



“I Am Still Learning”

LATE WORKS BY MASTERS

National Gallery of Art, Washington

The tour begins in the West Building and ends in the East Building. Please refer to the map on the back cover for the route.

cover: Edgar Degas, *Four Dancers* (detail), c. 1899. National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection, 1963.10.122

"I Am Still Learning":

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The title of this guide is translated from “Aún aprendo,” an inscription by Francisco de Goya on a black chalk drawing of an aged man walking with the aid of two sticks, made by the artist when he was about eighty years old (see André Malraux, *Goya: Drawings from the Prado*, Edward Sackville-West, trans., #416 [London, 1947]).

National Gallery of Art, Washington



Claude Monet, *The Japanese Footbridge*, 1899. National Gallery of Art, Gift of Victoria Nebeker Coberly in memory of her son John W. Mudd, and Gift of Walter H. and Lenore Annenberg, 1992.9.1

Introduction

In the arts as in other pursuits the opportunity to maintain or even surpass past performance is the ideal one sets for the “third age”: the years beyond middle age that can be fully productive for the artist, and, by inference, for ourselves. In the view of Carl Jung this is indeed possible: “A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old,” he writes, “if this longevity had no meaning for the species to which he belongs. The afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own...” (*Modern Man in Search of a Soul* [New York, 1933]).

That old age can be a meaningful culmination is borne out in the lives of artists in all fields who continue to practice their art with no loss of talent or inspiration, often breaking new ground late in life. Verdi composed *Otello* in his seventies and *Falstaff* in his eighties; Henrik Ibsen wrote several of his best and most incisive plays in his final years; Martha Graham was still innovative in her nineties; and Akira Kurosawa in his early eighties directed three films in as many years. Certainly, inspiration is no anomaly among the aged.

What allows many masters to maintain their creativity undiminished or even heightened in their late years? Can it be a consuming sense of purpose? Or the

sort of buoyant optimism that inspired the Japanese master Hokusai to declare more than 150 years ago:

All I have produced before the age of seventy is not worth taking into account. At seventy-three I learned a little about the real structure of nature, of animals, plants, trees, birds, fishes and insects. In consequence when I am eighty, I shall have made still more progress. At ninety I shall penetrate the mystery of things; at a hundred I shall certainly have reached a marvellous stage; and when I am a hundred and ten, everything I do, be it a dot or a line, will be alive. I beg those who live as long as I to see if I do not keep my word. (Kenneth Clark, *The Artist Grows Old* [London, 1972]).

The reason why some artists seem to have produced their most impressive work in the last ten or fifteen years of their long lives has yet to be determined, but the phenomenon is one that is recognized. Moreover, the late works of some great masters—Michelangelo, Titian, and Rembrandt, for instance—share certain distinctive characteristics such as an increased sense of drama and a more profound interpretation of human nature. They often share as well a tendency toward a more instinctual, less studied approach and less naturalistic forms, with clearly defined contours giving way to looser, freer brushwork or, correspondingly, in sculpture, to more amorphous, less corporeal forms. These characteristics have been referred to collectively as the “*Altersstil*” or “old age style”; late works of this nature by undisputed masters are valued as yet another expression of their creative genius.

This is not to say that all works by artists who continue to create in old age, however impressive, bear the hallmarks of the old age style while, conversely, the last works of some artists who never reached old age do. It should also be noted that there are artists who continue to work despite deteriorating vision and loss of physical dexterity and are thereby forced into a personal old age style.

The discussion here, however, centers on masters who retain astonishing vitality in their brushwork and undiminished inspiration in old age. Perhaps their continuing genius is nurtured by a mission, an impatience to sum up life’s experience coupled with strong confidence in instinct that has been tempered by trial and error. Whatever its cause, creative longevity is eloquently demonstrated in the works of many masters, among them the seventeen whose late works are represented here.



Giovanni Bellini and Titian, *The Feast of the Gods*, 1514/1529. National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection, 1942.9.1

Giovanni Bellini, c. 1427–1516, and Titian, c. 1490–1576
***The Feast of the Gods*, 1514/1529**

“He is very old and is still the best in painting,” Albrecht Dürer wrote of Giovanni Bellini, who was seventy-six when Dürer visited Venice in 1506 (Peter Strieder, *Albrecht Dürer* [New York, 1981]). Bellini produced some of his greatest works after his seventieth year and was still the most renowned painter in Venice in his mid-eighties when Alfonso d’Este, duke of Ferrara, commissioned him to paint *The Feast of the Gods* and three other large canvases of mythological subjects. The suite, intended for the Alabaster Chamber in the ducal palace, was to be completed with painted friezes and alabaster reliefs.

The Feast of the Gods reflects the continuing mastery of an aged artist who could adapt, after a lifetime of painting religious works and portraits, to the Renaissance taste for pagan themes from antiquity. Taking his subject from the Roman writer Ovid’s *Fastii*, Bellini depicts the ancient gods and goddesses enjoying themselves with nymphs and other

woodland creatures in an idyllic sylvan glade. Always responsive to innovation, some years earlier Bellini had begun to use the recently introduced medium of oil paints. In this picture the new medium allowed him to achieve the softer contours and sensuous color that changed the typically linear, patternlike effect of Venetian painting for all time. Idyllic mood, harmonious color, and mellow light combine to make *The Feast of the Gods* one of the greatest Renaissance paintings in America. With such late works, Bellini inaugurated the golden age of Venetian painting in the sixteenth century, which set a standard emulated throughout Europe for the next three hundred years.

After Bellini’s death Titian painted the three remaining canvases of the suite originally commissioned by Alfonso. He also repainted part of the background of *The Feast of the Gods*, perhaps to bring it into harmony with his own works for the duke.



Titian, *Venus and Adonis*, c. 1560. National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection, 1942.9.84

Titian, c. 1490–1576

Venus and Adonis, c. 1560–1565

Titian dominated Venetian painting for nearly seven decades, enjoying a healthy old age and international stature unequalled by any other Italian Renaissance master. His patrons included the pope and crowned heads of Europe, among them the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and later Charles' son, King Phillip II of Spain, for whom Titian painted an earlier version of *Venus and Adonis*.

In the Gallery's painting, the artist portrays a sensuously beautiful goddess clinging to her ill-fated mortal lover and entreating him not to go off to the hunt as Adonis strides forward, eager to free himself from her grasp. The beginnings of Titian's late style are evident in the dynamic, twisting poses of the pair, the vibrant brushwork, and rich but restrained palette, here somewhat darkened by the

ground visible through the thinning layers of paint. Titian exploited the potential of oils to the fullest extent, veiling one translucent layer of tinted glaze over another to achieve flesh tones that were unparalleled in his time. In his last works an increasing sense of pathos is heightened by extraordinarily free brushwork that seems to dissolve forms in color and light. The compression of space, with figures brought close to the picture plane as they are here, is characteristic of Titian's late work and seems also to be archetypal of the old age style. Erwin Panofsky described this phase of Titian's career as a time when the artist "outgrows the tradition established by himself and... attains a sphere no longer accessible to others" (*Problems in Titian: Mostly Iconographic* [New York, 1969]).



El Greco, *Laocoön*, c. 1610/1614. National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection, 1946.18.1

El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos), 1541–1614

Laocoön, c. 1610/1614

In the course of his career, El Greco transformed his early artistic training as an icon painter in his native Crete and what he learned during an interval in Venice, where Titian and Tintoretto were still active, into a highly personal and deeply emotional style that was especially well received in Toledo, his adopted home.

Laocoön, one of his last works, is the only mythological subject El Greco is known to have painted. Utilizing every expressive means available to him—writhing line, strident unnatural color, and distorted space—the artist depicts the climactic moment in the tale of Laocoön, the high priest of Troy. Laocoön and his two sons are attacked by serpents sent by the gods whom the high priest had angered when he warned his countrymen not to accept the Greeks’ “gift” of a wooden horse. The

city in the background is intended to represent Troy, but the stone entrance and the castle beyond are recognizable as Toledo’s southern gate and its



El Greco, *Saint Jerome*, c. 1610/1614. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Chester Dale Collection, 1943.7.6

Alessandro Magnasco, *The Baptism of Christ*, c. 1740.
National Gallery of Art,
Samuel H. Kress Collection,
1943.4.27



Alessandro Magnasco,
1667–1749
The Baptism of Christ, c. 1740

alcazar, structures that are still standing in the Spanish city. Perhaps the artist intended to suggest a parallel between the ancient setting of Laocoön's misfortune and events in contemporary Toledo. The harshly angular clouds, the flashing light, and the incorporeal, spectral figures in this visionary work are the culmination of El Greco's distinctive late style.

The National Gallery's unfinished *Saint Jerome*, with its similarly bold brushwork, has also been recognized as a major work of El Greco's last years, probably painted between 1610 and 1614. Its varying degrees of finish allow us to follow successive stages in the painting's development, from the thin tones used to block in the saint's left leg to the smoothly brushed lighter flesh tones added to the right leg and the thickly applied white impasto enlivening the upper torso and arms. The final stage is seen in the saint's face where translucent glazes create highlights that suggest living flesh.

Toward the end of his life Alessandro Magnasco turned more and more to biblical subjects. The *Baptism of Christ*, alluded to by each of the evangelists as having taken place at the River Jordan, and *Christ at the Sea of Galilee*, also in this room, both depict subjects that allowed the artist to experiment with the expressive possibilities of water. Nature, always potentially menacing in Magnasco's canvases, now turns violent. Broken trees, water whipped by wind, waves breaking with fury, and ragged clouds pervaded by eerie light create strange visions of a chaotic world whose frail figures are at the mercy of a particularly vengeful nature.

The degree to which the artist bends medium and technique to his own expressive needs is an aspect of the old age style. Though such works had both admirers and detractors in his day, they are now among Magnasco's most admired paintings.



Giovanni Battista Tiepolo,
The World Pays Homage to Spain,
probably 1762. National Gallery of
Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection,
1943.4.39

Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, 1696–1770
The World Pays Homage to Spain, probably 1762

European courts well beyond the borders of his native Venice competed for the services of Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. A decade after he had painted the renowned fresco cycle in the bishop's palace in Würzburg, he was called to Spain in his sixty-sixth year by Charles III to create equally dazzling decorations for the royal palace in Madrid.

In this *modello* for the throne room ceiling, one can visualize the actual architectural cornice of the eighty-foot room merging imperceptibly with the illusionistically painted architecture above it and the sky beyond so that the ceiling appears to be painted away, leaving the chamber

open to the heavens. Tiepolo was a master of *quadratura*, a perspectival tour de force in which architecture and figures are foreshortened as though seen from below. Here he sends winged infants called *putti* and trumpeting personifications of fame floating through the firmament as they pay homage to the enthroned figure of Spain. The throne room ceiling was signed and dated by Tiepolo in 1764 when he was sixty-eight years old. He continued to create masterworks at the court in Madrid, with neither a decline in his talents nor an appreciable change in his style, until his death six years later.



Frans Hals, *Portrait of a Gentleman*, c. 1650/1652. National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection, 1942.9.29

Frans Hals, 1582/1583–1666
Portrait of a Gentleman,
c. 1650/1652

Frans Hals, the leading artist in Haarlem in the seventeenth century, brought a new vitality and naturalism to Dutch painting. His career spanned more than a half century, encompassing the formative years of the Dutch republic and virtually paralleling the period that has come to be known as the golden age. Although he was primarily a portraitist, Hals is also justifiably famous for the spontaneity of his depictions of ordinary people exuberantly pursuing ordinary pleasures. In his large, innovative group portraits as in all of his images, he was able to capture with bold, fluid brushstrokes the momentary expressions, vigor, and confidence of his countrymen.

The evolution of his technique over time can be traced by comparing *Portrait of an Elderly Lady*, painted in 1633, with *Portrait of a Gentleman* and several others in this room that were painted nearly twenty years later, when he was almost seventy. Such

legible details as the crisp lace embellishing the lady's cap and cuffs, the starched ruff, and the tooled prayer-book in the earlier work give way to broader, looser brushwork in the late paintings. The buttons and other elements of decorative trim in *Portrait of a Gentleman* are merely suggested with cursory dabs, almost as amorphous as those that indicate the crushed folds of the sleeve or the vertical streaks of gray that read as the limp fingers of his glove. The lively strokes of paint seem to take on a life of their own. Such sketchy brushwork and the absence of preliminary drawings suggest that the artist worked quickly and improvised directly on his canvas.

Hals painted his last pair of group portraits as an octogenarian in 1664; it is all the more remarkable that these paintings were life-size and comprised individual characterizations of eleven figures. While the originality and spontaneity of his manner in portraiture were appreciated during his lifetime, after his death Hals' reputation was eclipsed by a shift in taste that rejected his works as lacking in finish, the very quality that would become the basis for celebrating the modern relevance of the artist's works two hundred years later.



Frans Hals, *Portrait of an Elderly Lady*, 1633. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1937.1.67



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Lucretia*, 1664. National Gallery of Art, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1937.1.76

Rembrandt van Rijn, 1606–1669

Lucretia, 1664

In his last decade Rembrandt painted some of the most moving images of his career. They epitomize the elements that characterize the old age style of many great masters, not only in profundity and depth of human emotion, but also in the looseness and vitality of his touch.

Lucretia, painted when Rembrandt was fifty-eight, depicts a heroine of ancient Rome whose tragedy became an allegory of womanly virtue. Known for her loyalty and chastity,

she was ravished by Sextus Tarquinius, the son of the Etruscan king of Rome, whom she had received as an honored guest in her home. Her attacker's threat to kill her and his servant and leave their naked bodies as evidence that he had found them in the act of adultery allowed Lucretia no choice but to submit. After denouncing the villain to her husband and to her father, Lucretia sought to restore her honor by taking her own life.

Rather than narrate the dramatic struggle, Rembrandt instead focused on the poignant moment in which the sad heroine contemplates her decision. With great sensitivity he conveys the tension between conflicting emotions, resolve and reluctance: the dagger poised in one hand is countered by the gesture of the other, raised as though to momentarily forestall the deed. Applying thick impasto (heavily textured pigment) with palette knife and brush, Rembrandt records his empathy in an image that seems to emerge as an organic whole rather than one that is described part by part. As in Titian's *Venus and Adonis*, the subject looms large against the picture plane, but here there is no hint of setting to distract. Space no longer intervenes; artist, subject, and surface communicate with us directly.

Rembrandt's capacity for understanding human responses and his extraordinary talent for evoking them on canvas was very likely tempered by his own personal misfortunes and was surely enhanced by his lifelong interest in studying his own face and

translating his inner moods into paint. While most artists eventually portray themselves, Rembrandt produced an unprecedented number of self-portraits: sixty in oils alone and nearly a hundred including drawings and engravings. They became a means of exploring the intangibles of mood and personality and giving them visible form. In *Self-Portrait*, 1659, he no longer resorts to disguises and contrived expressions; little attention is given to his garb and less to his surroundings. Instead this penetrating analysis, painted at the beginning of his last decade, focuses entirely on its subject; it seems to sum up the artist's experience, suggesting quiet resignation, perhaps, but not defeat. Like *Lucretia* this image seems to transcend the limitations of a picture and take on the aura of a presence.



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait*, 1659. National Gallery of Art, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1937.1.72



Joseph Mallord William Turner, *The Dogana and Santa Maria della Salute, Venice*, probably 1843. National Gallery of Art, Given in memory of Governor Alvan T. Fuller by the Fuller Foundation, 1961.2.3

Joseph Mallord William Turner, 1775–1851
The Dogana and Santa Maria della Salute, probably 1843, and
Approach to Venice, c. 1843

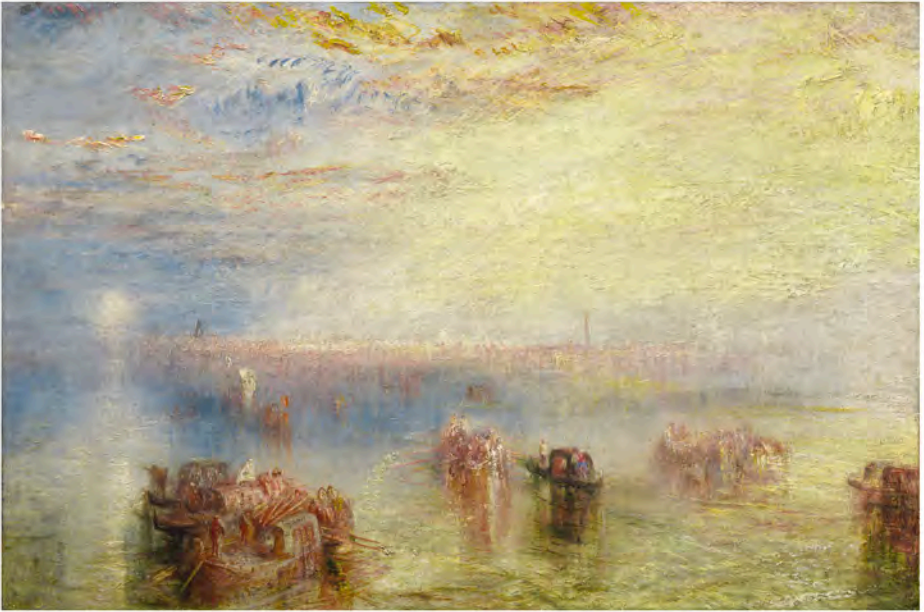
The highly industrious and precocious J. M. W. Turner was admitted to the Royal Academy School in London at fourteen and began to sell his watercolor renderings of architectural monuments to publishers while still a student. With a decided taste for the grandiose, he advanced rapidly from early topographical watercolor descriptions to the imaginative dramatization of sublime landscapes and then to the most respected genre of all, history painting. Later in his

career, by acquiring a succession of suburban retreats and making visits to wealthy landed patrons who sought his company, Turner was able to immerse himself in the English countryside. The firsthand experience of nature renewed his interest in actual rather than ideal landscapes or imagined episodes from history.

The subjects and compositions of Turner's later works for the most part remain similar to those of earlier years, continuing to represent his



Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Venice: Dogana and San Giorgio Maggiore*, probably 1834. National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection, 1942.9.85



Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Approach to Venice*, c. 1843. National Gallery of Art, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1937.1.110

romanticized view of the elements—the sun, the moon, fire—seen as colored light filtered through haze and reflected on water. Given that interest it is not surprising that views of the unique city, popular with collectors and critics, played an increasingly important role in his work from the time of his second visit to Venice in 1833. Three of the National Gallery’s Turners depict Venetian scenes. Though all treat similar themes, Turner’s way of perceiving the motif changed in the nine-year interim between the painting of *Venice: Dogana and San Giorgio Maggiore* in 1834 and the later canvases, *The Dogana and Santa Maria della Salute* and *Approach to Venice*, both of 1843. While the elements continue to dominate the three canvases, the limpid clarity and distinct linear treatment of architectural forms in the earliest work disappear in the later ones. In the 1843 canvases Turner’s increasingly free brushwork fuses air, sunlight, and moisture in colored light that becomes almost palpable, shrouding forms so they seem amorphous,

merely suggested rather than defined. Though Turner’s paintings are sometimes thought of as proto-impressionist, he exploited color to express his romantic vision of nature, its timeless, cosmic quality, unlike the later impressionists who would strive to capture on canvas the momentary effects of nature’s most transient qualities.

When Turner died at seventy-six, the doctor who had attended him that morning recorded that “the sun burst forth and shone directly on him with that brilliancy which he loved to gaze on” (Lorenz Eitner, *An Outline of 19th Century European Painting*, vol. 1 [New York, 1988]).



Winslow Homer, *Right and Left*, 1909. National Gallery of Art, Gift of the Avalon Foundation, 1951.8.1
The title refers to “right and left,” the sportsman’s feat of bringing down a bird with each muzzle of a double-barreled shotgun.

Winslow Homer, 1836–1910

Right and Left, 1909

“I am painting when it is light enough—on a most surprising picture...” the artist wrote to his brother (letter to Charles Savage Homer, Jr., 8 December 1908, Winslow Homer Papers, Bowdoin College Museum of Art). *Right and Left* is, indeed, surprising for both its startling composition and its powerful formal beauty. Homer presents two American goldeneye ducks at remarkably close range, juxtaposing a male on the left and a female on the right in contrasting positions. Placed against nearly abstract bands of sky and sea, the birds strike an unexpected balance between decorative pattern and realistic representation that takes on extreme poignancy as one recognizes the presence of a hunter in the background. His shotgun blast has already struck one of its targets, the female on the right, while her mate must inevitably succumb to a blast from the other barrel. Perhaps most unusual is the vantage point of the artist and the one he, in turn, assigns the viewer.

Both are placed in the same physical space as the hunted creatures, directly in the line of fire. That combination of thematic shock and pictorial beauty is surely what Homer referred to as “surprising.”

Homer’s career began a half century earlier as an illustrator whose drawings, based on his firsthand observations of the Civil War, served as woodcuts for *Harper’s Weekly*. After the war he turned to painting scenes of American life, producing sun-filled pictures of people in ordinary pursuits. But during a two-year stay on the northeast coast of England in the early 1880s, when he was approaching the age of fifty, the tone of his paintings became weightier, more serious, and representations of the sea grew more somber.

In 1883 when Homer settled at Prout’s Neck, a rocky promontory on the coast of Maine, the sea, which had been second to the human figure earlier, took precedence and in its timeless quality became a metaphor for

eternal nature. In this late work, with great economy of expression, the artist simplifies forms and flattens the picture space, pressing sea and birds to the surface of the canvas.

In declining health, Homer painted only rarely in oils after 1900. He suffered a paralyzing stroke in mid-1908; *Right and Left* was produced soon after his recovery. Thus Homer's masterful depiction of the moment of death and the moment preceding death, painted as he neared the end of his own life, becomes one of the most profoundly moving pictures in American art. Unlike Rembrandt's *Lucretia*, it does not communicate immediately with the viewer. It requires a moment's reflection.

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, 1780–1867 *Madame Moitessier*, 1851

Ingres' formal half-length portraits of elegant women are now considered the most important works of his late period. Portraying Madame Moitessier and other beautiful women brought out Ingres' most obsessive perfectionism. The carefully defined contours, minutely described jewelry, and enamel-smooth surface of *Madame Moitessier*, painted when the artist was seventy-one years old, are very much in contrast with the looser brushwork and reduction of detail often ascribed to the old age style. A student of Jacques-Louis David, whose *Napoleon in His Study* hangs nearby, Ingres was a superb draftsman who insisted on the importance of line throughout his career. However, unlike his mentor who believed that an artist should use his talents to mold public opinion (as well as to educate or uplift the view-



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Madame Moitessier*, 1851. National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection, 1946.7.18

er), Ingres was blind to politics. He was devoted to his art and remained so; questioned when he was in his eighties as to why he still sought to copy paintings by earlier masters, Ingres replied, "To learn" (Hugo Munsterberg, *The Crown of Life: Artistic Creativity in Old Age* [New York, 1983]).

At twenty-one Ingres won the coveted Prix de Rome, only two years after having been accepted as a student at the prestigious Ecole des Beaux-Arts. The prize enabled him to study at the French Academy in Rome, where his admiration for qualities that reminded him of ancient art increased. This is reflected in his imposing treatment of *Madame Moitessier*: the sculptural perfection of the shoulders and torso, the unfocused gaze, the overall stance.

Ingres first began to pose Madame Moitessier in the 1840s, but abandoned the work after the death of his wife in 1849. This painting is a second attempt, begun seven years later

when the prospect of his remarriage in 1852 roused him from a prolonged depression.

The aged Ingres returned in some of his late works to the theme of the female nude, reviving and recombining images from his earlier years and treating them in a more corporeal and erotic manner. In his eighty-second year he proudly inscribed his age on a painting of a Turkish bath crowded with some twenty-five sensual, languid nudes in anything but classical poses. In that same year, the master was also appointed to the French Senate.



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *The Turkish Bath*, c. 1851–1863. Musée du Louvre, Paris



Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *Agostina*, probably 1866. National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection, 1963.10.108

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot,
1796–1875

Agostina, probably 1866

Camille Corot was fifty years old and had been awarded the Legion of Honor before his father, a prosperous Parisian clothier, realized that his son could successfully pursue a career as a serious painter. At about this time the atmospheric landscapes for which he is best known began to attract a following. Seen as though through a silvery haze, their forms touched here and there with flecks of white, the landscapes continued to find an eager market (and many imitators) for the rest of his life.

Corot painted figure studies and portraits as well, though they make up only a fraction of his output; most were small in scale and were private works either kept in his studio or given as gifts to family and friends. In the last decades of his life, figure paintings assumed greater importance. Even in small canvases, the figures of women took on a certain grandeur; in larger works they might



Claude Monet, *Palazzo da Mula, Venice*, 1908. National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection, 1963.10.182

Claude Monet, 1840–1926
Palazzo da Mula,
Venice, 1908

be truly monumental, as is the lifesize *Agostina*. Instead of stressing portrait qualities, Corot emphasized the figure's mass and volume. He transformed the model into a generic Italian peasant woman; her dark beauty, the Italian costume frequently seen in his late "portraits," and the poetic landscape with its tile-roofed, stucco houses are nostalgic evocations of his earlier days in Italy. Despite her strong physical presence, the model's distant gaze suggests that her thoughts, too, are elsewhere.

Claude Monet's fascination with water and its reflections remained constant throughout his career, from the naturalist seascapes of his early years on the Normandy coast to the near abstraction of the *Water Lilies* painted toward the end of his life at Giverny. In his later years the quintessential impressionist turned almost exclusively to series painting, repeating motifs in works that were intended to be seen together as renderings of the same scene under varying light and weather conditions. To capture such ephemeral effects, Monet worked on several canvases simultaneously, progressing from one to the other as the changing light altered his perception of the motif. Examples from several of the series are exhibited in this gallery, including four views of London and two of Rouen Cathedral. There is also *The Japanese*

Footbridge, 1899, one of a group of eighteen canvases related to but preceding the renowned water lilies series (see illustration in Introduction).

The latest of his works seen here is *Palazzo da Mula, Venice*, painted when Monet was sixty-eight. He was somewhat discouraged with his work and disheartened by early signs of cataracts, which were beginning to impair his vision, when he traveled to Venice in the fall of 1908. There the light and atmosphere of the unique setting restored his enthusiasm. Twenty-nine canvases resulting from that visit were exhibited to great acclaim three years later. In those views of palaces and canals he studied the juxtaposition of water and architecture and explored the relationship between them.

Unlike the panoramic scenes of Monet's earlier years, the National Gallery's canvas restricts the view, depicting only the lower portion of the palace; nearly half the picture space is devoted to the intensely colored, watery reflections that preoccupied the artist until the end of his life. He would continue to narrow his scope even further; in the late water lilies series he ultimately eliminated all reference to the three-dimensional world to focus entirely on the surface of the pond itself. The tendency of many older artists to close in on a motif, as though with a telephoto lens, is apparent. But Monet, one of the prime innovators of the nineteenth century, in working with a motif as flat as the canvas itself, crossed the threshold of abstraction and, in his eighties, became an innovator of the twentieth century.

Camille Pissarro, 1830–1903
Boulevard des Italiens,
Morning, Sunlight, 1897

Views of busy Parisian boulevards played a dominant role in the work of Camille Pissarro's last decade. In the 1890s he exchanged his accustomed rural setting, where he had long concentrated on landscapes and scenes of everyday life, for lofty hotel rooms that allowed him bird's-eye views of the grand boulevards of Paris. He returned time and again to landscape painting, but it is in his cityscapes such as *Boulevard des Italiens, Morning, Sunlight* that the immediacy and spontaneity of early impressionism are seen. The unusual perspective, the blur of amorphous figures and traffic that convey the rush and flux of modern life, and the small, unblended touches of color that merge at a distance to render the effect of crisp morning light reflect the basic precepts of impressionism.

The paternal Pissarro had been an influential figure among the young avant-garde artists who, two decades earlier, had challenged the taste of the Establishment for heroic subjects, smoothly finished surfaces, and meticulous detail. Although his canvases had begun to gain acceptance in the official Salons, the conservative government-sponsored exhibitions, Pissarro joined the young renegades, who would come to be known as impressionists, in their first independent exhibition in 1874. He alone remained loyal to the group throughout the eight exhibitions that were held. After drifting away from impressionism, Pissarro experimented with new modes but finally rejected them. His art became more studio-based in the 1890s after a recurring eye inflammation made prolonged work out of doors difficult; the win-



Camille Pissarro, *Boulevard des Italiens, Morning, Sunlight*, 1897. National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection, 1963.10.198

dow views of city life as it flowed past presented an ideal subject that allowed him to convey in paint his feeling that “These Paris streets that people have come to call ugly... are so silvery, so luminous, so vital” (Eitner, 1988).

Despite deteriorating health and eyesight, he continued to work with pleasure in a range of subjects that interested him. The last years of his life were his most productive; in addition to drawings and pastels, he usually completed more than one painting a week.

Edgar Degas, 1834–1917 *Four Dancers*, c. 1899

Like the impressionists with whom he exhibited, Edgar Degas rejected the heroic subjects favored by the Establishment. He found his favorite themes in scenes of Paris: its cafés and racetracks, its shopgirls and laundresses, and most often its ballerinas, whose endlessly varied movements are the subject of more than half his works. The exquisitely controlled movements of the polished performance interested Degas less than the off-moments during rehearsals when the dancers were at rest, tying their slippers or exercising at the bar. He compared his own work with that of the ballerina, seemingly effortless and spontaneous but in reality a struggle to achieve perfect line and form.

In *Four Dancers* Degas creates a wonderful interplay of elbows and arms and lines as the figures adjust



Edgar Degas, *Four Dancers*, c. 1899. National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection, 1963.10.122

their shoulder straps, preparing to twirl their way onto the stage. Degas was aware of and may have owned sequential photographs of humans and animals in motion; this late work depicting a row of ballerinas was perhaps inspired by such images. Each dancer turns in what appears to be a further progression of the same action, leaving the viewer to wonder if the image represents a group of dancers or a single figure.

Years before he painted this canvas, when he was about fifty, Degas had begun to feel old and fear failure. As his eyesight began to deteriorate, he relied more and more on pastel, a type of oily chalk that obviated the need to mix color on a palette and allowed the reworking and experimentation that were characteristic of his art. One of his last monumental oil paintings, *Four Dancers* emulates the appearance of pastel, with each

layer of paint only partially covering rather than totally obscuring preceding layers of color. Black outlines around the bodices and arms of the dancers indicate passages the artist



Edgar Degas, *Dancer Holding Her Right Foot in Her Right Hand*, probably 1900/1910. National Gallery of Art, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, 1985.64.56



Paul Cézanne, *House on a Hill*, 1904/1906. The White House Collection, USG-6

intended to repaint. Elements of Degas' late style that signify a marked change in his approach parallel those of other artists: larger figures, vigorously modeled with broader, bolder brushwork and brought closer to the picture plane.

With his sense of touch compensating for his worsening eyesight, the aged Degas continued to explore gesture and motion in wax sculptures as well as pastels until he lost his vision almost entirely. While posthumous bronze casts of the sculptures may be seen in several museums, the National Gallery houses the largest group in existence of Degas' original waxes.

Paul Cézanne, 1839–1906 ***House on a Hill*, 1904/1906**

The National Gallery's collection of Cézannes offers a retrospective view of the artist's youthful, mature, and late paintings. They represent nearly all of the genres in which he worked, ranging from a monumental early portrait, *The Artist's Father*, painted in his native Aix-en-Provence when Cézanne was in his twenties, to landscapes, still lifes, and portraits of his last years. The youthful portrait, its thickly textured paint laid on with a palette knife, contrasts strongly with a work of his early maturity, *Houses in Provence*. Here the artist imposed his own order on nature, emphasizing the geometric structure of the landscape. Rhythmic, carefully calculated brushstrokes create images that read as concrete forms yet can also be seen as colored shapes on a surface.

In Cézanne's last years, at the beginning of this century, his style

became broader and more exaggerated. Large areas of unpainted canvas in *House on a Hill* and other late paintings raise the question of whether such works are finished. In this instance, Cézanne may have taken his complex patterns, based on careful deliberation, as far as he could without disturbing the balance and rhythm he was seeking. It could be said that the painting is finished though the representation is not. Near shapes and those one would read as distant have equal weight in this landscape; no atmospheric perspective or haze blurs form or softens color at the horizon. In fact, if we block out the house with its cubic volumes and look at the surrounding landscape, we see how abstract the patches of color that indicate a mountain, trees, and bare earth become. We perceive the intellectual problem that the sixty-five-year-old Cézanne seems to have set for himself: to balance the illusion of depth and three-dimensional space against the reality of the painting itself as a flat, two-dimensional surface decorated with shapes and color.

Cézanne was well aware of the revolutionary nature of his art. He was convinced of its greatness but, at the same time, was dissatisfied with it. "I am the primitive of the way I have discovered," he said (John Canaday, *Mainstreams of Modern Art* [New



Paul Cézanne, *Houses in Provence*, c. 1880.
National Gallery of Art, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, 1973.68.1

York, 1959]), although, of course, he could not have foreseen the eventual progression from the geometry of *House on a Hill* and other late landscapes (see *Bend in the Road*) to cubism and ultimately to the total abstraction of the twentieth century. Here is an undeniable example of last works as a culmination of the artist's quest.

Henri Matisse, 1869–1954 *La Nègresse*, 1952

Buoyant optimism pervades Matisse's art in all phases of his long career, and in none more so than in his last years when he turned almost exclusively to cut-outs as a means of expression. Painter, sculptor, and draftsman, Matisse thought of his cut-outs as a melding of all of those pursuits; he referred to the technique of cutting into the colored papers as drawing and sculpting with scissors. He considered them his greatest works.

Matisse had occasionally used cut paper forms earlier as a convenient means of working out large compositions. But after 1941, when complications from surgery made painting and sculpting too demanding, Matisse expanded his use of the collage technique. He was able to sit or recline in his bed as he cut into colored papers painted for him in vivid hues of gouache or semi-opaque watercolors. Guiding his scissors in fluid, continuous rhythms, he pared down forms derived from nature to their barest essence. Individually, many of the flat, simplified shapes would appear to have no clear reference to visible reality, yet within the context of the composition they become coherent parts of a recognizable whole.

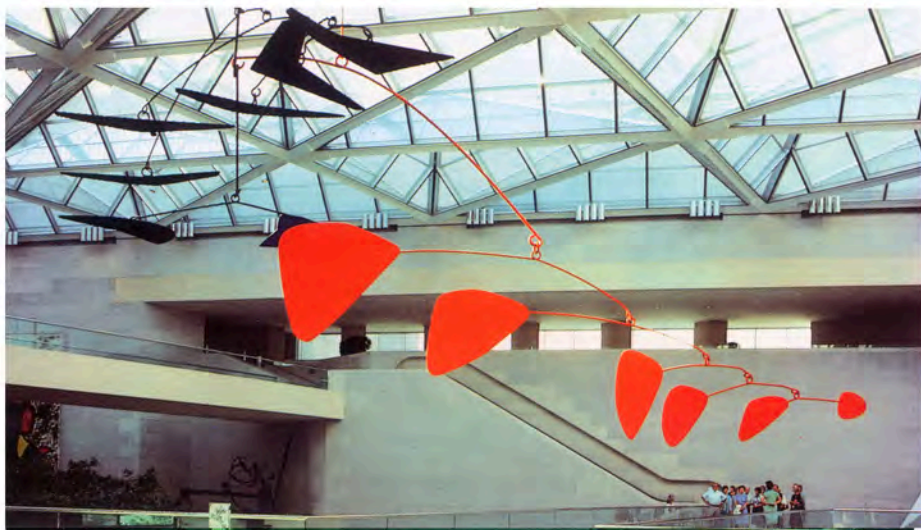


Henri Matisse, *La Nègresse*, 1952. National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1973.6.1

Such seemingly abstract elements combine in *La Nègresse* to create a larger-than-life image of Josephine Baker, the famous American performer who first gained recognition in Paris in the 1920s. The orange cut-out covering the lower torso refers to an early costume that brought the dancer instant notoriety: a bunch of bananas. Forms that serve as limbs for the figure metamorphose into leaves or wings when placed among the clustered shapes that read as flowers. Near those arc-like forms there is still evidence of lines the eighty-two-year-old artist made with charcoal on the end of a long stick to indicate the placement of the cut-outs. Pinholes made by his assistants as they arranged and rearranged the parts for his approval are visible as well.

From the early years of this century, when his unorthodox use of color earned Matisse and his followers the label *fauves*, or “wild beasts,” to the end of his life when his late style was enforced by physical limitations, Matisse’s art expresses his love of joyous subjects and saturated color. On his death at eighty-four, an aptly captioned *Time* magazine obituary announced the “Rainbow’s End” (15 November 1954).

The Gallery’s collection of Matisse cut-outs is on view in the East Building Concourse from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday through Saturday and noon to 4 p.m. on Sundays.



Alexander Calder, *Untitled*, 1976. National Gallery of Art, Gift of the Collectors Committee, 1977-76.1

Alexander Calder, 1898–1976

Untitled, 1976

As the third generation of a family of sculptors, Alexander Calder combined a natural affinity for that art with his early training as a mechanical engineer to devise an innovative new form, which he and his friend Constantin Brancusi dubbed “mobile.” Calder made the original maquette for *Untitled*, his last major commission and one of his largest mobiles, in 1972 after studying a scale model of the National Gallery’s projected East Building. Demonstrating undiminished technical skill, Calder carefully centered each tier with a precision that resulted in perfect balance.

When Paul Matisse, an engineer and the grandson of the artist Henri Matisse, executed the actual mobile, enlarging the original concept thirty-two times, he followed the design so meticulously that the final work preserves the spontaneity of the model. Despite its seventy-six-foot span, the mobile is relatively lightweight because it is made mainly of aluminum. It is not motorized as earlier mobiles sometimes were, but rotates in response to air currents, its

dynamic sweep gracefully dominating the central space of the East Building.

At first there would appear to be no correlation between the colossal mobile and Calder’s contemporary group of minuscule animals at the National Gallery. Delightful whimsy and seeming simplicity almost conceal the skill their witty creator called upon to balance the movable parts of the “animobiles,” as they are known. Each of the simplified forms is made of a flat sheet of metal that is cut, folded, and painted. Most have mobile heads carefully balanced on



Alexander Calder, *A Group of Ten Bent-Metal, Painted Sculptures*, 1970–1971, 1976. National Gallery of Art, Gift of Mrs. Paul Mellon, 1991.7.6-12

pointed necks; some also have dangling parts. All reflect the sculptor's delight in animals, undiminished in the half century since he had made nearly 250 drawings at the Bronx and Central Park zoos and then explored the artistic and comic possibilities of animals in his well-known miniature functioning circus, complete with a roaring lion.

The lighthearted caprice that overrides the technical aspects of his animobles is also found in lesser degree in the large mobile, where instead of adhering to his apparent formula of black horizontal fins and red verticals, Calder chose to add the surprise of one unpredictable bright blue fin. Calder's fanciful nature and aptitude for tinkering are as obvious in his last works as in his youthful ones.



Can parallels be drawn between the brilliant color and marvelous reduction of form in Calder's menagerie and Matisse's cut-outs? Is there an analogy between the flat simplifications and brilliant color of these twentieth-century masters' "sculpting" in paper and metal and the compression of space, reduction of detail, and dissolution of form in color and light seen in so many of the works discussed here? Do they signify an impatience with details and detours that interfere with the directness of the message that is summed up in the mature artist's work?

Suggestions for further reading

Clark, Kenneth, *The Artist Grows Old: The Rede Lecture, 1970* (London, 1972).

Munsterberg, Hugo, *The Crown of Life: Artistic Creativity in Old Age* (New York, 1983).

Rosenthal Gertrude, ed., *From El Greco to Pollock: Early and Late Works by European and American Artists* (Greenwich, Conn., 1968).