

Life and Leisure along the Rivers of the Île-de-France

To a large extent, our picture of impressionism is located in the Île-de-France, in small towns and riverside resorts along the Seine and its tributaries. The very word impressionism conjures the image of a painter, white hat shading the face, at work in a grassy field near flower-strewn banks.



Rail service made these once rural places easily accessible and brought them into the larger orbit of the capital. Many became bedroom communities for middle-class families. An 1886 census indicated that fewer than half of all residents in the environs of Paris had been born in the place where they lived; for the rest of France the figure was almost 85 percent. The area was transformed

by these new, more urbane residents and by constant economic interchange with Paris. The Île-de-France supported the capital with intensive farming—in some areas using city sewage to fertilize crops—and supplied it with building materials. Commercial services and heavy industry moved to the suburbs, and smokestacks punctuate the skies of many impressionist pictures.



A view along the Oise
Leo J. Kasun



John Singer Sargent | American, 1856–1925

Claude Monet Painting at the Edge of a Wood,
c. 1887

Oil on canvas, 13 ³/₈ x 25 ⁵/₁₆ in.

London, Tate Modern, presented by Miss Emily
Sargent and Mrs. Ormond through the National Art
Collections Fund 1925/Art Resource, NY

While some artists edited out these signs of progress, others frankly included the modernity of steel railroad bridges and billowing smoke.

Several river towns were centers for recreation—another byproduct of a growing middle class. The very concept of mass leisure was new. While city workers normally toiled six days a week, even the poor could take a train for a Sunday outing. Only a ten-minute ride from the Gare Saint-Lazare was Asnières, where a popular bathing establishment stood opposite factory buildings. Sailing was the primary attraction downstream at Argenteuil, and rowing at Chatou. People with means built houses for extended summer stays.

For the impressionists these places in and along the rivers held appeal as sites of modern life and as landscapes where they could capture the fresh look of light and air—but they were also home. Monet, Renoir, Sisley, and Pissarro all lived and worked in small river towns like Argenteuil, Louveciennes, and Vétheuil—names familiar to us from their paintings.

Background: Rivers and the Île-de-France

- In the Middle Ages the word *île* designated not only islands but areas bounded by rivers; the Île-de-France, the “island” of France, is defined by the Seine and two of its tributaries, the Aisne and the Oise.
- The Île-de-France formed the nucleus from which the modern French state was created.
- The population of the Île-de-France quadrupled between the mid-19th and 20th centuries.
- Today, industry in the region includes electronics, information technology, and aeronautics manufacturing, among others.
- The Île-de-France is home to many residential suburbs for people who work in Paris and is the most densely populated part of France outside the city itself.
- Outer *départements* still have rolling fields of grain, rapeseed, soybeans, and sugar beets; fruit trees, grapes, and market produce are also grown.

The Seine

- The Seine flows about 770 km (roughly 480 mi.) through northwestern France from its origin in the Langres Plateau, north of Dijon.
- It empties in the English Channel between Honfleur and Le Havre.
- The river is navigable for oceangoing ships as far as Rouen and since Roman times has been an important commercial artery linking Paris and the north.
- The Seine and its main tributaries—Aube, Loing, Marne, Oise, Yonne, and Eure—drain the entire Seine basin.

Accompany 19th-century characters on Seine outings:
Émile Zola, *L'Oeuvre*, 1886

Visit the town of Chatou today:
www.chatou.fr

Visit a riverside establishment immortalized by Renoir, which is now a museum and restaurant:
www.musee-fournaise.com

Vocabulaire

barque (f): barge

cantonnier (m): rower

fleuve (m): a large river (in France: Seine, Loire, Rhône, and Garonne)

inondation (f): flooding

jardin (m): garden

loisir (m): leisure

nymphéa (m): white water lily

pré (m): meadow

rive (f): river bank, shore

rivière (f): river

verger (m): orchard

voile (f): sail

The Works

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Auguste Renoir
French, 1841–1919

Madame Monet and Her Son, 1874
Oil on canvas, 19 7/8 x 26 3/4 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.60



Many years after Auguste Renoir painted this canvas, his friend Monet described the circumstances of its creation:

This delightful painting by Renoir, of which I am the happy owner today, portrays my first wife. It was done in our garden at Argenteuil. One day, Manet, enthralled by the color and light, undertook an outdoor painting of figures under the trees. During the sitting, Renoir arrived. He, too, was caught up in the spirit of the moment. He asked me for palette, brush, and canvas, and there he was, painting away alongside Manet.¹

After the Franco-Prussian War, Monet moved his family to Argenteuil. Manet had found them a rental house, and both he and Renoir were frequent visitors. Renoir's image captures a leisurely afternoon of middle-class domesticity. Monet's wife Camille appears in contented contemplation, older son Jean, born in 1867, in a dreamy sprawl. We glimpse them from

above. Of Monet's fabled garden—still newly established—we see only a young tree and bit of geranium bed (and the ubiquitous yard fowl). The lack of horizon and the incidental way Camille's skirt is cropped at the bottom of the canvas impart a momentary quality.

This ephemeral feeling is well matched by the lively spontaneity of Renoir's brush. Touches of blue and yellow are enough to shape the shaded gathers of Camille's hat. Long, fluid strokes suggest the soft fullness of her skirt and the pull of fabric in the leg of Jean's jumper. We can almost sense a faint stir of air lifting the rooster's loosely brushed feathers. Up close, chicks dissolve into mere dabs of paint.



This is Édouard Manet's version of the same scene. Although the poses of Camille and Jean are very close in both paintings, Manet takes a wider view, revealing a much deeper background. This added depth places his figures in a more specific, more "real-time" place. On the left we even see Monet, watering can at his feet. While Renoir shows Camille's gaze drifting idly upward, Manet depicts her looking directly at the viewer (or the painter). The moment feels more concrete. Even Manet's paint appears more substantial than Renoir's feather-light surfaces.

Édouard Manet

The Monet Family in Their Garden at Argenteuil, 1874
Oil on canvas, 24 x 39 1/4 in.

New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Joan Whitney Payson, 1975 (1976.201.14)

reproduction
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Claude Monet
French, 1840–1926

Argenteuil, c. 1872
Oil on canvas, 19 7/8 x 25 5/8 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.42



In the six years or so that Monet lived in Argenteuil, he produced about 260 paintings, many of the river or its banks. From the early 1860s until 1889, there was not a single year that he did not paint the Seine. Like Daubigny, Monet even outfitted a studio boat.

Here, Monet presents a view along the promenade in Argenteuil, created when a brackish back channel of the Seine had been filled. In the distance are two signs of the once rural town's new life: sailboats on the left, smokestacks on the right. Though these "facts" are recorded by the painter, Monet's real interest seems to be the river's silver surface—liquid and light—and the effect of sun. Cool shadows bathe the bank

and promenade with mauve and green, except where streaks of low-angled light break through in single strokes of salmon- and lemon-colored paint.

Monet later advised American artist Lilla Cabot Perry:

*When you go out to paint, try to forget what objects you have before you, a tree, a house, a field or whatever. Merely think here is a little square of blue, here an oblong of pink, here a streak of yellow; and paint it just as it looks to you, the exact color and shape . . .*²

slide 16
CD 36Claude Monet
French, 1840–1926*Bridge at Argenteuil on a Gray Day*, c. 1876
Oil on canvas, 24 x 31 5/8 in.National Gallery of Art, Washington
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.44

The landscapes captured in impressionist paintings were not natural but built environments. Artifacts of industrialization were increasingly a part of the view. Two bridges crossed the Seine at Argenteuil (one for road, one for rail traffic), and they figure often in Monet's paintings. More conventional landscape artists might have eliminated such intrusions as insufficiently "picturesque" or chosen another vantage point. Monet, however, took them as simply and undeniably part of what he saw, a part of the "truth" he painted.



"Impressionism"

In April 1874 a group of artists opened an independent exhibition in the studios of the photographer Nadar on the boulevard des Capucines. The program identified them as the "Société Anonyme des Artistes, Peintres, Sculpteurs, Graveurs" —roughly "Artists, Painters, Sculptors, Engravers, Inc." They came to be known as impressionists.

The name is usually attributed to a disparaging critic who seized on the title of Claude Monet's *Impression, Sunrise*. Accustomed to the more polished works of the Salon, he compared Monet's sketchy harbor view to wallpaper—unfavorably. He expected more of a painting than a mere "impression." But what had Monet meant when he put the word in his title? The word

was already in common use both for rapidly executed sketches and to describe the initial visual impact a scene made on an artist. Another commentator on the 1874 exhibition noted, "They are impressionists in the sense that they render, not the landscape, but the sensation produced by the landscape..."³ Artists like Monet, he realized, wanted to paint not simply what they saw but the way they saw it at a particular time and place.

"Impressionism" entered the painting lexicon at a time when French positivist philosophers and scientists were studying perception and color theory. Young avant-garde artists like Monet, Renoir, Sisley, and the other founders of impressionism were *observers* and accepted on principle that

juxtaposing discrete brushstrokes of pure color transcribed their raw sensation directly, allowing them to capture the fleeting and evanescent. Instead of modeling from dark to light, with quick brushwork they could record changing effects of weather and times of day, creating form through color.



Program of the first impressionist exhibition

Monet's dahlias

As France industrialized the beauties of nature held ever greater appeal for middle-class citizens, who were convinced of its beneficial effects on physical and mental well-being. The nature they sought, however, was not wilderness—it was a setting of beauty tamed by civilization. The number of gardens and gardeners, the sheer variety of plants cultivated, grew dramatically in the late nineteenth century. As part of modern life, gardens and promenades were natural subjects for impressionist painters, many of whom were devoted gardeners themselves. Monet created gardens wherever he lived; for forty years they engaged his passion for plants and painter's eye.



Auguste Renoir

Monet Painting in His Garden at Argenteuil, 1873
Oil on canvas, 31 ½ x 18 in.

Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art,
Bequest of Anne Parrish Titzell



Monet lived in Argenteuil, on and off, between 1872 and 1878. Monet, Manet, and Renoir all painted this garden where Monet made an exuberant hedge of dahlias, a flower he expressed particular fondness for. The style of French gardens had become much less formal in the late nineteenth century. In place of tidy parterres, Parisians adopted the profusion of English gardens.

CD 37 | Claude Monet

The Artist's Garden in Argenteuil (A Corner of the Garden with Dahlias), 1873
Oil on canvas, 24 ½ x 32 ½ in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Gift of Janice H. Levin, in Honor of the 50th
Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art 1991.27.1

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Claude Monet
French, 1840–1926

The Artist's Garden at Vétheuil, 1880
Oil on canvas, 59 7/8 x 47 5/8 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.45



Monet called Vétheuil, a little downstream from Argenteuil (and about 60 km, or 40 mi., from Paris), “a ravishing spot.” When he rented a house there in 1878, he arranged immediately with the landlord to landscape terraces leading down to the river. In this large painting, the garden is shown in full-summer bloom of gladioli and sunflowers. Dappled sunlight tessellates the path in prisms of color. Even the “blue-and-white” planters (which Monet took with him as he moved from Argenteuil, to Vétheuil, and beyond to Giverny) are hued green and pink by reflections on their surfaces.

CD 39	<p>Claude Monet French, 1840–1926</p>	<p><i>The Japanese Footbridge</i>, 1899 Oil on canvas, 32 x 40 in.</p>	<p>National Gallery of Art, Washington Gift of Victoria Nebeker Coberly, in memory of her son John W. Mudd, and Walter H. and Leonore Annenberg 1992.9.1</p>
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In 1883 Monet moved to a property in Giverny, which he eventually bought. It was in Normandy, just over the Epte River from the Île-de-France, still a favored spot for Parisians' summer retreats. Improvements to the gardens occupied Monet until his death in 1926. In his last decade, he painted little else but his prized lily pond, which had required long negotiations with local authorities to allow diversion of river water. Monet's stepson described the lily pond in 1960:

This was entirely his own creation; he converted a patch of landscape, and filled it

*with water to mirror the sky and with plants: some red, yellow, pink and white water lilies to float on this water as though it were on the surface of the sky; the others, irises, calatheas and arrowheads to mark the line of the banks, and above all else to give pleasure to the eyes...and then there is a little Japanese-style arched bridge...*⁴

Monet called his water lily pictures *paysages d'eau* (waterscapes). Progressively, they lost their landscape elements—the footbridge, the definition of banks and horizon—to become floating shapes and reflections over the entire surface of the canvas. Here, the sky has already

been eliminated; the lush foliage rises all the way to the frame, and the illusion of three-dimensional space is flattened by the decorative arch of the bridge. Attention is forced onto the paint surface itself, and held there, not drawn into the scene. In later lily pond paintings, flowers and their mirrored reflections assume equal stature, blurring distinctions between solid objects and transitory effects of light. Monet had always been interested in reflections, feeling that their discontinuous and fragmented shapes paralleled his own broken brushwork.

River sports

The French passion for sailing and rowing, which arose in the 1830s, was an import from England. Initially, these sports were enjoyed only by the wealthy, but by the later 1800s, railroad expansion to outlying towns and creation of less exclusive boating clubs made river sports widely accessible. Even lower-class Parisians could enjoy close-in Seine resorts like Asnières that offered dining and musical entertainment along with swimming and boating.



At Argenteuil the Seine widened, giving more water and the steadier breezes needed for sailing. By the 1870s about two hundred sailboats were moored in the Argenteuil basin. Many were owned by Parisians—the capital was only a half-hour train ride away—but others were available for rent. With a breezy lightness of its own, Renoir's painting depicts the boats and bankside spectators at one of Argenteuil's many regattas. At least two were run every month between early spring and fall.

CD 40 | Auguste Renoir

Regatta at Argenteuil, 1874

Oil on canvas, 12 ¾ x 18 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.59

reproduction
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Auguste Renoir
French, 1841–1919

Oarsmen at Chatou, 1879
Oil on canvas, 32 x 39 7/16 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Gift of Sam A. Lewisohn 1951.52



At Chatou rowing was the main attraction. In Renoir's painting a man brings a gig to shore. These two-person boats were designed for relaxed recreation. The rower sat facing his companion, often a lady, who controlled the rudder by ropes. The man in the boat, wearing a typical boating costume, may be the artist's brother Edmond. Standing on the bank are painter Gustave Caillebotte and Aline Charigot, who would become Renoir's wife. On the opposite bank are riverside restaurants, where pleasure boaters could end an afternoon with food, drink, and dancing.

The painting captures the brilliance of sun and water, summer and youth. The silky texture of Renoir's brushstrokes mirrors his languid, leisurely scene. In the water, skips of strong blues and white alternate, their shimmering intensity enhanced through the equally strong presence of orange in the boat's reflection and the scarlet accent of Aline's bow. Renoir has put into practice aspects of contemporary color theory, which suggested that colors were perceived more strongly when placed next to their opposites, by juxtaposing orange with blue, for example, or red with green.

Consider this

How many figures do you see in this painting? What are they doing? Where have they come from? Where will they go?

Where do you see warm colors laid beside their complementary cool colors?

What effect does this juxtaposition have?

- *the paired colors have more visual punch, seeming to pop out from the canvas*

What areas of the painting are meant to read as white? What colors have actually been used to create that effect?

Use words and gestures to contrast the brushstrokes in these areas: the foreground grasses; the ripples of water; the distant sky.

Judging by the fall of light, what landscape feature do you think might be found to the left of the figures?

- *trees creating dappled light*

If horizontal lines suggest restfulness and diagonal lines suggest dynamism, how would you characterize the composition?

How might photography have influenced this painting?

- *high, angled vantage point*
- *asymmetrical composition*
- *casual, unstaged poses*

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Gustave Caillebotte
French, 1848–1894

Skiffs, 1877
Oil on canvas, 35 x 45 ¾ in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1985.64.6



While Renoir focused on leisure, Caillebotte was interested in sport. He competed in both sailing and rowing, sometimes in craft he designed himself. The lightweight, flat-bottomed skiffs he painted here were fast but precarious—their name, *périssoires*, comes from a verb meaning “to sink.” Like most of Caillebotte’s paintings, this river scene (at Yerres, his family home) uses strong diagonals and a plunging perspective. The viewpoint is so low that the boaters are dramatically foreshortened, and we feel ourselves nearly at the water’s surface.

Gastronomie

The Île-de-France still supplies garden vegetables, fruit (including cherries, apples, pears, plums), and dairy products to the capital. Wheat and other grains are also grown locally. Among the most famous of all French cheeses is a product of the Île-de-France: Brie, whose name comes from the old province that corresponds roughly to the modern department of Seine-et-Marne. With 45–50 percent fat, Brie was known as “the king’s cheese” before the Revolution.

Crème Argenteuil (Cream of Asparagus Soup)

Argenteuil drew Parisians on excursion and foreign visitors alike. British guidebooks noted that, although its wines were modest, the town’s asparagus was justly celebrated. In this recipe be sure to use white asparagus.

2–4 cloves of garlic, whole
1 lb. white asparagus
1 onion
2–3 leeks
small bunch of fresh chervil
pinch of dried thyme
pinch of dried laurel
1 tbs. flour
¾ stick butter
2 cups crème fraîche
2–3 cups chicken stock
salt, pepper, cayenne

Peel and clean the asparagus. Chop the stalks, reserving the points. Clean and slice the leek and onion. Sauté them in butter for 5 minutes with the garlic, then add the asparagus. Add the flour and continue to sauté, but do not let the mixture brown. Add the stock and herbs. Salt and pepper to taste. Continue to cook over low heat for 45 minutes. Remove the garlic and herbs and strain the mixture through a *chinois* or sieve. Add the cream and adjust the seasoning. Keep warm in a *bain marie* (water bath), or serve cold. Before serving add the reserved asparagus tips as garnish.

reproduction
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Camille Pissarro
French, 1830–1903

Orchard in Bloom, Louveciennes, 1872
Oil on canvas, 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 21 $\frac{5}{8}$ in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.51



Consider this

Is this a painting of labor or of leisure?

What are the figures doing? Is their activity suggestive of a modern or of a traditional way of life?

Although some critics accused Pissarro of choosing commonplace subjects, they respected his ability to find beauty in them. Why might contemporary critics have considered this scene unsuitable for art? How has its treatment made it artistic?

What evidence do you see to indicate that this painting was completed very quickly, perhaps in just one outdoor session?

What adjectives describe the mood or emotions conveyed by this painting?

When the idea for the first impressionist exhibition arose, Camille Pissarro was one of its earliest and most energetic supporters. He drafted the written statement of purpose and would be the only artist to participate in all eight impressionist exhibitions. This painting is one of the five he showed in the first exhibition in 1874. It was made shortly after Pissarro had returned to the small town of Louveciennes after the Franco-Prussian War and the violence of the Commune that followed. A Danish national, Pissarro had spent the war in England, and his house had been used

by Prussian troops. Many of the canvases he had left there were destroyed. Returning home, Pissarro must have viewed the freshly plowed earth and budding trees as signs of renewed hope.

In the early 1870s, Pissarro created his most purely impressionist works, painted—as this one probably was—in a single session outdoors. The paint is quickly applied. We can see, in parts of the foliage, for example, where brushstrokes have been pulled through one another while still wet on the canvas. Most of his fellow impressionists chose sophisticated and urbane subjects from modern life and leisure, but Pissarro preferred to paint a

more traditional, rural way of life. These small figures are peasants and laborers, not fashionable Parisians. Committed to socialist and anarchist principles, Pissarro identified strongly with the land and those who worked it. Some critics complained about this rusticity, one writing, “He has a deplorable predilection for market-gardens and does not hesitate to paint cabbages.” But the critic went on to say that such “vulgaries of taste do not alter his beautiful qualities of execution.”⁵

Peasants

After centuries of a relatively unchanging existence on the land, the French peasantry experienced dramatic upheavals during the nineteenth century. Large numbers of them moved to Paris, where they became urban poor. For many it was a lonely existence. Cafés and bars often substituted for family. In some neighborhoods of the capital, most weddings were witnessed by bartenders. While suffrage was granted in 1848, their opportunities and status remained low; still, peasants' political stake did grow, disquieting many in the bourgeoisie.



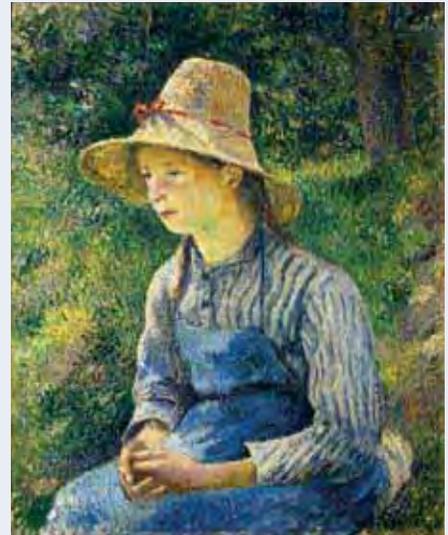
CD 44 | Jean-François Millet

The Sower, unknown date
Chalk on blue laid paper, 14 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 10 $\frac{1}{16}$ in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Rosenwald Collection 1943.3.6257

The artist most closely associated with scenes of peasant life was the Barbizon painter Jean-François Millet. He portrayed them with epic dignity but also unpretified realism. Born himself into a prosperous farm family in Normandy, Millet turned to scenes of peasant life after he moved to Barbizon in 1849. As rural areas were depopulated, his images smacked of controversy, particularly following the Revolution of 1848.

The figure of the sower appeared in one of Millet's earliest peasant paintings, exhibited at the Salon in 1850. He linked the figure with the age-old and endless cycles of agriculture, but the man's large, almost hulking, posture and coarse features were also disturbing to audiences worried about the impact of change in the countryside. Millet's work, with its bold composition and sympathetic treatment, influenced both Pissarro and Van Gogh, who copied Millet's sower and incorporated the figure into his own paintings.



While the peasants in Pissarro's early paintings, such as *Orchard in Bloom*, were usually small, anonymous figures, in the 1880s his rustic subjects became large and individualized. In some pictures they are busy with their work, in others paused in pensive, meditative moments—but always they are shown with a direct honesty and lack of sentiment.

In places the heavily worked surface of this canvas seems almost stuccoed with paint. After the spontaneous *plein-air* landscapes of the 1870s, Pissarro's work in the next decade was produced more slowly, with painstaking deliberation in the studio. His brushstrokes assume a kind of independence, a logic of their own. The variously colored shadows—green on the girl's chin, purple on her hat—reveal Pissarro's study of how local color is affected by reflected light.

CD 45 | Camille Pissarro

Peasant Girl with a Straw Hat, 1881
Oil on canvas, 28 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 23 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.52

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CD 46

Alfred Sisley
French, 1839–1899

Flood at Port-Marly, 1872
Oil on canvas, 18 ¼ x 24 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1985.64.38



When the Seine overflowed its banks at the small village of Port-Marly in December 1872, the chance to paint watery streets and a rain-heavy sky lured both Alfred Sisley and Monet. Sisley, who lived nearby in Louveciennes, painted a half-dozen views, and made still others during another inundation a few years later.

In previous generations artists had been drawn to floods for their dramatic display of nature's power. Sisley, however, was interested in the water's visual effects. He worked quickly, on the scene, probably completing this canvas in a single session. His brushstrokes are thin and fluid, varying in response to the textures he represents: rippling zigzags in the watery reflections, broad rectangles in

window panes. The heavy skies are well matched to the muted, nuanced tones preferred by Sisley, who seems to have had a liking for the palette of winter.

The expanses of air and water form an open stage for weather and light. Yet Sisley chose his vantage points carefully, framing and composing his scenes with a more classical sensibility than most of his impressionist colleagues, whose cropped views imparted a more momentary, more "modern" feel. Here, Sisley used the trees and pole at right, with their long reflections, to balance the tall mass of the restaurant at the left. The dark figures poling a small boat help our eye mark the distance to the background.

reproduction
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Berthe Morisot
French, 1841–1895

Hanging the Laundry Out to Dry, 1875
Oil on canvas, 13 x 16 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1985.64.28

A long loop in the Seine defines the bulging plain of Gennevilliers. The towns of Gennevilliers and Petit-Gennevilliers were well located for boating in Argenteuil or Chatou, and attracted many well-to-do Parisians. Caillebotte built a summer villa there, and Manet's family also owned property. It was while Morisot was staying at the Manet house (she was married to Manet's brother) that she painted this small canvas.

The broad, flat fields that stretch out to the river had been part of an agricultural experiment to fertilize using human waste pumped in from Paris. It is not clear that contemporary viewers, however, would have found any irony in Morisot's picture of clean clothes hanging out to dry. The wash lines are those of a commercial laundry, an enterprise that had not existed in previous decades. Washing had been done at home for the most part or by young women in the city. Laundresses, whose lives were chronicled in realist fiction, worked long, hot hours for low wages, and their morals were often questioned because of their loose attire and the deliveries that took them to men's apartments. Now, though, with expansion of urban life into suburbs, laundry from the city was bundled and hauled by the wagon-load to towns like Gennevilliers, where factory-type operations employed local women. Contemporary audiences who saw Morisot's picture—it was shown in the second impressionist exhibition in 1876—were attuned to its depiction of modernization and of new employment for rural women.

More striking, however, was Morisot's brushwork. Critics often noted its distinctiveness, many complaining that her work seemed only half-finished. She



defined this landscape with bare flicks of paint. Restless and luminous, her brushstrokes appear almost to flutter. Their looseness contrasts with the strong, cropped geometry of the composition, formed by the oblique parallel wash lines, the vertical poles, and the upright slats of the horizontal fence that form the garden border. Morisot's clear color and light touch—often described as “feminine” during her lifetime (and long afterward)—took impressionist technique as far as any of her male colleagues ever dared.

Consider this

What is the subject of Morisot's painting?

What visual elements do you think attracted the painter to the scene?

How have human activities redefined this landscape?

What aspects of the painting suggest that it was done very quickly, right as Morisot was looking at the scene? If, instead, it had been painted slowly in the artist's studio rather than on the spot how might it look different?

A critic described Morisot's brushstrokes as being like flower petals. What comparisons would you use?

The Artists

Gustave Caillebotte

French, 1848–1894



Gustave Caillebotte

Self-Portrait, c. 1889 | Oil on canvas,
16 ¾ x 12 ¾ in.

Paris, Musée d'Orsay/Erich Lessing/
Art Resource, NY

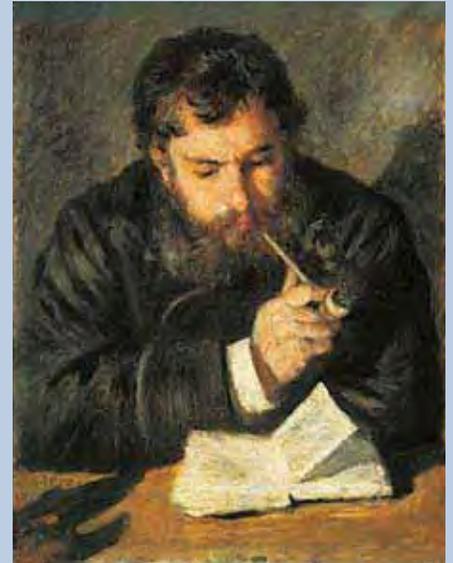
Gustave Caillebotte came from a wealthy Parisian family. Before beginning to study painting with an academic artist, he received a law degree. In 1873 he was accepted at the *École des Beaux-Arts* but apparently attended only briefly, if at all. Instead he was attracted by the impressionists and their new paintings of modern life. Degas invited him to join the first impressionist exhibition in 1874, and Caillebotte continued to participate regularly. He organized the 1877 show and worked hard to maintain cohesion in the group. Because of his fortune, he never needed to sell his own work but frequently supported his colleagues by buying theirs.

Caillebotte was more attracted to the geometry of Paris' architecture than the bustle of its citizens. His unusual, plunging perspectives produced bold spatial effects, some of which seem to foreshadow early twentieth-century photography. Disappointed at the disputes that fractured the original group of impressionists, Caillebotte distanced himself from the art community in Paris and eventually settled in the river town of Petit-Gennevilliers. He was an avid boater and had long painted river scenes. These river paintings and his garden (he equaled Monet in his passion for gardening) became his main focus.

Caillebotte willed his personal collection—including many of what are today considered among the most important works by Manet, Monet, Degas, and others—to France. Renoir was one of his executors. Eventually the state accepted thirty-eight of the sixty-seven impressionist paintings in his bequest. Today they form the core of the impressionist collection of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.

Claude Monet

French, 1840–1926



CD 78 | Auguste Renoir

Claude Monet, 1872 | Oil on canvas,
25 ¼ x 19 ½ in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington | Collection of
Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1985.64.35

Claude Monet was born in Paris but grew up outside Le Havre on the Channel coast, where his father had a wholesale grocery and ships' provisioning business. He displayed an early talent for drawing, producing incisive caricatures of local notables. Some of these, on view in a shop window, drew the attention of Eugène Boudin. While still a teenager, Monet began to accompany Boudin as the older artist painted the beaches and their flocks of tourists. Boudin worked outdoors, directly in the sand and wind. This "truthful" painting, Monet later claimed, had determined his path as an artist.

Berthe Morisot

French, 1841–1895

In 1862 Monet entered the studio of a history painter in Paris, a condition of his family's grudging assent to his career choice. It proved to be a signal event—but for an unexpected reason. There he met fellow students Sisley, Renoir, and Frédéric Bazille. They would form the core of the original impressionists. During the 1860s Monet was still looking for success at the Salon with ambitious figure paintings (see p. 45). But toward the end of the decade, he had largely abandoned these projects in favor of smaller, more spontaneous outdoor paintings.

Most of Monet's canvases from the 1870s are landscapes made in and around the small towns along the Seine. They epitomize classic impressionist style: quick, seemingly spontaneous transcriptions of visual phenomena. By about 1880, however, Monet was already beginning to show greater interest in the painted surface itself. He reworked canvases in the studio, elaborating brushstrokes that began to take on greater importance in their own right—decorative as well as descriptive. As he looked at color and light as more purely artistic concerns, he began to paint the same subject repeatedly in series. Harmonizing colors and textures allowed him to elaborate his original response to a place and explore effects on mood.

Monet traveled widely, painting in Paris, along the Seine, in Normandy and Brittany, and the Mediterranean coast of France. He also worked in England, Holland, Venice, and Norway.

Jean-François Millet

biography, p. 48



Édouard Manet

Berthe Morisot with a Bouquet of Violets, 1872 | Oil on canvas, 21 ½ x 14 ¾ in.

Paris, Musée d'Orsay/Art Resource, NY

Daughters of a high-ranking civil servant, Berthe and her sisters were encouraged to draw as a social accomplishment. They took informal lessons from two well-regarded artists. The Morisots were supportive of the girls' artistic endeavors, even building a studio in the garden of their home. Both Berthe and Edma had works shown at the Salon in the mid-1860s. Edma did not continue to paint seriously, but Berthe did. She studied informally with Corot, who was a strong influence on her growing interest in outdoor painting.

Morisot also studied old masters in the Louvre and, while she was copying there in 1867, was introduced to Manet. From the same well-to-do society, Morisot also became part of his artistic circle, meeting Renoir, Monet, Degas, and others (and in 1874 marrying Manet's brother Eugène). Despite Manet's attempt to dissuade her, Morisot exhibited in the first impressionist show in 1874. Of the eight impressionist exhibitions, only the one in 1879 did not include her work.

Temporarily without studio space after the Franco-Prussian War, Morisot had started to work with watercolors. The transparency of these paints had a lasting impact on her technique and style. Her colors became brighter and her brushwork loosened radically—reduced to delicate, quick flicks. Critics often described her works in feminine terms. Théodore Duret said her white and silvery gray tones were “scattered like flower petals.” She avoided what would be seen as the taint of professionalism for a woman of her class by working in her home, and her subjects were often family members and friends. Nevertheless, Morisot was respected by her male colleagues and her daring technique evinced astonishing freedom.

Camille Pissarro

biography, p. 27

Auguste Renior

biography, p. 28

Alfred Sisley

French, 1839–1899



Auguste Renoir

Portrait of the Painter Alfred Sisley, 1864 |
Oil on canvas, 32 ¼ x 26 in.

Zurich, Foundation E. G. Bührle Collection/
Bridgeman Art Library

Alfred Sisley's parents were English, but he was born in Paris and spent almost his entire life in France. Not long before his death, he tried unsuccessfully to become a French citizen. His father directed a company that manufactured artificial flowers. In 1857 Sisley was sent to London to study business but came away with a greater admiration for painting, especially the landscapes of J. M. W. Turner and John Constable. When he returned to Paris five years later, his parents supported his decision to become an artist. He met Monet and Bazille and became a close friend of Renoir, with whom he painted in the forest of Fontainebleau.

The Franco-Prussian War altered Sisley's circumstances dramatically. His father went bankrupt and died shortly after. Sisley, who had never had to worry about money, was now forced to support his new family with his painting. (He never achieved the same level of financial success eventually enjoyed by his colleagues and died in relative poverty.) He left Paris to economize but also to pursue his favorite subjects, which were located in the countryside and river towns. During the 1870s, he painted his best works, landscapes realized with simple but apt brushwork.

In the 1880s Sisley settled in the small medieval town of Moret-sur-Loing at the edge of the Fontainebleau forest. The move separated Sisley from his colleagues and, to some degree, their experiments. He remained committed to landscape and to the visual qualities of impressionism; he has been called the most "pure" of the impressionist painters.



CD 48

Édouard Vuillard
French, 1868–1940

Landscape of the Île-de-France, c. 1894
Oil on cardboard on wood, 7 ³/₄ x 9 ¹⁵/₁₆ in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon
1995.47.14