

# **Light and Impressionism: a Radical Change**

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ARTS 1692  
March 21, 2001

The Impressionist movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century represented a radical change from the art of the past. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in the Impressionist view of light and its use in painting. Previous eras considered and used light, but nowhere in the past was the focus of painting on the light itself.

The Impressionists observed that the human eye does not constantly remain in sharp focus on its surroundings. Rather, humans see their environment as indistinct forms illuminated by light and receding in shadow, until something “catches the eye” and pulls the eye to focus clearly on that object. The surrounding objects, then, will tend to remain indistinct until and unless they can draw the focus away from the original focal point. Impressionist paintings were created to capture these moments of indistinct observation, in the instant before a specific object becomes a focal point and springs into detail.

As one illustration, compare Renoir’s *A Torso of a Woman in the Sun* (c. 1875-76) with any of a number of Renaissance-era paintings of female nudes, for example Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* (1538). Renoir’s model, though clearly an unclothed female form, is indistinctly formed. Her figure is barely distinguishable from the landscape behind her, primarily because of the differences in color, blues and yellows in contrast with peach and grayed flesh tones. Only the outline of her form is truly distinct, however. Her features, as well as the structure of her body, are disguised by the patchy application of the flesh tones and the white highlights, all emphasized by the soft, loose brushwork. The viewer catches a glimpse of a nude woman with brown hair, but that is all. On the other hand, Titian’s *Venus* is distinct, clear, obviously the subject of much study. Careful, delicate shading delineates her facial features as well as her body’s form – even the musculature under her skin is subtly indicated by the use of chiaroscuro. Both women

wear the same jewelry – a bracelet and a ring – but while the Venus’s jewelry is detailed, the jewelry of Anna Leboeuf (Renoir’s subject) is seen only as a difference in the reflection of light. The viewer is left feeling that they are well acquainted with Titian’s Venus, but that Renoir’s Anna is a mystery. In a sense, the Classical, mythological subject of Titian is more “real” to the viewer than the real human being painted by Renoir.

Another example can be seen in contrasting the Baroque use of spotlighting with the Impressionist use of light. In Degas’ *Absinthe* (1876), we see strong diagonal lines and an asymmetrical composition not unlike those used in the Baroque era. However, the two central figures of the piece almost blend into the background because of Degas’ treatment of light in the painting. The viewer’s eye is actually drawn to the curtains over the window behind the subjects because of the intense light coming through those curtains. As well, the shadows of the two heads against the light of the window catch the viewer’s attention. The facial features of the man and the woman are in shadow, less distinct than they would be in a more classical treatment. Contrast this with a Baroque-era painting such as Peter Paul Rubens’ *The Straw Hat* (c. 1620-25), where Rubens’ model Susanna Fourment is the central focus of the painting and therefore clearly “in the spotlight.” The characteristic Baroque use of spotlighting shows us Susanna’s facial features clearly and distinctly despite the shadow cast over them by the broad brim of her hat. While Degas’ subjects, the woman in particular, are trying to hide in the shadows, Rubens’ subject straightforwardly faces the world and her audience.

Claude Monet’s use of color and light illustrates the guiding principles of the movement more than that of any other painter of the era. His *Bassin des Nymphéas*

*(Waterlily Pond)* (1904), a late work, is essentially patches of color representing the reflection of lights into the eyes as one first gazes upon the scene. Nothing is clear, nothing is distinct. The viewer perceives a shoreline in the distance, and the intense colors of the flowers, but details are not yet present. This is actually a realistic representation of how one would view a pond in sunlight at first glance. The reflections of sunlight on the water break up into light and dark patches, and the glare obscures any attempt to focus on details until the eyes adjust to the light. It does not matter whether an area of the picture is close to the viewer or in the distance; the light obscures the details. Contrast this with another landscape, Thomas Cole's *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm (The Oxbow)* (1836), an American Romantic painting. Cole's work shows a very traditional use of light and shadow for highlighting and detailing. Though the clouds in the background and to the left side show a bit of premature Impressionism in their formation and coloring, more detail is present than would be expected in a truly Impressionist painting. Furthermore, Cole takes a very traditionalist approach to detail, with foreground objects clearly delineated (even individual leaves are distinctly drawn) and background objects fading gradually into obscurity. Light and shadow are used to emphasize this realism of detail.

In making these three comparisons, it is easy to conclude that for traditional artistic movements, light is a tool to be used to facilitate representation of content and form, and as such does play an important role in the art of these movements. For the Impressionists, though, light itself was the object of the work, and as such was far more of a toy to be played with and manipulated.