



The Impressionists Classroom Guide

Introduction: Impressionism emerged in late nineteenth-century France as a reaction to the constraints of traditional art, also known as Academic art. Impressionist painters such as Claude Monet, Pierre Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, Edgar Degas, and Berthe Morisot shared a commitment to depicting modern life and painting in the open air. Starting in the 1860s, these painters developed an array of artistic techniques which focused on shifting light and color in an effort to capture the essence of feelings and experiences rather than to simply portray places and events with accuracy. This new style of painting launched an artistic revolution, and inspired generations of painters. The four-hour special series, *The Impressionists*, explores the lives and masterpieces of these five individuals who forever changed the way the world would view art.

A vivid exploration of 19th century Parisian life, this documentary will help students understand the cultural and social context from which Impressionism emerged. Through an examination of ways Impressionism diverged from previous forms of art, this documentary gives students a framework for understanding why this new form had such a transformative effect artistically. A personal and insightful approach to these artists, this documentary will open up students to the colorful world of the Impressionists and the vibrant era in which they lived.

OBJECTIVES AND CURRICULUM LINKS

The Impressionists is suitable for use in art, art history, literature, World Cultures, and Global Studies classes. It is appropriate for middle school and high school. **Note to Educators:** *The Impressionists* is appropriate for students in high school and beyond. There is some nudity and mature language. Teachers are recommended to preview the program before showing it in class.

Vocabulary:

Using the dictionary at www.merriamwebster.com, an Internet resource such as www.history.com, or an encyclopedia, students should define or explain the significance of the following terms:

- Academic art
- Composition
- Expressionism
- genre painting
- *Impasto*
- Impressionism
- naturalistic
- palette
- Realism
- still life

Critical Viewing Questions:

1. Describe or list some of the elements that characterize "history paintings." In what ways did the Impressionists embrace or reject these elements?
2. What did it mean, in terms of artistic style and subject matter, when the Impressionists said that they wanted to "catch a fleeting moment in time" in their work?
3. What was the function of the Salon? How did it help to define popular or "accepted" art of the day?
4. How did Claude Monet first gain recognition as an artist? Who or what encouraged him to branch out and try a different approach to his artwork?
5. How did Renoir's background differ from many other contemporary artists, including some of Renoir's fellow Impressionist painters?
6. Why did Degas believe that it was so important to copy the works of master painters? Do you agree with his view?
7. Why was Berthe Morisot's painting teacher so apprehensive about her artistic talents? What were some of the obstacles that she and her sister, Edmé, faced as painters?
8. Why was Renoir almost killed by a firing squad in 1871? What does this event say about the extent of artistic freedom during this period of history?
9. Why did the Impressionists ultimately stop exhibiting together?
10. What accounted, at least in part, for the Impressionists' long-awaited financial success in the 1890s? Why did the public seem more willing to accept their art at this point?

Extended Activities

Visual Arts

After watching this documentary, ask students to create their own Impressionist work that depicts a fleeting moment in contemporary life. Students can choose an ordinary or an everyday scene, just as the Impressionists did. Ask students to write a brief explanation of the definition of Impressionist art and why their work is an example of Impressionism.

Language Arts

Ask students to write a letter, diary entry, or newspaper article about the controversy over the 1874 Impressionist exhibition in Paris. In preparation for these projects, ask students to research and review the way critics including Louis Leroy responded to the exhibition. Students may also want to write a response or letter to the editor from the perspective of one of the Impressionist artists responding to the criticism they received.

History

With a partner, ask students to research one aspect of 19th century Parisian society and to create an illustrated presentation on this era. Areas students may want to focus on could include fashion, architecture, politics, literature, café life, work, or another appropriate topic. These presentations can be in PowerPoint or poster-board format. Students can include Impressionist painting or images to illustrate connections between their chosen topic and the artwork of the period. Students may also want to focus their projects on a specific Impressionist artist or theme.

Sciences

Ask students to research the mid-19th century chemist Eugène Chevreul's law of "simultaneous contrast," which suggested that colors appear most intense when juxtaposed with their complements: green next to red, for example, yellow next to violet, or orange next to blue. Using specific examples from the Impressionist paintings they have seen, ask students to prepare an oral or visual presentation explaining how the Impressionists achieved powerful optical effects by placing complementary colors next to one another.

Additional Resources

Websites

Bio.com - The Impressionists:

<http://www.bio.com/impressionists/>

The BBC's Impressionism Gallery:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/multimedia/impressionism/>

The Metropolitan Museum of Art web site; search the online which includes impressive array of Impressionist works arranged by artist

<http://www.metmuseum.org>

Books

King, Ross. *The Judgment of Paris: Manet, Meissonier and the Birth of Impressionism*. (Walker & Company, 2006)

Thompson, Belinda. *Impressionism: Origins, Practice, Reception*. World of Art Series. (Thames & Hudson, 2000)

Welton, Jude. *Eyewitness Art - Impressionism* (In association with the Art Institute of Dorling Kindersley, 2000.)