

PERMANENT REVOLUTION

The nineteenth century

What I have called the break in tradition, which marks the period of the Great Revolution in France, was bound to change the whole situation in which artists lived and worked. The academies and exhibitions, the critics and connoisseurs, had done their best to introduce a distinction between Art with a capital A and the mere exercise of a craft, be it that of the painter or the builder. Now the foundations on which art had rested throughout its existence were being undermined from another side. The Industrial Revolution began to destroy the very traditions of solid craftsmanship; handiwork gave way to machine production, the workshop to the factory.

The most immediate results of this change were visible in architecture. The lack of solid craftsmanship, combined with a strange insistence on 'style' and 'beauty', nearly killed it. The amount of building done in the nineteenth century was probably greater than in all former periods taken together. It was the time of the vast expansion of cities in England and America that turned whole tracts of country into 'built-up areas'. But this time of unlimited building activity had no natural style of its own. The rules of thumb and the pattern books, which had so admirably served their turn up to the Georgian period, were generally discarded as too simple and too 'inartistic'. The businessman or town committee that planned a new factory, railway station, school building or museum, wanted Art for their money. Accordingly, when the other specifications had been fulfilled, the architect was commissioned to provide a façade in the Gothic style, or to turn the building into the semblance of a Norman castle, a Renaissance palace, or even an Oriental mosque. Certain conventions were more or less accepted, but they did not help much to improve matters. Churches were more often than not built in the Gothic style because this had been prevalent in what was called the Age of Faith. For theatres and opera houses the theatrical Baroque style was often considered suitable, while palaces and ministries were thought to look most dignified in the stately forms of the Italian Renaissance.

It would be unfair to assume that there were no gifted architects in the nineteenth century. There certainly were. But the situation of their art was



all against them. The more conscientiously they studied to imitate the bygone styles, the less their designs were likely to be adapted to the purpose for which they were intended. And if they decided to be ruthless with the conventions of the style they had to adopt, the result was usually not too happy either. Some nineteenth-century architects succeeded in finding a way between these two unpleasant alternatives, and in creating works which are neither sham antiques nor mere freak inventions. Their buildings have become landmarks of the cities in which they stand, and we have come to accept them almost as if they were part of the natural scenery. This is true, for instance, of the Houses of Parliament in London, *figure 327*, whose history is characteristic of the difficulties under which architects of the period had to work. When the old chamber burned down in 1834, a competition was organized, and the jury's choice fell on the design of Sir Charles Barry (1795–1860), an expert on the Renaissance style. It was felt, however, that England's civil liberties rested on the achievements of the Middle Ages, and that it was right and proper to erect the shrine of British Freedom in the Gothic style – a point of view, by the way, which was still universally accepted when the restoration of the chamber after its destruction by German bombers was discussed after the Second World War. Accordingly, Barry had to seek the advice of an

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Charles Barry &
Augustus Welby
Northmore Pugin
Houses of Parliament,
London, 1835

expert on Gothic details, A.W.N. Pugin (1812–52), one of the most uncompromising champions of the Gothic revival. The collaboration amounted more or less to this – that Barry was allowed to determine the overall shape and grouping of the building, while Pugin looked after the decoration of the façade and the interior. To us this would hardly seem a very satisfactory procedure, but the outcome was not too bad. Seen from the distance, through the London mists, Barry's outlines do not lack a certain dignity; and, seen at close quarters, the Gothic details still retain something of their Romantic appeal.

In painting or sculpture, the conventions of 'style' play a less prominent part, and it might thus be thought that the break in tradition affected these arts less; but this was not the case. The life of an artist had never been without its troubles and anxieties, but there was one thing to be said for the 'good old days' – no artist needed to ask himself why he had come into the world at all. In some ways his work had been as well defined as that of any other calling. There were always altar-paintings to be done, portraits to be painted; people wanted to buy pictures for their best parlours, or commissioned murals for their villas. In all these jobs he could work on more or less pre-established lines. He delivered the goods which the patron expected. True, he could produce indifferent work, or do it so superlatively well that the job in hand was no more than the starting point for a transcendent masterpiece. But his position in life was more or less secure. It was just this feeling of security that artists lost in the nineteenth century. The break in tradition had thrown open to them an unlimited field of choice. It was for them to decide whether they wanted to paint landscapes or dramatic scenes from the past, whether they chose subjects from Milton or the classics, whether they adopted the restrained manner of David's classical revival or the fantastic manner of the Romantic masters. But the greater the range of choice had become, the less likely was it that the artist's taste would coincide with that of his public. Those who buy pictures usually have a certain idea in mind. They want to get something very similar to what they have seen elsewhere. In the past, this demand was easily met by the artists because, even though their work differed greatly in artistic merit, the works of a period resembled each other in many respects. Now that this unity of tradition had disappeared, the artist's relations with his patron were only too often strained. The patron's taste was fixed in one way: the artist did not feel it in him to satisfy that demand. If he was forced to do so for want of money, he felt he was making 'concessions', and lost his self-respect and the esteem of others. If he decided to follow only his inner voice, and to reject any commission which he could not reconcile with his idea of art, he was in danger of starvation. Thus a deep cleavage developed in the nineteenth century

between those artists whose temperament or convictions allowed them to follow conventions and to satisfy the public's demand, and those who gloried in their self-chosen isolation. What made matters worse was that the Industrial Revolution and the decline of craftsmanship, the rise of a new middle class which often lacked tradition, and the production of cheap and shoddy goods which masqueraded as 'Art', had brought about a deterioration of public taste.

The distrust between artists and the public was generally mutual. To the successful businessman, an artist was little better than an impostor who demanded ridiculous prices for something that could hardly be called honest work. Among the artists, on the other hand, it became an acknowledged pastime to 'shock the bourgeois' out of his complacency and to leave him bewildered and bemused. Artists began to see themselves as a race apart, they grew long hair and beards, they dressed in velvet or corduroy, wore broad-brimmed hats and loose ties, and generally stressed their contempt for the conventions of the 'respectable'. This state of affairs was hardly sound, but it was perhaps inevitable. And it must be acknowledged that, though the career of an artist was beset with the most dangerous pitfalls, the new conditions also had their compensations. The pitfalls are obvious. The artist who sold his soul and pandered to the taste of those who lacked taste was lost. So was the artist who dramatized his situation, who thought of himself as a genius for no other reason than that he found no buyers. But the situation was only desperate for weak characters. For the wide range of choice, and independence of the patron's whim, which had been acquired at such high cost, also held their advantages. For the first time, perhaps, it became true that art was a perfect means of expressing individuality – provided the artist had an individuality to express.

To many this may sound like a paradox. They think of all art as a means of 'expression', and to some extent they are right. But the matter is not quite so simple as it is sometimes thought to be. It is obvious that an Egyptian artist had little opportunity of expressing his personality. The rules and conventions of his style were so strict that there was very little scope for choice. It really comes to this – that where there is no choice there is no expression. A simple example will make this clear. If we say that a woman 'expresses her individuality' in the way she dresses, we mean that the choice she makes indicates her fancies and preferences. We need only watch an acquaintance buying a hat and try to find out why she rejects this and selects the other. It always has something to do with the way she sees herself and wants others to see her, and every such act of choice can teach us something about her personality. If she had to wear a uniform there might still remain some scope for 'expression', but obviously much less. Style is such a uniform. True, we know that as time went on the scope it

afforded the individual artist increased, and with it the artist's means of expressing his personality. Everyone can see that Fra Angelico was a different character from Vermeer van Delft. Yet none of these artists was deliberately making his choice in order to express his personality. He did it only incidentally, as we express ourselves in everything we do – whether we light a pipe or run after a bus. The idea that the true purpose of art was to express personality could only gain ground when art had lost every other purpose. Nevertheless, as things had developed, it was a true and valuable statement. For what people who cared about art came to look for in exhibitions and studios was no longer the display of ordinary skill – that had become too common to warrant attention – they wanted art to bring them into contact with men with whom it would be worth while to converse: men whose work gave evidence of an incorruptible sincerity, artists who were not content with borrowed effects and who would not make a single stroke of the brush without asking themselves whether it satisfied their artistic conscience. In this respect the history of painting in the nineteenth century differs very considerably from the history of art as we have encountered it so far. In earlier periods it was usually the leading masters, artists whose skill was supreme, who also received the most important commissions and therefore became very famous. Think of Giotto, Michelangelo, Holbein, Rubens or even Goya. This does not mean that tragedies could never occur or that no painter was ever insufficiently honoured in his country, but by and large the artists and their public shared certain assumptions and therefore also agreed on standards of excellence. It was only in the nineteenth century that the real gulf opened between the successful artists – who contributed to 'official art' – and the nonconformists, who were mainly appreciated after their death. The result is a strange paradox. Even today there are few specialists who know much about the 'official art' of the nineteenth century. Admittedly most of us are familiar with some of its products, the monuments to great men in public squares, murals in town halls and stained-glass windows in churches or colleges, but for most of us these have acquired such a musty look that we pay no more attention to them than we do to the engravings after once famous exhibition pieces we still encounter in old-fashioned hotel lounges.

Maybe there is a reason for this frequent neglect. In discussing Copley's painting of Charles I confronting Parliament, *page 483, figure 315*, I mentioned that his effort to visualize a dramatic moment of history as exactly as possible made a lasting impression, and that for a whole century many artists expended much labour on such historical costume pictures showing famous men of the past – Dante, Napoleon or George Washington – at some dramatic turning point in their lives. I might have added that such theatrical pictures generally scored a great success in

exhibitions but that they soon lost their appeal. Our ideas of the past tend to change very quickly. The elaborate costumes and settings soon look unconvincing and the heroic gestures look like 'hamming'. It is quite likely that the time will come when these works will be rediscovered and when it will be possible again to discriminate between the really bad and the meritorious. For obviously not all of that art was as hollow and conventional as we tend to think today. And yet, it will possibly always remain true that since the Great Revolution the word Art has acquired a different meaning for us and that the history of art in the nineteenth century can never become the history of the most successful and best-paid masters of that time. We see it rather as the history of a handful of lonely men who had the courage and the persistence to think for themselves, to examine conventions fearlessly and critically and thus to create new possibilities for their art.

The most dramatic episodes in this development took place in Paris. For it was Paris that became the artistic capital of Europe in the nineteenth century much as Florence had been in the fifteenth century and Rome in the seventeenth. Artists from all over the world came to Paris to study with the leading masters and, most of all, to join in the discussion about the nature of art that never ended in the cafés of Montmartre, where the new conception of art was painfully hammered out.

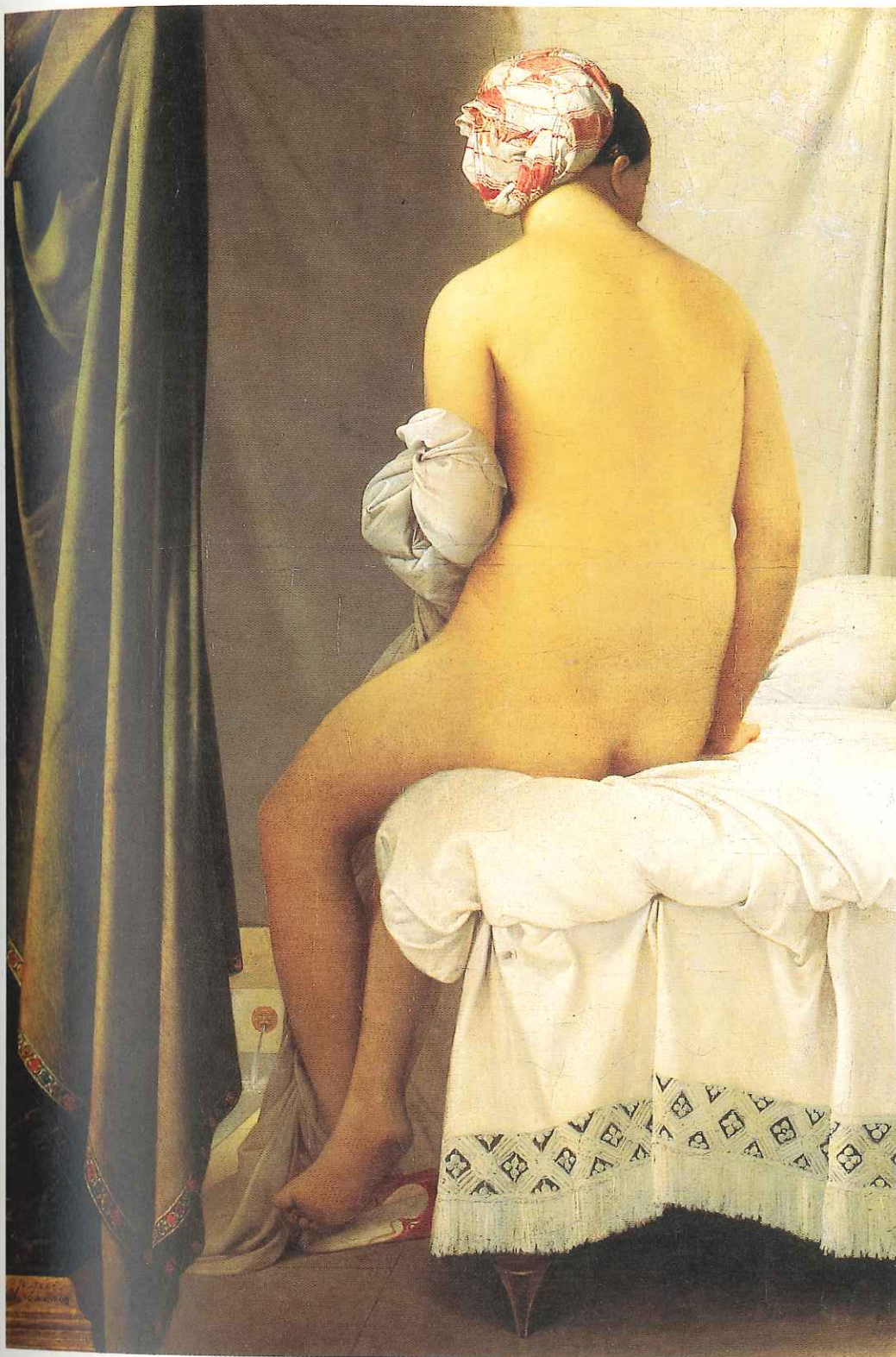
The leading conservative painter in the first half of the nineteenth century was Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867). He had been a pupil and follower of David, *page 485*, and like him admired the heroic art of classical antiquity. In his teaching he insisted on the discipline of absolute precision in the life-class and despised improvisation and messiness. *Figure 328* shows his own mastery in the rendering of forms and the cool clarity of his composition. It is easy to understand why many artists envied Ingres his technical assurance and respected his authority even where they disagreed with his views. But it is also easy to understand why his more passionate contemporaries found such smooth perfection unbearable.

The rallying-point for his opponents was the art of Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863). Delacroix belonged to the long line of great revolutionaries produced in the country of revolutions. He himself was a complex character with wide and varied sympathies, and his beautiful diaries show that he would not have enjoyed being typed as the fanatical rebel. If he was cast in this role it was because he could not accept the standards of the Academy. He had no patience with all the talk about the Greeks and Romans, with the insistence on correct drawing, and the constant imitation of classical statues. He believed that, in painting, colour was much more important than draughtsmanship, and imagination than knowledge. While Ingres and his school cultivated the Grand Manner and admired Poussin and Raphael,

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Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres
The Valpurga bather,
1808

Oil on canvas, 146 × 97.5
cm, 57½ × 41¼ in;
Louvre, Paris



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97-5

Delacroix shocked the connoisseurs by preferring the Venetians and Rubens. He was tired of the learned subjects the Academy wanted painters to illustrate, and went to North Africa in 1832 to study the glowing colours and romantic trappings of the Arab world. When he saw horses fighting in Tangier, he noted in his diary: 'From the very beginning they reared up and fought with a fury that made me tremble for their riders, but magnificent for painting. I am sure that I have witnessed a scene as extraordinary and fantastic as anything that ... Rubens could have imagined.' *Figure 329* shows one of the fruits of his journey. Everything in the picture is a denial of the teachings of David and Ingres. There is no clarity of outline here, no modelling of the nude in carefully graded tones of light and shade, no pose and restraint in the composition, not even a patriotic or edifying subject. All the painter wants is to make us partake in an intensely exciting moment, and to share his joy in the movement and romance of the scene, with the Arab cavalry sweeping past, and the fine thoroughbred rearing in the foreground. It was Delacroix who acclaimed Constable's picture in Paris, *page 495, figure 325*, though in his personality and choice of romantic subjects he is perhaps more akin to Turner.

Be that as it may, we know that Delacroix really admired a French landscape painter of his own generation whose art may be said to form a bridge between these contrasting approaches to nature. He was Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot (1796–1875). Like Constable, Corot started out



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Eugène Delacroix
*Arab cavalry practising
a charge, 1832*

Oil on canvas, 60 × 73.2
cm, 23½ × 28¾ in; Musée
Fabre, Montpellier



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Jean-Baptiste Camille
Corot
*Tivoli, the gardens of
the Villa d'Este, 1843*

Oil on canvas, 43.5 ×
60.5 cm, 17¼ × 23¾ in.,
Louvre, Paris

with the determination to render reality as truthfully as possible, but the truth he wished to capture was somewhat different. *Figure 330* shows that he concentrated less on details than on the general form and tone of his motifs, to convey the heat and stillness of a summer day in the South.

It so happens that about a hundred years earlier Fragonard had also selected a motif from the park of the Villa d'Este near Rome, *page 473, figure 310*, and it may be worth pausing for a moment to compare these and other images, all the more as landscape painting was increasingly to become the most important branch of nineteenth-century art. Fragonard clearly looked for variety, while Corot sought for a clarity and balance that may remind us remotely of Poussin, *page 395, figure 254*, and of Claude Lorrain, *page 396, figure 255*, but the radiant light and atmosphere that fill Corot's picture are achieved with very different means. Here the comparison with Fragonard can help us again, because Fragonard's medium had compelled him to concentrate on the careful gradation of tone. As a draughtsman, all he had at his disposal was the white of the paper and various intensities of brown; but look, for instance, at the wall in the foreground to see how these sufficed to convey the contrast between shadow and sunlight. Corot achieved similar effects by the use of his palette, and painters know that this is no minor

achievement. The reason is that colour often comes into conflict with the gradations of tone on which Fragonard could rely.

We may recall the advice which Constable received and rejected, *page 495*, to paint the foreground a mellow brown, as Claude and other painters had done. This conventional wisdom rested on the observation that strong greens tend to clash with other colours. However faithful a photograph (such as *page 461, figure 302*) may look to us, its intense colours would surely have a disruptive effect on that gentle gradation of tones that also served Caspar David Friedrich, *page 496, figure 326*, to achieve the impression of distance. Indeed, if we look at Constable's 'Haywain', *page 495, figure 325*, we shall notice that he also muted the colour of the foreground and of the foliage to remain within a unified tonal range. Corot appears to have captured the radiant light and luminous haze of the scene with his palette by novel means. He worked within a key of silvery grey that does not quite swallow up the colours but maintains them in harmony without departing from the visual truth. True, like Claude and like Turner, he never hesitated to people his stage with figures from the classical or biblical past, and in fact it was this poetic bent that finally secured him international fame.

Much as Corot's quiet mastery was loved and admired also by his younger colleagues, they did not wish to follow him along this path. In fact the next revolution was mainly concerned with the conventions governing subject-matter. In the academics the idea was still prevalent that dignified paintings must represent dignified personages, and that workers or peasants provided suitable subjects only for genre scenes in the tradition of the Dutch masters, *pages 381, 428*. During the time of the Revolution of 1848, a group of artists gathered in the French village of Barbizon to follow the programme of Constable and look at nature with fresh eyes. One of them, Jean-François Millet (1814-75), decided to extend this programme from landscapes to figures. He wanted to paint scenes from peasant life as it really was, to paint men and women at work in the fields. It is curious to reflect that this should have been considered revolutionary, but in the art of the past peasants were generally seen as comic yokels as Bruegel had painted them, *page 382, figure 246*. *Figure 331* represents Millet's famous picture 'The gleaners'. There is no dramatic incident represented here, nothing in the way of an anecdote. Just three hard-working people in a flat field where harvesting is in progress. They are neither beautiful nor graceful. There is no suggestion of the country idyll in the picture. These peasant women move slowly and heavily. They are all intent on their work. Millet had done everything to emphasize their square and solid build and their deliberate movements. He modelled them firmly and in simple outlines against the bright sunlit plain. Thus his three peasant women assumed a dignity more natural and more convincing than that

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Jean-François Millet
The gleaners, 1857

Oil on canvas, 83.8 ×
111 cm, 33 × 43½ in;
Musée d'Orsay, Paris





of academic heroes. The arrangement, which looks casual at first sight, supports this impression of tranquil poise. There is a calculated rhythm in the movement and distribution of the figures which gives stability to the whole design and makes us feel that the painter looked at the work of harvesting as a scene of solemn significance.

The painter who gave a name to this movement was Gustave Courbet (1819–77). When he opened a one-man show in a shack in Paris in the year 1855, he called it *Le Réalisme, G. Courbet*. His 'realism' was to mark a revolution in art. Courbet wanted to be the pupil of no one but nature. To some extent, his character and programme resembled that of Caravaggio, page 392, figure 252. He wanted not prettiness but truth. He represented himself walking across country with his painter's tackle on his back, respectfully greeted by his friend and patron, figure 332. He called the picture 'Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet'. To anyone used to the show-pieces of academic art, this picture must have seemed downright childish. There are no graceful poses here, no flowing lines, no impressive colours.

Compared with its artless arrangement, even the composition of Millet's 'The gleaners' looks calculated. The whole idea of a painter representing himself in shirtsleeves as a kind of tramp must have appeared as an outrage to the 'respectable' artists and their admirers. This, at any rate, was the impression Courbet wanted to make. He wanted his pictures to be a protest against the accepted conventions of his day, to 'shock the bourgeois' out of his complacency, and to proclaim the value of uncompromising artistic sincerity as against the deft handling of traditional clichés. Sincere Courbet's pictures undoubtedly are. 'I hope', he wrote in a characteristic letter in 1854, 'always to earn my living by my art without having ever deviated by even a hair's breadth from my principles, without having lied to my conscience for a single moment, without painting even as much as can be covered by a hand only to please anyone or to sell more easily.' Courbet's deliberate renunciation of easy effects, and his determination to render the world as he saw it, encouraged many others to flout convention and to follow nothing but their own artistic conscience.

The same concern for sincerity, the same impatience with the theatrical pretentiousness of official art, that led the group of the Barbizon painters and Courbet towards 'Realism', caused a group of English painters to take a very different path. They pondered on the reasons which had led art into such a dangerous rut. They knew that the academies claimed to represent the tradition of Raphael and what was known as the 'Grand Manner'. If that was true, then art had obviously taken a wrong turning with, and through, Raphael. It was he and his followers who had exalted the methods of 'idealizing' nature, page 320, and of striving for beauty at the expense of truth. If art was to be reformed, it was therefore necessary to go

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Gustave Courbet
*The meeting, or
 'Bonjour Monsieur
 Courbet', 1854*
 Oil on canvas, 129 ×
 149 cm, 50¾ × 58¾ in;
 Musée Fabre, Montpellier

further back than Raphael, to the time when artists were still 'honest to God' craftsmen, who did their best to copy nature, while thinking not of earthly glory, but of the glory of God. Believing, as they did, that art had become insincere through Raphael and that it behoved them to return to the 'Age of Faith', this group of friends called themselves the 'Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood'. One of its most gifted members was the son of an Italian refugee, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–82). *Figure 333* shows Rossetti's painting of the Annunciation. Usually, this theme was represented on the pattern of the medieval representations such as *page 213*, *figure 141*. Rossetti's intention to return to the spirit of the medieval masters did not mean that he wanted to copy their pictures. What he desired to do was to emulate their attitude, to read the biblical narrative with a devout heart, and to visualize the scene when the angel came to the Virgin and saluted her: 'And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be' (Luke i. 29). We can see how Rossetti strove for simplicity and sincerity in his new rendering, and how much he wanted to let us see the ancient story with a fresh mind. But for all his intention to render nature as faithfully as the admired Florentines of the *Quattrocento* had done, some will feel that the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood set itself an unattainable goal. It is one thing to admire the naïve and unselfconscious outlook of the 'primitives' (as the painters of the fifteenth century were then oddly called); it is quite another thing to strive for it oneself. For this is the one virtue which the best will in the world cannot help us to attain. Thus, while their starting point was similar to that of Millet and Courbet, I think that their honest endeavour landed them in a blind alley. The longing of Victorian masters for innocence was too self-contradictory to succeed. The hope of their French contemporaries to make progress in the exploration of the visible world proved more fruitful for the next generation.

The third wave of revolution in France (after the first wave of Delacroix and the second wave of Courbet) was started by Édouard Manet (1832–83) and his friends. These artists took Courbet's programme very seriously. They looked out for conventions in painting which had become stale and meaningless. They found that the whole claim of traditional art to have discovered the way to represent nature, as we see it, was based on a misconception. At the most, they would concede that traditional art had found a means of representing men or objects under very artificial conditions. Painters let their models pose in their studios, where the light falls through the window, and made use of the slow transition from light to shade to give the impression of roundness and solidity. The art students at the academies were trained from the beginning to base their pictures on this interplay between light and shade. At first, they usually drew from the



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Dante Gabriel Rossetti
'Ecce Ancilla Domini',
 1849–50

Oil on canvas, mounted
 on wood, 72.6 × 41.9 cm,
 28¾ × 16½ in; Tate
 Gallery, London

We remember how the Egyptian artists found it inconceivable to represent a figure without showing each part from its most characteristic angle, *page 61*. They *knew* what a foot, an eye, or a hand 'looked like', and they fitted these parts together to form a complete man. To represent a figure with one arm hidden from view, or one foot distorted by foreshortening, would have seemed outrageous. We remember that it was the Greeks who succeeded in breaking down this prejudice, and allowed foreshortening in pictures, *page 81, figure 49*. We remember how the importance of knowledge came to the fore again in early Christian and medieval art, *page 137, figure 87*, and remained so till the Renaissance. Even then the importance of theoretical knowledge of what the world *ought* to look like was enhanced rather than diminished through the discoveries of scientific perspective and the emphasis on anatomy, *pages 229–30*. The great artists of subsequent periods had made one discovery after another which allowed them to

plaster casts taken from antique statues, hatching their drawings carefully to achieve different densities of shading. Once they acquired this habit, they applied it to all objects. The public had become so accustomed to seeing things represented in this manner that they had forgotten that in the open air we do not usually perceive such even gradations from dark to light. There are harsh contrasts in the sunlight. Objects taken out of the artificial conditions of the artist's studio do not look so round or so much modelled as plaster casts from the antique. The parts which are lit appear much brighter than in the studio, and even the shadows are not uniformly grey or black, because the reflections of light from surrounding objects affect the colour of these unlit parts. If we trust our eyes, and not our preconceived ideas of what things *ought* to look like according to academic rules, we shall make the most exciting discoveries.

That such ideas were first considered extravagant heresies is hardly surprising. We have seen throughout this story of art how much we are all inclined to judge pictures by what we *know* rather than by what we *see*.

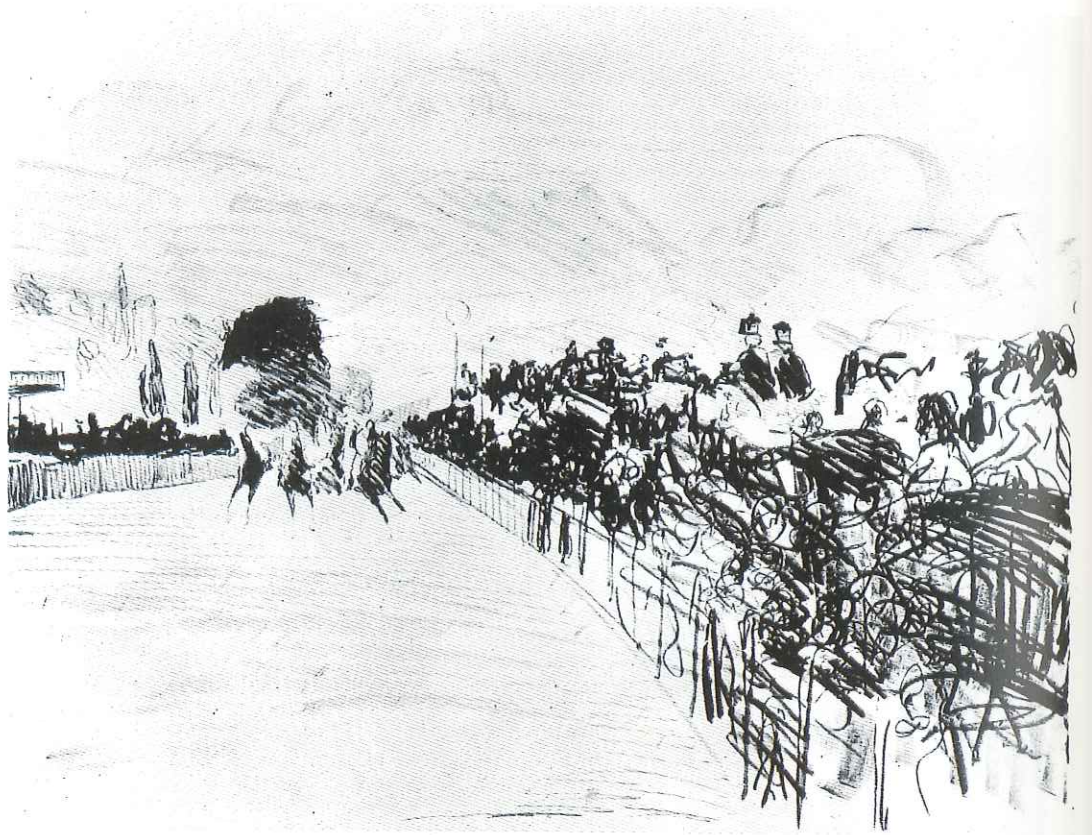
conjure up a convincing picture of the visible world, but none of them had seriously challenged the conviction that each object in nature has its definite fixed form and colour which must be easily recognizable in a painting. It may be said, therefore, that Manet and his followers brought about a revolution in the rendering of colours which is almost comparable with the revolution in the representation of forms brought about by the Greeks. They discovered that, if we look at nature in the open, we do not see individual objects each with its own colour but rather a bright medley of tints which blend in our eye or really in our mind.

These discoveries were not made all at once or all by one man. But even Manet's first paintings in which he abandoned the traditional method of mellow shading in favour of strong and harsh contrasts caused an outcry among the conservative artists. In 1863 the academic painters refused to show his works in the official exhibition called the Salon. An agitation followed which prompted the authorities to show all works condemned by the jury in a special show called the 'Salon of the Rejected'. The public went there mainly to laugh at the poor deluded tyros who had refused to accept the verdict of their betters. This episode marks the first stage of a battle which was to rage for nearly thirty years. It is difficult for us to conceive the violence of these quarrels between the artists and the critics, all the more since the paintings of Manet strike us today as being essentially akin to the great paintings of earlier periods, such as those by Frans Hals, *page 417, figure 270*. Indeed, Manet violently denied that he wanted to be a revolutionary. He quite deliberately looked for inspiration in the great tradition of the masters of the brush whom the Pre-Raphaelites had rejected, the tradition initiated by the great Venetians Giorgione and Titian, and carried on triumphantly in Spain by Velázquez, *pages 407-10, figures 264-7*, and down to the nineteenth century by Goya. It was clearly one of Goya's paintings, *page 486, figure 317*, that had challenged him to paint a similar group on a balcony and to explore the contrast between the full light of the open air and the dark which swallows up the forms in the interior, *figure 334*. But Manet in 1869 carried this exploration much further than Goya had done sixty years earlier. Unlike Goya's, the heads of Manet's ladies are not modelled in the traditional manner, as we shall discover if we compare both with Leonardo's 'Mona Lisa', *page 301, figure 193*, Rubens's portrait of his child, *page 400, figure 257*, or Gainsborough's 'Miss Haverfield', *page 469, figure 306*. However different these painters were in their methods, they all wanted to create the impression of solid bodies, and did so through the interplay of shadow and light. Compared with theirs, Manet's heads look flat. The lady in the background has not even got a proper nose. We can well imagine why this treatment looked like sheer ignorance to those not acquainted with Manet's intentions. But

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Édouard Manet
The balcony, 1868-9
 Oil on canvas, 169 x
 125 cm, 66½ x 49½ in;
 Musée d'Orsay, Paris





the fact is that in the open air, and in the full light of day, round forms sometimes *do* look flat, like mere coloured patches. It was this effect which Manet wanted to explore. The consequence is that as we stand before one of his pictures it looks more immediately real than any old master. We have the illusion that we really stand face to face with this group on the balcony. The general impression of the whole is not flat but, on the contrary, that of real depth. One of the reasons for this striking effect is the bold colour of the balcony railing. It is painted in a bright green which cuts across the composition regardless of the traditional rules of colour harmonics. The result is that this railing seems to stand out boldly in front of the scene, which thus recedes behind it.

The new theories did not concern only the treatment of colours in the open air (*plein air*), but also that of forms in movement. *Figure 335* shows one of Manet's lithographs – a method of reproducing drawings made directly on stone, which had been invented early in the nineteenth century. At first sight, we may see nothing but a confused scrawl. It is the picture of a horse-race. Manet wants us to gain the impression of light, speed and movement by giving nothing but a bare hint of the forms emerging out of the confusion. The horses are racing towards us at full speed and the stands are packed with excited crowds. The example shows more clearly than any other how Manet refused to be influenced in his representation of form by his knowledge. None of his horses has four legs. We simply do not see the four legs at a momentary glance at such a scene. Nor can we take in the details of the spectators. Some fourteen years earlier the English painter William Powell Frith (1819–1909) had painted his 'Derby Day', *figure 336*, which was very popular in Victorian times for the Dickensian humour with which he depicted the types and incidents of the event. Such pictures are indeed best enjoyed by studying the gay variety of these situations one by one at our leisure. But in actual life we can only focus on one spot with our eyes – all the rest looks to us like a jumble of disconnected forms. We may *know* what they are, but we do not *see* them. In this sense, Manet's lithograph of a racecourse is really much more 'true' than that of the Victorian humorist. It transports us for an instant to the bustle and excitement of the scene which the artist witnessed, and of which he recorded only as much as he could vouch for having seen in an instant.

Among the painters who joined Manet and helped to develop these ideas was a poor and dogged young man from Le Havre, Claude Monet (1840–1926). It was Monet who urged his friends to abandon the studio altogether and never to paint a single stroke except in front of the 'motif'.

335

Édouard Manet

*The races at
Longchamp*, 1865Lithograph, 36.5 × 51 cm,
14½ × 20¼ in.

336

William Powell Frith
Derby Day, 1856–8Oil on canvas, 101.6 ×
221.5 cm, 40 × 88 in; Tate
Gallery, London



He had a little boat fitted out as a studio to allow him to explore the moods and effects of the river scenery. Manet, who came to visit him, became convinced of the soundness of the younger man's method and paid him a tribute by painting his portrait while at work in this open-air studio, *figure 337*. It is at the same time an exercise in the new manner advocated by Monet. For Monet's idea that all painting of nature must actually be finished 'on the spot' not only demanded a change of habits and a disregard of comfort, it was bound to result in new technical methods. 'Nature' or the 'motif' changes from minute to minute as a cloud passes over the sun or the wind breaks the reflection in the water. The painter who hopes to catch a characteristic aspect has no leisure to mix and match his colours, let alone to apply them in layers on a brown foundation as the old masters had done. He must fix them straight on to his canvas in rapid strokes, caring less for detail than for the general effect of the whole. It was this lack of finish, this apparently slapdash approach, which frequently enraged the critics. Even

337

Édouard Manet
*Monet working in his
boat*, 1874

Oil on canvas, 82.7 ×
105 cm, 32½ × 41½ in;
Neue Pinakothek, Munich

after Manet himself had gained a certain amount of public recognition through his portraits and figure compositions, the younger landscape painters round Monet found it exceedingly difficult to have their unorthodox paintings accepted for the Salon. Accordingly they banded together in 1874 and arranged a show in the studio of a photographer. It contained a picture by Monet which the catalogue described as 'Impression: sunrise' – it was the picture of a harbour seen through the morning mists. One of the critics found this title particularly ridiculous, and he referred to the whole group of artists as 'The Impressionists'. He wanted to convey that these painters did not proceed by sound knowledge, and thought that the impression of a moment was sufficient to be called a picture. The label stuck. Its mocking undertone was soon forgotten, just as the derogatory meaning of terms like 'Gothic', 'Baroque' or 'Mannerism' is now forgotten. After a time the group of friends themselves accepted the name Impressionists, and as such they have been known ever since.

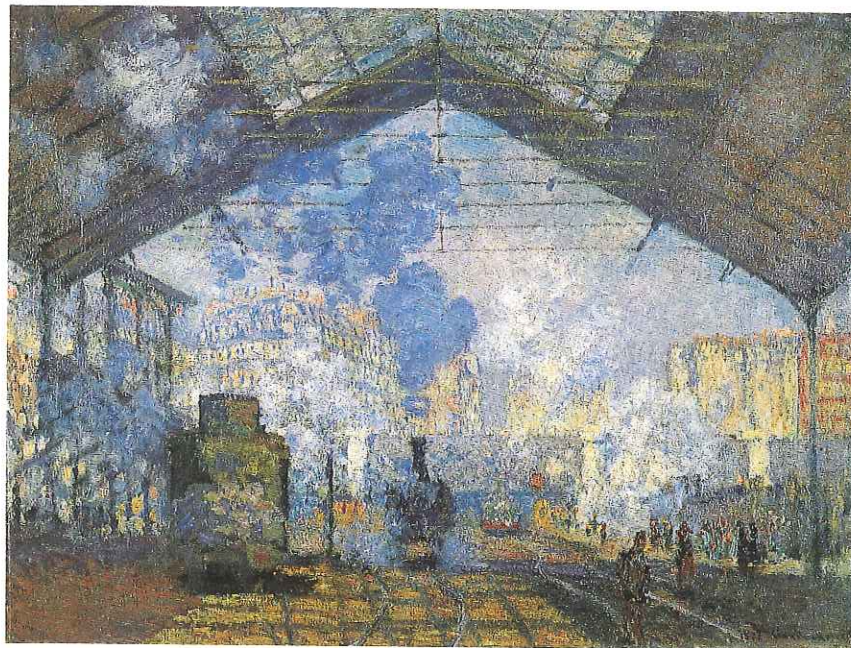
It is interesting to read some of the press notices with which the first exhibitions of the Impressionists were received. A humorous weekly wrote in 1876:

The rue le Peletier is a road of disasters. After the fire at the Opéra, there is now yet another disaster there. An exhibition has just been opened at Durand-Ruel which allegedly contains paintings. I enter and my horrified eyes behold something terrible. Five or six lunatics, among them a woman, have joined together and exhibited their works. I have seen people rock with laughter in front of these pictures, but my heart bled when I saw them. These would-be artists call themselves revolutionaries, "Impressionists". They take a piece of canvas, colour and brush, daub a few patches of paint on it at random, and sign the whole thing with their name. It is a delusion of the same kind as if the inmates of Bedlam picked up stones from the wayside and imagined they had found diamonds.

It was not only the technique of painting which so outraged the critics. It was also the motifs these painters chose. In the past, painters were expected to look for a corner of nature which was by general consent 'picturesque'. Few people realize that this demand was somewhat unreasonable. We call 'picturesque' such motifs as we have seen in pictures before. If painters were to keep to those they would have to repeat each other endlessly. It was Claude Lorraine who made Roman ruins 'picturesque', page 396, figure 255, and Jan van Goyen who turned Dutch windmills into 'motifs', page 419, figure 272. Constable and Turner in England, each in his own way, had discovered new motifs for art. Turner's 'Steamer in a snowstorm', page 493, figure 323, was as new in subject as it was in manner. Claude Monet knew Turner's works. He had seen them in London, where he stayed during the Franco-Prussian war (1870-1), and they had confirmed him in his conviction that the magic effects of light

and air counted for more than the subject of a painting. Nevertheless, a painting such as *figure 338*, which represents a Paris railway station, struck the critics as sheer impudence. Here is a real 'impression' of a scene from everyday life. Monet is not interested in the railway station as a place where human beings meet or take leave – he is fascinated by the effect of light streaming through the glass roof on to the clouds of steam, and by the forms of engines and carriages emerging from the confusion. Yet there is nothing casual in this eye-witness account by a painter. Monet balanced his tones and colours as deliberately as any landscape painter of the past.

The painters of this young group of Impressionists applied their new principles not only to landscape painting but to any scene of real life. *Figure 339* shows a painting by Pierre Auguste Renoir (1841–1919) which represents an open-air dance in Paris, painted in 1876. When Jan Steen, *page 428, figure 278*, represented such a scene of revelry, he was eager to depict the various humorous types of the people. Watteau, in his dream scenes of aristocratic festivals, *page 454, figure 298*, wanted to capture the mood of a carefree existence. There is something of both in Renoir. He, too, has an eye for the behaviour of the gay crowd and he, too, is enchanted by festive beauty. But his main interest lies elsewhere. He wants to conjure up the gay medley of bright colours and to study the effect of sunlight on the whirling throng. Even compared to Manet's painting of Monet's boat, the picture looks 'sketchy' and unfinished.



338

Claude Monet
Gare St-Lazare, 1877
 Oil on canvas, 75.5 × 104
 cm, 29¾ × 41 in; Musée
 d'Orsay, Paris



339

Pierre Auguste
Renoir*Dance at the Moulin de
la Galette*, 1876Oil on canvas, 131 × 175
cm, 30¼ × 44½ in; Musée
d'Orsay, Paris

Only the heads of some figures in the foreground are shown with a certain amount of detail, but even they are painted in the most unconventional and daring manner. The eyes and forehead of the sitting lady lie in the shadow while the sun plays on her mouth and chin. Her bright dress is painted with loose strokes of the brush, bolder even than those used by Frans Hals, *page 417, figure 270*, or Velázquez, *page 410, figure 267*. But these are the figures we focus on. Beyond, the forms are increasingly dissolved in sunlight and air. We are reminded of the way in which Francesco Guardi, *page 444, figure 290*, conjured up the figures of his Venetian oarsmen with a few patches of colour. After the lapse of a century it is hard for us to understand why these pictures aroused such a storm of derision and indignation. We realize without difficulty that the apparent sketchiness has nothing whatever to do with carelessness but is the outcome of great artistic wisdom. If Renoir had painted in every detail, the picture would look dull and lifeless. We remember that a similar conflict had faced artists once before, in the fifteenth century, when they had first discovered how to mirror nature. We remember that the very triumphs of naturalism and of perspective had led to their figures looking somewhat rigid and

wooden, and that it was only the genius of Leonardo that overcame this difficulty by letting the forms intentionally merge into dark shadows – the device that was called ‘*sfumato*’, pages 301–2, figures 193–4. It was their discovery that dark shadows of the kind Leonardo used for modelling do not occur in sunlight and open air, which barred this traditional way out to the Impressionists. Hence, they had to go farther in the intentional blurring of outlines than any previous generation had gone. They knew that the human eye is a marvellous instrument. You need only give it the right hint and it builds up for you the whole form which it knows to be there. But one must know how to look at such paintings. The people who first visited the Impressionist exhibition obviously poked their noses into the pictures and saw nothing but a confusion of casual brushstrokes. That is why they thought these painters must be mad.

Faced with such paintings as figure 340, in which one of the oldest and most methodical champions of the movement, Camille Pissarro (1830–1903), evoked the ‘impression’ of a Paris boulevard in sunshine, these outraged people would ask: ‘If I walk along the boulevard – do I look like this? Do I lose my legs, my eyes and my nose and turn into a shapeless blob?’ Once more it was their knowledge of what ‘belongs’ to a man which interfered with their judgement of what we really see.

It took some time before the public learned that to appreciate an Impressionist painting one has to step back a few yards, and enjoy the miracle of seeing these puzzling patches suddenly fall into place and come to life before our eyes. To achieve this miracle, and to transfer the actual visual experience of the painter to the beholder, was the true aim of the Impressionists.

The feeling of a new freedom and a new power which these artists had must have been truly exhilarating; it must have compensated them for much of the derision and hostility they encountered. Suddenly the whole world offered fit subjects for the painter’s brush. Wherever he discovered a beautiful combination of tones, an interesting configuration of colours and forms, a satisfying and gay patchwork of sunlight and coloured shades, he could set down his easel and try to transfer his impression on to the canvas. All the old bogeys of ‘dignified subject-matter’, of ‘balanced compositions’, of ‘correct drawing’, were laid to rest. The artist was responsible to no one but his own sensibilities for what he painted and how he painted it. Looking back at this struggle it is perhaps less surprising that the views of these young artists encountered resistance than that they were so soon to be taken for granted. For bitter as was the fight and hard as it was for the artists concerned, the triumph of Impressionism was complete. Some of these young rebels at least, notably Monet and Renoir, luckily lived long enough to enjoy the fruits of this victory and to become



340

Camille Pissarro
*The boulevard des
 Italiens, morning,
 sunlight, 1897*

Oil on canvas, 73.2 ×
 92.1 cm, 28 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 36 $\frac{1}{4}$ in;
 National Gallery of Art,
 Washington, DC, Chester
 Dale Collection

famous and respected all over Europe. They witnessed their works entering public collections and being coveted possessions of the wealthy. This transformation moreover made a lasting impression on artists and critics alike. The critics who had laughed had proved very fallible indeed. Had they bought these canvases rather than mocked them they would have become rich. Criticism therefore suffered a loss of prestige from which it never recovered. The struggle of the Impressionists became the treasured legend of all innovators in art, who could always point to this conspicuous failure of the public to recognize novel methods. In a sense this notorious failure is as important in the history of art as was the ultimate victory of the Impressionist programme.

Perhaps this victory would not have been so quick and so thorough had it not been for two allies which helped people of the nineteenth century to see the world with different eyes. One of these allies was photography. In the early days this invention had mainly been used for portraits. Very long exposures were necessary, and people who sat for their photographs had to



341

Katsushika Hokusai
*Mount Fuji seen behind
 a cistern*, 1835

Woodblock print from
 'One hundred views of
 Mount Fuji', 22.6 × 15.5
 cm, 9 × 6 in

be propped up in a rigid posture to be able to keep still so long. The development of the portable camera, and of the snapshot, began during the same years which also saw the rise of Impressionist painting. The camera helped to discover the charm of the fortuitous view and of the unexpected angle. Moreover, the development of photography was bound to push artists further on their way of exploration and experiment. There was no need for painting to perform a task which a mechanical device could perform better and more cheaply. We must not forget that in the past the art of painting served a number of utilitarian ends. It was used to record the likeness of a notable person or the view of a country house. The painter was a man who could defeat the transitory nature of things and preserve the aspect of any object for posterity. We would not know what the dodo looked like, had not a Dutch seventeenth-century painter used his skill in portraying a specimen shortly before these birds became extinct. Photography in the nineteenth century was about to take over this function of pictorial art. It was a blow to the position of artists, as serious as had been the abolition of religious images by Protestantism, *page 374*. Before that invention nearly every self-respecting person sat for his portrait at least once in his lifetime. Now people rarely underwent this ordeal

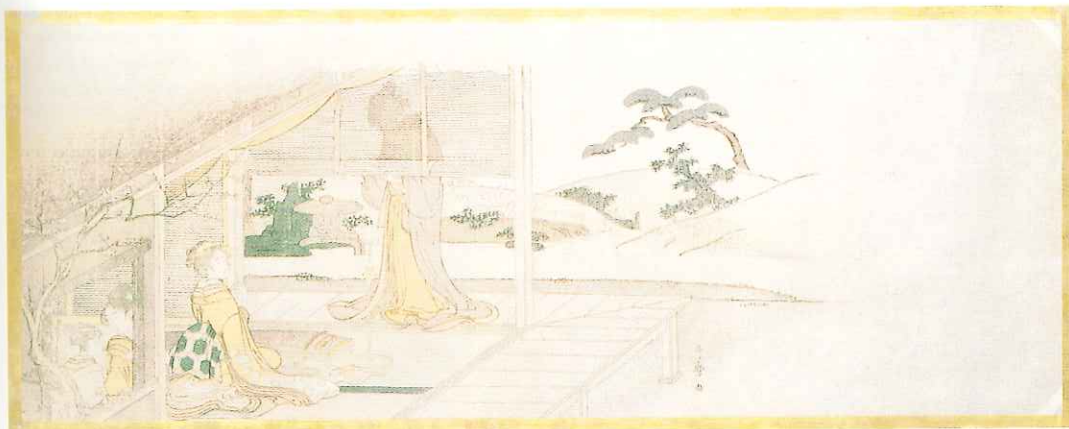
unless they wanted to oblige and help a painter-friend. So it came about that artists were increasingly compelled to explore regions where photography could not follow them. In fact, modern art would hardly have become what it is without the impact of this invention.

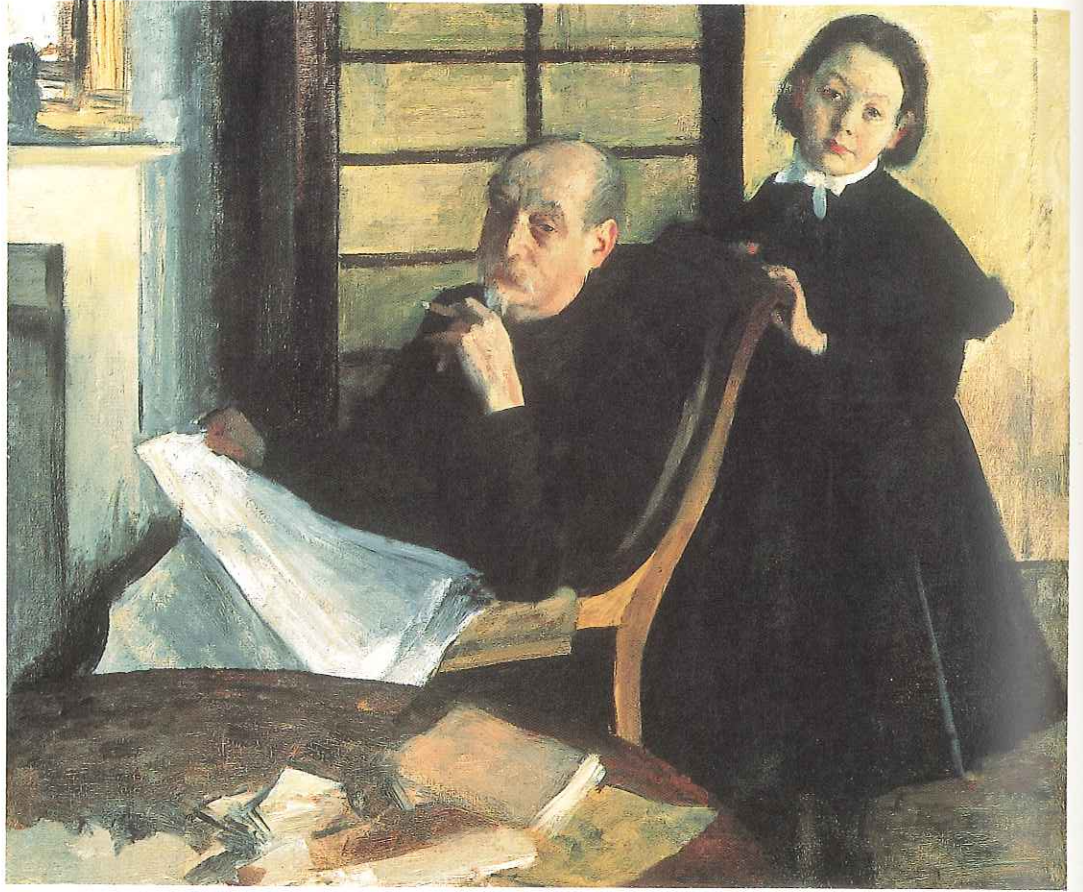
The second ally which the Impressionists found in their adventurous quest for new motifs and new colour schemes was the Japanese colour-print. The art of Japan had developed out of Chinese art, *page 155*, and had continued along these lines for nearly a thousand years. In the eighteenth century, however, perhaps under the influence of European prints, Japanese artists had abandoned the traditional motifs of Far Eastern art, and had chosen scenes from low life as a subject for colour woodcuts, which combined great boldness of invention with masterly technical perfection. Japanese connoisseurs did not think very highly of these cheap products. They preferred the austere traditional manner. When Japan was forced, in the middle of the nineteenth century, to enter into trade relations with Europe and America, these prints were often used as wrappings and padding, and could be picked up cheaply in tea-shops. Artists of Manet's circle were among the first to appreciate their beauty, and to collect them eagerly. Here they found a tradition unspoiled by those academic rules and clichés which the French painters strove to get rid of. The Japanese prints helped them to see how much of the European conventions still remained with them without their having noticed it. The Japanese relished every unexpected and unconventional aspect of the world. Their master, Hokusai (1760–1849), would represent Mount Fuji seen as by chance behind a scaffolding, *figure 341*; Utamaro (1753–1806) would not hesitate to show some of his figures cut off by the margin of a print or a bamboo curtain, *figure 342*. It was this daring disregard of an elementary rule of European painting that struck the Impressionists. They discovered in this rule a last hide-out of the ancient domination of knowledge over vision.

342

Kitagawa Utamaro
*Rolling up a blind for
 the plum-blossom view,*
 late 1790s

Woodblock print, 19.7
 × 50.8 cm, 7¾ × 20 in





Why should a painting always show the whole or a relevant part of each figure in a scene?

The painter who was most deeply impressed by these possibilities was Edgar Degas (1834–1917). Degas was a little older than Monet and Renoir. He belonged to the generation of Manet and, like him, kept somewhat aloof from the Impressionist group though he was in sympathy with most of their aims. Degas was passionately interested in design and draughtsmanship and greatly admired Ingres. In his portraits, *figure 343*, he wanted to bring out the impression of space and of solid forms seen from the most unexpected angles. That is also why he liked to take his subjects from the ballet rather than from out-door scenes. Watching rehearsals, Degas had an opportunity of seeing bodies from all sides in the most varied attitudes. Looking down on to the stage from above, he would see the girls dancing, or resting, and would study the intricate foreshortening and the

343

Edgar Degas
*Henri Degas and his
niece Lucie, 1876*

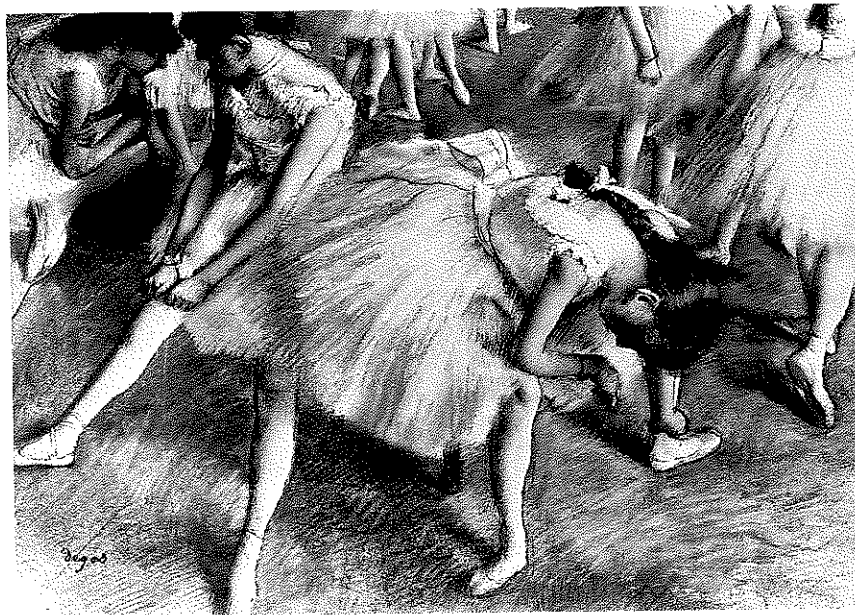
Oil on canvas, 99.8 ×
119.9 cm, 39½ × 47¼ in.;
The Art Institute of
Chicago

effect of stage-lighting on the modelling of the human form. *Figure 344* shows one of the pastel sketches made by Degas. The arrangement could not be more casual in appearance. Of some of the dancers we see only the legs, of some only the body. Only one figure is seen complete, and that in a posture which is intricate and difficult to read. We see her from above, her head bent forward, her left hand clasping her ankle, in a state of deliberate relaxation. There is no story in Degas's pictures. He was not interested in the ballerinas because they were pretty girls. He did not seem to care for their moods. He looked at them with the dispassionate objectivity with which the Impressionists looked at the landscape around them. What mattered to him was the interplay of light and shade on the human form, and the way in which he could suggest movement or space. He proved to the academic world that, far from being incompatible with perfect draughtsmanship, the new principles of the young artists were posing new problems which only the most consummate master of design could solve.

The main principles of the new movement could find full expression only in painting, but sculpture, too, was soon drawn into the battle for or against 'modernism'. The great French sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) was born in the same year as Monet. Since he was an ardent student of classical statues and of Michelangelo there need have been no

344

Edgar Degas
Awaiting the cue, 1879
 Pastel on paper, 99.8 ×
 119.9 cm, 39¼ × 47¼ in;
 private collection





345

Auguste Rodin
*The sculptor Jules
 Dalou*, 1883

Bronze, height 52.6 cm,
 20½ in; Musée Rodin,
 Paris

346

Auguste Rodin
The hand of God,
 c. 1898

Marble, height 92.9 cm,
 36½ in; Musée Rodin,
 Paris

fundamental conflict between him and traditional art. In fact, Rodin soon became an acknowledged master, and enjoyed a public fame as great as, if not greater than, that of any other artist of his time. But even his works were the object of violent quarrels among the critics, and were often lumped together with those of the Impressionist rebels. The reason may become clear if we look at one of his portraits, *figure 345*. Like the Impressionists, Rodin despised the outward appearance of 'finish'. Like them, he preferred to leave something to the imagination of the beholder. Sometimes he even left part of the stone standing to give the impression that his figure was just emerging and taking shape. To the average public this seemed to be an irritating eccentricity if not sheer laziness. Their objections were the same as those which had been raised against Tintoretto, *page 371*. To them artistic perfection still meant that everything should be neat and polished. In disregarding these petty conventions to express his vision of the divine act of Creation, *figure 346*, Rodin helped to

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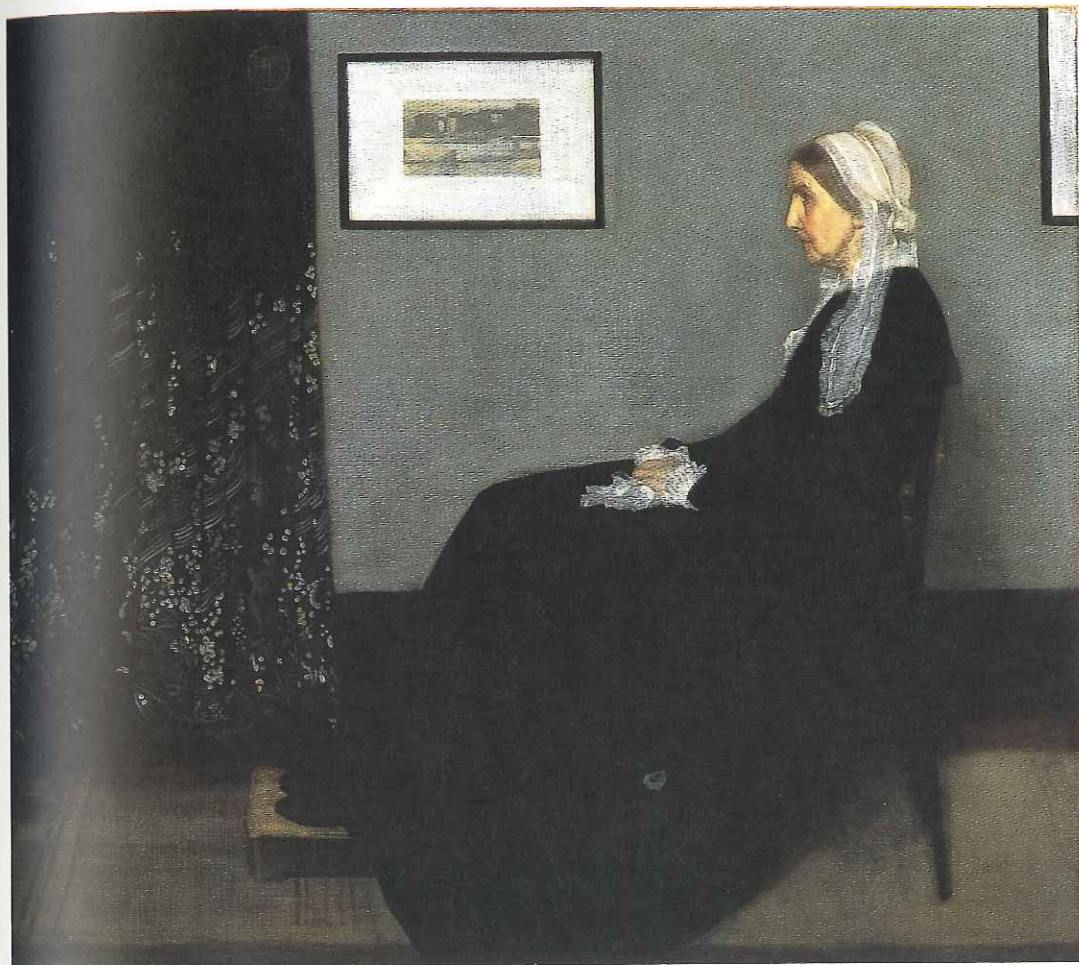


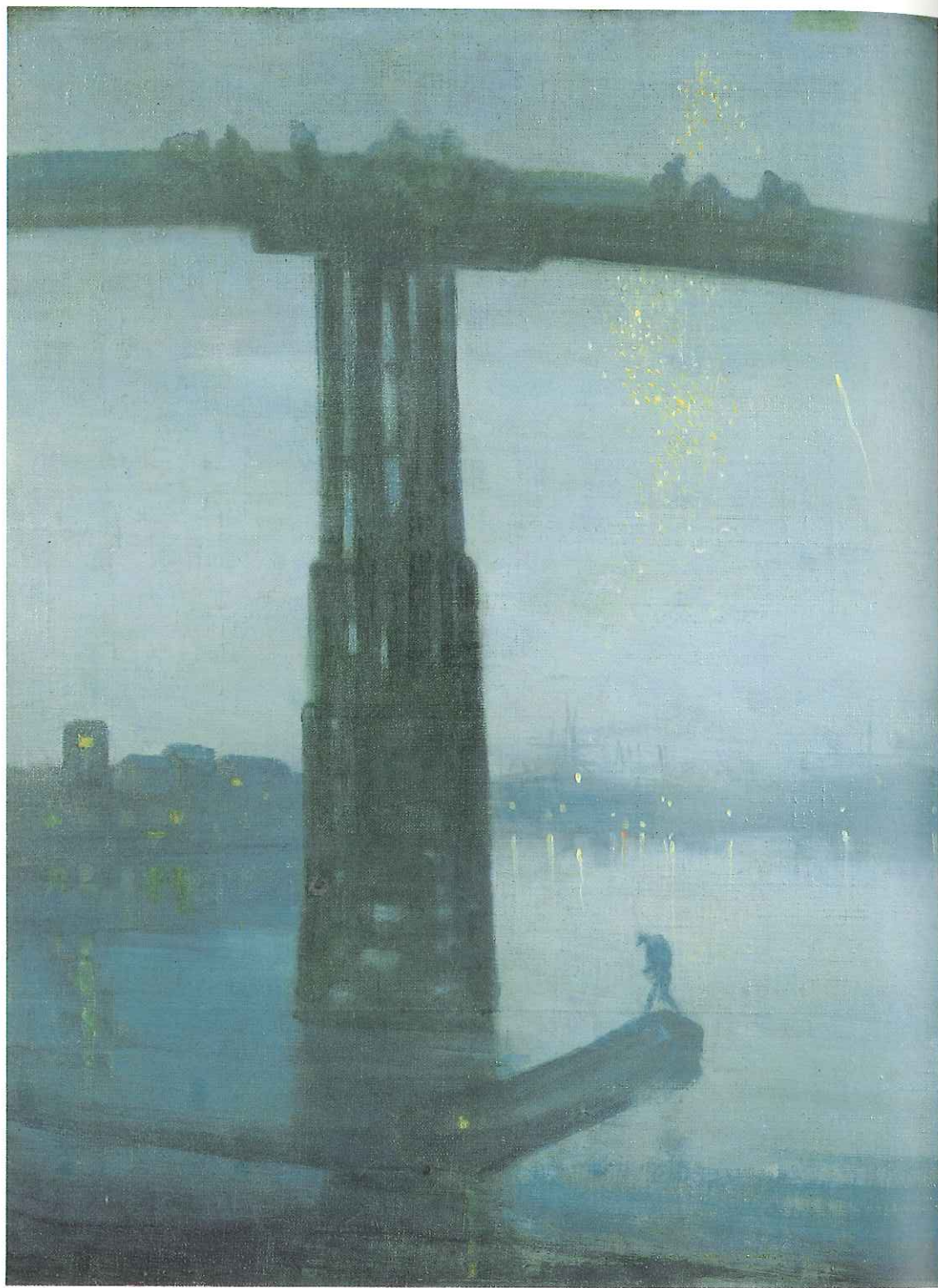
assert what Rembrandt had claimed as his right, *page 422* – to declare his work finished when he had reached his artistic aim. As no one could say that his procedure resulted from ignorance, his influence did much to pave the way for the acceptance of Impressionism outside the narrow circle of its French admirers.

Artists from all over the world came into contact with Impressionism in Paris, and carried away with them the new discoveries, and also the new attitude of the artist as a rebel against the prejudices and conventions of the bourgeois world. One of the most influential apostles of this gospel outside France was the American James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903). Whistler had taken part in the first battle of the new movement; he had exhibited with Manet in the Salon of the Rejected in 1863, and he shared the enthusiasm of his painter-colleagues for Japanese prints. He was not an Impressionist in the strict sense of the word, any more than was Degas or Rodin, for his main concern was not with the effects of light and colour but rather with the composition of delicate patterns. What he had in common with the Paris painters was his contempt for the interest the public showed in sentimental anecdotes. He stressed the point that what mattered in painting was not the subject but the way in which it was translated into colours and forms. One of Whistler's most famous paintings, perhaps one of the most popular paintings ever made, is the portrait of his mother, *figure 347*. It is characteristic that the title under which Whistler exhibited this painting in 1872 was 'Arrangement in grey and black'. He shrank from any suggestion of 'literary' interest or sentimentality. Actually the harmony of forms and colours at which he aimed is in no contradiction with the feeling of the subject-matter. It is the careful balance of simple forms that gives the picture its restful quality, and the subdued tones of its 'grey and black', ranging from the lady's hair and dress to the wall and setting, enhance the expression of resigned loneliness which gives the painting its wide appeal. It is strange to realize that the painter of this sensitive and gentle picture was notorious for his provocative manner and his exercises in what he called 'the gentle art of making enemies'. He had settled in London and felt called upon to fight the battle for modern art almost single-handed. His habit of giving paintings names which struck people as eccentric, his disregard of academic convention, brought upon him the wrath of John Ruskin (1819–1900), the great critic who had championed Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites. In 1877 Whistler exhibited night-pieces in the Japanese manner which he called

347

James Abbott
McNeill Whistler
*Arrangement in grey
and black: portrait of the
artist's mother, 1871*
Oil on canvas, 144 ×
162 cm, 56¾ × 63¾ in;
Musée d'Orsay, Paris





'Nocturnes', *figure 348*, asking 200 guineas for each. Ruskin wrote: 'I have never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face.' Whistler sued him for libel, and the case once more brought out the deep cleavage that separated the public's point of view from that of the artist. The question of 'finish' was promptly trotted out, and Whistler was cross-examined as to whether he really asked that enormous sum 'for two days' work', to which he replied: 'No, I ask it for the knowledge of a lifetime.'

It is strange how much the opponents in this unfortunate law-suit really had in common. Both were deeply dissatisfied with the ugliness and squalor of their surroundings. But while Ruskin, the older man, hoped to lead his countrymen to a greater awareness of beauty by an appeal to their moral sense, Whistler became a leading figure in the so-called 'aesthetic movement', which tried to make out that artistic sensibility is the only thing in life worth taking seriously. Both these views gained in importance as the nineteenth century drew to its close.

348

James Abbott
McNeill Whistler
*Nocturne in blue and
silver: old Battersea
Bridge*, c. 1872-5
Oil on canvas, 67.9 ×
50.8 cm, 26¾ × 20 in;
Tate Gallery, London

*The rejected painter
exclaiming, 'And they
have turned this down,
the ignorant fools!'*,
1859

Lithograph by Honoré
Daumier, 22.1 × 27.2 cm,
8¾ × 10¾ in

