A False Impression

The first thing to greet visitors at the Chicago Art Institute is the Impressionism gallery and the painting *Paris Street; Rainy Day*. In the world-renowned museum, filled with everything from Titans, Da Vincis, and Michelangelos to O'Keeffes and Warhols, why is the first thing people are funneled to are the Impressionists? Space, possibly? I think the reason is because the Impressionist artistic movement is one of the most revered and transformative artistic movements in history. Impressionism generally "depict[s] the natural appearances of objects by means of dabs or strokes of primary unmixed colors in order to simulate actual reflected light" ("Impressionism." 1). However, unsurprisingly, it gets much deeper than that. Impressionism may have officially started in 1874, but the twenty years of change prior to 1874 is where its soul came from (Samu 1). The young artists who would become the Impressionists started their twenty-year journey in the 1850s as a reaction to dramatic changes in the world around them. This journey and the experiences had by the innovative young future Impressionists had a major impact upon their art and the subjects they addressed through their art. But is what the Impressions addressed in their art realistic?

The first major change in the status quo of the art world that led to the rise of Impressionism was the invention of photography during the 1850s. The 1850s have since been dubbed the "golden age" of photography in Europe; intrepid photographers exploded onto the art scene and altered the definition of art forevermore. Not only did photo studios spring up rapidly, but photography quickly became respected as an art form (Daniel 1-3). This started to especially hurt professional artists who had long made their money painting portraits (Freeland 97). Portrait artists, full-time and part-time alike, had to find a new way to survive because the basic economics of art were starting to change. Not only was the photograph hurting artists' bottom lines, but according to Carole McNamara, it was, in a way, devaluing the traditional artistic styles: "artists saw how a photograph was an immediate way to capture motion" (qtd. in "Reexamining Link" 2). Photographs were a culmination of everything that art had been striving to achieve for centuries. Photos were able to capture scenes in perfect detail—the light, depth, and shadow all were correct to the scene. It must

have been scary for artists who solely painted for a living to think that their traditional methods, such as oil and watercolor, would be replaced by photographs.

The business of art and, eventually, the very idea of what art was and could be were gradually changing across Europe. Simultaneously, the city of Paris was undergoing a similar dramatic change that to would forever alter the city. In one of the greatest and most controversial city-planning projects of all time, Georges-Eugène Haussmann ripped the "historic heart out of Paris" (Willsher 2). Haussmann replaced narrow, winding, and random roads with Paris's iconic, wide, and straight avenues. He replaced ancient, medieval housing with imposing, intricate, brick buildings (Ivain 1)**.** While small areas of the city were radically changed, most of Paris was not touched (Willsher 3). The painters who became the Impressionists lived in these extremely public changes for twenty years. They watched as the city they lived in was fundamentally changed. And as Paris was "renewed," its culture inevitably shifted, especially for the bourgeoisie (Ivain 1).

Parisian artists saw the world around them dramatically changing in every way. Enduring the long twenty-year series of changes, young artists began to wonder if the world around them was changing, why should art not change as well? The idea of the first Impressionist and the first Impressionist painting is a long, fraught, and impossible-to-definitively-prove argument. Anyone who names a Monet or a Van Gogh or any painting with any kind of certainty is grossly and incorrectly oversimplifying history (Prodger 5). Like most things, likely, no one person started the movement, but it was a gradual twenty-year change. There were moments when Impressionist momentum increased, as in 1874 when artists who were sick of being continually rejected by the official Paris Salon and then set up their own exhibition (Hoving 1). But, as Impressionists garnered more public acceptance and people fell in love with their paintings, the subjects of their paintings became more cemented. Impressionists painted **"**paintings that represented people trying to be modern" (qtd. in Moss 1). They rejected the traditional, historical, religious, mythological, and portraits as the only acceptable subjects of art (Belton 2). They wanted to paint "modern life" (Moss 1-3).

Impressionist saw many things as "modern life." The first and foremost aspect of modern life was "regular people." In Western art, the last paintings to focus on regular people were probably Neolithic cave paintings. Since then, art was reserved for scenes of religion, history, mythology, and portraits of royalty (Belton 2). Go to any major gallery and look at paintings painted before 1850; all of the paintings will fit into one of these four categories. The Impressionist movement was built on radical change—the most rebellious thing they could do was paint the world that they saw around them. And what they saw was regular people doing regular things. Artists would flock to the streets, soaking up inspiration and steeping themselves in modern life. According to Charles Baudelaire[1], "[H]e [the artist] remembers and passionately wants to remember everything" (3). What the artists remembered they would paint: scenes of love, courtship, beauty, leisure, and gazes—nothing was off limits (Samu 3). Enter any Impressionist wing at any museum, and you will find paintings **"**depict[ing] scenes of leisure, such as cafés, hotels, beaches, gardens, and public parks" (Moss 1).

The second thing Impressionists saw when looking around for "modern life" was the newly rebuilt, modern city that they lived in, Paris and all its new, fascinating technology. When they were out on the streets, they saw all kinds of people—people going about their life and people wandering[2], people enjoying the city. Impressionists were obsessed with what modern life was, but they got it wrong. They depicted half-truths in many of their paintings—romanticizing large aspects of life for "regular people" and focusing on the realities of wealthy life (Baudelaire 4). The most frequently misrepresented, romanticized, and partially depicted topics Impressionists painted were prostitutes, the city of Paris, and daily life—leading them to, ultimately, fail to achieve their goal of "depicting real life."

The first famous Impressionist artist who missed a key aspect of what modern life meant was Édouard Manet[3]. Manet was one of the first Impressionists, to the point where he did not really consider himself a "true Impressionist." He was friends with most of them but was older and rejected some of their values. But today, he is known as the the "father of Impressionism" and the "father of Modernism" (Rabinow 4). And it is easy to see why. His brush strokes are large and dabby in places. Look at the bench, pillows, and Nana's corset,

skirt, and legs to name an instance of this style. But then, these large stokes are mixed with a level of detail that other Impressionists did not include in their paintings (Wood 889-891). This detail is especially clear in Nana's face and eyes. His paintings were inspiration for many artists who came after him, such as Monet, who, for a long time, Manet accused of stealing his style and even signature (Rabinow 3). True to Manet's distinctive style, *Nana* is realistic for an Impressionist piece. In it, Manet depicts a "celebration of a high-class prostitute" (Clayson 65). In the center is the courtesan, Nana, gazing[5], as if at the viewer, and to the right, partially out of view, is a richly dressed man, presumably a client, sitting. Art had long idealized prostitutes (Greer 2). Manet was, in a way, an exception, but, even so, *Nana* does not go nearly so far as to depict the true nature of 19th century Parisian prostitution. At the time *Nana* was criticized for its graphic depiction of prostitution (Kaufman 1). However, out of all the things that Manet could have painted, this is one of the tamest prostitution scenarios that he could have depicted.

Not only does the painting *Nana* portray a very high-class prostitute, but it depicts Nana in control of the male client. He is having to wait for her, and she appears to be in complete control of the situation. Manet may have "[given] a name and a face to yet another courtesan" ("Courtesans: Nana" 1). However, who he chose to give a name to is almost exclusionary, because very few of Paris's prostitutes would have been able to identify as a "Courtesan" like the women depicted (Kaufman 3). Yet, this is who Manet and other Impressionists chose to portray. The tier of prostitutes below courtesans, called *grisettes* "would exchange sex work for a stable home, protection, and pay" (Murphy and Mattson 1). While grisettes were slightly more common and still had an easy life compared to the "*fille publique,"* they were never depicted in the work of the Impressionists. Most Parisian prostitutes were *fille publique,* or women of the street. They were considered "essentially the vessel through which society's ills are drained; hated but needed. They are often associated with filth and baseness" (Murphy and Mattson 5). Most women were barely able to achieve a sense of financial security being a prostitute (Murphy and Mattson 5). Yet, *Nana* was vilified for depicting the true nature of prostitution (Kaufman 1). And while it did depict a tiny subset of reality, it is hardly representational of prostitutes in 19th-century Paris and the daily

ordeals they had to overcome to survive. Compared to most Parisian prostitutes, Nana might as well have been a queen.

The second large misrepresentation of "real life" by Impressionists was of the realities of what Paris was like to live in during the 19th century. The Impressionists literally grew up as Paris was changing around them. Emperor Napoléon the III and Georges-Eugène Haussmann had knocked down parts of medieval Paris to improve the quality and usability of the city (Willsher 2). The city Paris turned into fascinated the Impressionists. And many of their works depict the new, large, straight avenues fenced by ornate and modern houses, as seen in figure 2. Camille Pissarro depicted the same street from the same angle 14 times in a series called *The Boulevard Montmartre*, which he painted between February and April in 1897 ("Pissarro, Camille*"* 1). All his paintings, and especially the *The Boulevard Montmartre* series, capture the movement and life of Paris. He used quick and sharp brush strokes, which are highly characteristic of the Impressionist movement to capture the vitality of daily life ("Pissarro, Camille" 1). Through his paintings, many impressions of people can be seen, but few are pinned down. His goal was to depict "the spectacle of urban life as it unfolded below his window" ("The Boulevard Montmartre" 1). And he successfully depicts this. However, he only manages to depict a small part of "the spectacle of urban life."

Parts of Paris were covered in these large, majestic boulevards, but not all Paris was. However, these boulevards were concentrated in richer areas of Paris. And much like the painting of prostitutes, Impressionists solely painted scenes revolving around wealthy individuals. To call the wealthy part of "real life" and ignore the other common or poor aspects of life is less than a half-truth. As interesting as Pissarro's series is, it is painted from a "fixed viewpoint". While he was able to "record the ever-shifting configurations of crowds and traffic," he could not depict the whole city and all its inhabitants ("Pissarro, Camille. Turner to Monet*"* 1-3). People are said to be creatures of habit, so it is reasonable to assume that many of the people depicted in Pissarro's series were like each other. Since it was a wealthy neighborhood, it is also reasonable to assume most of the people were wealthy. This can be corroborated by the clothes that the people in the painting were wearing. Most of Parisians still lived in the medieval parts of Paris, which were dirty, crowded, and poor.

Baudelaire described areas of Paris as a place where criminals and women "drift about in the underworld of a great city" (qtd. in "City of Sin" 1). Impressionists painted the "great city," when in fact most of the city was an "underworld" where "you might get held up on occasion" (Sante 193).

The last aspect of "real life" that the Impressionists glossed over was how daily life was for most people. Unsurprisingly, they exclusively painted the daily life of wealthy individuals. In these paintings, there might be a member of the proletariat serving them, but the plebeian classes were rarely the focus of these paintings. And, really, any Impressionist painter, from Degas to Seurat, could demonstrate this point. Monet is probably the most famous Impressionist painter of all time. He is most well-known for his paintings of leisure scenes and landscapes, especially water lilies and haystacks (Auricchio 1). His artistic style is distinct. All his paintings have a blurred feeling, and he made use of both thick and thin brush strokes. To work on paintings, Monet would physically go to what he wanted to paint: "Monet found subjects in his immediate surroundings, as he painted the people and places he knew best" (Auricchio 2). So, there is a good argument to be made that he did paint "real life." However, that applies to his scenes of nature like his study of haystacks and water lilies. His scenes of the city and its people were also painted from "immediate surroundings." But the surroundings he chose to paint were above the average level of wealth. And the painting *Parc Monceau* is not exception—it is a park in one of the wealthiest parts of Paris, frequented by the wealthiest individuals. While it was a place "he knew best," it was still not highly representational of real life.

Monet did paint real life to an extent, but he was biased based on what he chose to paint. He would go and paint places like the Parc Monceau, which was in a wealthy part of Paris ("Claude Monet, 'The Parc'" 1). Therefore, it would be frequented by rich people. "Regular people" in Paris did not have time for excessive leisure. Like contemporary times, regular people were busy working and had to work to survive. Only the richest of Parisians would be able to spend their afternoons relaxing in the park. This is reflected in the painting. One man, well dressed, is relaxing in the shade near what appears to be a small group of students or a nurse caring for a large family. In the background, a group of women strole

with parasols. Nothing in this painting reflects anything about the reality of the poverty many Parisians faced. Even the background of the painting is a large, stone mansion.

The Impressionists did change the world of art forever. And they did begin the shift from painting scenes like mythology to painting scenes of real life. However, it is important to recognize that the version of real life that the Impressionists painted was that of wealth. Some frequently depicted Impressionist's scenes, like prostitutes, the city of Paris, and daily life were misrepresented and romanticized. This skewed bias led Impressionists to fail to achieve their goal of "depicting real life."

Notes

1. *The Painter of Modern Life by* Charles Baudelaire is a cornerstone of literature about the Impressionists. In it he describes an unnamed friend who he feels is the archetypal Impressionist. By means of his unnamed friend, he describes what an Impressionist is like, how they think, and how they see the world. From here more than anywhere else is the ideal of "real, daily life" presented as important. Today it is still regarded as the most important window into the psyche of the Impressionists. He is also a wonderful writer in his own right.
2. The idea of the aimless wander, flâneur, became very important to the Impressionists. "The stroller, the passionate wanderer emblematic of nineteenth-century French literary culture—has always been essentially timeless; he removes himself from the world while he stands astride its heart" (Stephen 1). To be so aloof from, and so observant of, the world was something many Impressionists strived for. It also helps the idea that the flâneur was very chic at the time.
3. Much more than any other artist, I feel *bad* for putting Magnet on this list. Compared to the others (Pissarro and Monet and every other Impressionist) Manet's work reflect the time. He always had the most cutting and pointed pieces about the real nature of Parisian prostitution, however I felt it was important to show that his work did not go far enough in showing how truly terrible of a job it was. His painting *Olympia* is much more risque than *Nana* and also much more famous. I think it does a better job in general then *Nana* in depicting reality. However, again, it falls into the same problems with depicting the rare courtesan.

Works Cited

Auricchio, Laura. "Claude Monet (1840–1926)." *The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Oct. 2004, www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cmon/hd_Cmon.htm.

Barris, Roann. "The End of the Salon and the Rise of Impressionism." *Radford.edu*, Radford University, www.radford.edu/rbarris/art216upd2012/Impressionism.html.

Baudelaire, Charles. The Painter of Modern Life. Translated by P E Charvet, Penguin Books, 2010.

Belton, Robert J. "Art History: A Preliminary Handbook." *Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies*, University of British Columbia, 1996, fccs.ok.ubc.ca/about/links/resources/arthistory/elements.html.

"City of Sin: Representing the Urban Underbelly in the Nineteenth Century - Symposiums What's On." *Rijksmuseum*, Rijksmuseum, www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/city-of-sin.

"Claude Monet, 'The Parc Monceau'." *The National Gallery of Scotland*, The National Gallery of Scotland, 13 Aug. 2010, www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWuudRgsGUA.

Clayson, Hollis. *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era*. J. Paul Getty Trust, 2003.

"Courtesans: Nana." *France in the Age of Les Misérables*, Indiana University, www.indiana.edu/~paris10/ParisOSS/Day10_Sex_and_Gender/Nana.html.

Daniel, Malcolm. "The Industrialization of French Photography after 1860." *The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Oct. 2004, www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/infp/hd_infp.htm.

Freeland, Cynthia. "Portraits in Painting and Photography." *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, vol. 135, no. 1, 2007, pp. 95–109. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40208798.

Greer, Germaine. "Artists Have Always Glamorised Prostitution. Manet Savaged All Their Delusions." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 6 Feb. 2011,

www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/feb/06/manet-olympia-prostitution-courtesan.

Hoving, Thomas. *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1973, metmuseum.org/pubs/bulletins/1/pdf/3269130.pdf.bannered.pdf.

"Impressionism." Merriam-Webster.com. Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/impressionism

Ivain, Jeannette. "Aron Haussmann (1809-1891)." *Joconde*, Ministère De La Culture, Sept. 2009, www2.culture.gouv.fr/documentation/joconde/fr/decouvrir/zoom/zoom-Haussmann.htm.

Kaufman, Linda. "Visual Representations." *France in the Age of Les Misérables*, Mount Holyoke College, www.mtholyoke.edu/courses/rschwart/hist255-s01/courtesans/intro-to-images.htm.

Manet, Édouard. *Nana*. 1877, Kunsthalle Hamburg, Hamburg.

Murphy, Libby and Greggor Mattson. *A la Recherche des Femmes Perdues*. Oberlin College, 2016, onprostitution.oberlincollegelibrary.org/exhibits/show/prostitutes-in-19th-century-fr/grisette.

Monet, Claude. *The Parc Monceau*. 1878, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437108

Moss, Melissa Beattie. "Probing Question: Why Is Impressionist Art so Popular?" *Penn State News*, The Pennsylvania State University , 28 Aug. 2014, news.psu.edu/story/324175/2014/08/28/research/probing-question-why-impressionist-art-so-popular.

Pissarro, Camille. *The Boulevard Montmartre, Spring*. 1897, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. artsandculture.google.com/asset/boulevard-montmartre-spring/GQFQaBkcnONwiQ

"Pissarro, Camille." *Turner to Monet*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, nga.gov.au/exhibition/turnertomonet/Detail.cfm?IRN=4701.

"Pissarro, Camille." *Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza*, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, www.museothyssen.org/en/collection/artists/pissarro-camille.

Prodger, Michael. "The Man Who Made Monet: How Impressionism Was Saved from

Obscurity." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 21 Feb. 2015, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/feb/21/the-man-who-made-monet-how-impre
sionism-was-saved-from-obscurity.

Rabinow, Rebecca. "Édouard Manet (1832–1883)." *The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Oct. 2004, www.metmuseum.org/TOAH/hd/mane/
hd_mane.htm.

"Reexamining Link between Rise of Photography and Impressionism." *Arts & Culture*, University of Michigan, 7 Oct. 2009, arts.umich.edu/news-features/reexamining-link-between-rise-of-photography-and-impressionism/.

Samu, Margaret. "Impressionism: Art and Modernity" *The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Oct. 2004, www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/imml/hd_imml.htm.

Sante, Luc. *The Other Paris: The People's City, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. 1st ed., Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.

Stephen, Bijan. "In Praise of the Flâneur." *The Paris Review*, The Paris Review, 17 Oct. 2013, www.theparisreview.org/blog/2013/10/17/in-praise-of-the-flaneur/.

"The Boulevard Montmartre on a Winter Morning." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437310.

Willsher, Kim. "Story of Cities #12: Haussmann Rips up Paris – and Divides France to This Day." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 31 Mar. 2016, www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/mar/31/story-cities-12-paris-baron-haussmann-france-
Urban-planner-napoleon.

Wood, Paul. "Manet the Initiator." *Art in Theory*, by Charles Harrison, Blackwell, pp. 889–891,
msu.edu/course/ha/446/geoffroymanet.htm.