With the advent of Symbolism in the late 1880s, and the growth of an antinaturalist current in the paintings of younger artists (Seurat, Van Gogh, Gauguin), Impressionist art came to be regarded as an unthinking form of naturalism. The Symbolist critics praised the new painters by claiming that their art was rich in intellectual, expressive, and decorative ideas, as opposed to Impressionism which, they believed, merely added a heightened color sense to the old Renaissance tradition of verisimilitude. Impressionist naturalism was dismissed by Félix Fénéon, Seurat’s chief defender, in these derisive terms:

The spectacle of the heavens, the water, greenery, varies from moment to moment, professed the first Impressionists. To imprint one of these fugitive appearances on the retina was their goal. Thus arose the necessity to paint a landscape in one séance and a tendency to make nature grimace in order to prove that the moment was unique and that one would never again see it.1

This view became commonplace in the twentieth century, and until the 1940s it was generally believed that in their mature work Morisot, Degas, Monet, Renoir, Cassatt, and Manet were depicting their own society without analyzing it. They enjoyed theaters and promenades in the country and simply represented these innocent pleasures. Praise for them therefore fell not on their images of contemporary life, but on their innovations in color, brushwork, and other aspects of “pure painting,” so congenial to the era of abstraction, given the premium it has placed on the formal components of painting.

Since the 1940s this view has been discredited, and scholars have expanded the range of issues eligible for analysis to include complicated interrelationships among painting, literature, and the history of Paris from 1848 to the 1880s.2 We now know that Impressionism was not a simple-minded representation of color-light, and we are constantly reminded of the painters’ innovations, for which the words “radical” and “revolutionary” are frequently used (especially by corporate sponsors of the recent spate of “blockbuster” Impressionist exhibitions). We have learned that Impressionism really was born of adversity and miscomprehension; its new brushwork, color, and

1 Impressionism, Originality, and Laissez-Faire

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spatial organization were subversive; its devotion to the immediate present was profoundly shocking; its subjects and attitudes undermined the whole concept of what art was, what art schools should teach, and how art exhibitions should be organized.

All this is well worth pointing to, but were the Impressionists radicals? On the surface of it, no. Caillebotte, Degas, Manet, and Morisot were upper-class Parisians who can readily be assimilated with their peers, and who demonstrated no wish to make profound alterations of their society. Monet was the upstart son of a shopkeeper, eager to be accepted, and Renoir, the only Impressionist of artisan-class origins, was critical of the ruthlessness of urban-industrial society, but wanted to return to a premodern patrician order. Pissarro was the only political radical among the painters, but he remains a special case, and he dealt with rural life, not with the urban and suburban society the others preferred.

What is needed in order to assess the label “radical” are inquiries along new lines. Further investigation of the artists’ subjects, especially their preference for themes of leisure and entertainment, should be revealing. Systematic study of the artists’ clients and dealers, not yet undertaken, would certainly be rewarding. Many of their early patrons, for example, were not long-established members of high society, but wielders of new money: the financier Ernest May, the banker Albert Hecht, the retailer and speculator Ernest Hoschedé, the renowned baritone Jean-Baptiste Faure. The links between the new money and the new painting are doubtless there, but will remain speculative until someone does the work. In addition to these aspects of social history, we should look more deeply into the often discussed issues of the “caught moment,” the hedonistic indulgence in natural light and out-of-doors living, the pronounced individualism of the painters, and their concern for originality. This chapter concentrates on the last two of these.

The Impressionists’ devotion to contemporary phenomena is now recognized as one of the key elements of their art. They looked to Paris and its suburbs for most of their subjects; even when they turned to the countryside, they represented it as though it were newly seen, free of the literary, historical, and moral overlays that had characterized the work of the preceding generation. They dealt in what are, after all, slight events in the history of humankind, mere ephemeral moments seized from the pleasure of leisure-time activities. Not only did they turn toward present-day subjects, they also emphasized features that pointed to the immediate and the momentary. There are many ways to represent a moored sailboat or a ballet rehearsal, but Monet and Degas used broken brushwork, indistinct contours, bright colors, and striking compositional geometry to induce in the viewer a sense of the spontaneous, the unresolved, that which is just now being seen. Impressionism, wrote César Graña,

assumes a world in which moments can exist as total units of experience: where self-feeling, as well as the perception of others, has a new swiftness and, within that, a new, flickering poignancy; where the ephemeral and the unguarded can be memorable and must be followed and scanned by the painter with a flashing perceptivity of his own.

Graña’s words point to the combination of external observation and subjectivity that marked Impressionism. When the painters concentrated upon the illusion of what could be seen in the flash of a moment, they seemed to reduce experience to the self, unsupported by references to other moments, to other experiences. This was upsetting to many, for the viewer, required to concentrate on this one moment, was denied contact with other moments—with memory, in effect.

Denial of memory meant denial of history, a pervasive consequence of the Impressionists’ orientation. “History” was not simply the discarded subjects of earlier painting, but the means by which they were rendered, particularly the structure of light and dark that gave conventional painting the satisfactory illusion of three dimensions. The exaltation of bright
color and patchy brushwork was the Impressionists’ way of presenting what one could see, without recourse to what one “knows” by virtue of traditional artistic training. This was only an apparent spontaneity, for Impressionism was just as artfully constructed as earlier painting. However, to many observers, then and later, the concentration on spontaneous vision and the absence of memory-trained techniques condemned the Impressionists to a superficial indulgence in pleasures. Max Friedländer, gifted historian of Lowlands art, could not grant profundity to Impressionism because he believed that seeing was not just looking with the eyes, but with the judgments provided by memory and history:

The man who knows most sees most; he sees more than is actually visible to him in a given instant and from a given standpoint. The Impressionists, however, were at pains to forget what they knew so as to notice only what fell within their field of vision.

The Impressionists, deliberately forgoing all criticism and judgment in respect of the phenomenal world, appealing neither to sentiment nor to sense of humor, absorbing the prismatic glitter of things with a positive neutrality, mark the visual art off from the art of poetry, from history, from satire, as also from the affecting, entertaining, instructive or informative type of narrative. The picture is no longer the exemplar of an idea, does not point beyond the visible, strikes us as something unique, individual, like a portrait. 7

For this reason, Friedländer denied the label “genre” to Impressionism. It lacked the moral ideas that he required for his definition. Similarly, Graña, while admiring the Impressionists, said that they cannot be called “naturalistic” because their art is one of “amiable lyricism” that mirrors but does not interpret contemporary life. 8

The Impressionists’ disavowal of memory and of history was one symptom of the gulf between present and past that opened ever wider with the spread of the urban-industrial revolution. History, mythology, and religion, for centuries the chief points of reference for painting, were discarded with surprising rapidity during the third quarter of the nineteenth century, first by the Barbizon artists in the second halves of their careers, then by the Impressionists (after youthful essays in traditional subjects). An education in Greek and Latin, in Homer and Virgil, and in the Bible had little real function for the entrepreneurs of industrial capitalism: “If you’re so smart, why ain’t you rich?” These premodern subjects, which had been attached to monarchy, nobility, and theocracy, eventually ceased to underpin public education (private schools, out of class solidarity, retained the old curriculum for much longer). The Impressionists were ahead of most of their contemporaries when they denounced the Academy and its retardataire allegiance to those traditional sources.

To uproot the past was no easy step for the painters to take, and this is evident when we reflect on the upheavals it caused. Manet’s mocking of history in his Déjeuner sur l’herbe and Olympia (both Musée d’Orsay, Paris), as well as in other pictures of the 1860s, was linked to his defiance of the government’s guardians of history—the directors of fine arts, the Academy, the juries of official exhibitions. The other Impressionists did battle with the government by organizing their own exhibitions, a step which effectively, by the end of the century, demoted the Academy’s shows to minor status, and set the pattern for twentieth-century exhibitions, so often sponsored by independent artists’ societies. A number of the Impressionists had only perfunctory periods of training in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, and their example led to its rapid decline, if we are to judge by the pattern of artists who dominated early modernism. Few of them studied in sanctioned ways, and by ignoring government exhibitions, prizes, and fellowships, rendered them obsolete. The whole world of official painting came tumbling down, at least as far as alert young artists were concerned.

Because they turned toward contemporary subjects, the Impressionists had to disavow tradition and its institutions—hence their constant demands for freedom. Critics close to them made a virtual litany
of this demand. Manet’s friend Théodore Duret wrote of all “true artists” that they
are vigorous persons, profoundly original, most often obeying in their methods of production a kind of
instinct and inherent natural strength. Let all these
individuals develop instead of trying to restrict them,
let them freely express the outstanding aspects of
their nature. Everything that will contribute towards
assuring the individual his freedom of action will
contribute to the development of the artist.  

The Impressionists and their supporters in the
press demanded freedom from the restraints of official
art policies. In this context, the term “freedom” has
political meaning, for it paralleled the freedom from
prior restraints that entrepreneurs were pleading for.
Duret’s words (including the phrase “methods of
production”) could have served the cause of a Para-
sian businessman trying to market a product in the face
of government restrictions that survived from an ear-
erlier era. Edmond Duranty, another friend of the Im-
pressionists, after invoking the word “liberté” several
times, used the famous economic phrase “laissez-
faire, laissez-passer” to initiate a plea for freedom from
“this bureaucracy of the mind, steeped in rules, that
weighs on us in this country.”

Freedom, quite logically for the artists, was re-
quired both for the sake of producing their works (art
historians recognize this) and for marketing them
(most art historians avoid this). The laissez-faire
market they fought for is the most obvious compar-
ison with the commercial world. Having rebelled
against the subjects of a prior age, they had excluded
themselves from the patronage of government and
church, and were forced to develop their own mar-
ket. The role of private dealers greatly expanded in
their era, and some of the painters, particularly Monet
and Degas, were very clever in manipulating their
markets. They played one dealer off another, learned
various maneuvers to keep their prices up, and by-
passed commercial galleries when they could reach
clients directly. In December 1873 the Impressionists
formed their own exhibition society, duly incorpo-
rated as a cooperative business, and began display-
ing their wares in rented quarters in the fashionable
center of Paris.

Forced to seek their own outlets, the painters had
to claim value for their product. This value was lo-
cated in their originality, in the very way their works
were produced. Their paintings were said to be the
result of the creative individual working in freedom.
Creativity, that is, was identified with the individual,
not within the social, and originality was the precise
locus of value. Originality in the business world was
equated with invention, and it is revealing that both
words are used repeatedly by the defenders of the Im-
pressionists. Real artists, according to Duret, “are in-
ventors, men who have an unusual character, an origi-
inal way of feeling and, if they are painters, a touch,
a sense of color, a way of drawing that are entirely
personal.” Their works are original because they do
not imitate existing ones. They earn their way, fur-
thermore, because they succeed “by painful labor, a
tension of all their faculties, in giving form to their
conceptions.” And these forms are like other prod-
ucts whose originality guarantees their value: “new
forms, original creations.”

By using the phrases “painful labor” and “origi-
nal creations,” Duret was crediting the Impression-
ists with two kinds of entrepreneurial virtue: hard,
steady work and brilliant flashes of genius. These two
values were often separated. Horatio Alger’s boy he-
roes made it the hard way, with patience and dutiful
attention to the boss’s wishes. Victor Appleton’s Tom
Swift also made it by the end of each of his books,
but it was invariably thanks to his remarkable inven-
tive powers, such as building a giant searchlight in his
garage. The Impressionists were more like Swift than
like Alger’s heroes, but Duret and other critics had
to allay bourgeois fears by showing that genius was
accompanied by hard work and skill.

The Impressionists’ originality was based upon in-
dividuality and craftsmanship, and was therefore free
of the monotonous effects of that unimaginative
kind of work that emulates the perfectly finished
product, that is, the industrial artifact. This product
was equated with clever academic art, so that Du-
ranty, in distinguishing the Impressionists from their imitators, again used the vocabulary of commerce. In France, he wrote, “the inventor disappears in favor of the one who takes out a patent on perfecting; virtuosity wins out over naïve awkwardness, and the vulgarizer absorbs the value of the man who has innovated.” The Impressionists’ famous brushwork was cited constantly as proof of their “naïve awkwardness,” of their honest and empirical response to nature, as distinct from the hated polish of conventional painting, where brushwork was suppressed, the smooth result constituting a sign of “skill.” Mere polish in painting was equated with the despised values of the bourgeoisie, who confused skill with talent, and who valued mass production over the rare, imaginative, and hand-wrought piece.

What happened over the course of the nineteenth century was simply this: artists who remained within the sanctioned institutions of art did not have to cultivate very much originality (only enough to be noticed), because the system of prizes, government purchases, and church commissions gave them a living. The requirement was to conform enough to these institutions to guarantee continued subsidies and commissions—observing tradition was literally a way to make a living. How could artists outside this closed market earn their way? Like upstart businessmen, they had to develop a new product, and in the process they had to assert its newness, its originality. Their battles with tradition were a means of establishing this essential quality or originality that a few years later was translated into market value. “Radical” or “revolutionary” in relation to the dominant institutions, they were taken up at first by a handful of patrons, usually men of new fortunes, and therefore joined the advanced thrust of the rising bourgeoisie.13 Their enemy was not the bourgeoisie as a whole, but its stodgiest representatives who were still mired in the past, whose protectionist attitudes thwarted progress. The painters, like other advanced entrepreneurs, had difficulty making their way at first, but this very difficulty was a sign of their originality, and a half-generation later (for most, when they reached their mid-forties) their originality was the very proof of their genius to a larger segment of the middle class, who then provided the income.

Thorstein Veblen, in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), offered an analysis of this phenomenon that should be applied to artistic originality:

Hand labor is a more wasteful method of production; hence the goods turned out by this method are more serviceable for the purpose of pecuniary reputability; hence the marks of hand labor came to be honorific, and the goods which exhibit these marks take rank as of higher grade than the corresponding machine product. Commonly, if not invariably, the honorific marks of hand labor are certain imperfections and irregularities in the lines of the hand-wrought article. . . . The ground of the superiority of hand-wrought goods, therefore, is a certain margin of crudeness. This margin must never be so wide as to show bungling workmanship, since that would be evidence of low cost, nor so narrow as to suggest the ideal precision attained only by the machine, for that would be evidence of low cost.14 Veblen then went on to say that the “honorific” mark is not appreciated by the ordinary mortals who prefer the perfection of the machine-made, and therefore its appreciation is a way of distinguishing oneself from the common herd.

Originality and handcraft gave distinction and, eventually, great value to the Impressionists’ paintings. They were not, therefore, radicals seeking the overthrow of their society, despite their flirtations with gypsies, urban itinerants, and other marginals. They were more like other aggressive members of the bourgeoisie, doing battle with outmoded institutions in order to push themselves and their culture in new directions. Nineteenth-century industrial society thrived on its critics, using them to lurch forward, to shed old ideas, painfully and awkwardly, in a process that bound together critic and target, each requiring the other.15 The Impressionists were the vanguard of the bourgeoisie, not of any revolution. Of course it did not seem so at the time, not just because their work was new or “radical,” but also because the
world of entertainment and leisure that they favored was so opposed to the work ethic and the other moral underpinnings of the bourgeoisie.

From the vantage point of over a century later, it is easy to see this. Even so, historians have paid too little attention to the undercurrents flowing beneath the brilliant surfaces of Impressionist paintings. Their innovations have been largely seen in terms of style, and the social meanings of their forms and their subjects have remained too seldom explored. The history of Impressionism should be rewritten by integrating style and subject, individual and society.

The whole history of modernism suffers still from formalism, including its latest manifestation, a trendy combination of semiotics and structuralism that gives a false veneer of newness, but that preserves the erroneous idea that art is somehow “pure,” elevated above history into a realm of its own. Impressionism is a good place to start the necessary reevaluation; it has replaced Renaissance painting as the art most widely admired and most sought after, because it built the foundations for the experience of modern life as it is comprehended and given structure in visual form.

Notes


2. The key work in the revision of Impressionism is T. J. Clark’s The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers (New York, 1985), a brilliant, original, and often tendentious interpretation (incorporating, amended, two influential earlier articles). My regret is that he pays insufficient attention to Degas, and little at all to Monet and Renoir. See also my Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society (New Haven, 1988).
5. Only after the original publication of this essay did I find Michel Melot’s article “La Notion d’originalité et son importance dans la définition des objets d’art,” in Sociologie de l’art, ed. Raymonde Moulin (Paris, 1986), 191–202. Melot’s incisive article concentrates on the relation of the quantitative rarity of an object to “originality,” demonstrating that its value as property lies behind metaphysical, aesthetic, and other considerations of the term.
6. César Graña, “Impressionism as an Urban Art Form,” in Fact and Symbol (New York, 1971), 83–84. Welcome though this view was in 1971, it has been superseded by Clark’s Painting of Modern Life. Clark embeds the idea of “flickering poignancy” in the social history of Haussmannian Paris, particularly well in his first chapter.
11. Théodore Duret, “Edouard Manet,” in his Critique d’avant-garde (Paris, 1885), 121–22. Richard Shiff, Cézanne and the End of Impressionism (Chicago, 1984), offers by far the most incisive analysis of the new marks and forms of Impressionism, and he deals extensively with the issues of originality in artistic processes. He limits his discussion to aesthetics, however, and does not incorporate social history.
15. In addition to Marx, this process has been studied by Georg Simmel, especially in his essay “Conflict,” in Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago, 1971), 70–95. See also Siegfried Kracauer, Orpheus in Paris: Offenbach and the Paris of His Time (New York, 1938); Jerrold Siegel, Bohemian Paris (New York, 1986); and Green, “Dealing in Temperaments.”