming out as one could have. In this significant painting, Eugène is life-size, full-length, dressed in glorious white, and flanked by dozens of bronzed naked men. From here on out, the nude male form would be the only focus of his work. His massive canvases were now vertical life-size paintings. They combined his unique energetic brush marks with precision, accuracy, and detail. They celebrated the male nude without shying away and were incredibly bold.

Tragically, Eugène died in 1915 at the age of 53 of a brain hemorrhage, just as he was hitting his prime. His brother, who was also gay but feared legal consequences, burned all the letters between him and Eugène to avoid any potential scandal or denigration of his brother's legacy.

ARKHIP KUINDZHI

Arkhip Kuindzhi was born in 1841 in Mariupolsky Uyezd, present-day Mariupol, Ukraine, to a poor family of Pontic Greek descent. His parents died when he was only six years old. As a teenager, he began working around artists and artist studios, mixing paint and touching up photographs. This kind of work gave his brilliant mind references to study, and he developed an incredibly keen eye for light, shadow, and realism. It's clear in his paintings how much of that photography background influenced him.

He was an undeniable master of observing and conveying the subtleties of light. Many of his paintings look like photographs from afar. Up close, the brushstrokes are clear, but the precise details are astonishing. For example, *Moonlit Night on the Dnieper* has a canvas that is 90% dark, black night. Aside from the moon and its reflection in the river, there is

little detail. However, the use of subtle color shifts in the highlights in the river, from the bright white to the subtle greenish blue and then warming up on the edges with an orange hue, helps create an uncanny sense of reality. Kuindzhi was just as talented with sunlight.

Kuindzhi had an interesting mix of artistic influences. By the 1870s, he was part of a rebel artist group in the Russian Empire known as The Wanderers; they resisted the dominance of academic painting and the Imperial Academy of Arts. However, Kuindzhi was almost like a rebel within the rebels.

Nearly all his colleagues painted in a realist style and often focused on subjects that highlighted the social and political problems of Russia. However, Kuindzhi was all about paintings such as *Elbrus. Moonlit Night*, with its high-contrast, illuminated moments in an otherwise dark landscape. Always experimenting, he was looking at light, color, and optical effects and how they exploit our emotional connection to nature. He can't be classified definitively as a post-impressionist in a narrow sense, but he was thinking more like one of them than many of his colleagues.

Each year, he got better and better, and his paintings reveal an even more refined skill set. He was able to convey nearly any kind of light or atmosphere and make you feel like you are there. Kuindzhi was also interested in the fantastic worlds seen from the symbolist painters, in which beautifully illuminated landscapes begin to transcend reality, as in *The Birch Grove*.

The Kuindzhi Art Museum in Ukraine was destroyed by invading Russian troops early in 2022. His paintings are rumored to have been moved from the museum before destruction.

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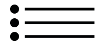

EDVARD MUNCH'S EMOTIONAL PALETTE

Edvard Munch, the subject of this lecture, is one of the few non-French artists who gets mentioned in the same breath as the post-impressionists and also one of the few famous artists to come out of Norway. However, he's not always easy to classify. He spent time in Paris and was strongly influenced by the techniques and style of Toulouse-Lautrec, van Gogh, and Gauguin. However, he also spent significant time in Germany, and his powerful emotional works can also be classified as part of the expressionist movement that was arising there.

MUNCH'S EARLIER LIFE

Munch was born in a small village in Norway in 1863 to Christian Munch, a pious man and military doctor, and Laura Catherine Bjølstad. The family moved to Kristiania, now Oslo. Laura died of tuberculosis when Munch was only five years old, and his closest sister died of tuberculosis in 1877. Another sister struggled with mental illness and would be in and out of mental hospitals throughout her life. Feelings of fear, loss, and anxiety would become major themes in Munch's life, ones he would revisit again and again in his paintings. Munch himself was often ill and laid up in bed for weeks at a time. He spent a good deal of his time staring out the window, drawing and painting.

Munch left school at 16 to become a painter—much to his father's disapproval. He began his studies at the Norwegian Royal School of Art and Design. He was a natural and started getting attention right away. His understanding of light, shadow, form, and volume was miles ahead of his classmates'.

While studying at the Royal School, Munch met a few people who would be influential on his career. First was his painting professor Christian Krohg, who was publishing a journal of the developments of French impressionism; he encouraged Munch to give it a try. Second was Hans Jaeger, a prominent writer and anarchist. He encouraged his followers to overthrow bourgeoisie society, including its moral code. His group was referred to as the Kristiania Bohemians. Jaeger's idea was to reorganize government and society around a decentralized structure based on humanity's natural inclination toward love.

EDVARD MUNCH

Munch fell in with the bohemians of Oslo: anarchists, atheists, and nonconformists. Between Krohg and Jaeger, he had been set free. Krohg had freed his painting style and given him permission to be more creative and intuitive. Jaeger had freed his mind from the conventional norms and attitudes of society and given him the confidence to trust his own strange ideas. Munch felt free to express his pain—his grief, depression, and anxiety.

Munch was met with pretty quick success, and he even started to sell a few paintings. He was accepted into some of the larger exhibitions in Norway. However, he was also quick to attract controversy. After his first exhibit, the conservative Christian press described one of his works as an "almost frighteningly ugly portrait."

Morning is a good example of the types of "frighteningly ugly" portraits Munch was making at the time. Although he hadn't been to France to see the impressionist paintings there, he was learning as much as he could from the reproductions and publications he saw. This is a highly skilled impressionist painting, with Munch focusing on the light and its glow. Also influenced by realism, he used real colors and showed details such as dirty feet and wrinkled sheets. Norway was a long way from Paris, and *Morning* shows a much looser and softer style of painting than the conservative critics there would have been used to. By the French standards, however, he was still quite conservative with his colors, using mostly neutral tones.

MUNCH'S ARTISTIC EVOLUTION

Over the years, Munch gradually started pushing things, getting a little bit looser and brighter. He was still studying with Krohg, who appreciated impressionism but was no impressionist himself. In 1886, Munch had a breakthrough when he finished his painting *The Sick Child*, based on the terrible memory of his sister dying from tuberculosis. He took his time painting this piece, adding and scraping away paint, layer by layer. The Norwegian critics said it looked unfinished, rough, and dirty, with no realistic light and shadow—but that was the point.

In 1889, Munch had his first solo exhibition in Oslo. It was a hit, and the local government even offered him a grant to go study in Paris. As part of his scholarship, he was exhibiting paintings and enrolling in classes as soon as he arrived. He was also going to museums, visiting studios, and soaking in as much as he could. He fell in love with the work of van Gogh, Pissarro, Seurat, and, especially, Gauguin. The symbolism and reaction against realism were enlightening and incredibly inspiring to Munch.

However, Munch soon received word that his father had passed away. He headed back to Norway to attend to his father's funeral and be with his family. He became suicidal and hopeless after so much death in his family. His father's death had left the family destitute, and Munch

felt the responsibility fall on his shoulders. Fortunately, based on the quality and success of his paintings, he was able to secure a loan from a wealthy art collector so that he could start supporting his siblings.

Eventually, Munch was able to start painting again. He returned to Paris to study more. Seurat had been on his mind, and he wanted to try out a bit of pointillism. You can see him dipping his toes in pointillism in *Spring Day on Karl Johan Street*. He was beginning to push himself beyond his comfort zone and think about things in a different way.

Munch's popularity was rising, and in 1892, he was invited by the Association of Berlin Artists to have a solo show in Berlin. The directors apparently weren't completely aware of what they would get. They decided to shut down the show after only a week, to spare anyone else from being exposed to this "degenerate" art, which included a painting called *Melancholy* of an unhappy man on a beach. Closing the show, though, had the opposite effect of what they anticipated, and news of the censorship blew up. Munch was suddenly in high demand.

His closed show started to tour around Germany. The fallout led to the formation of the Berliner Sezession: artists and writers who were ready to shake off the hold of the German art establishment. They demanded freedom from censorship. This was significant, as it would kick off similar movements throughout Europe. By the time his show toured around the country and came back to Berlin, the association had changed its tune and welcomed this new celebrity back for a full show.

Now, Munch was getting recognition, but in his words, it was "more honor than gold." He wasn't selling much work, and there were several family members back in Norway depending on him and a large loan collecting interest. He also found it difficult to part with many of his paintings, describing them as being like his children.

Munch would stay in Berlin for about four years, painting, sketching, and planning. His work was becoming more abstract, more simplified, with flattened forms; he was more interested in color, unusual compositions, and mood and feeling, exaggerating them to heighten the emotion. *Starry Night*, from 1893, shows the view from the window of the hotel where he remembered falling in love for the first time.

THE SCREAM

Munch completed *The Scream* in 1893 when he was 30 years old. In the simplest of terms, he was painting the fear and loneliness of a person in a natural setting. Why he painted the sky red has long been debated: Some believe that Munch was depicting the memory of the Norwegian skies about 10 years earlier, when Krakatoa had erupted in Indonesia and tinted the skies throughout the Western Hemisphere. There are also variants of polar clouds that appear in Norway that can catch the sunset. However, other scholars are not convinced. Munch was an expressionist and symbolist; he was more interested in what he felt than what he saw.

THE SCREAM by Edvard Munch

The figure and the face in the painting look very much like they were influenced by mummies Munch saw in Paris. In tiny letters in the sky, Munch wrote: "Can only have been painted by a madman." This painting is far more abstract than anything he'd painted up to this point. Fundamentally, he wanted his paintings to answer questions such as: How does it feel to exist? What's going on behind our calm exteriors?

Munch made many versions of *The Scream*, and he also made other similar paintings with the same themes and composition. He was now making the most groundbreaking and recognizable work of his long and successful career. These new, highly emotional paintings are part of a long-running series he later called the *Frieze of Life*.

By 1897, he was doing relatively well and was regularly selling his paintings. He returned to live in Kristiania again. The same old conservative art scene was there, but Munch was a legit artist now, with Paris and Berlin under his belt. Begrudgingly, the Norwegian establishment started to accept him.

Munch's financial success was due in large part to printmaking. This was a great way for artists to sell multiple copies of a single work. He hired Auguste Clot, a renowned printer in Paris who worked with Toulouse-Lautrec and van Gogh. Soon, Munch also got into printmaking, and he was making tons of new work, and reworking old work with new ideas, for this new format. He got more involved in the process, and he invented a way to make wood-block printing easier: using a jigsaw to saw out the colored bits. Those parts could be switched out instead of the whole plate.

Within a few years, he had made hundreds and hundreds of new prints. Continuing to experiment and push the boundaries with this medium, he would embrace using the texture of the wood grain to press the print. Unlike other artists, he usually kept the printing plates themselves, too. They found 500 in his home when he died.

TULLA LARSEN by Edvard Munch

TULLA

A bizarre chapter in Munch's life, in 1899, was when he met a woman named Tulla Larsen who fell madly in love with him. At first, they had a roaring affair and traveled to Italy together. Once she started talking about marriage, Munch rejected her. Then, she pursued him across international borders. He would often refuse her advances and then give in to her. He even got close to agreeing to getting married before fleeing to another city again.

They had a highly dysfunctional relationship. Eventually, Tulla told Munch he had made her depressed and suicidal. They had an argument. There was a gun involved, and somehow, Munch got his fingertip shot off. He commemorated this traumatic evening in a painting he coyly titled *The Death of Marat I*, a personal retelling of the classic Jacques-Louis David painting. Unsurprisingly, this failed to improve their relationship. They did reconcile for a bit, but Tulla finally moved on to one of Munch's younger artist friends.

Munch was obviously not in a good place after Tulla. By 1908, his bohemian lifestyle was beginning to catch up with him. He eventually collapsed. He was hearing voices, and too much nicotine and alcohol were taking their toll on his body. Self-medication only exacerbated the problem. Thankfully, he was able to get the help he needed. He spent the next eight months in the hospital resting, recuperating, and getting his drinking under control. He also decided to make some significant changes to his lifestyle. There were some friends who were bad influences that he would have to cut off. His largest goal was keeping the drama to a minimum. He needed to relax and focus on painting.

END OF LIFE

Munch returned to Norway once again. The public there had finally embraced him, and he started receiving acclaim and honors as an artist. Coming home and living a cleaner lifestyle seemed to work well, and there was a visible change in his work after this. His colors became brighter and his marks even looser. *Geniuses: Ibsen, Nietzsche, and Socrates* is perhaps a more hopeful work of his intellectual heroes Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright, and the philosophers Nietzsche and Socrates.

In 1916, he bought a former plant nursery on a large piece of land outside of Oslo called the Ekely estate. He was doing so well now that he was basically part of the landed gentry. A few years later, he caught the flu in the great pandemic. He not only survived but also made some fascinating paintings of himself while he had it.

Munch tried to live out the last few decades keeping mostly to himself, with a large studio out in the country, taking inspiration from nature and painting. During these years, he was also commissioned to paint some murals in the hallways of Oslo University, which he would finish in

1916. The glorious, colorful, and hopeful sunsets he painted couldn't be further from the anxious loneliness in *The Scream*. A commission like this one would help cement his legacy.

Although his later works are not well known and perhaps lack the emotional rawness that made him so famous, he continued to make incredible and beautiful paintings until the end of his life. During these later years, the admiration and praise kept coming. He was even awarded the Grand Cross of the Order of Saint Olav.

As Munch's eyes began to fail him, he would record the process of degeneration much like Cézanne did, although Munch painted far more abstract and inscrutable works. In fact, his self-portrait during his eye disease, *Disturbed Vision*, is kind of terrifying. Unsurprisingly, his old companions, fear and anxiety, returned to his paintings.

Munch lived long enough even to see World War II, in which Norway was occupied by Germany. The Nazis declared his works degenerate, and they were removed from the museums. Munch spent most of the war trying to keep a low profile. He died in 1944 at the age of 80 from pneumonia. He donated his entire estate—consisting of some 20,000 paintings, prints, drawings, and watercolors—to the city of Oslo, plus stacks of all his writings and notes.

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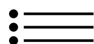

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GUSTAV KLIMT'S JOURNEY TO ART NOUVEAU

Gustav Klimt is another artist of the post-impressionist generation who had a unique style that doesn't fit neatly in a single box. He was an Austrian and much more associated with the Vienna Sezession movement that began in the late 1890s. However, undoubtedly, Klimt's work was strongly influenced by symbolism and the cloisonné style and, to some degree, Nabi and Japanese art as well. In Klimt's case, you see the transition from post-impressionism to art nouveau and the Sezession movements about to sweep the German-speaking world.

KLIMT'S EARLIER LIFE

Klimt was born to a large middle-class family near Vienna in 1862. His father was a goldsmith. Klimt and his brother Ernst seemed to have a natural gift for drawing early on, and their parents enrolled them at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. This was more an arts and crafts school than a purely fine art school. Thus, they were learning figure painting and such but also the applied arts: patterning, design, wallpaper, furniture, and decorative arts. This instilled in Klimt a love for craft that would influence the rest of his career. Later, he would say that he wanted to get rid of the distinction between art and craft. He helped this to become a fashionable idea in Austria and Germany.

While in school, their teachers were so impressed with Klimt and Ernst—and another friend they worked with, Franz Matsch—that they started recommending the three for prestigious commissions. Thus, they became successful mural painters before they even finished school. Their most prominent commission was to paint the ceiling and staircase at the Burgtheater in Vienna. Sampling a variety of styles used throughout history, they showed the evolution of art over the centuries. Klimt, Ernst, and Matsch finished this mural in only two years. Klimt was then awarded the Golden Order of Merit by the Austro-Hungarian ruler himself, Franz Joseph.

GUSTAV KLIMT

Klimt had an almost supernatural ability to quickly and effortlessly render form, value, and volume on any subject and in any style presented to him. The kind of historical, classical painting seen in *Allegory of Sculpture* is what thrust him to the top. He painted the illusion of sculpted marble alongside another black sculpture at the bottom, with a person standing in front with a bronze figure in her hands. He was flaunting his talent here at the young age of 27.

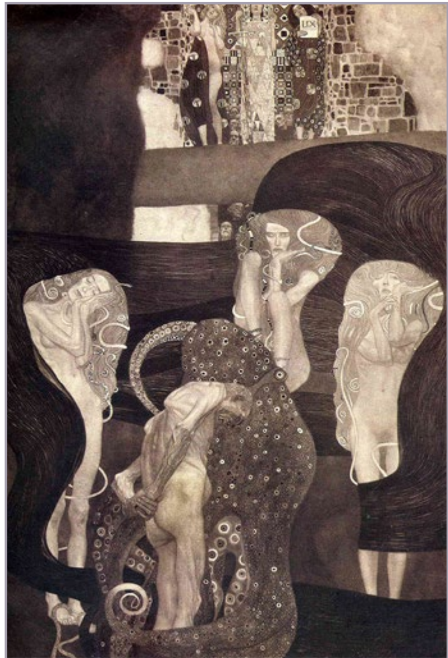
Moreover, Klimt was particularly famous for jaw-dropping portraits of young, beautiful women. Soon, many high-society ladies wanted their portraits painted by him. These portraits turned out to be a good, steady source of income and helped him build an excellent Rolodex of contacts of some of the richest and most powerful women in Vienna.

Thankfully, behind his technical abilities, he was incredibly creative and bursting with new ideas. Soon, he was getting inspired by Japanese prints and the symbolist movement and seeing all the new work being produced by the post-impressionists in Paris. This is where you start to see his own unique style emerge.

THE VIENNA SEZESSION

Vienna was an extremely conservative city compared to Paris. However, it was being shaken up by a progressive group of artists, writers, architects, musicians, and scientists—a new golden age that would shape the 20th century. Klimt seemed to be channeling much of this energy into his paintings. In 1892, his father and Ernst died unexpectedly, and he didn't paint much while grieving. When he did finally come back, the tragedy seemed to have triggered a new confidence to pursue his unique vision.

Several years later, he was commissioned to paint murals for the University of Vienna. They were expecting the kind of painting he'd done on the ceiling of the Burgtheater. They gave him the themes of jurisprudence, philosophy, and medicine. However, what they got was much more shocking than anything they were expecting. His murals caused a scandal, as he was accused of painting blasphemy and pornography and denigrating the sacred pillars of their university.



JURISPRUDENCE by Gustav Klimt

Granted, these paintings were weird and more abstract. The figures were contorted, gaunt, and overtly sexual. They weren't glorifying the university; they

were presenting difficult and obtuse imagery. His representation of *Jurisprudence* was an accused man being grasped by a giant octopus, surrounded by awkwardly cramped and judgmental female onlookers in a dark, swirling sea. If that wasn't enough, some of the figures had pubic hair. The paintings were rejected by the university.

This rejection by the University of Vienna revealed a fissure that had grown for decades between the traditional academy and the avant-garde. Klimt decided to lead a group of his fellow radicals to break away from the art establishment, creating a movement called the Vienna Sezession. They were ready to break away from traditional ideas and the oppressive conservative culture of the ruling class.

One of the first works he created for the new group was a portrait of Athena, who was chosen as the mascot for the Vienna Sezession. In *Pallas Athene*, you start to see the hallmarks of Klimt's iconic style. Gold dominates the picture; he would use gold leaf in many of his most famous works. Athena was probably the perfect subject for Klimt—a goddess and a muse to represent this powerful new movement. On her breastplate you see Medusa poking her tongue out; that's Klimt giving the finger to the art establishment. Yet she's still an alluring femme fatale, and he couldn't resist painting in a more sexualized female figurine to stand in Athena's hands.

KLIMT'S ARTISTIC EVOLUTION

Soon, Klimt was going all out with his gold, as in his portrait of the biblical character of Judith. Gold leaf isn't something you can modulate to create dimensionality through highlight and shadow, and it tends to dominate wherever it is. However, Klimt embraced its boldness and flatness, and he framed his subject in *Judith* in copious amounts of gold leaf. He used its flatness to accentuate the volume in the face. She looks much more real and three-dimensional juxtaposed against the gold. Up close, the skin tones he created are a fascinating layering of contrasting colors harmonizing to an almost photographic realism. The face and the expression show wistful pleasure, comfort, and ease.

Taking inspiration from long, tall, closely cropped Japanese prints, Klimt began to experiment with increasingly vertical compositions. He got more edgy, more sexual, and more playful. He nearly always heightened with gold, but it doesn't always dominate the composition.

The Sezession took their work seriously. They dedicated a whole new building in Vienna as a headquarters for their ideas. For their exhibition in 1902, they decided to honor the 75th anniversary of Beethoven's death. Artists were asked to illustrate certain themes and emotions they got from Beethoven's music.

Klimt produced a series of murals for the exhibition, now called the *Beethoven Frieze*. This is where he stepped out and let his freak flag fly. Here, you see Klimt's telltale tall vertical women, compressed together with abstract geometric shapes and patterns. This painting has a lot going on, featuring three stylishly nude women on the left broken by bold geometric patterns and being lured over by a much scarier woman. One woman's foot is tied by a green rope to a cute stone with a ghost face on it. The centerpiece figures appear to be two women emerging from a gold-and-black-patterned portal, just behind another figure with a large belly and breasts. There's one more dead or ghostly figure off to the right.

The giant ape is Typhoeus, a hybrid monster, son of Gaea and Tartarus, who was eventually cast into the netherworld by Zeus. The giant blue wing that spans the top of the canvas belongs to him as well. Behind Typhoeus's arm is a massive snake, which is emerging or morphing from his body. You see only the pattern of the snake, and that snake seems to multiply toward the right, into a dozen different patterns and colors.

KLIMT'S ARTISTIC EXPERIMENTATION

Consider a lesser-known painting by Klimt, *Pear Tree*—specifically the way he painted the natural world as he was honing his abstract style. Although this pear tree is indeed composed of thousands of dots, it's not pointillism. The colors aren't there to blend. He portrayed each of the 20,000 leaves with a dot rather than creating a green leaf out of smaller blue and yellow dots. There are more trees in the distance with thousands of smaller dots. The tree trunks are composed of long, brown scraping gestures and patchy, knotty brown spots.

As Klimt's reputation grew and he was living more comfortably, he was able to experiment more in his portraits of the nouveau riche. Despite how strange and abstractly many parts were painted, the women's faces were always handled with the utmost delicate care. Taking inspiration from Egyptian art to Diego Velázquez, Klimt came

up with many unexpected combinations. In *Fritza Riedler*, the three-dimensionality and softness of her face are contrasted with such intense patterning that it becomes extremely striking. All this is framed by a large block of muted, textured orange. The way the pattern on the chair abruptly stops at an edge or a fold and immediately picks up again creates a fascinating little moment in stark contrast to the soft loose and lacy folds of her long, flowing dress. This gives the painting a collage-like feel.

As Klimt's success and confidence grew, he used gold in all kinds of unconventional ways. He started laying a surface of gold leaf down as the base for some works and then painted a thin darker gold color over it. Then, he flicked tiny dots of gold paint all over that to make it sparkle. The height of the gold craze can be seen in the famous portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer. There is only about 10% of this canvas where a little bit of Adele is showing through in oil paint. Klimt built this painting up with layers of gold and silver leaf of various types. Then, he added further texture, building up shapes on top of the painting that he would then overlay with the gold leaf as well. This created the illusion that actual metal reliefs had been added to the painting.

The year after that portrait was finished, he premiered *The Kiss*, which has become an icon of romance. It's a striking image with a beautiful combination of golds and yellows. There are colorful round and flowerlike patterns over the woman and strong bold geometric patterns over the man. However, if you look at it from another perspective, she seems resistant to his advances. Scholars debate whether this painting reflects Klimt's complicated history with women.

ABSTRACTION

Klimt almost always portrayed women as strong and independent characters. His portraits frequently deify women as goddesses, and his frank paintings of female sexuality tracked with the larger movement toward female liberation in the early 20th century—even showing taboo subjects such as pregnancy. However, he never married and is rumored to have left behind 14 children, most of which he never acknowledged. Even his long-term relationship with Emilie Flöge is ambiguous. Although it was an intimate friendship that endured for more than 20 years, it was also partly a business relationship, as they introduced their wealthy clients to each other to sell more portraits and dresses. However, when Klimt died, he left half of his estate to Emilie.

His fellow star of Vienna, Sigmund Freud, would have much to investigate in Klimt's psyche: a man who uplifted and supported women in his work and yet was obsessed with sex and too emotionally stunted for a relationship. Moreover, he lived with his mother, Anna, for most of his life. Additionally, look at the overall shape the couple makes in *The Kiss*. Does the form not seem a bit phallic? *Fulfillment* also looks rather phallic.

THE KISS by Gustav Klimt

You can see how Klimt was going down the path of abstraction. By now, Europe was moving beyond post-impressionism and into a new era of cubism, fauvism, and expressionism, and Klimt reflected all these changes in his own work. Through patterning, he was gradually getting more rigid and hard-edged in his paintings; almost everything was painted clean and flat. After this, though, he seemed to swing back the other way and bring much more looseness, freedom, spontaneity, and variety to his brushstrokes.

In his portrait of Eugenia Primavesi, you can see the classic hallmarks of Klimt, with a vertical woman in pattern on a gold background. He was still pushing figures and patterns into tight spaces, but he was moving away from the phallic rigidity of previous years. His overall compositions started to become much looser, ditching sharp geometric abstraction with softer, rounder, and curvilinear lines and patterns. The colorful patterns began to take up more and more canvas space. These paintings were also much more rounded, open, and flowerlike.

However, he still maintained a beautiful contrast with areas of intense detail against large swaths of space. In *Baby (Cradle)*, that detail is especially fascinating as it accumulates into a mountain or hill of swirling garments and fabrics. On top of this mountain is a sweet little ghostly baby head with bright pink lips, which alters your whole perspective. You're suddenly reoriented to be at the end of this cradle looking down at the baby in foreshortened perspective. It's a bizarre and fascinating composition and an incredibly loose painting, especially for Klimt.

In 1918, the flu pandemic was raging. Weakened by the flu, Klimt eventually died from a stroke and pneumonia. He left *The Bride* unfinished when he died. A suite of 25 erotic drawings were released the next year. This is a collection that Klimt was focused on before his death, and they were his most erotic and graphic yet.

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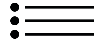

WHY POST-IMPRESSIONISM MATTERS

This last lecture will focus on a handful of interesting artists who straddled the transition from post-impressionism to modern art. With post-impressionism, all the rules and classical methods and techniques handed down in artists' studios for centuries went right out the window. Artists were running free. Soon, dozens of new movements took hold, such as fauvism and constructivism. Indeed, the massive social, economic, technological, political, and cultural changes that helped drive post-impressionism only increased in scale and pace in its wake. If there was a point where post-impressionism likely ended, it was the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914, which brought the good times of the belle epoque to an abrupt end.

CUBISM

The most important and influential movement to come out of post-impressionism was cubism. Made famous by Picasso, cubism laid the foundations for abstract art. The cubists expanded space and time beyond three dimensions, even beyond traditional linear perspective. They wanted to know what it would look like if you could see multiple perspectives simultaneously. Cubism breaks down everyday objects, analyzes them, and then reassembles them as a series of shapes and planes.

Recall that one of the post-impressionists had already started this: Paul Cézanne. With his apples and landscapes, he started experimenting with strange angles and odd perspectives. He was moving around his still lifes to take in a greater sense of reality than a single perspective could give him. You can recognize the roots of cubism in a painting such as *Madame Cézanne in a Red Dress*, where the hard edges and shadows create a blocky, geometric feeling. His work was widely admired by the early cubists, who built on his foundation and took it to the next level.

One of those artists was Juan Gris, a Spanish painter and contemporary of Picasso who spent most of his career in France. Gris initially studied engineering in Madrid, where he would make satirical political drawings for the local periodical. He moved to Paris in 1906. Though he started out doing political cartoons there, he was quickly blown away by a radical new cohort of artists that included Georges Braque, Fernand Léger, and Picasso.

It was around this time that Picasso painted *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, one of the most revolutionary paintings in art history, and became an icon of modern art. The painting forgoes any realistic sense of perspective and completely flattens the plane. The women are heavily abstracted into sharp angles and geometric shapes, while some have their faces rendered as African masks. It wouldn't be shown in public until 1916.

Excited, Gris turned his sharp mind and talented drawing skills toward cubism. What you see in his works is that the abstraction starts slowly. In his earliest works, you can still make out most of what the subject is. In *Man in a Café*, the gentleman in a top hat looks like he could have been in a political cartoon but then fractured in a mirror or a kaleidoscope. All the pieces are there, but they all seem to be jumbled up, overlapping and repeating. However, the top hat, cocktail glass,

his shoes, and even the wallpaper and cityscape in the background are all easily spotted. The face is super detailed but not in the traditional way: It's been broken up, messed up, and rearranged into a somewhat coherent puzzle.

MAN IN A CAFÉ by Juan Gris

As Gris developed his skills, he began experimenting more with color and composition. In *Still Life before an Open Window*, multiple scenes from multiple angles collide together. Colors are sectioned off but not limited to the space they are depicting. The name provides some clues as to what you're looking at here. Thus, you can start to make out a table, perhaps with some magazines and a bottle on it. Gris was also experimenting with other conventions of drawing and collage and framing. He used actual pages from an actual book to depict a book.

In *Still Life: The Table*, the shapes have become flatter and more abstract. There are fewer recognizable objects anymore. All that's left of this table is a bit of faux wood grain. You can just make out a newspaper amongst the clutter, and the headline in French reads "the true and the false." That's what Gris was trying to create here—various slices of reality all colliding into each other on a single plane.

By 1917, Gris had gone all out with his abstraction. In *Glass and Checkerboard*, you can barely make out two objects toward the bottom corner, but it's unclear what the rest is supposed to be. Gris and the cubists were pioneers in this strange new land of abstract art.

FAUVISM

Fauvism was all about color—larger, bolder, louder colors. Many of the post-impressionists expanded their palette using all the lurid new colors made possible by technology in exciting ways. Divisionism and neo-impressionism were the parents of fauvism.

Henri Matisse would be the most important and influential of the fauvists. Like Picasso, he's one of the pillars of modern art. Around the same time Picasso was painting the ladies of Avignon that would shake up the art world, Matisse revealed his own groundbreaking piece, called *Le Bonheur de vivre (The Joy of Life)*. He was taking the bold focus on color contrast from the divisionists and going to new extremes with it.

HENRI MATISSE

Fauvist colors are crazy; they are not realistic. They are intense, way beyond what the impressionists were doing. However, the fauvists weren't completely untethered from reality. They used value and color strategically to correspond to the light. Using lower contrast and lighter colors in the distance, they were still able to show space and depth and atmosphere. Strategically placing highly contrasting colors and darker colors created an extreme vibrancy and dynamic shifts in space.

Fauvism was a fairly brief movement, with only a few years of shows in Paris, but its impact was significant. Artists all over the place started getting larger and bolder with their colors, such as Franz Marc in Germany. Born in 1880, Franz is usually more closely associated with the expressionism movement, but his paintings shared a similar palette with those of the fauves, using bright, bold, and unexpected color combinations, unrestrained by reality.

Franz had his own interpretation of color, he said. Blue was used to portray masculinity and spirituality, yellow represented feminine joy, and red encased the sound of violence. Increasingly, cubism and fauvism started coming together in the work of many artists, combining bright colors with hard geometry. In *The Mandrill*, from 1913, you can see how Franz mashed the two together with the abstract geometric shapes of a Picasso and the vibrant palette of a Matisse.

THE MANDRILL by Franz Marc

Several other artists would start combining new styles. In fact, Robert and Sonia Delaunay, an artist couple in France, would found a movement called orphism, which explicitly merged fauvism and cubism together. Robert tended to lean more toward flatter shapes, brighter colors, and simpler forms over time. His work was heavily influenced by his wife's flat, colorful quilt shapes. You can see an early combination of the styles in *The Cardiff Team*, which comprises large shapes and highly saturated colors. However, there are still many recognizable pieces here, including text, signage, and a Ferris wheel.

Within a few years, though, Robert started looking less at reality and more at highly saturated colors and interesting interlocking shapes and patterns from his own mind. In *Nude Woman Reading*, you can make out some table legs on the left, with a book on the table. However, the woman is almost indecipherable. The beautiful bold color palette looks quite contemporary. In *Portuguese Woman*, from a year later, the edges are sharper, the colors bolder, and the subject even less decipherable, if that's possible.

FUTURISM

Futurism was another influential movement in Italy in the 1910s, on the heels of post-impressionism. It was all about embracing the modern age. The world was changing, and the futurists wanted their art to reflect and promote it.

Unique Forms of Continuity in Space was a mascot that represented the hope of the futurists, sculpted by Umberto Boccioni. He also made some astoundingly intricate and bizarre paintings and sculptures before his early death at the age of 33. You can see in his painting *States of Mind II: Those Who Go* a chaotic and detailed composition that shows the constant movement and intensity of modern life. Ghostly faces swirl in the aggressive speed of machinery smoke and fire.

Although futurism was gorgeous and intricate, the futurists embraced war and violence in all its ugliness. The aesthetic of futurism would be a significant influence on the look and feel of Italian fascism. You can see that combination in a painting such as *The City Rises*, which has all the speed, chaos, and confusion of a battle. It's bold and exciting, but the undertone is violence. The look and feel of futurism, though, would also influence many other artists and designers as well as the general excitement about the modern age.

PRECISIONISM

In the early 20th century, America was taking over as the world's largest economy. Groundbreaking new technologies, such as airplanes, skyscrapers, and automobiles, were speeding up modern life. You can see why young American artists were also excited about the future. Morton Schamberg, for example, painted machine portraits both real and imaginary, spurring a movement called precisionism—one of the first truly American art movements. This style was a more focused and precise type of cubism.

Joseph Stella is particularly interesting because he sort of fused cubism, precisionism, fauvism, and futurism all at the same time. Born in Italy in 1877, he was sent by his family to New York City in 1896 to study medicine. There, he ditched medical school and signed up to study at the Art Students League, where he proved to be a gifted draftsman. In 1909, dissatisfied with America, Joseph went back to Italy, where he met Boccioni and learned about futurism.

In 1913, he returned to America to give it another shot. With fresh eyes, he became fascinated with the geometry of the architecture of New York City. In *Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras*, you can see all his influences coming together. It's colorful, abstract, precise, and exciting, capturing all the sights and dynamism of the greatest amusement park of its age. Joseph predated psychedelic painting by a few generations. However, his paintings are undeniably trippy—a wild, swirling mass of color and shape, pulsating, glowing, and roaring.

KANDINSKY AND MALEVICH

In Russia and Ukraine, artists were getting weird in their own ways. They would take what the cubists and futurists were doing and go completely nonrepresentational. One of the most famous painters to yank post-impressionism in this direction was Wassily Kandinsky. Born in Moscow and raised in Odessa, Ukraine, he decided to do art school first and then study law and economics. At the age of 30, though, he returned to art, studying and teaching in Germany and eventually settling in France after World War I, where he spent the last decade of his life painting.

In his earlier works, such as *Houses at Murnau*, he was fully investigating post-impressionism, divisionism, fauvism, and symbolism. He was starting to twist reality, but for now, it was still based in observation.

Kandinsky was also a theorist and a professor, and he had many ideas about painting. He wrote two books on the theoretical backgrounds to his work. He was a significant influence on art throughout all of Europe. He is most famous for his quest to visualize music, sound, spirituality, and emotion, unencumbered by representations of the physical world that can weigh us down with all their associations. In *Improvisation 27 (Garden of Love II)*, unnamed forms, shapes, and colors appear and disappear. A wandering line connects the different passages like the timeline of a song leads us to different events, back to familiar choruses, and into a new verse. Circles, hash marks, and lines mark the time and the movement.

Kandinsky eventually felt he had no need to reference our world, and he turned purely abstract. He favored the emotion of the mark and the gesture, the speed, the rhythm, and the color. Music has the ability to override our prefrontal cortex, where it doesn't need analyzing or filtering

IMPROVISATION 27 (GARDEN OF LOVE II) by Gustav Klimt

to go straight to our emotional core. Thus, Kandinsky sought to empower the line, the shape, the color, and the gesture and elevate them to the emotional power of musical notes, as in *Improvisation 30 (Cannons)*.

Meanwhile, Kazimir Malevich, born in Kiev but ethnically Polish, took a look around at the art of his day and decided to skip ahead and reduce forms to flat color blocks on a white background. You can see this in *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying*. Is the red line the propeller or the horizon? Which squares are the wings?

Malevich figured if he could refine his shapes all the way, then perhaps he could find what he called “the supremacy of pure feeling.” The movement he started would be called suprematism as a result. It’s impossible to get much more abstract than suprematism. He was breaking down art to its most fundamental and basic components.

In 1915, Malevich was commissioned for a theater piece, and he decided he would go all the way: a single black square on a white background. He said *Black Square* was meant to evoke “the experience of pure non-objectivity in the white emptiness of a liberated nothing.” In some ways, this could be considered the ground zero of painting. However, in the context of what Malevich said, perhaps painting was now fully liberated from all previous notions and traditions.

What’s incredible is how quickly all this happened. This was barely 10 years after Matisse and Picasso had started to make waves. Many of the younger post-impressionists, such as Signac, Bonnard, and Sérusier, were still alive and painting. It must have been strange for them to remember how radical and rebellious they had been a few decades before—only to look so old-fashioned 20 years later.

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