

Before I put this paper together, I knew little about Impressionism and its history.

So I considered myself extremely fortunate to have one sister who just happened to be painting in Monet's garden outside of Paris the week I was assigned this paper. Also, my daughter, Stephanie, an Art faculty member at Rutledge University held my hand and always pointed me in the right direction. And my not so secret weapon was Charles Shepard, The President and CEO of the Fort Wayne Museum of Art and a proud former member of QUEST. Under Charles' leadership, the Fort Wayne Museum of Art now hosts one of the fastest growing collections of Studio Glass in the Midwest in the new permanent glass wing of the Fort Wayne Museum of Art.

As I grew more and more entranced by the Impressionist artists and their remarkable work, I realized that this topic could easily fill a semester class. So I will use this time to give you a small peek into this art movement and speak broadly about why this 19th century movement and the movement's struggles were so pivotal to art history.

What is Art?

To truly understand the critics who fomented the struggles of the impressionists - perhaps picture that time you sat on that bench in that art gallery staring at a work of art that you couldn't possibly understand. It perhaps looked to you as if cans of different colors of paint had been tossed on a windy day towards the canvas – and what landed on the canvas was framed and then considered a work of art.

For those of us who do not always understand the mind behind art, it may be close to impossible to understand the relevance of sculptures composed of tens of thousands of pieces of salt water taffy that the audience is encouraged to partake of – only to find out later when you

actually read the “program” that you have ingested a portion of the artists’ body – thus sharing in their spiritual, personal, emotional and physical pain.

I’m certain that most of us have asked the question at some point – “is THAT art?”

My goal in preparing this paper was to better understand:

- What was art before Impressionism?
- What was impressionism and how did it come to be?
- Who were THE impressionists?
- Why were Impressionist considered “revolutionary”?
- Is Impressionism relevant today?
- Why should we care about this movement

The Impressionist movement emerged in the late 19th century in Paris. Prior to this, traditional Western art, especially since the development of linear perspective in art in the 15th century, was characterized by highly detailed and realistic depictions of subjects, often with a strong focus on historical or religious themes – often referred to as academic art.

Typical pictures of this era include: SLIDE

- Portraits of individuals, often commissioned by wealthy patrons
- Historical scenes, such as battles or scenes from mythology SLIDE
- Religious scenes such as depictions of the Virgin Mary or scenes from the Bible
- Landscapes, usually idealized and with a great deal of attention to detail SLIDE
- Still life paintings, which were often packed with symbolism.

They were also usually made to be shown and displayed in the big salons, museums or churches.

Impressionism was different from the traditional art of the late 19th century in France in several ways:

SLIDE The works of the Impressionists seemed sketchy, spontaneous and “unfinished” as though they had been done in a few minutes and had not progressed beyond the preliminary stage.

Impressionists often painted outdoors to capture the changing light and atmosphere – whereas traditional artists had always worked in studios. The style of painting outdoors was referred to as “plein air” or “open air.” The goal of the Impressionist’s plein-air painting was to capture the light and atmosphere in a specific place at a specific time – often with the use of vibrant colors, loose brushstrokes and quick execution to capture the effects of light and atmosphere. This method of painting allowed the artist to experience the subject firsthand, rather than just relying on photographs or memory.

Through Mr. Shepherd I was able to learn more about the longstanding local/regional interest in Plein Aire painting which Indiana artists have pursued for decades and which is currently enjoying a bit of a renaissance moment in Fort Wayne. Local artists, including John Kelty, have contributed to this local resurgence of Plein Aire. Here is one of his recent works of art capturing an area landscape and the natural light. **SLIDE**

I would suspect that several members of the Quest Club collect local and regional Plein Aire art.

Other aspects of Impressionism that differed from long-held ideas of art are captured beautifully in Edouard Manet's Luncheon on the Grass

SLIDE

These changes included:

- The Subject Matter: the Impressionists often painted modern, everyday scenes, such as urban life, leisure activities, and landscapes.
- Composition: impressionists were more likely to use unconventional compositions, such as cropping the subject or placing it off-center, to create a dynamic, modern look.
- Artistic Movement: Impressionism brought together a group of artists who shared similar ideas and techniques, whereas traditional art was mostly done by individual artists and not as a movement.
- Colors: Impressionists used a variety of new pigments that had recently become available such as cadmium yellow and vermilion. They also made extensive use of new synthetic pigments, such as cobalt blue and ultramarine blue which were more stable and consistent than traditional pigments. And the paint colors were now available in a tube which allowed the colors to be transported easily from inside to outside. Previously the paint was made from a colored powder that was mixed with oil or egg tempera.

The Impressionist vocabulary includes without a doubt the direct, living "impression" of THE moment. **SLIDE**— These are scenes and figures of modern everyday life - workers and prostitutes, passers-by in the street or guests in the café - railways, streets and parks, stations and cathedrals, opera-house foyers and cafés, the pleasures of bathing, beach life, regattas and horse races.

In practice, Impressionism involved discarding traditional, painstaking methods of building a composition from dark to light using tonal gradation and glazes, replacing them with emphatic brushwork and coloring with great freedom and subtlety.

The impressionists influenced not only other artists worldwide but also showed the bourgeois society of their age a new, modern way of painting and seeing. Their works generated so much uproar that they were regarded as revolutionaries and were largely excluded from the traditional art community of the academies.

During this time, the Royal Academy in Paris, which was the official institution for all the arts in France, had – to say the least – a contentious relationship with the Impressionist painters. Through determining who would be granted an education and patronage for their work, the Academy had a lot of power in determining who could become a working artist.

The Academy held annual government-run juried art shows called the “Salon” which were considered the most important exhibitions of the year and were a major venue for artists to showcase their work. The Impressionists, however, were frequently rejected by the Salon jury, as their work did not conform to the long –held traditional academic style favored by the Academy.

The major impressionists of the mid- 1870s to late 1880s included Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Edgar Degas, Camille Pissarro and Alfred Sisley. They lived and worked together and were bound together by the ties of friendship. They financially suffered jointly during the years their art was ignored.

Renoir gathered the paint tubes thrown away by other students and Monet and Pissarro scraped off the paint from finished pictures in order to use the canvas for a second time.

But these artists were steadfast. They took it upon themselves to join forces to organize their own exhibitions – thus combatting their ongoing exclusion from the annual exhibitions held by the French Academy of Art. They provided the organizational framework for eight exhibitions which were held between 1874 and 1886.

It was determined that each artist should share in the costs and that ten percent of the proceeds of any sale would be paid into a joint “kitty.” The hanging of the pictures was to be decided by lot in order to avoid any dispute. They were given a studio free of charge.

A paint dealer, Julien Tanguy, **SLIDE** supported these young artists who were always in financial difficulty, by accepting their pictures in exchange for paint and canvas. Julien Tanguy was not just a supplier of paints, but also an art collector. Without Tanguy’s support, many great Impressionist works may not have been created. Most contemporaries regarded these paintings as worthless.

On April 15, 1874, the Impressionist artists were ready to open their doors to the public for their first exhibit which included 165 paintings. The exhibition ran for four weeks – a total of 3,500 came to see the unusual works of the young artists – a small number in comparison to the 400,000 people who visited the official Salon exhibit. This first exhibit in 1874 was largely ignored or derided by critics and the public.

Monet’s famous painting: “Impression, Sunrise” **SLIDE** was created from a scene in the port of LeHavre and was featured in this first of eight exhibits. In this painting, Monet depicts a mist, which provides a hazy background. The orange and yellow hues contrast brilliantly with

the dark vessels, where little, if any detail is immediately visible. This painting's name, "Impression" featured in that first show, oddly became the name for this new movement in the world of French art.

A critic, Louis Leroy, who attended that first exhibition wrote an article in which he used the term "Impressionist" derisively based on the title of this Monet painting. "Oh, it was a strenuous day when I ventured into the first exhibition. I thought I would find, good and bad paintings – but not crimes of this nature – against the great masters and against form."

Another visitor at that first exhibit expressed the view: "The artists must have loaded a pistol with a number of tubes of paint and fired them at the canvas, leaving only the signature to be added."

Shortly before his death in 1926, Monet wrote: "I am deeply depressed to have been the cause of a name that was applied to a group."

But the artists who had taken part in the exhibition soon adopted the negatively intended description for their movement.

Impressionism – over time - became accepted by the French art establishment and the general public due to a combination of factors. One of those factors was the Impressionist's persistence and determination - they continued to exhibit and promote their work despite all the criticism and rejection.

Another important factor was the rise of the middle class, which provided a growing market for art. As more people had disposable income to spend on art, they became more willing to buy works by Impressionist artists.

Also, the advent of photography earlier in the 19th century changed how people thought about art and visual representation. The Impressionists were able to tap into this new perspective.

Over time, Impressionism became increasingly popular and eventually became one of the most well-known and beloved art movements in history.

The French government eventually recognized the significance of this art movement and began to acquire works by Impressionist artists for the national museums.

In 1883, nine years after that first Impressionist art exhibition, the French Government purchased Impressionist paintings for the first time. It was Monet's "Houses of Parliament" series. **SLIDE** The series is considered to be one of Monet's most important works and is highly valued for its technical and artistic achievements. Several of the paintings from this series (Effect of Fog) are currently on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

Interestingly enough, according to a study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences on January 31, 2023 (just two weeks ago), the rise of Impressionist paintings, marked by blurred landscapes and hazy lines, throughout the 1800s, was not just due to a shift in artistic trends but also proof of mounting air pollution. **SLIDE**

As the Industrial Revolution engulfed London and Paris in smog, did air pollution and smog actually inspire Impressionism?

Earlier I had mentioned the major impressionists of the mid- 1870s to late 1880s who lived and worked together: Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, Sisley and Degas.

Monet

Probably the most well-known Impressionist painter was Claude Monet. **SLIDE**

His gardens and ponds in Vetheuil and Giverny inspired his first still-life paintings with flowers which he referred to as “excellent things.” A journalist once asked Monet about his studio and Monet answered, “My studio! I never had one, and I don’t understand how someone can shut themselves in a room – maybe to draw, but not to paint.”

I had mentioned earlier that my sister recently visited and painted at Monet’s Giverny gardens. **SLIDE** This is where Monet painted his series of 250 highly acclaimed paintings depicting his water lily pond and his gardens. I was surprised to see that after all these years, my sister’s I-phone photos beautifully captured the Monet gardens that have been restored to mimic what Monet savored in his private life and through his art. **SLIDE SLIDE SLIDE**

This series of paintings are notable for their vivid color and attention to detail. The paintings depict the gardens, the water lilies, the Japanese bridges and the willow trees.

Monet painted this series from 1899 until his death in 1926 and was particularly interested in capturing the effects of light and atmosphere on the garden. This series is considered a masterpiece of impressionist painting and continues to be popular and highly valued to this day.

Today, Monet’s artwork is invaluable. But during his life he suffered from financial difficulties and struggled to make ends meet. He also suffered great loss and grief after the early death of his wife and several children.

Pissarro **SLIDE**

Camille Pissarro was known by artists and critics alike as the “Father of Impressionism.” He also struggled to find commercial success and financial support for his work. He endured various health problems including eye troubles which impacted his ability to paint. His work,

Hoarfrost, **SLIDE** was shown at that first Impressionist exhibition in 1874 and was met with harsh criticism. He reacted by noting, “the critics are tearing us to shreds, accusing us of learning nothing. I’m returning to my work, that’s better than reading the reviews that teach us nothing.

Renoir **SLIDE**

Pierre-Auguste Renoir was a figure painter rather than a landscape painter. His painting = Lise with Parasol, **SLIDE** depicts a woman in a white dress holding a parasol, her dress tinged with a blue tone.

Renoir also was often unable to make ends meet and his painting was hindered by his arthritis later in his life.

Renoir noted “For me a picture must always be something lovable, pleasurable and pretty, yes, something pretty. There are enough unpleasant things in the world; we do not have to produce any more.”

Sisley **SLIDE**

Alfred Sisley painted almost nothing but landscapes. He wrote “What is more beautiful indeed than the summer sky, with its wispy clouds idly floating across the blue? What movement and grace, don’t you agree?”

In his painting, the Watering Place at Marly-le-Roi, **SLIDE** Sisley concentrated on the winter sky, in which a milky sun is trying to shine through the layer of cloud. This piece used just five hues plus black and white. The painting, with its hasty brushstrokes, was done in one sitting outside, with just a few dabs of paint being added later when the painting was dry.

Sisley wrote, “Every picture shows a spot with which the artist has fallen in love.”

Degas SLIDE

Edgar Degas is most commonly known for his paintings, pastel drawings, and sculptures depicting ballerinas. He was fascinated by the movement of dancers and the atmosphere of the stage as an expression of contemporary city life. Degas's artwork shows the dancers learning, rehearsing and performing. Among the impressionists, Degas is known as the one who experimented the most and was most receptive to new ideas and innovations.

One of the most well-known and highly regarded impressionist paintings is: Ballet Rehearsal on Stage. SLIDE This series is almost a study in anti-impressionism, with the composition resembling a sketch more than an oil on canvas. A surprising amount of realism, depicting the scene in stark reality with desaturated hues.

Another one of his pieces, in pastel and gouache on paper, is Dancers at Rest SLIDE

Degas encouraged others to see the world in new and imaginative ways. His quote: "Art is not what you see, but what you make others see."

Recently, the development of advanced artificial intelligence software like DALL-E has made it easy for many to quickly generate images based on short text prompts.

For example, if you input the prompt "Fort Wayne Skyline in the style of Monet into DALL-E, this is what is generated. SLIDE SLIDE SLIDE SLIDE SLIDE

If you input “Fort Wayne skyline in the style of Rembrandt” this is what it came up with. **SLIDE**

Will ART AI replace human artists? Will Art AI change the definition of what constitutes art and who can create it? Who owns AI-generated art and how should it be monetized? What ethical questions should we ask about creativity, originality and authenticity? If the data the AI generated art is based upon is skewed, could it create biased stereotypes. What financial struggles will current artists face as the traditional market creates challenges for artists, galleries and collectors?

And if images in the style of the Impressionist painters can be generated at the push of a button, what’s the relevancy of these works now?

A tantalizing and challenging ethical topic perhaps for a future QUEST presentation.

Why is Impressionism relevant now – and why should we care? Impressionism is a collection of painters trying to capture fleeting moments – and representing those moments as just that – fleeting. The Impressionists depicted the shifting nature of everyday things – in different seasons – at different times of the day.

How do WE make sense of things that don’t last? Everything is in flux – everything around us is changing. Maybe today, when we’re also trying to come to terms with a world infused with quickly advancing technologies and rapidly generated images, we can look to the Impressionists for one method of how to deal with it. They were willing to sit with, acknowledge and embrace all the flux and the blurry edges and perhaps even rejection.

As a part of my preparation for this presentation, I was able to experience the Monet Immersive Exhibit being hosted at the Newfield Museum of Art in Indianapolis. This exhibit will continue until May 28, 2023. If the topic of art and Impressionism interests you, I would highly encourage you to make a day trip to Indianapolis for this interactive exhibit. **SLIDE** It is a multi-sensory experience and the largest exhibition in the Newfield Museum's existence featuring 30,000 square feet of immersive digital art. During this exhibit you will sit in the midst of Monet's artwork. You will be immersed in the middle of popular impressionist subjects such as lily pads and tadpoles. The unexpected surprise at the end of the exhibit are ten original impressionist works of art – including one by Monet – encased in heavy glass locked boxes - looked over carefully by a security guard.

SLIDE Monet's most notable quote: "I must have flowers, always, always."

Monet believed that beauty and color were essential to life and his desire was to surround himself with beauty - always.

Thank you.