

Post-Impressionism

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Term applied to the reaction against Impressionism led by Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, and Georges Seurat. It can be roughly dated from 1886, the year of the last Impressionist exhibition, to c. 1905, when Fauvism appeared and the first moves towards Cubism were made. While it was predominantly a French movement, there were related developments in other countries, which often occurred somewhat later. Post-Impressionism can be loosely defined as a rejection of the Impressionists' concern for the naturalistic depiction of light and colour in favour of an emphasis on abstract qualities or symbolic content. It therefore includes Neo-Impressionism, Symbolism, Cloisonnism, Synthetism, and the later work of some Impressionists. The term was coined in 1910 by the English critic and painter Roger Fry for an exhibition of late 19th-century French painting, drawing, and sculpture that he organized at the Grafton Galleries in London.

1. History and application of the term.

After considering more substantive terms such as 'expressionism', Fry settled on 'Post-Impressionism' for the title of the exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in 1910–11, as this did no more than point out that the Post-Impressionists came after the Impressionists. From the beginning he admitted that the label was not descriptive of a single style. The catalogue preface, written by Fry with Desmond MacCarthy, secretary to the gallery, but not signed by either, begins (1910–11 exh. cat., p. 7):

The pictures collected together in the present exhibition are the work of a group of artists who cannot be defined by any single term. The term 'Synthetists', which has been applied to them by learned criticism, does indeed express a shared quality underlying their diversity; and it is the critical business of this introduction to expand the meaning of that word, which sounds too much like the hiss of an angry gander to be a happy appellation.

For Fry and MacCarthy the only common denominator between the Post-Impressionist painters was their rejection of Impressionism (1910–11 exh. cat., p. 7):

In no school does individual temperament count for more. In fact, it is the boast of those who believe in this school, that its methods enable the individuality of the artist to find completer self-expression in his work than is possible to those who have committed themselves to representing objects more literally ... the Post-Impressionists consider the Impressionists too naturalistic.

The full title of the exhibition was *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*, although Manet was represented by fewer works (nine) than the painters of the next generation. There were, for example, forty-six works by Gauguin, twenty-five by van Gogh, and twenty-one by Cézanne. Other artists whose work was shown included Seurat (two works), Paul Sérusier (five), Maurice Denis (five), Félix Vallotton (four), and Odilon Redon (three). The Fauves were represented by Albert Marquet (five), Henri Manguin (four), Maurice de Vlaminck (eight), and André Derain (three). The two paintings by Matisse and the three by Picasso were supplemented by numerous drawings and sculptures by both. Fry felt that Manet had begun the rejection of the Impressionists' realistic goals and that Cézanne was Manet's heir. Gauguin and van Gogh concurred in their submission of nature to the expression of emotion in their works. According to Fry, Cézanne most distinctly marked the transition away from naturalism. He 'aimed first at a design which would produce the coherent, architectural effect of the masterpieces of primitive art' (1910–11 exh. cat., p. 10). Cézanne's goal was to move away from the 'complexity of the appearance of things to the geometrical simplicity which design demands' (1910–11 exh. cat., p. 10). Fry viewed Gauguin as more of a theorist than a painter, claiming that his interest was 'the fundamental laws of abstract form' and 'the power which abstract form and colour can exercise over the imagination of the spectator' (1910–11 exh. cat., p. 11). Van Gogh was singled out for his Romantic temperament. Fry's initial definition of Post-Impressionism excluded Neo-Impressionism, even though he included two works by Seurat in the exhibition. Of the generation following Gauguin, Cézanne, and van Gogh, only Matisse was mentioned in the catalogue preface. He was praised for the fact that his 'search for an abstract harmony of line, for rhythm, has been carried to lengths which often deprive the figure of all appearance of nature' (1910–11 exh. cat., p. 11).

In 1912 Fry organized a second Post-Impressionist exhibition at the Grafton Galleries. While he had concentrated the first solely on French artists, in the second he admitted that the movement had existed in England and Russia as well. He therefore included works by such English artists as Duncan Grant, Vanessa Bell, Stanley Spencer, and Wyndham Lewis and by such Russian artists as Natal'ya Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov. He disparaged the Post-Impressionist painting in European countries outside France, England, and Russia, writing: 'Post-Impressionist schools are flourishing, one might say raging in Switzerland, Austro-Hungary and most of Germany. But so far as I have discovered, they have not added any positive element to the general stock of ideas.' His introduction to the 'French Group' concentrated on Cézanne and ignored both van Gogh and Gauguin. There were, however, more works by Matisse and the Fauves than before. The development of Cubism was also highlighted by a large number of works by Picasso.

The one area of late 19th-century French art that Fry left unexplored was Symbolism. Of its pioneers, Gustave Moreau and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes developed their style and aesthetic before Impressionism, while Odilon Redon (whose work was included in the 1910–11 exhibition) developed his contemporaneously with Impressionism. Symbolism exerted its most powerful influence on the artists of the generations immediately following the Impressionists. By its contribution to the redirection of art from the external to the internal world and by its rejection of the superficiality of Impressionism, Symbolism is characteristically Post-Impressionist. Though imprecise, the term 'Post-Impressionism' remains widely used: John Rewald adopted it as the title for his encyclopedic work, *Post Impressionism: From Van Gogh to Gauguin*, first published in 1956, although he limited his attention to French artists. The exhibition entitled *Post-Impressionism: Cross-Currents in European Painting*, held at the Royal Academy, London, in 1979–80, attempted to broaden the term to include works by a variety of such European artists as Carlo Carrà, Lovis Corinth, James Ensor, Erich Heckel, Fernand Hodler, Fernand Khnopff, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Edvard Munch, Emil Nolde, Giovanni Segantini, James McNeill Whistler, and many others.

2. Development in France and elsewhere.

Influenced by the Symbolist movement in literature, the French Post-Impressionists ignored the minutiae of natural scenes in favour of the more intangible areas of aesthetics or symbolic content. Deeper meanings, as well as the personal feelings of the artist, became valid subjects. Cézanne used colour to explore the spatial relationships between objects in nature, while at the same time studying the underlying forms of nature itself. His work shows one of the earliest reactions against Impressionism, as in *Zola's House at Médan* (c. 1880; Glasgow, Burrell Col.), where he used carefully brushed, diagonal paint strokes to lend structure to the composition. Van Gogh, on the other hand, allowed his brushstrokes and colour to express his almost

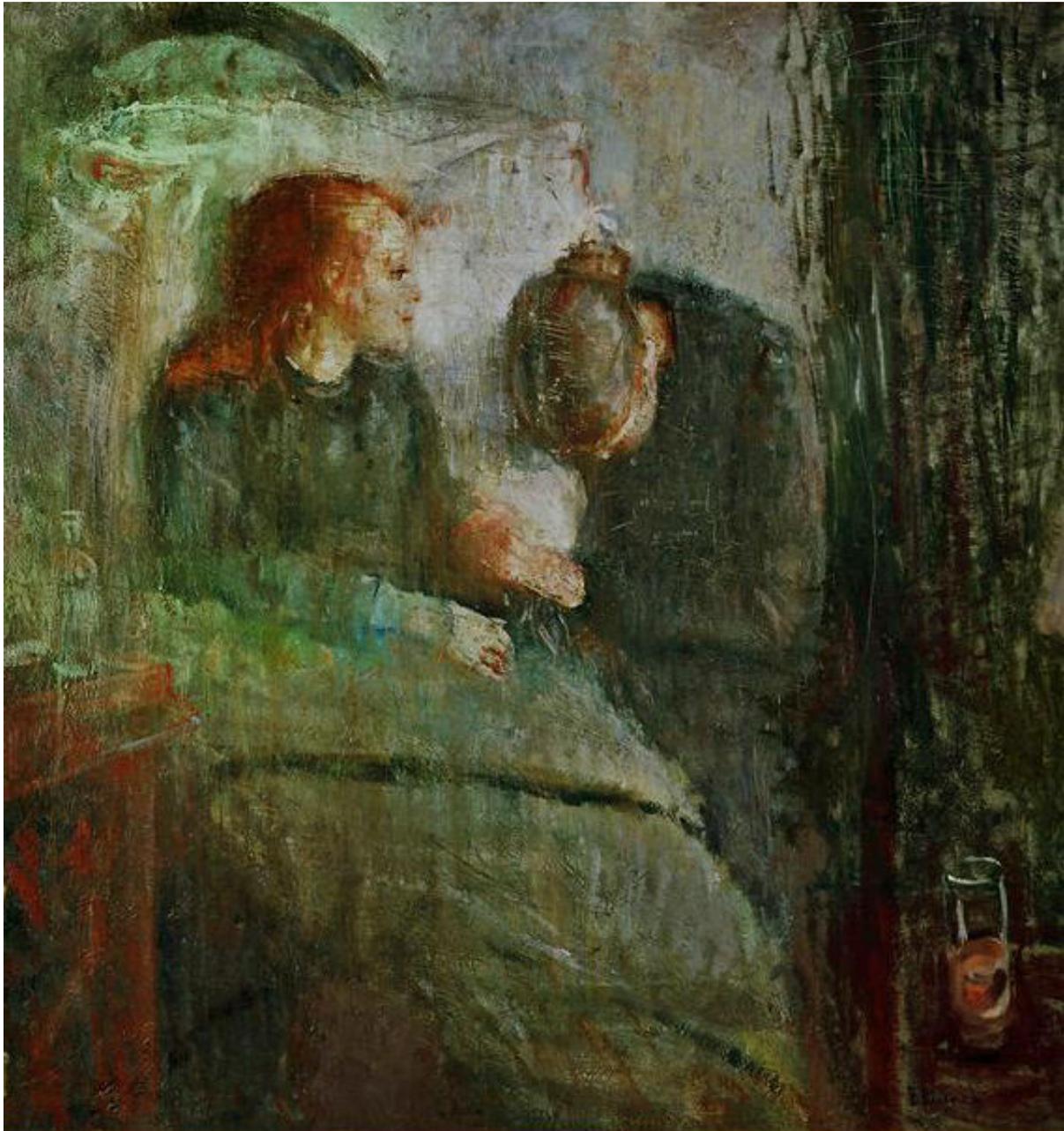
pantheistic fascination with the energy that animates natural forms as well as individual people, as in *Starry Night* (1889; New York, MOMA). Gauguin preferred to use colour and line in order to suggest the spiritual or emotional as well as physical environments of the places he painted, especially Brittany and Tahiti, as in *Nevermore* (1897; U. London, Courtauld Inst. Gals). Seurat, the chief theorist and practitioner of Neo-Impressionism, produced harmonious, static paintings by adopting a meticulous, scientific approach to colour and composition, as in *Young Woman Powdering herself* (1889–90; U. London, Courtauld Inst. Gals).



Post-Impressionist painting by Paul Cézanne: *Zola's House at Médan*, oil on canvas, 590×725 mm, c.1880 (Glasgow, Burrell Collection); photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

In the work of all these artists, the abstract concerns of harmony and the two-dimensional arrangement of forms took precedence over naturalism. Many French artists were soon influenced by these innovations, particularly by those of Gauguin and Seurat. A group of painters, including Paul Sérusier, Emile Bernard, and others, gathered around Gauguin at

Pont-Aven in Brittany, while Seurat's divisionist technique was taken up by such artists as Henri Edmond Cross, Maximilien Luce, and Paul Signac. Some of the original Impressionist artists, including Renoir, themselves moved away from their earlier aesthetic in an attempt to introduce a greater structure to their work, as shown in Renoir's painting *La Roche-Guyon* (c. 1885; Aberdeen, A.G.), executed in meticulous brushstrokes like those used by Cézanne. Monet, on the other hand, loosened his compositions and colour schemes in order to become more subjective in his interpretation of nature.



Edvard Munch: *The Sick Child*, oil on canvas, 1.20×1.18 m, 1885–6 (Oslo, Nasjonalgalleri); © 2007 The Munch Museum/The Munch–Ellingsen Group/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

In France the political and cultural anarchy of the 1880s and 1890s encouraged artists to reject the stylistic norms of the past. In other European countries different aesthetics and political environments spawned varying responses to this artistic freedom. In Germany the lack of a strong Impressionist tradition, as well as of any single artistic centre, diluted the impact of Post-Impressionism. The Norwegian Edvard Munch caused a stir in Berlin in 1892 with such starkly expressionistic works as *Sick Child* (1885–6; Oslo, N.G.) and created a following in avant-garde circles. The predominant artistic style among avant-garde painters nonetheless remained Naturalism, as in the works of such painters as Hans Reinhard von Marées and Lovis Corinth. A few painters, such as the Swiss artists Arnold Böcklin and Ferdinand Hodler, who worked mainly in Germany, moved from Naturalism to Symbolism, as shown by Hodler's *Eurhythmy* (1895; Berne, Kstmus.). The critic Julius Meier-Graefe was largely responsible for bringing the works of van Gogh, Gauguin, and the other French Post-Impressionists to the attention of the German public. Visits between France and Germany by such artists as Paula Modersohn-Becker, Alexei Jawlensky, Maurice Denis, Jan Verkade, and Paul Sérusier further helped to establish an awareness of Post-Impressionist work in the next generation of German painters, the Expressionists.

In 1883, when Octave Maus and 20 disgruntled artists established Les XX in Belgium, they opened their annual exhibition to French Post-Impressionist artists. Redon, Seurat, Signac, Gauguin, Bernard, Denis, and van Gogh were among those represented in exhibitions between 1886 and 1893. These close contacts between French and Belgian artists quickly led such painters as Théo Van Rysselberghe, James Ensor, and Fernand Khnopff to adopt French ideas: Neo-Impressionism and Symbolism dominated avant-garde Belgian artists from the 1890s until the beginning of the 20th century. The British were less interested in the politics of the French Post-Impressionists but were more open to the intellectual approach to art offered by Cézanne. Impressionism, filtered through the more naturalistic work of Jules Bastien-Lepage, remained the predominant style in Britain until the 1890s. Fascination with the work of Whistler in London led some artists, including Walter Richard Sickert and George Moore, to an interest in the work of Degas. Moreover, the large number of British art students in Paris helped to transmit Post-Impressionist ideas back to London, as did the fact that such artists as Roderic O'Connor and Robert Bevan spent time in Pont-Aven, absorbing the ideas of Gauguin and his circle. However, the greatest influence of Post-Impressionism came in the first two decades of the 20th century in the work of such artists as Grant and Bell and certain members of the Camden Town Group, especially in the wake of Fry's two exhibitions.

The anarchist or socialist beliefs of many French Neo-Impressionists particularly attracted Dutch and Italian artists to their political as well as artistic causes. In the Netherlands the Impressionist landscape and light of the Hague school set the standard for most Dutch artists in the late 19th century. However, Jan Toorop's exposure to Neo-Impressionist and Symbolist ideas, when he studied in Brussels (1882–5) and became a founder-member of Les XX, led to his efforts to introduce these new art forms to his native country, as did Johan Thorn Prikker

soon afterwards. The proximity of Brussels led many Dutch artists to visit the annual exhibitions of Les XX, so furthering awareness of French Post-Impressionism. These new ideas, however, were often subordinated to the Dutch passion for order and carefully defined spaces, as seen in the early works of Piet Mondrian. In Italy the divisionist techniques of the Neo-Impressionists were influential on the work of many artists in the early years of the 20th century, most notably on the work of those artists who later became Futurists, such as Giacomo Balla, Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, and Gino Severini. In Scandinavia, Russia, and North America, Impressionism and Naturalism continued to dominate the art world until well after 1900. In these areas, as in other countries, Post-Impressionism was never considered a 'movement' in art. The French Post-Impressionists nevertheless later influenced many artists who were trying in various ways to move beyond the realistic concerns of the Impressionists. Thus the synthetism of Gauguin, the geometry of Cézanne, the expressionism of van Gogh, and the divisionism of Seurat found followers throughout the world.



Vincent van Gogh: *Starry Night*, oil on canvas, 736×921 mm, 1889 (New York, Museum of Modern Art); photo © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by Scala/Art Resource, NY

In the early 21st century, the word 'Post-Impressionism' gradually lost ground to the term 'Symbolism' as a title for the work created by all of the artists and approaches discussed above.

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See also

Colour, §I, 3: Western world, late 19th century: Impressionism

Expressionism

Formalism

Landscape painting, §II, 8: 20th century

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