

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION  
THE LONG CENTURY  
LECTURE 14: THE NEW PARIS AND THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF  
IMPRESSIONISM

"We ripped open the belly of old Paris, the neighborhood of revolt and barricades, and cut a large opening through the almost impenetrable maze of alleys piece by piece, and put in cross-streets whose continuation terminated the work"—Baron Haussmann

"The subjects of Impressionist painting were in their time model occasions of freedom. They released spectators for a moment from constricting habit, routine, and domestic order, and revitalized them through the stimulus of the novel beauties of the visual. This art celebrates the mobility of urban strollers, travelers, and sportsmen; the receptivity of eager, alert spectators; and the richness and indeterminate aspect of the surroundings; open, changing, and offering a multitude of captivating views and sensations.... The scenes, both outdoor and indoor, were, in feeling, the contrary of the regulated in practical life; they were congenial to an outlook that anticipated the moment of aesthetic seeing as an end in itself, to be savored without thought of cause or consequence.

"In Impressionist pictures, the agreeable aesthetic occasions of life in the common environment, with their connotations of pleasure and freedom, have become the chief subjects of art. Their subjects consist not only of nature encountered in the open countryside as in earlier landscape painting, where it is often a secure and agreeable solitude, but also of what was most public and modern: the streets, parks, resorts, railroads, cafes, amusements, outdoor sports, and other attractions of the holiday world"—Meyer Schapiro.

### 1. THE NEW PARIS

The population of Paris grew from about one million in 1840 to two million in 1870, but most of that new population was housed in the dingy suburbs. The center of the city became a largely middle class housing, entertainment, and shopping zone. The first railway had arrived in the 1840s and by the 1870s Paris was the terminus of ten lines. These railway lines and the rebuilding of Paris initiated by Napoleon III created an effervescent Parisian economy that was good for the upper classes and provided employment for the working classes. But it drove up rents in the center of the city, so that even those working class families who were not directly displaced by the new boulevards were often uprooted. The scheme was to make the reconstruction self-financing: by unleashing capitalism and providing a modern urban infrastructure, stimulated and directed by government investment. Napoleon and his chief lieutenant, Baron Haussmann, wagered that they could borrow against future revenues from augmented property values. The state treasury bore only around 10% of the costs of the public works the two men initiated. Almost all the rest came from loans. For the most part, the bet paid off: an early example of successful deficit spending to prime the pump of the economy.

This great project of urban renewal shifted the center of the city westward to the area around the Opera where so many of the new boulevards converged. Baron Haussmann's urban aesthetics were neoclassical and rectilinear: broad tree-lined streets leading the eye to a monument at their end, uniform buildings, open squares adorned with statues. But his thinking was also utilitarian: the new streets were designed to ease the flow of passengers and merchandise to and from the new railway stations. The goal was to redesign the city to accommodate it to its new role as the commercial hub of the country, to enhance state power and imperial prestige, and to flatter the newly rich middle classes. The ultimate result was to shift the balance of forces in the city in favor of commerce against industry, in favor of the middle classes against the workers. Except for the new Boulevard Saint-Germain, Haussmann neglected the Left Bank, which is why that area retains some of its late medieval charm and intimacy.

Ironically, Napoleon III knew more about London than he did about Paris: before 1848 he had never lived in the city except as an infant and later, fleetingly, as a tourist. But he had spent several years of exile in London, and was impressed by that great city's parks and its Georgian redevelopment project, Regent Street. He and Haussmann saw themselves "as physician-urbanists, whose task was to ensure Paris's nourishment, to regulate and to speed up circulation in its arteries (namely, its streets), to give it more powerful lungs so as to let it breathe (notably, through green spaces), and to ensure that its waste products were hygienically and effectively disposed of" (Colin Jones, *Paris: A History*). The goal was to convert an ailing city into a capital worthy of a new Napoleon and a great "empire."

There was no shortage of damning verdicts on the old Paris. The political economist Victor Considérant denounced Paris in 1848 as "a great manufactory of putrefaction in which poverty, plague, and disease labor in concert and where sunlight barely enters. It is a foul hole where plants wilt and perish and four out of seven children die within the first year." Flaubert's friend, the writer Maxine du Camp, agreed: "Paris, in its state following the 1848 Revolution, was on the point of becoming uninhabitable. Its population was suffocating in the tiny, narrow, putrid, and tangled streets in which it had been dumped. As a result of this state of affairs, everything suffered: hygiene, security, speed of communication and public morality."

Haussmann improved the water supply of the city at great cost by constructing impressive aqueducts, so that by the 1870s Parisians were using ten times the amount of water they had consumed in the 1850s. He also quintupled the length of the city's sewer lines, making the system a tourist attraction: "the presence of lovely women can add charm to a sewer," one American visitor noted. Meanwhile, the establishment of a national rail network allowed fruit, vegetables and wine to be shipped quickly and efficiently from afar. Formerly agricultural lands around the city's edge now became industrial districts, leaving the central part of the city increasingly devoted to the service sector of the economy. And

there were new parks: in 1848, Paris had only 19 hectares of parks; by 1870 the total was 1,800.

In contrast to Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, in London, Napoleon III disliked the gothic style. He knew a good deal about the use of industrial-age wrought iron and glass, examples of which one can still see in the cathedral-like railway station, the Gare du Nord (beloved by Monet and Manet), and the delicate iron pillars of the reading room of the Bibliothèque Nationale. The gothic heart of old Paris, the Ile de la Cité, was cleared of its medieval houses, where, as late as 1856, some 14,000 people lived, many of them "released convicts, thieves, murderers" (according to the novelist Eugène Sue). Of course, the great cathedral of Notre Dame remained, but the island now became an administrative center, full of law courts and police, and traversed by three major roads linked directly to bridges. Similarly, Haussmann obliterated the clutter of houses between the Louvre and the Tuileries, described by Balzac in 1838 as "a haven for cutthroats." And westwards from the Louvre, Paris began to reach out beyond the Champs-Élysées, now lit by gas and therefore a respectable place in the hours of darkness.

And finally there were the impressive apartment blocks, running for hundreds of meters down the new boulevards with their symmetrical wrought-iron balconies and common cornice lines. The leafy trees lining the new, wider streets softened the austere appearance of the facades, and the interiors offered all the appurtenances of bourgeois comfort. With so many slums removed, the bourgeoisie now represented a greater percentage of the inner-city population than ever before. "Because of the escalation of rents in the newly developed quarters—or because affordable accommodation had simply disappeared, as in the old Cité—the *classes laborieuses* were driven, eastwards and outwards, from the charmed city of the boulevards to crowded ghettos that were every bit as evil as those demolished in the center."

"Thus," writes Alistair Horne in his *The Seven Ages of Paris*, "Haussmannization had led to a kind of apartheid provoking sullen resentment. Far from piercing the traditional trouble-centers of Paris, Haussmann had just created new and much more threatening ones, in solidly proletarian and Red arrondissements such as Belleville and Ménilmontant, where in the latter days of the Empire no policeman would dare appear alone..."

## 2. MONTMARTRE AND THE PARADISE OF SOCIABILITY

Most of the Impressionist painters came from middle class backgrounds. Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919) was an exception: from a family of modest means, he began his career as a painter of porcelain. Though he made most of his money by painting portraits of the rich, he was ambivalent about the gentrification of Paris, and moved his studio to Montmartre, a working class quarter of the city that escaped Haussmannization and rising rents. The hill of Montmartre was originally occupied by windmills, pleasure gardens, and a few substantial houses built by those who came there for the quiet and the view. It was too precipitous for the factories and warehouses of the working class areas to the east and west, La Chapelle and Batignolles. It became an area of small

workshops, small tenements, and little houses. The pleasure gardens remained, among them one dominated by a disused windmill, the Moulin de la Galette. The Boulevard de Clichy and the Boulevard de Rochechouart at the bottom of the hill became a mainly working class entertainment area, with cabarets, circuses, and brothels. In the 1880s, Mark Girouard tells us, artists began to move into Montmartre partly because it was cheap, partly because they found congenial subjects to paint in the circuses, cabarets, pleasure gardens, and laundries, and partly because a cult of the working class was developing.

The artists went to the existing places of amusement in the area, but they also began to start up cabarets of their own. And people who were getting bored with the conventional amusements of the grand boulevards began coming up to Montmartre. Middle class types fraternized with workers, artists, prostitutes, and even gangsters. But the Moulin de la Galette soon ceased to be the modest pleasure garden that Renoir had painted, frequented by workers and clerks and their girlfriends, and became a huge and hectic dance hall. The Moulin Rouge opened, and had an artificial windmill instead of a genuine one, to draw the crowds. Ultimately the amusements and the tourists drove out the artists, but not before Toulouse-Lautrec, a post-Impressionist artist, had immortalized the Moulin Rouge and its denizens.

In the mid-1870s Renoir's improving financial circumstances gave him the freedom to attempt a large painting an outdoor theme. He was drawn to Montmartre not only because he could afford studio space there but also because he liked the conviviality of working class socializing, and because he preferred the young women he encountered there to professional models. His great masterpiece, *Moulin de la Galette* (1876) includes a number of his close friends and their female companions. In the lower right corner sit the writer Georges Rivière, along with Pierre Franc-Lamy and Norbert Goeneutte, painters in their twenties, drinking grenadine and chatting with one of Renoir's models, Jeanne, a seamstress, who leans over her younger sister Estelle, seated on the bench. More Renoir models are seen dancing with other friends of the artist, including Lestringuez and Paul Lhôte, who several years later appeared in Renoir's *Dance in the Country*.

Although Renoir used sketches and painted this large canvas in a studio, it exhibits its outdoor origins in the play of light and shade, rendered even more complex by suspended gas lights. The delicate tones and feathery brushstrokes produce an effect of soft-focus harmony. The lamps above, the patches of sunlight falling on the dancing figures, and the general conviviality of the scene transform what was reputedly a somewhat shabby setting into a classless urban paradise of artists and models. There is a similar atmosphere of conviviality and cross-class fraternization in *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1880). The railroad had made it possible for Parisians to enjoy visit restaurants and rent boats in small village along the river Seine, ten to twenty miles from the great city. Claude Monet (1840-1926) loved to paint the sailboats at Argenteuil; Renoir and the writer Guy de Maupassant were fond of the rowing at Chatou. (There are no shadows in Renoir's world, but there are in Maupassant's: the writer died

prematurely, at the age of 43, of syphilis, which also killed the great diarist Jules Goncourt, Dumas *fils*, Baudelaire, and Manet.)

If one thinks of the claustrophobia of Victorian culture—all of those heavy draperies and upholsteries, and the clutter of the bourgeois home—it's impossible not to see how Impressionism, with its emphasis on painting out of doors, appeared as a liberation. For a counter-example, consider the hero of Ibsen's play *Ghosts*: having enjoyed this feeling of liberation as an artist in Paris, nevertheless finds himself forced to return to his bourgeois home, where claustrophobia oppresses him, and he dies from the same dreadful disease that killed Maupassant.

### 3. THE NEW PAINTING

Impressionist paintings were not so much compositions made up of things as observations of *processes*: the drama of weather, the flow of water, the movement of light through atmosphere or foliage, the pulse of street traffic, the railroad train speeding through the countryside or arriving at the station and transforming them by smoke and steam. The role that narrative subjects had played in traditional art shifted, in Impressionist painting, to the spectacle of physical, phenomenal nature in endless change. In the traditional theory of art the impression had been discounted as an inferior moment of experience and was often equated with the merely apparent and illusory. In the older view, the painter strives to present ideal forms free from the accidents and imperfections of the natural. In the new painting, the changing environment is precisely the subject of art: flux, not stability, is the concern of representation; the vivid and the incidental go together. In the old art, there is a feeling that the vignette has been staged; with the Impressionists, the camera seems really candid.

In traditional landscape painting, the artist usually highlighted his figures or set them apart in some way. The Impressionists rejected this tradition of giving certain things a privileged position in a painting. An Impressionist makes no representational distinctions between shadows and material reality, between reality and its reflection, between the foreground and the background of the painting. The Impressionist gives to the near part of the scene the same qualities of reduced contrast, fusion, and vagueness that appear in distant space. There is an effect of continuous vibrancy throughout the painting. The sovereign value is freshness of perception: a commitment to capturing immediate experience and a rejection of the visual language of the Renaissance, with its inherent concerns for volume, space, and weight. Impressionist iconography refuses to reproduce the world in terms of a hierarchical order. Impressionism, writes Lorenz Eitner, is "a refined materialism that seeks fulfillment of the self in the visual pleasures of a reality unembellished by moral, sentimental, or literary associations."

That refusal of embellishment is the signature of early modernism: art becomes interested in its own techniques of representation: the Impressionists do not try to hide the brush stroke, but rather emphasize it. Subjectivity becomes paramount: the Impressionist is interested principally in the transcription of visual reality as it affects the retina of the painter at a particular moment in a particular place. (In more technical terms: "Impressionism recognized, and in a

sense, fetishized the subjectivity of the act of representational transcription"—Richard Brettell).

Meyer Schapiro: "this radical commitment to the visible as the freshly encountered and continuously changing distinguished the Impressionist choice of objects from that of the older painters, whose portrait subjects and still lifes had been more obviously prearranged and set for the act of painting: their landscapes had been composed with a formality that seems a permanent attribute of the stable site, independent of a moving observer." Even the portrait or figure painting presented people in a natural setting and as subject to the same conditions of visibility—of light and air—as landscape.

#### 4. LEISURE AND LIGHT

The Impressionists, then, placed a new emphasis on the visual, the optical. They believed that all vision consists of positive color experience, and therefore progressively eliminated from their paintings the non-colors which painters with which painters had traditionally represented shadows: black, gray, brown. Since mixing pigments neutralizes their intensities and reduces their hues to low-keyed tones of dark brown, greens, and grays (the somber colors of traditional landscape, so unlike the actual brightness of sun-dappled nature), the Impressionists developed a method of using colors pure, setting unblended strokes of intense color side by side. in such a way as to combine when seen at a distance. They came to define objects by color accents rather than by outlines or light/dark contrasts. This method, they believed, engaged the eye more, forcing it to assemble continuity from the discontinuous brushstrokes that comprise the painting.

The greatest of all modern art historians, Meyer Schapiro has given us a classic account of the other major preoccupation of the Impressionist, leisure: "These paintings possess, for the most part, an imagery of the environment as a field of freedom of movement and an object of sensory delight in every day life. Especially in the 1860s and 1870s, during the first fifteen years of this art, scenes with both a spectator and a spectacle were common. Painters were attracted by those real-life situations in which individuals enjoyed their surroundings and especially their visual impact.... Impressionist pictures were often of resorts, recreation, and travel, of the open country as a place for strolling or rest. Besides cultivated nature, they represented the promenade, the city streets, the parks, the beeches, the waters of river and ocean close to the shore; the races, the theater, the concert hall, and circus; the conviviality of the cafe, the picnic, and the table; and the individual human person as an engaging, unproblematic presence—beautiful, loved, friendly, intimate, depicted without critical scrutiny of either character or role. Even where spectators did not appear, or where the image was of an uninhabited segment of nature, the viewpoints of the painter-observers were often like those of strollers or travelers, whose relations to their surroundings were not those of small-townpeople or farmers, but of holiday or vacation spectators who enjoyed in the landscape refreshment of the senses, expansive feelings of freedom and attunement. Impressionist painters represented a freshly met world of open paths and bright skies, with changing, informal views and horizons."

If Victorian culture, the culture of the British middle class, was notable for its earnestness, its sexual repression, its emphasis on postponement of gratification, Impressionism was a sort of delightful middle class heresy. It stood for leisure and pleasure without a sense of sin, without a guilty conscience. And perhaps that is why this art, which met ferocious opposition in the 1860s and 1870s, continues to be so popular in our own time.

##### 5. MODERNISM: THE AMBIGUOUS IMAGE

One of the features of modernism in the arts is the demotion of narrative as the center of the artist's concern. In painting, we first notice this tendency in the art of Edouard Manet. In such great works as the *Picnic on the Grass*, with its conspicuous female nude surrounded by fully clothed bourgeois males, and the notorious *Olympia*, with its scandalous presentation of a naked courtesan, minus the usual softening chiaroscuro of traditional depictions of the nude in European art, we have the elements of narrative, but no clear or definitive ideas of what these pictures are really about. In other words, Manet scrambled his visual signals and made his images ambiguous. The subject matter of the painting became less important than its treatment, and its ability to point to certain aspects of modernity. "Manet's subjects," the art historian Richard Schiff has written, "demonstrated the immediate presence of modernity—its environmental presence as well as the pressure it put upon the viability of classical modes of representation, which seemed unsuited to images of urban movement, transience, and the flux that shaped modern society."

Nowhere is this tendency clearer than in Manet's last great masterpiece, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*. Like the other great painters of his time (and his successors in the next generation of French artists as well), Manet painted many scenes of cafés and bars: places where people tend to mix in crowds without establishing genuine contact or communication. But this painting has the most complex presentation of space in European art since Velazquez. And what are we to make of the shadowy male figure in the mirror, or the vacant gaze of the barmaid? The mirror not only reflects, but also seems to split the picture space into alternative zones of reality and illusion. And the gaze of the beautiful Suzon (the name of the barmaid who actually posed for Manet) offers the most enigmatic expression since... well, perhaps since Leonardo painted a certain lady. In any case, if Renoir is the painter of utopian fraternity and fulfillment, Manet is the painter of urban alienation: the gazes and glances in his paintings rarely connect with each other. For multiple views of his masterpiece, see Richard Schiff's *12 Views of Manet's Bar* (Princeton, 1996).