

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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local general

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PAINTINGS BY 19TH CENTURY FRENCH MASTERS AT MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Fifteen paintings by French masters of the 19th century sent here from France by the Louvre and the Museums of Albi and Lyon to mark the 25th Anniversary of the Museum of Modern Art will be on view at the Museum, 11 West 53 Street, New York, from February 25 through April 24. The exhibition of paintings by French masters who prepared the way for the art of the twentieth century includes many never before shown in this country. A reception in honor of the new French Ambassador to the United States, Monsieur Couve de Murville, was held at the occasion of a private preview of the exhibition on Thursday evening, February 24.

The exhibition of 13 paintings from the Louvre and one each from the Museums of Albi and Lyon ranges from a painting by Gericault dated 1822-23 to the Serpent Charmer by Henri Rousseau, painted in 1907. Other artists represented are Bazille, Cézanne, Corot, Courbet, Daumier, Degas, Delacroix, Gauguin, Manet, Monet, Renoir and Seurat. The exhibition was organized by Rene d'Harnoncourt, Director of the Museum of Modern Art, and made possible by the generous and enthusiastic cooperation of Jacques Jaujard, Director General of Arts and Letters at the French Ministry of Education, Georges Salles, Director of the National Museums of France, and of Germain Bazin, Curator of Paintings at the Louvre.

In his introduction to the catalog for the exhibition, James Thrall Soby, Museum trustee and well-known art scholar and critic writes:

The present exhibition of thirteen paintings from the Louvre, and one each from the distinguished museums at Lyon and Albi, gives an impressive if necessarily incomplete account of certain main tendencies in nineteenth-century French painting, from Géricault to Lautrec. Géricault's portrait of a woman obsessed by envy is the earliest picture in the show, its subject's eyes beady with the incalculable calculation of madness. For the romantics, insanity held an irresistible fascination (as it did for the surrealists a hundred years later), and Géricault's series of portraits of the mad, painted for an alienist at the Salpêtrière hospital, reaches a climax in his picture from the Lyon Museum. Delacroix, too, was much preoccupied with madness. But whereas Géricault in his portraits had treated the subject with quasi-scientific objectivity, stressing the physiognomic symptoms of mental illness, Delacroix thought of insanity as a dramatic situation involving others, as when he painted Tasso disconsolate in his asylum among gibbering lunatics, or when he showed Medea in her fatal, jealous rage against her children and Jason's.

To turn from such images to the blissful serenity of Corot's Trinità dei Monti is something of a relief. Indeed, confronted by this luminous work, one wonders whether any painter since Vermeer had understood so well the eloquence to be achieved within humility's bounds. Corot might well have been awed by Rome, like Poussin and Ingres before him. Instead he treated its landscape and architecture as though they constituted a treasured picnic-ground, remembered from youth; his freshness and intimacy of perception, no less than his natural solidity of form, are unforgettable. In later years Corot sometimes gave way to a weakness for blurred effects, particularly in landscape. Not so his friend Daumier, whose contours in both painting and drawing are deeply incised, and who made the human grimace a vehicle of satire or used it for affectionate commentary on the drama of the stage, as in Crispin and Scapin. If neither Corot nor Daumier became a chef d'école in the traditional sense, painting has been immeasurably richer for their guidance.

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Courbet, on the contrary, was born to lead the reaction against romanticism's ecstasies and grandeur. Though he was far more interested in formalistic pictorial solutions than we would ever admit, he usually worked with headlong bluntness, counting on his uncanny sense of texture, color and light to hold our attention. The Wave is an especially revealing case in point. One might expect monotony from this thoroughly horizontal composition, relieved only by the diagonal thrust of the shore and boats. But the froth of the sea is magnificently alive and the sky a subtle foil. Despite his claims to the contrary, Courbet always knew how to go nature one better. With water he felt an almost mystic communication, as when in his final years he swam for hours, impossibly bloated and ill, in the lake near his Swiss home in exile.

With Manet what we think of as "modern" art begins. A master of elision, bold, provocative and immensely skilled in his juxtapositions of color, Manet opened the door for a procession of fine artists from Monet to Matisse. It is easy to deplore his lack of invention in subject matter and composition. That does not alter the fact that Manet re-emphasized the autonomous validity of painting on which more recent artists in great number have insisted. The Balcony is one of the most beautifully painted of all his works, its virtuosity tending to obscure its interest as a document of the "haute bourgeoisie" of the time. Manet was not much interested in psychological interpretation. But he recorded his subjects' costume and postures with acumen and flair, and he foretold that devotion to contemporary epoch which characterizes not only his immediate successors, the impressionists, but also later artists like the "Nabis." Without Manet's example, Bazille's Studio in the rue de la Condamine, with its delicious informality, could perhaps not have been created -- at least not so early.

Monet's The Luncheon, shimmering and radiant, was presumably painted about two years before the first exhibition of the impressionists in 1874. Yet already there is evident that tight clustering of flecked, opposing tones which Monet was soon to develop and refine. The picture's linear structure is relatively firm compared to that of later works by the artist. But the play of sunlight on figures and objects is its real theme and, in the handling of the seated child in the foreground, we are aware of that curious hide-and-seek melding of contours which must have fascinated Bonnard and Vuillard at the turn of the century. With Renoir's Rising Path, Tall Grasses of c. 1875, the impressionist esthetic is pushed still further. This is admittedly not a major work, but it is exceptional in its spontaneity.

Degas for his part seems never to have stopped worrying about impressionism's sacrifice of linear definition, as was natural for one who deeply admired Ingres. His Absinthe was executed during the first heady years of the impressionist movement, yet retains a strict control of space and volume through line. Degas' genius was many-sided, forbidding easy generalization. In the famous Absinthe, however, the casual, "snapshot" asymmetry of the placing of the figures is perhaps to be especially noted and the depiction of mood is intense. In sociological terms, this image is the absolute reverse of Manet's trio of self-assured citizens on their prosperous balcony.

Lautrec inherited Degas' love of incisive line -- to such a degree in fact that for a considerable period of time he was thought of primarily as a brilliant graphic artist. The Albi Museum's In the Salon, rue des Moulins reveals in full measure how original and inspired was his cacophonous use of color; the acid, rainbow palette he invented was by no means the least of his achievements. Needless to say, Lautrec was also a superb designer, and it is significant that his posters and prints are to be found in the studios of some of the leading abstract painters of our own time. An element of irony enters here in that Lautrec's subject matter meant so much to him and was an integral part of his style.

With Seurat, Cézanne and Gauguin (and also van Gogh, unfortunately missing from this exhibition), the later nineteenth-century rebellion against academicism became a full-scale revolution. Seurat, who seemed to dissolve form in his neo-impressionist crucible, only to pour it forth in a new, marvelously durable shape and substance; Cézanne, creating a spatial synthesis of overwhelming importance and beauty; Gauguin, whose insolent, flat color has nourished a host of modern painters -- these were formidable personalities, and art is not likely soon to forget their lessons. And finally, in the present exhibition, there is the Douanier Rousseau: a so-called "primitive" of infinitely sophisticated instinctive wisdom, and possibly the most forceful reminder we have had in recent centuries that great art is a human rather than a scholastic mystery.