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Realism, Impressionism, and
Post-Impressionism
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With the study of the period, “Realism, Impressionism, and Post-Impressionism,” we are moving closer in time to the age of the modern world.

During the mid-nineteenth century, “practicality, demonstration, and speed were terms that defined the modern Western world” (Stewart et. al., 186). These new characteristics of society contributed to the development of new styles in art. The rules for choosing and presenting a subject had changed dramatically. The art of this time did not seek to inspire stability nor to have political meaning. Art depicted free individuals, realistic subjects, and an unprecedented freedom of forms, colors and light. We are witnessing the birth of the Realism.

Realism had roots in naturalism, but it rejected the ideals of the academic art. We can see this very well in **Gustave Courbet**’s (1819-77) paintings. He depicted realist subjects like funerals and everyday customs of modern life and ordinary people. His paintings appeared as a threat to the moral order and standards of the aristocracy of the time. Courbet’s paintings were a representation of the real things and not a mere desire to copy them. His landscapes are the result of the eye’s interpretation and not a result of the conventional ways used to interpret and

analyze a subject. The nudes were part of the realist projects. The nudes were “true to the appearance” (Wood, TV Course)—even if that meant unflattering.

Honoré Daumier (1808-1879)—a versatile and ingenious artist, painter, satirical cartoonist, and even sculptor—developed a sensitive mastery of light and shade. He painted the life of the poor, exploring also the world of third-class railroad cars.

Another famous realist painter is **Edouard Manet** (1832-1883). His technique was harshly criticized at the time for treating everything alike, from an umbrella to a person. He painted nudes in a new way. The directness of the woman invites the spectator to participate in the painting’s activities. This technique was also criticized because it violated the principle that nude must be remote and passive.

Edgar Degas (1834-1917) brought to the radical style a new way of arranging the composition of the painting. He paid great attention to the expressions, gestures, and emotions of human figures—mostly women. He was also inspired by the simple daily life of washerwomen, housemaids, and seamstresses, investigating their attitudes.

Another important period is **Impressionism**. The main critique of the time regarding impressionist paintings was that they had an imprecise definition of form. Although Impressionism was not accepted easily at the time, it would become one of the most appreciated art style.

From this period, Renoir and Monet are the first names that come to mind.

For **Pierre-Auguste Renoir** (1841-1919) the forms of the figures “dissolved” into a “play of patches of warm and cool colors” (Woods, TV Course).

On the other hand, **Monet** was preoccupied with light and how light modified the objects. After 1890, Monet’s new garden became his source of inspiration, celebrating the color and light in a series of breathtaking paintings.

Other famous impressionists are Camille Pissarro (1831-1903), Mary Cassatt (1845-1926), and Berthe Morisot (1841-1895).

The contrast between the “images painted by women, and the representations of women produced by men, alerts us to the sexual politics in the formation of modernism” (Wood, TV Course).

Around 1880, the Impressionist movement would not satisfy anymore the needs of new artists, who would push beyond Impressionism. The term **Post-Impressionism** referred the period of 1886–1900. It was not a stylistic term. In this period we would witness the development of a new style, a style of immense innovation and diversity.

A few of the famous Post-Impressionists are Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, and Georges Seurat.

Paul Cézanne's (1839-1906) major preoccupation was with technique. For Cézanne, colors could represent nature. He used a constructive brush-stroke to carefully build his paintings. He was mostly a still life painter, and he treated almost all themes as still life. “Cézanne takes modernism another giant step toward the autonomy of the work of art, freed from the task of imitation of nature. This oscillation, the visual shifting of planes, not only continued to be a feature of Cézanne’s work, but will become an important device in cubism, called passage” (Stewart et. al., 205).

Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901) laid the foundation for important developments in art and became a source of inspiration for the Expressionists. He is also the originator of a new genre—the advertising and commercial art.

Paul Gauguin's (1848-1903) style simplified forms into large, flat areas of color separated by distinct outlines. Gauguin used unnatural colors and did not obey perspective. He went beyond the sensory limits of impressionism suggesting rather than describing, shifting attention to an imaginary world. His later style reflected his passion for exotic and primitive.

Vincent van Gogh's (1853-1890) early work with its marked social content is clearly derived from the Realism of the second half of the nineteenth century and in particular Daumier’s ability to accentuate expression to the point of distorting reality. His later work reflected the drama of his complex existential crisis. Some of his later work found expression in a visionary style of painting of unprecedented violence. Unfortunately, the artist would end his life by shooting himself.

Georges Seurat (1859-1891) investigated the physics of light and color. He handled the color in a totally new way: broken down into an infinite series of tiny points, each one separated and detached—a technique called **Pointillism**. This technique enhanced the effect of light and shade.

With the contribution of Realism, Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, one more time, art would proceed in a new direction: the art of the early twentieth century, and we would witness, one more time, the ever changing face of art over time.

Works Cited

Stewart, Andrew, et. al. *Art of the Western World: Study Guide*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1989.