

How the Impressionists changed art

At first, these painters were laughed at for their “messy” style, but the likes of Degas, Manet, Monet, Pissarro and Renoir went on to become some of the most influential artists of all time.

During the 19th century, artists often painted from their imagination. Most European art showed grand scenes, such as battles from history or stories from ancient Greece and Rome. However, there was a group of French artists doing something different. They painted landscapes and scenes of people eating, sleeping and doing housework. These artists were not painting pictures that looked realistic, but rather they were attempting to create an impression of how a person, object or landscape looked to them. They became known as Impressionists. In the 1870s, they left Paris and came to paint in London. Some of these paintings form part of a new exhibition at the Tate Modern. Find out more here: tinyurl.com/twj-Impressionists

Who were the Impressionists?

Some of the most famous Impressionists were Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Berthe Morisot, Camille Pissarro, Auguste Renoir and Alfred Sisley. The Impressionists all had similar ideas about painting and spent lots of time together, although they came from different backgrounds. Renoir's father was a tailor, whereas the father of Degas was a banker. Monet was not rich when he started painting but he later became wealthy because of his art. The Impressionists were not just French men – the movement spread around the world. An American woman, Mary Cassatt, also came part of their group.



Claude Monet

Painting the Thames

Many of the artists painted the River Thames in London. Monet painted the Houses of Parliament in different weather conditions. In the example shown here (right), the Houses of Parliament had recently been rebuilt following a huge fire, and you can see workers taking down the scaffolding. The trees are young, suggesting they were newly planted. Monet used blue, purple and grey to show what the sky looked like when there was fog.

The Thames below Westminster by Claude Monet (1871).



Working quickly

Impressionists hoped to capture scenes in the way they looked at a particular moment, so the artists had to work quickly. The American Impressionist, John Singer Sargent, would only work on his painting called *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* for a few minutes each evening when the light was exactly right for the picture.

Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose by John Singer Sargent, painted from 1885–86.



DID YOU KNOW?

Impressionists used quick brush strokes and applied the paint thickly. This differed from paintings up until then, which normally looked much neater.

THANKS A BUNCH

The painter Edouard Manet sold a painting called *A Bunch of Asparagus* for 800 francs. The buyer sent him 1,000 francs. As a thank you, Manet painted a single asparagus and sent it with a note saying, “There was one missing from your bunch”.

Capturing the light

Impressionists liked to paint outdoors to capture the light of natural scenes at particular moments. Painting outdoors became more popular in the 1870s, when painters could carry paint around with them in tubes (like toothpaste tubes). Before this, painters had to make their own paints by grinding and mixing dry pigment powders with oil. This was a much trickier and messier process.

The Ball on Shipboard by James Tissot, 1874.



WOW!

It took Monet just 40 minutes to paint one of his most famous works, called *Impression, Sunrise*.

Park life

The Impressionists noticed lots of things about life in Britain that were different from life in Paris. The artist Camille Pissarro painted ordinary people enjoying themselves walking on the grass on Kew Green (right) and Kew Gardens. This was in contrast to the way people behaved in French gardens, where the public weren't allowed to walk on the grass. Pissarro stayed in a nearby apartment so that he could paint the area in the morning light.

Kew Green by Camille Pissarro, 1892.



What impact did they have?

Many people didn't like Impressionism at first. They thought the paintings looked messy and unfinished. When people first started calling these painters Impressionist, it was an insult. Yet the Impressionists embraced their name and Impressionism went on to change the art world forever. The movement inspired later artists including Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh and Pablo Picasso.



Pablo Picasso