




# FRENCH PAINTING

*National Gallery of Art*





*Celebrating the bicentennial of the  
Musée du Louvre*

With one exception (Corot's *Ville d'Avray* in the East Building), all works in this collection guide are found in the West Building. Please refer to the map of the Main Floor on the back cover for locations.

Cover: Camille Pissarro, *Place du Carrousel, Paris* (detail), 1900, showing parts of the Louvre. National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.55.

frontispiece: Georges Seurat, *The Lighthouse at Honfleur* (detail), 1886, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1983.1.33

Written and compiled from Gallery sources by Carla McKinney Brenner, education division, with assistance from members of the curatorial division. Produced by the editors' office, National Gallery of Art. © 1994 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



**T**he publication of this booklet marks a double celebration: first, of the remarkable collection of French paintings at the National Gallery of Art from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, and second, of the bicentennial of the establishment of the Louvre museum in Paris in 1793. While the Louvre and its sister institution the Musée d'Orsay have French painting collections that are unrivaled, the National Gallery boasts one of the greatest assemblies of French art in the United States. Ours is a collection all the more remarkable for being only a little more than fifty years old.

During the French Revolution the centuries-old royal art collection housed in the Louvre palace was appropriated for the nation, forming the basis of the museum we know today. The vision of a national public art museum in Washington, D.C., created for the edification and enjoyment of all, can be traced to the Louvre. But we owe our collection to the inspired and public-spirited philanthropy of the Gallery's founders and succeeding generations of benefactors.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are represented by outstanding works from the brushes of the most important painters of the times, showing the rich artistic heritage of France. The nineteenth century, above all in the work of the impressionists and post-impressionists, saw the beginnings of modern painting and hence had a special appeal for progressive American collectors in the first half of our own century. The perspicacity of these collectors is reflected in the Gallery's especially rich holdings of advanced French art from the later nineteenth century.

*Philip Conisbee*

*Curator of French Paintings*





## CLAUDE LORRAIN

1600–1682

*The Judgment of Paris*, 1645/1646

Oil on canvas, 1.123 x 1.495 m

(44 ¼ x 58 ⅞ in.)

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1969.1.1

### 17TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

**B**orn in the Duchy of Lorraine, which later became a French province, Claude is traditionally placed in the French school although he spent his entire career in Rome. From there he made many trips into the surrounding countryside, which was the principle inspiration for his landscapes. With mellow light and a careful structuring of space, Claude transformed the beauty of the Roman Campagna into a timeless, idealized world—an imaginary setting suitable for the stories of classical mythology that were his favored subjects. Like the Arcadian worlds created by Ovid

and other ancient poets, this is a place where gods, goddesses, and mortals meet.

The Judgment of Paris is one of the most familiar stories in all of Western literature. The vengeful goddess Strife had tossed among all the gods of Mount Olympus a golden apple labeled “to the fairest.” Who should receive this distinction? Juno, consort of Jupiter; Minerva, warrior goddess of wisdom and craft; or Venus, goddess of love? When it fell to the mortal shepherd Paris, son of the king of Troy, to award the prize, each goddess approached with a bribe. This painting shows Juno proposing to make him ruler of the world. Minerva offered Paris victory in war. But Paris gave the apple to Venus, who promised him the love of the world’s most beautiful woman—Helen—and so set in motion the Trojan War.



*Follower of*

**NICOLAS POUSSIN**

1594–1665

*Holy Family on the Steps, 1648*

Oil on canvas, .686 x .978 m  
(27 x 38 ½ in.)

Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.49

17TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

Like Claude Lorraine, Poussin found inspiration in Italy, studying ancient sculpture and the works of Renaissance artists. He remained there all but two years of his career. Italian sculptor Bernini characterized Poussin's rational approach to painting. "Poussin," he said, pointing to his head, "works from here." Within strict formal limits—like the unities of action, time, and place that govern classical French drama—Poussin sought clarity and economy. He painted the Holy Family—Jesus, Mary,

Joseph, Mary's cousin Elizabeth, and Elizabeth's son John the Baptist—in a space organized by geometric forms. Architecture divides the background into a series of rectangular shapes, while the figures rise in a triangle to the Virgin and Child.

Nothing is incidental. The color scheme is carefully planned around the three primary colors in the women's clothing: the red and blue, for example, combine in Joseph's purple robe. Elizabeth's pose is like that traditionally used for sibyls, the ancient prophetesses who foretold Christ's life and sacrifice. John holds out an apple to Jesus to underscore Christ's role in redeeming humankind from sin. And the steps suggest Mary's identification as the *scala coelestis*, literally "stairway to heaven."





## LOUIS LE NAIN

1593–1648

*A French Interior*, about 1645

Oil on canvas, .556 x .647 m  
(21 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 25 $\frac{3}{8}$  in.)

Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.2.20

### 17TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

The three brothers Le Nain were active as painters in Paris in the middle decades of the seventeenth century. One specialized in miniatures, another in portraits of dashing militia men, but the third, usually thought to be Louis, continued to paint the rural people and rich agricultural lands that surrounded their provincial hometown of Laon. His sympathetic views of local peasant life are unique in French art at this time. Other artists held peasants up to

ridicule, using their poverty and rough manners as metaphors for idleness and loose morals. Le Nain, though he recorded their destitute circumstances, did not strip them of humanity.

His restrained grays and muted earth tones give even this intimate view of a peasant home a feeling of neutral detachment. Le Nain's composition is classically balanced and focused on the woman at the center. She is clad in tatters, yet she seems also to have a calm dignity. An unused distaff, such as the one she holds casually under her arm, was sometimes employed by artists to suggest laziness, but spinning was also a common emblem for the passage of time. And here—as she sits between an old man and a young boy—it seems instead to underscore the three ages of life.



## GEORGES DE LA TOUR

1593–1652

*The Repentant Magdalene*, about 1640

Oil on canvas, 1.130 x .927 m

(44 ½ x 36 ½ in.)

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1974.52.1

### 17TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

**T**his woman is “Mary, called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils” (Luke 8.2). Only briefly mentioned in the Gospels, her story was greatly elaborated in the late Middle Ages. She was portrayed as a courtesan, devoted wholly to the pleasures of the senses until she became a follower of Christ and he pardoned her of sin. She witnessed the Crucifixion and took news of the Resurrection to the disciples. Because she was identified with Mary, sister of the hardworking Martha, Mary Magdalene also came to embody the contemplative

life. A medieval author described how her penance and inward contemplation culminated in heavenly glory—“she is enlightened with the light of perfect knowledge in her mind, and she will be enlightened with the light of glory in her body.”

A single flame illuminates this scene, a flame that La Tour uses as a metaphor for divine truth. Its dramatic effect shows the influence of Italian painter Caravaggio’s style, often called “tenebrism,” on northern artists. Its light both reveals and concentrates, removing all extraneous details to the invisible shadows—encouraging us to meditate on this image in the same way Mary Magdalene meditates on penance and forgiveness. She considers a skull, reflecting on human mortality, the vanity of this world, and the eternal life of the spirit—reflections we share with her in a mirror.





## JEAN SIMEON CHARDIN

1699–1779

*Soap Bubbles*, probably 1733/1734

Oil on canvas, .930 x .746 m  
(36 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 29 $\frac{3}{8}$  in.)

Gift of Mrs. John W. Simpson 1942.5.1

### 18TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

*Consider well, young man  
These little globes of soap.  
Their movement so variable,  
Their luster so fragile.*

—from an eighteenth-century engraving of *Soap Bubbles*

Our attention is fixed on this youth who is, in turn, fully absorbed in blowing a soap bubble. Like him, we hold our breath as the glistening film hangs, full of air, ready to slip from his pipe—or burst. For eighteenth-century viewers, the bubble was a familiar symbol of life’s transience and a popular subject of prints. Often the prints bore instructive

verses like the one quoted above, and reflect contemporary French interest in Dutch moralizing genre painting of the seventeenth century. Chardin amplified the meaning by subtle pictorial means: the youth, large and distinct against the restricted colors and muted detail of the background, has a monumentality that lends gravity to his solemn concentration on an apparently frivolous pursuit.

To his contemporaries, Chardin was “the great magician,” conjuring everyday objects and lifelike figures out of mere paint and canvas. His thick brushstrokes invested simple household objects and quiet daily occupations with dignity and meaning at a time when other artists were painting lighthearted scenes in the delicate pastel colors of the rococo style. Chardin was accepted into the French Academy as a painter of “animals and fruit,” and even his figures have the calm, meditative qualities of still life.





## FRANÇOIS BOUCHER

1703–1770

*The Love Letter*, 1750

Oil on canvas over wood, .820 x .752 m  
(32 ¼ x 29 ¾ in.)

Timken Collection 1960.6.3

### 18TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

*We really have nothing else to do but to seek pleasant sensations and feelings.*

**E**ighteenth-century French aristocrats like the woman quoted above filled their idle hours with amusements. They were enchanted by idealized views of country life. Pastorals were produced on stage and played out in real-life masquerades by elegant young people—including perhaps these “shepherdesses.” Their rustic fashions are made of fine silks in delicate pastel tints, and the only

threat to their flock comes from the stone lion of a garden statue. Their display of dainty toes is not a sign of a simpler life in the country. It held—as contemporary audiences would have recognized—an amorous promise. There is no doubt this is a love note they so intimately discuss.

Boucher developed a style that perfectly embodied the elegance of eighteenth-century aristocratic life. His colors have the pale luminosity of shells, butterflies, and polished stones—all objects he collected to study and copy their iridescence. He became the most important decorative painter in France under the patronage of Madame de Pompadour, Louis XV’s influential mistress. This painting was commissioned for her chateau at Bellevue, where it was one of a pair of overdoor decorations.





## JEAN-HONORE FRAGONARD

1732–1806

*The Swing*, probably about 1765

Oil on canvas, 2.159 x 1.855 m

(85 x 73 in.)

Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.17

### 18TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

Elegant young people amuse themselves at a *fête galante* (an idyllic gathering) with flirtation and games of love. They find themselves in a magical garden, an immense expanse of earth and sky that is an idealized vision of Nature, imposing yet tamed by civilization.

Light plays on the towering clouds and breaks through in patches on the ground to illuminate the tiny figures as if they were on a spotlight stage. Our eye falls on a young woman swinging

beneath the trees. As she waves with a flower to her companions, she kicks out a leg to reveal petticoats, ankles, and a dainty calf. To eighteenth-century audiences, the swing's rhythm and motion would have suggested erotic abandon. Looking carefully, we find that this swing is pulled by a youth barely visible in the shadows between the two lion fountains—and so we discover a romantic attachment.

Fragonard adopted the lighthearted subjects of his teacher Boucher, but painted in a freer style. Quick trills of paint create silk ruffles; spare dots of color are sufficient to convey a wealth of flowers. “Swordplay of the brush” one contemporary called it. This painting and its companion nearby, *Blind-man’s Buff*, originally formed part of a large scheme of decoration.





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ELISABETH VIGÉE-LEBRUN

1755–1842

*The Marquise de Pezé and the Marquise de Rouget with Her Two Children, 1787*

Oil on canvas, 1.234 x 1.559 m  
(48 3/8 x 61 3/8 in.)

Gift of the Bay Foundation in memory of  
Josephine Bay Paul and Ambassador Charles  
Ulrick Bay 1964.11.1

18TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

In 1789 during the first months of the French Revolution, Madame Vigée-Lebrun escaped Paris disguised as a serving woman. She had been first painter, friend, and personal confidante to Queen Marie Antoinette, and was very much a part of the doomed aristocratic world she painted.

Vigée-Lebrun was most sought-after for portraits, like this one, of aristocratic women and children. She ide-

alized her subjects—flattered them, really—into a kind of family resemblance. These two women, unrelated to each other, could easily be mistaken for sisters. Their garments, airy silks and iridescent taffetas, are almost more individual than their faces, even though both were friends of the artist and attended her fashionable parties. They have, however, an engaging and appealing directness. Madame de Pezé turns to us as if introducing her friend, a pretty mother with attractive children. They are posed with casual ease against a lush landscape and darkening sky. When it was first exhibited, this painting was hailed as a paean to maternal love and friendship—only later, after a bitter quarrel, did one of the sitters threaten to expunge the other's image.





## JACQUES-LOUIS DAVID

1748–1825

*Napoleon in His Study*, 1812

Oil on canvas, 2.039 x 1.251 m  
(80 ¼ x 49 ¼ in.)

Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.15

### 18TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

David himself described Napoleon's tireless diligence in a letter to the Scottish nobleman who commissioned this painting: "He is in his study.... The candles flickering out and the clock striking four remind him that day is about to break. He rises from his desk to gird his sword and pass his troops in review."

Despite its convincing detail, it is unlikely that Napoleon actually posed for this portrait. The painting is a political icon, an artful contrivance to communicate three aspects of his public image: soldier, emperor, and adminis-

trator, working into the small hours for the glory of France. On the floor, a volume of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, which described the accomplishments of Greek and Roman generals and statesmen, positions Napoleon with great leaders of the past. His military role is underscored by campaign maps, uniform, and sword. Embroidered on the chair are the golden bees and *N* of his imperial emblem. And on the desk, rolled papers—the *Code Napoléon*, which forms the basis of modern French legal theory—point out his civic contributions.

David's style is restrained and disciplined. Its austere clarity seems to impart a stamp of certitude and moral truth—a quality well suited to the propaganda purposes of his patrons. Throughout the period of the French Revolution and the Empire, David placed his art in the service of politics.





JEAN-AUGUSTE-  
DOMINIQUE INGRES

1780–1867

*Madame Moitessier*, 1851

Oil on canvas, 1.467 x 1.003 m

(57¾ x 39½ in.)

Samuel H. Kress Collection 1946.7.18

18TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

Ingres demurred when a friend suggested that he paint Inès Moitessier, the young wife of a financier and jurist. Not until he saw her “*terrible et belle tête*” (terrible and beautiful head) did he accept the commission. She was described as “Juno-like”—and Ingres’ portrayal gives her the imposing remoteness of a Roman goddess. She stands severe and strongly silhouetted, her pale shoulders monumental and stark against the

somber and restricted colors around her. Emphatic line defines her form. Throughout his long career Ingres maintained the supremacy of line over color.

He painted every detail from life, so he could achieve, in his words, “the faithful rendering of nature that leads to art.” With minute accuracy he records the light-absorbing darkness of Madame Moitessier’s lace and velvet costume, the gleam of gold and enameled jewelry, the gloss of her elaborate coiffure. The emphatic reality of these details seems in contrast to Madame Moitessier’s unfocused gaze, contributing to our sense that she is somehow removed from life. Her very material presence and her finery seem emblematic of bourgeois French society in the middle of the nineteenth century.





## GUSTAVE COURBET

1819–1877

*Beach in Normandy*, about 1869

Oil on canvas, .613 x .902 m

(24 1/8 x 35 1/2 in.)

Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.10

### 19TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

Fishing boats drawn onto a beach, a sail drying on the smooth sand, tiny figures looking to the sea—all are dominated by massive cliffs rising solidly beside them. Our eye is drawn to this rock face—and to the paint itself, whose sheer tactile mass vies for our attention. Crags of rough stone, painted not with a brush but with Courbet's palette knife, emerge as dense highlights against dark shadows. "I do what light does," he said, "I bring out the salient points...." In the sea and wet sand, long, heavy streaks of color run horizontally like the unbroken surfaces they portray.

Courbet's choice of subjects as well as his rough technique scandalized the art establishment. Ignoring grand religious and mythological themes, he painted instead the real life of raw nature and ordinary workers. Fiercely proud of his rural origins, boasting often about his vigor and strength, Courbet retained a forthright and physical connection to the world. He painted the concrete, he said, giving the matter before his eyes physical dimension on the canvas.

Courbet was an important example to the younger generation of impressionist painters, who admired the realism of his art and his bold style. A beach scene such as this one is, in turn, an acknowledgment of Courbet's own admiration for the early work of Monet and other artists who painted the Norman coast with new freshness.





**JEAN-BAPTISTE-CAMILLE  
COROT**

1796–1875

*Ville d'Avray*, about 1867/1870

Oil on canvas, .493 x .655 m

(19 3/8 x 25 3/4 in.)

Gift of Count Cecil Pecci-Blunt 1955.9.1

EAST BUILDING, GROUND LEVEL  
(FRENCH PAINTINGS)

**V**ille d'Avray is a small village west of Paris where Corot's family had a country house—we see it through the trees at the center of the canvas. Corot kept a studio there in the winter months and often painted the village buildings and ponds. The true subject of this lyrical view, however, is Corot's quiet reverie in front of a landscape that is both real and filtered through the painter's imag-

ination. Small figures in peasant costumes invite nostalgia and meditation. Feathery silver tones, soft and luminous, impart an all-pervading tranquility. The muted harmony of these colors—red, yellow, blue, green, brown—almost disguises their diversity. Corot blended each with white or pale gray on his palette, not, he said, out of principle but out of instinct.

Corot was trained in the classical landscape tradition of Poussin and Claude Lorrain. Start with the forms, Corot advised, then consider value, color, and so on—here light and dark bands alternate in measured progression to the horizon. But, he continued, subordinate them all to the emotion experienced in front of nature. Poetical landscapes like *Ville d'Avray* reflect this intuitive response.



## EDOUARD MANET

1832–1883

*Gare Saint-Lazare*, 1873

Oil on canvas, .933 x 1.115 m  
(36 ¾ x 43 ¾ in.)

Gift of Horace Havemeyer in memory of his mother, Louisine W. Havemeyer 1956.10.1

### 19TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

In 1873, the Gare Saint-Lazare was the busiest train station in Paris, and its ambitious bridge, which carried six streets across the rail yard, was a familiar landmark. Railways embodied industrial progress and the brute power of machines—themes seized on by many painters and novelists—but for Manet the station is an almost invisible background. Only the iron fences and the steam billowing from an unseen engine locate these two enigmatic figures. They are a

study in contrasts. One child, one adult. One standing back to us, the other seated and looking at us. One's tresses long and loose, the other's tidily bound. One in a white dress with blue bow, the other in blue with white trim.

The woman is Victorine Meurent, the artist's favorite model during the 1860s—it was her nude figure in *Luncheon on the Grass* and *Olympia* that so scandalized Manet's audiences. This painting, too, was criticized. Viewers were disturbed by its title. Manet had called it simply "Railroad" but this did not seem to match the subject, itself judged to be unintelligible. Audiences also saw Manet's style—its broad, flat areas of color and elimination of transitional tones—as unfinished. By 1900, however, works by Manet could be found in the Louvre.





## FREDERIC BAZILLE

1841–1870

*Young Woman with Peonies, 1870*

Oil on canvas, .603 x .755 m  
(23 ¾ x 29 ¾ in.)

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1983.1.6

### 19TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

**B**azille was among the founders of impressionism. He, Monet, Renoir, and Sisley were all students of the academic painter Charles Gleyre. The four young men met in Paris at the Café Guberois, where Manet and other avant-garde artists gathered. If today Bazille’s name is less known, it is probably because he died only days before his twenty-ninth birthday, shot in the Franco-Prussian War.

Bazille and his colleagues abandoned the studio to observe nature directly, choosing casual moments of daily life over loftier literary themes. “The subject,” Bazille wrote, “has little importance as long as what I do is interesting from the point of view of painting.” It was just prior to the outbreak of war that Bazille painted this flower vendor. She pauses to offer peonies from a basket overflowing with rich blooms. Manet cultivated peonies and painted them often. Bazille creates their lush petals with daubs of paint that recall Manet’s own style. The model is herself a kind of tribute to Manet, a reference to a black woman in Manet’s infamous work *Olympia* (now in the Musée d’Orsay).



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## CAMILLE PISSARRO

1830–1903

*Place du Carrousel, Paris, 1900*

Oil on canvas, .549 x .654 m

(21 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 25 $\frac{3}{4}$  in.)

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.55

### 19TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

From the dappled edge of the Tuileries Gardens, we see the Louvre across the light-filled Place du Carrousel, the site of renovations undertaken for the museum's bicentennial in 1993. The pavilion at left, until recently part of the finance ministry, has now been reclaimed for gallery space.

Better known for rural landscapes, Pissarro came to paint urban scenes late in his career. As his vision failed and he was forced to work indoors, he

rented rooms that gave him views of Rouen, Paris, and other cities. Influenced by Monet's series paintings, Pissarro set up a number of easels to work simultaneously on different canvases, as light and weather conditions changed. This is one of several such views of the Place du Carrousel painted from his rooms above the Rue de Rivoli.

By giving us a sidelong view and by interrupting it on all sides, Pissarro captures some of the busy city's restless activity. His quick brushwork seems to mimic the action. Scoured circles of paint trace the motion of carriage wheels. With the movement of the brush in his hand, Pissarro does not simply paint; he reenacts their rolling progress.





## AUGUSTE RENOIR

1841–1919

*Pont Neuf, Paris, 1872*

Oil on canvas, .753 x .937 m  
(29 3/4 x 36 7/8 in.)

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.58

### 19TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

Among the energetic crowd crossing the Pont Neuf, Paris' oldest bridge, one man appears twice. Sporting a straw boater and carrying the boulevardier's cane, this is Renoir's brother Edmond, dispatched by the artist to delay people on the street. Edmond later explained that while passersby paused to answer his idle questions, Renoir was able to capture their appearance from his window above a Right Bank café nearby.

Figures are defined by a few quick strokes. Incidental details disappear in the glare of bright sun. The pavement is yellow with this light, brighter even

than the sun-drenched sky. Shadows fall, not black or gray but in cool blue tones. Although he is best known for figures, Renoir's originality as a landscape painter was instrumental in the formation of impressionism. In paintings like this he transcribed the immediate and fleeting effects of light on the senses. We almost squint at these backlit forms.

In 1872, humiliating foreign occupation during the Franco-Prussian War and the savage political violence in its wake were fresh memories. But with the vitality of these Parisians—soldiers and dandies, laborers and elegant young women—Renoir comments on the future and the city with optimism. Scenes of modern urban life became a popular subject for impressionist painters, many of whom fit French novelist Zola's description of men who "like their own times...like the horizons of our towns."



## MARY CASSATT

American, 1844–1926

*The Boating Party*, 1893/1894

Oil on canvas, .900 x 1.173 m

(35<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 46<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.)

Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.94

### 19TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

**A**lthough she was American, from a prominent Pennsylvania family, Mary Cassatt's work normally hangs with French painting. At the age of twenty-two she left to study art in France and she remained there most of her life. Her choice of career—and success—were unusual for nineteenth-century women. Her paintings were exhibited with the independent artists we now call impressionists, and she produced some of the most inventive works in

their late expositions. It was through Cassatt's social contacts and wealthy friends at home that impressionist works were first acquired by progressive American collectors.

Like Degas, however, Cassatt detested the term "impressionist." She relied, not on momentary inspiration, but on drawing and the careful working out of design. This bold composition—one of her most ambitious—shows her understanding of the flat, patterned surfaces, simplified color blocks, and unusual angles of Japanese prints, which were very popular in nineteenth-century Paris. The horizon is pushed to the top of the canvas, giving an oblique, bird's-eye view into the boat. Bold areas of citron and blue carve strong patterns and flatten space.





## EDGAR DEGAS

1834–1917

*Four Dancers*, about 1899

Oil on canvas, 1.511 x 1.802 m  
(59 ½ x 71 in.)

Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.122

### 19TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

**L**s this four dancers we see practicing in the wings offstage—or a single figure moving? Faces are indistinct, costumes and coiffures similar. Our eye follows only the linked movements of arms and the few dark lines of Degas' drawing. An avid photographer, Degas may have been influenced by Eadward Muybridge's sequential photographs of animals and men in motion. Degas owned a set of photographic plates—and maybe even shot the pictures—of a similar looking model in some of the same poses. The plates had solarized into colors that

resemble, in reverse, the complementary greens and oranges that produce the eerie effect of stage lighting in *Four Dancers*.

Degas' composition is framed off center and some figures are cut off. Yet this is not an accidental arrangement; in contrast to many of his impressionist contemporaries Degas did not seek spontaneous improvisation but, like the dancers he painted so often, a carefully polished performance. The sudden sharp focus on the dancers' arms and backs emphasizes their movements, while descriptive details around them are suppressed. The sketchy background, painted in a broad, almost blurry manner, is typical of Degas' late work. As his eyesight failed he often worked in pastels. This oil—one of his last large paintings—has a matte finish reminiscent of pastel.



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## CLAUDE MONET

1840–1926

*Rouen Cathedral, West Façade,  
Sunlight, 1894*

Oil on canvas, 1.002 x .660 m  
(39 ½ x 26 in.)

Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.179

### 19TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

In the 1880s Monet began to paint several subjects in series. The paintings of Rouen cathedral at the National Gallery are only two of the more than thirty he made. Almost all of them share the same viewpoint on its looming façade, close up and cropped by the frame. Their varying colors reflect different light and weather conditions—what Monet called the *enveloppe* that surrounds the building. In the painting illustrated here it is a shimmer of bright sun.

Unlike his earlier works, however,

this is not a spontaneous view designed to capture fleeting atmospheric effects. Though he began the canvases in Rouen, he reworked them laboriously in his studio at Giverny over a period of years. Monet conceived of the paintings as an interrelated group and did not consider that any one was finished until all were complete. Twenty were finally exhibited together in Paris in 1895. Because of this “collectiveness” their subject was transformed from Rouen cathedral to Monet’s own exploration of the more purely artistic concerns of light and color, and their effect on mood. Though his pigment seems to imitate the rugged texture of carved and weathered stone, it is independent of its motif. Approach the canvas closely—the cathedral disappears into a blurred mosaic of paint.





## GEORGES SEURAT

1859–1891

*The Lighthouse at Honfleur*, 1886

Oil on canvas, .667 x .819 m  
(26 ¼ x 32 ¼ in.)

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1983.1.33

### 19TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

**H**oping to systematize what he felt to be the randomness of impressionism, Seurat developed a technique he called “divisionism” based on new theories about the optical characteristics of color and light. He juxtaposed minute, discrete touches of pure color that merged in the viewer’s eye to produce a range of shades more luminous than intermediary colors blended on an artist’s

palette. His paintings mimic not what the eye sees, but what the eye does.

Seurat’s aesthetic theories extended beyond appearance to mood, which he held was determined by three factors: tone, tint, and line. He wrote to a friend that “Calm of tone is the equality of dark and light; of tint, equality of warm and cold; calm of line is given by the horizontal.” These are precisely the qualities we see in *The Lighthouse at Honfleur* and give Seurat’s seascapes what a contemporary reviewer called “calm immensity.” Interlaced sweeps of blond colors are balanced with cooler blues and dots of bright red. Shadows and light are counterpoised, and a jetty reinforces the interrupted horizon.



**PAUL GAUGUIN**

1848–1903

*Parau na te Varua ino (Words of the Devil)*, 1892

Oil on canvas, .917 x .685 m  
(36 1/8 x 27 in.)

Gift of the W. Averell Harriman Foundation in  
memory of Marie N. Harriman 1972.9.12

**19TH-CENTURY GALLERIES**

It is unlikely that anyone who saw this painting when it was exhibited in Paris in 1893 would have understood the Tahitian legend Gauguin inscribed on it. Its symbolism remains complex. The masked kneeling figure is the *varua ino* of the title, a malevolent spirit who materializes as strange and frightening human forms. The standing woman, on the other hand, is associated through her gestures evoking modesty and shame with Western images of Eve after the Fall. When Gauguin traveled to Polynesia in

search of life unspoiled by civilization, he took with him a collection of photographs—of Renaissance paintings, the Parthenon, the Buddhist temple of Borobudur—and often incorporated these images in his Tahitian paintings.

Yet this is not simply a Western theme in Polynesian guise, and it is unlikely that this Eve is meant to embody guilt and remorse. Among the women of Tahiti, Gauguin discovered profound spiritual forces at work. In the Polynesian Eve he identified a channel through which spiritual energy enters the everyday world. Probably, she represents knowledge of good and evil, of life and human mortality—part of Gauguin's long dialogue with life and death. At the upper right, under the curiously serpentine red and green face, Gauguin inserts himself into the scene with the depiction of a sketchy hand, an emblem he used in self-portraits.





## HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC

1864–1901

*A Corner of the Moulin de la Galette, 1892*

Oil on cardboard over wood, 1.003 x .891 m  
(39 ½ x 35 ½ in.)

Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.67

### 19TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

**S**cion of one of France's aristocratic families, Toulouse-Lautrec suffered childhood accidents that left him with painful stunted legs. During a long convalescence he was encouraged to draw.

Like most impressionist and post-impressionist artists, Lautrec followed Baudelaire's call for painters of "modern life," but he was drawn to its darker side. Alienation and the emotional isolation caused by his deformity made Lautrec a keen observer of

the Parisian demimonde. He painted a part of the city untouched by the renovations of Baron Haussmann. Lautrec's Paris was a place of prostitutes, dancehall singers, and absinthe-dulled drinkers in nightclubs like the Moulin de la Galette. The men and women in this painting are lost in solitary reflection. They are linked not by human interaction but the artist's scrutiny. We see them close up, as if Lautrec's aggressive perspective has pressed us against the scene, yet the crowded bar seems strangely silent.

With simplified color and line, Lautrec summarized rather than elaborated his settings and characters. His incisive linear style was well suited to new graphic media like color lithography, which he mastered and also used to produce his well-known posters and illustrations.



VINCENT VAN GOGH

Dutch, 1853–1890

*La Mousmé*, 1888

Oil on canvas, .733 x .603 m  
(28 7/8 x 23 3/4 in.)

Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.151

19TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

**B**orn in Holland, Van Gogh spent only the last four years of his life in France but in that brief period produced almost the entire body of work for which he is famous. At times, he was painting nearly a picture a day.

The sensational legends surrounding Van Gogh's life often cloud the intention and deliberation behind his highly charged and expressive style. In a letter to his brother he described how this painting consumed his attention: "It took me a whole week...but I had to reserve my mental energy to do

the *mousmé* well." The name, he explained, came from a character from a popular novel set in Japan, "A *mousmé* is a Japanese girl—Provençal in this case—twelve to fourteen years old."

Her costume is a contrast of patterns and complementary shades of blue and orange. The paint in these bold stripes and dots stands out against a lattice of vertical and horizontal brushstrokes in the pale green background. The vigorous patterns express Van Gogh's sympathetic response to his young sitter, whose face he carefully modeled. *La Mousmé* is one of a series of portraits that Van Gogh painted while living in Arles, in the south of France. They were, he wrote, "the only thing in painting that excites me to the depths of my soul, and which make me feel the infinite more than anything else."





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PAUL CEZANNE

1839–1906

*Still Life with Apples and Peaches*,  
about 1905

Oil on canvas, .810 x 1.005 m  
(31<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 39<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.)

Gift of Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer 1959.15.1

19TH-CENTURY GALLERIES

The still-life artist creates the world he paints. The roundness of fruits and bowls, the angles of furniture and folded curtains reflect careful decisions about order and composition. “The eye must grasp, bring things together,” Cézanne said, “The brain will give it shape.” Six times he painted fruit in various arrangements using the same table, patterned cloth, and flowered pitcher—all props he kept in his studio. Here he uses the

curtain’s triangular folds to echo and frame the pyramid of peaches and apples. The table tilts unexpectedly but in a way that explains its shape more completely and gives us a fuller look at the fruit. Perspective shifts, revealing the open mouth of the pitcher but not of the flower holder nearby. The white towel—Cézanne stiffened it with plaster—stands on its own.

The bright towel, pitcher, and flower holder punctuate the autumnal colors, which deepen from orange-pink into glowing browns across the canvas. The flutes of the flower holder are molded by individual strokes of complementary orange and blue. “There is neither line nor modeling, there is only contrast,” Cézanne explained.