THE IMPRESSIONISTS

The painters known as Impressionists worked in Paris from the 1860s until, in some instances, well into the twentieth century. The 25 pictures in this set have been selected from various sources. The explanatory text and classroom notes discuss the subject matter and technique of Impressionism.

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The Impressionists are often seen as the earliest avant-garde group — who led painting away from the Renaissance tradition of ‘picturing’ the world, through visual illusion, into the uncharted waters of modern painting.

A century later, in post-modern times, art historians have revised the modernist view that since Impressionism painting has been mostly about ‘form’. They point out the obvious, that modern art is of course imbued with social and sometimes political meaning.

Like the Realists before them, the Impressionists broke new technical ground. They also helped to establish a key point—that the surface of the canvas and its flatness is what distinguishes painting from every other art.

Today, the Impressionists are legendary figures. Their work, and reproductions of it, can give intense pleasure. This guide considers the background, working practice and careers of the artists, to help to explain their achievements.
Looking at Impressionist paintings

DEFINING THE CATEGORIES

The works chosen for this guide are eight by Monet, five by Renoir, four by Pissarro, three by Morisot, three by Sisley and two by the ‘forgotten Impressionist’, Caillebotte.

Most of these canvases were made during the decade and a half of the Impressionist exhibitions. There are also later paintings by Monet, who despite major stylistic developments was considered an Impressionist throughout his life, and Pissarro, the most loyal member of the original group.

The summer of 1869 typified the early days of Impressionism, when Renoir and Monet sat painting beside the Seine at a popular bathing place called La Grenouillère, meaning The Froggery. In his ‘study’ (only several years later did they exhibit the paintings of this scene as finished works) Monet has emphasised an enclosed space, with chopped-off trees and a lack of sky, and painted bright colour contrasts with squiggles.

In 1863, eleven years before the First Impressionist Exhibition, Manet’s Dejeuner sur l’herbe, depicting a nude at a fashionable picnic, had been rejected by the official Salon. (It was not the only one: that year such had been the protest that so many works had been refused that Napoleon III ordered a special exhibition for them. This became known as the Salon des Refusés.)

Most of the paintings selected are landscapes, and more than half — if rain, steam and ice are included — depict the effect of light on water.

The artists’ individual choice of subject matter should be considered. Monet and Sisley are represented here as landscapists, while Renoir, Morisot and Caillebotte take the figure as their central theme. Pissarro, who thought of himself as the complete Impressionist, is covered by both subjects.

To understand more one must return to characteristics of the Impressionist style. For this it will be useful to try to sort the images under the following headings:

- Recording everyday life
- Depicting a fleeting moment
- Representing light through paint
- Landscape water and reflections

Some of the images will fit any of these headings, others only one or two. General points such as working en plein air or the range of the palette apply to virtually all the pictures.
Part 5 — **Looking at the images**