The Move Toward Modernism – Impressionism

An art of pure sensation, impressionism was, in part, a response to 19th century research into the physics of light, the chemistry of paint, and the laws of optics. Since the invention of the camera, artists turned away from realism toward a fresh way to imitate the world. The artist was freed from rigid formalism, with a new emphasis on subjectivity and self-expression, the psychology of perception, and the intuitive realm of experience.

Painting as “Event” - art is appreciated totally for itself. Artists employed luminosity – the interaction of light and form, subtlety of tone, and a preoccupation with sensation, language of color. The color bursts on canvas and dabbing brush strokes blended into a unified emotional effect, rendering nature in short strokes of brilliant color. This blending of various hues and shadings created a continuum of light.

Preferred subject matters included the commonplace and the intermingling of the upper, middle, lower classes, and the combined romantic fascination with nature and the realist preoccupation with daily life. Impressionism brought painterly spontaneity to a celebration of the leisure activities and diversions of urban life: dining, dancing, theater-going, boating, and socializing. Famous Impressionist Painters: Édouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Alfred Sisley, Paul Cézanne, Camille Pissarro, Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt.

Édouard Manet (1832-1883)

- One of the first nineteenth century artists to approach modern-life subjects, he was a pivotal figure in the transition from Realism to Impressionism. He recasted traditional subjects in modern guise, but was enthralled by the life of his own time – by Parisians and their middle-class pleasures and leisure.

- Painted female nudity in a contemporary setting – which was deemed scandalous and indecent. Manet’s _Olympia_ desentimentalized the image of the female. By deflating the ideal and rendering it in commonplace terms, Manet not only offended public taste, he challenged the traditional view of art as the bearer of noble themes.

- Manet also violated conventional practice by employing new painting techniques. Imitating the current photographic practice, he bathed his figures in bright light and, using a minimum of shading, flattened them out.

- He was influenced by the Impressionists, especially Monet and Morisot. Their influence is seen in Manet's use of lighter colors, but he retained his distinctive use of black, uncharacteristic of Impressionist painting. He painted many outdoor pieces, but always returned to what he considered the serious work of the studio.

Claude Monet (1840-1926)

- _Impression: Sunrise_ – the “first modern painting.” This painting says more about how one sees than about what one sees. It transcribes the fleeting effects of light and the changing atmosphere of water and air into a tissue of small dots and streaks of color – the elements of pure perception.

- Maintaining that there were no “lines” in nature, he avoided fixed contours and evoked form by means of color.

- Monet’s canvases capture the external envelope: the instantaneous visual sensation of light itself. His water-garden paintings are visionary meditations on light and space.
Post Impressionism - 19th - 20th Century

- Rejection of objective representation in favor of subjective expression.
- Perspective is subjective.
- Intent: transfer to the canvas the world as they saw it -- projecting their own unique depth perception.
- The familiar world is altered by emotion and the subjective experiences of light, bold colors, and form.
- Time period that bridges the gap between Impressionism and Abstractionism.

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

- Re-fashioned art to suit himself.
- An explosion of pure feeling transferred to color, shapes, and paint textures.
- A short, stabbing brush stroke technique that makes the canvas throb with energy.
- Sensuous impact of life’s forms and colors.
- Heavily influenced by the vivid colors used by Paul Gauguin and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.