



Artistic Response in 19th Century France

Embracing Modernity and Change

By Szan Tan

The 19th century was a period of great contrasts and change for France. This period saw a flourishing of artistic currents that defied any singular designation. It is the period in which the exhibition *Dreams and Reality: Masterpieces of Painting, Drawing and Photography from the Musée d'Orsay, Paris* at the National Museum of Singapore, is set. Through the works in this exhibition, we can get a glimpse of the complexities

the Commune brought further chaos to society and added suffering for the people. Artists responded to these historical events with fervent nationalistic sentiments through depictions of the atrocities of war. Henri Rousseau's *War*, which was presented at the 1894 *Salon des Indépendants*, was one such response. Highly expressive and individualistic in style, Rousseau's terrifying figure of war leaps across the havoc she has created on a black horse. Mutilated bodies lie piled on top of each other in pain.

The Second Industrial Revolution, which took place around 1850, saw the development of steamships and railways and the introduction of electricity in France. In 1855 France presented the *Universal Exhibitions*, which extolled the glory of progress while Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann's massive modernisation programme commissioned by Napoléon III pushed France into the forefront of modernity. Streets were widened, boulevards created, old buildings demolished and water and sewerage facilities improved. Paris finally shed its medieval shell and became the rationally designed city we see today.

In art, change was in the air; the disjuncture in the themes painted and favoured by the officially sanctioned *Salon* artists and the reality faced by modern artists signalled the decline of Academic Art. It no longer had any relevance to the contemporary way of life. The stronghold of the Neo-



Study of a Figure Outdoors: Woman with a Parasol Looking to the Right (1886) by Claude Monet (1840-1926)
Oil on Canvas, 131 x 88 cm; Gift of Michel Monet, 1927
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and richness of the history and socio-economic changes and their impact on artists in the 19th century. A variety of painting styles – ranging from Neo-Classicism, Romanticism, Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism to Nabis – flourished, while individualistic tendencies also emerged. Whilst embracing modernity, artists simultaneously delved into the past and inwards into their thoughts, emotions and consciousness to deal with the rapidly changing physical and social environment.

Amidst rapid technological and economic progress, 19th century France suffered much political turmoil and conflict. The Revolution of 1848, the setting up of the Second Empire (1852-70), the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, followed by the ceding of Alsace and part of Lorraine to Prussia, all affected the people of France deeply. The uprising in Paris known as



Venus in Paphos (1852-1853) by Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780-1867); Oil on Canvas, 91.5 x 70.3 cm
Acquired with the assistance of the Société des Amis du Musée d'Orsay, 1981
©RMN (Musée d'Orsay)/ Frank Raux

Classicists, as represented by Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres and Jacques Louis David and their followers, was slowly losing ground. In fact, in 1863, Napoléon III had to call for a special *Salon des Refusés* to showcase the works that had been rejected by the official salon in response to artists' protests. It showcased more than 600 paintings, including those of Édouard Manet, Henri Fantin-Latour, James Abbott McNeil Whistler and Camille Pissarro.

Impressionism was born at this time when the Anonymous Society of Painters, Sculptors, Printmakers etc., held an exhibition in 1874 featuring Claude Monet's famous work *Impression Sunrise* (now at the Musée Marmotan, Paris). They were united in their stance against the official *Salon* and aimed to represent nature and life as they saw them – in other words, to paint contemporary subject matter. They embraced modernity and captured men at work and leisure, setting the human figure in an urban context going about his daily tasks, or enjoying a picnic or boat party in the outskirts of Paris in the countryside. Instead of the glossy, highly finished works that were shown in the *Salon*, their works had a sketchy, unfinished appearance. Most of them were *plein-air* artists, drawing from nature and highly observant of light and its effects. Their approach to colour properties was also new. They employed small and separate dabs of primary and complementary colours that they placed next to each other, creating an overall sensory effect and impression.



War or The Cavalcade of Discord (c.1894) by Henri Rousseau (1844-1910); Oil on Canvas, 114 x 195 cm ©RMN (Musée d'Orsay)/ Droits reserve

Monet's *Study of a Figure Outdoors: Woman with a Parasol Looking to the Right* embodies the essence of Impressionism. The figure here is only an excuse to study the effects of light, wind and the atmosphere, for the features and form of Suzanne Hoschedé, Monet's step-daughter, are indistinct. Monet foreshortens the figure, heightening the impression of movement and a sense of immediacy. The vibrant and energetic strokes and juxtaposition of complementary colours produce a quivering effect. Enveloped in luminosity, the figure is no different from the landscape from which she emerges. The focus for Monet was capturing the precise moment of the effect of light on her as she strolled through the fields in the open air. Berthe Morisot's *Hydrangea* or *Two Sisters* is another typical Impressionist work with its emphasis on capturing the effects of light and a transitory moment. Although seemingly executed casually and quickly, featuring quick, diaphanous strokes, Morisot's technique is actually carefully considered and rehearsed. In order to give some form to the figure, she has outlined some parts of the sisters' bodies in blue.

In the late 1880s, a group of artists began to explore other modes of representation distinct from that of the Impressionists. Hoping to break away and go beyond the Impressionist approach to reality, these artists explored tradition, the primitive and their own emotions and inner consciousness and played with form, colour and composition



The Cardplayers (1890-1895) by Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) Oil on Canvas, 47.5 x 57cm; Bequest of Comte Isaac de Camondo, 1911 ©RMN (Musée d'Orsay)/ Hervé Lewandowski

to come up with a diverse and complex range of pictorial language. Chief among these artists were Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Georges Seurat and Vincent van Gogh, who each helped pave the way for the development of 20th century art.

Cézanne's *The Card Players* shows the beginning of his exploration of form and colour. Wanting to give solidity to Impressionism, Cézanne slowly reduced his subject matter to its most basic geometric shapes. The elaborate range of colours applied in juxtaposed patches of colour with wide brushstrokes in *The Card Players* (for example on the card players' sleeves) betray an intense obsession with colour, light and form. In *Rocks near Caves above the Black Castle*, we can see the development of Cézanne's continuing determination to give solidity to form whilst capturing light effects. Gauguin, on the other hand, explored colour and primitivism; the early beginnings of this exploration can be seen from his works in Arles when he was painting together with van Gogh who invited him to Arles in 1888. In *Alyscamps, Arles* we see a simplification of forms and a move towards the expressive use of colours. Another unique and highly expressive response can be seen in Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, also painted in Arles in the same period. It is a masterpiece in terms of its emotive brushstrokes and study of night light.

At the end of the 19th century, artistic plurality flourished and the Post-Impressionist period saw the emergence of photography as art, Neo-Impressionism and Nabis painters. The course of modern art was to change forever after the 19th century. Artists such as Picasso and Matisse who were immediately influenced by 19th century artists moved away from the representational to delve deeper into the formal aspects of painting and approached abstraction.

Szan Tan is a Senior Curator at the National Museum of Singapore and has worked in Singapore's museums since 1997. Paintings are her first love (her father is a Singapore artist) and she is fascinated by the textures and colours of textiles of the world. If she wasn't a curator, she says she would have been a painter or fashion designer.

Page 14 cameo, *Starry Night* (1888-1889) by Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) Oil on Canvas, 72.5 x 92 cm ©RMN (Musée d'Orsay)/ Hervé Lewandowski

Dreams and Reality: Masterpieces of Painting, Drawing and Photography from the Musée d'Orsay, Paris runs through 5 February 2012 at the National Museum of Singapore.