

# The movements of impressionism, post- impressionism, and fauvism

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## **Introduction**

Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Fauvism — an extension of Post-Impressionism combined with Neo-Impressionism — are French artistic revolutions that had profound influences on the artistic community and share a universal popularity. Throughout history, artists strove to capture the world around them in attempt to document the contemporary events and their surroundings or present their own interpretation of a concept. The different trend of techniques and mediums artists used to express and visualize their ideas throughout the transition of artistic movements often classifies the work as being categorized to a specific style; thus, illustrating a set of common traits between the artworks belonging to the same period.

## **Impressionism**

The Impressionism period marks the first distinctly modern movement in painting during the late nineteenth century. The transition from Realism to Impressionism marks a clear shift from the artists' focus on illustrating the details of a subject matter to depicting the visual impression of the moment. The classically trained Édouard Manet, who never identified himself as a true impressionist, straddled Realism and Impressionism and led artists including Monet, Degas, Renoir, Pissarro, and Cezanne in a new artistic direction. His innovations fell under four broad categories: content and composition, brush-stroke, color, and representation of light. Manet's *The Monet Family in Their Garden at Argenteuil* (1874) exemplifies the artist's innovative spirit in regard to the aforementioned categories.

The painting depicts Monet's family in their private garden: a leisure scene typical in Impressionist art. At first glance, the viewers are drawn to the main subject — Monet's wife, Camille — due to its relative centrality on canvas and bright contrast of white against the green background; upon further examination, however, the subject becomes only a part of a scene as the eye consumes surrounding depictions of Monet's son Jean, Monet himself, and the garden they are in. With a Monet caught in the action of gardening and the son paying no particular attention to the artist, the painting captures a momentary and transient scene. Prior to the Impressionists, artists traditionally positioned their compositions so that the main subject secured the viewer's attention. Manet, however, along with future Impressionists, relaxed the boundary between the subject and the background that often resembled a snapshot. Such evolution of Impressionism can be partly seen as a reaction by painters to the challenge and competition presented by photography which seemingly discredited painters' capability to reproduce reality.

Manet's use of short "broken" brush stroke—typically associated with the Impressionists — in Camille's and Jean's faces almost breaks a sense of solidity of their facial forms, just as the loose brushstrokes depicting the trees and grass, impart an overall impression of the scene without lingering on specific details. His style of brushwork closely relates to his mastery of color as he paints frankly, in patches or dabs of color, eliminating the in-between values — gradual shading — and achieves a sharper contrast of colors. In a sense, he separates the medium from the narrative of the

artwork, placing a greater emphasis on the paint instead of the subject matter: as he quotes, “ When you go out to paint, try to forget what objects you have before you—a tree, a house, a field... Merely think, here is a little square of blue, here an oblong of pink, here a streak of yellow, and paint it just as it looks to you, the exact color and shape.”

Because Impressionists were intent on capturing the most fleeting aspects of nature, especially the changing light of the sun, while most Realist artist completed their sketches back in the studio, accompanied by other props to finalize their works, Impressionists, including Manet, decided to paint and complete their work outdoors (en plein air) in one seating. Due to his way of painting in patches of color, to indicate the vicinity of light, manet simply slapped on streaks of light pink as can be seen on the Camille’s white dress, instead of painting a range of progressively lighter or darker shades of color. The lack of definitive lines and search for precision create a foggy effect, adding to the dreamy and abstract mood of the painting.

## **Post-Impressionism**

The Metropolitan Museum describes Post-Impressionists as “ breaking free of the naturalism of Impressionism in the late 1880s, a group of young painters sought independent artistic styles for expressing emotions rather than simply optical impressions, concentrating on themes of deeper symbolism. Through the use of simplified colors and definitive forms, their art was characterized by a renewed aesthetic sense as well as abstract tendencies.” Three defining characteristics of post-impressionistic artworks are use of symbolism, evocative color, and distinctive brushstrokes. Paul Gauguin,

along with Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Cézanne, pioneered the Post-Impressionism movement. Gauguin's *la Orana Maria* (1891) is his first major Tahitian canvas — before undertaking a series of Polynesian inspired artworks — that demonstrates the artist's major contribution to Post-Impressionism.

*La Orana Maria* embodies the artist's life-long fascination with the exotic and successfully illustrates a Christian narrative in a “primitive” cultural setting through the use of heavy symbolism. Gauguin depicts Mary as a Tahitian woman in a red paréo along with the Christ child: a sturdy and naked toddler sitting on her shoulder. The artist secures their religious identity with other symbolic attributes: gold halos on their heads, two young girls hold their hands in prayer as if worshiping, and an angel with colorful wings partially obscured by the tropical leaves and flowers in the back. The fruit on the foreground is laid out on a *fata*: a platform used to make offerings to the gods in Polynesia; as such, Gauguin not only draws upon his cultural hybridity by interweaving symbols of Western Christianity and foreign Tahitian culture, but also conveys the connection between femininity, fertility, and nature.

Gauguin considered color as a language: “Color! What a deep and mysterious language, the language of dreams.” As opposed to the Impressionists who endeavored to capture natural light's effect on tonality, Post-Impressionists deliberately used an artificial color palette as a method of portraying their emotion-driven perceptions of the subject. Heavily saturated color, multicolored shadows, and rich ranges of contrasting colors

are evident in most Post-Impressionist painting, displaying the artists' innovative means to representation. Gauguin's palette of evocative colors contributes to his effortless fusion of Christian iconography with Tahitian subject matter. He uses bright reds, blues, greens, and yellows of the vibrant colors of the paréo fabrics: rather divergent from the paler color palette of "saint artists." His colors exude a sense of passion, exoticism, and decorative aesthetic rather than sense of religious deference. On the surface, the color scheme may seem to be out of context, but it plays a critical role in allowing the artist to illustrate the world he sought—blending the mythologies and imageries of Tahiti he was residing in with that of the West which he was from and his own imagination.

Like works completed in the Impressionist style, most Post-Impressionist pieces, including that of Gauguin's, embody discernably broad brushstrokes that not only adds texture and a sense of depth to the works of art, but also speaks volume to the artists' lack of interest in pursuing a realistic representation of the subject. While Gauguin's *la Orana Maria*, feature bold brushstrokes, his thin paint allows the artist to capture the roughness in the material of the fabric and his seemingly inattentively confident blending of colors — blue and greyish pink on the mountains of the landscape — adds to the imaginative aspect of his work.

## **Fauvism**

Fauvism was very much influenced by Post-Impressionism in terms of its use of color and technique. The most distinctive feature of the movement is its artists' taste for arbitrary representation through liberated and intensified

approach to color, further reduction of detail to subject matter, and distorted lines. Amongst distinguished artists of the Fauvist movement, including Andre Derain, Paul Signac, and Maurice de Vlaminck, Henri Matisse was the prominent leader of Fauvism. His distinguished technique in outlining figures and depicting shapes by juxtaposing pure areas of color is demonstrated through his painting *Young Sailor II* (1906).

The sitter is painted against a flat, bright pink background and the saturated blues and greens of his cap, pullover, and trousers accentuate the boldness of the boy's slanted posture with his left arm leaning on the chair back, hand cradling his head, and one leg turned up, directly gazing into the artist. His facial features and body position are an example of Matisse's use of forced deformations. His nose is small and out of proportion, contrasted by his red ears, which are large, protruding out away from his skull. His eyes are also out of proportion and their shapes vary and his hands and fingers have no detail to them.

Like how Paul Cézanne used green and blue shades for the subject in his work, *The bather* (1885), which created a sense of unity between the subject and the background, Matisse's use of green to outline the boy's eyes and beard, and blue on the linings of his green trousers, also develops a sense of aesthetic unity in his painting, *Young Sailor II*. The artist's use of complementary colors and bold brushstrokes is not intended to capture the realistic outlines of the subject matter but to highlight and emphasize an emotional image he perceives that might not resemble reality completely; Matisse admits that his intent in *Young Sailor II* was to “condense the

meaning of [a] body by seeking its essential lines.” Likewise, the major contrast between the frenetic brushstrokes of his clothing and the solidity of structure and color of the sitter’s face seems to indicate how the artists intended to direct our focus onto the subject’s face.

## **Conclusion**

Prior to Impressionism, most paintings had a “ finished” surface: founded upon their scientific intent, artists endeavored to illustrate a subject or scene with great precision. In 19th century, with the unfolding of Impressionism, followed by Post-Impressionism and Fauvism, artists used their artworks to express their personal impressions and interpretation of moments. The progression of the movements signals a growing trend and focus on evocation of feelings and urge of self-expression. The techniques and mediums function more as a tool for achieving such psychological goal rather than an artistic achievement in pure illustration for the sake of illustration.