Impressionism:
How Artists Painted Light and Modern Life



- See Impressionist works as deliberate experiments in light, color, and modern life—not sketches
- Build a shared toolkit: close looking, side-by-side comparison, and a three-question routine
- Ask: What light? What moment? What modern life?
- Began in France in the 1870s–1880s, when independents exhibited outside the official Salon
- Still matters today: it changed what art records—everyday life, weather, speed, perception
- Roadmap: the Salon, 1874, technique, modern subjects, key figures, market, guided looking, legacy

Before Impressionism: The Academy and the Salon

- Académie des Beaux-Arts trained artists and controlled the annual Paris Salon
- Salon was the main route to sales, commissions, and fame
- Academic priorities: history painting, idealized forms, smooth finish, muted color
- 1863: jury rejected 3,000 of 5,000 works, prompting the Salon des Refusés
- 1874 Salon drew half a million visitors — the scale independents faced
- Key terms: Salon, jury, academic painting, avant-garde, Salon des Refusés



A Movement Takes Shape: The 1874 Breakaway Exhibition

- April 15, 1874: Société Anonyme opens "open exhibition, without juries or prizes"
- Nadar's former studio, 35 Boulevard des Capucines; about 30 artists, roughly 165–200 works
- United by independence from the Salon, not by a single style
- Modest attendance: about 3,500 visitors in a month; few works sold
- Louis Leroy's satirical review in *Le Charivari* (April 25, 1874) coined "Impressionists"
- Artists adopted the name; eight group exhibitions followed, 1874–1886



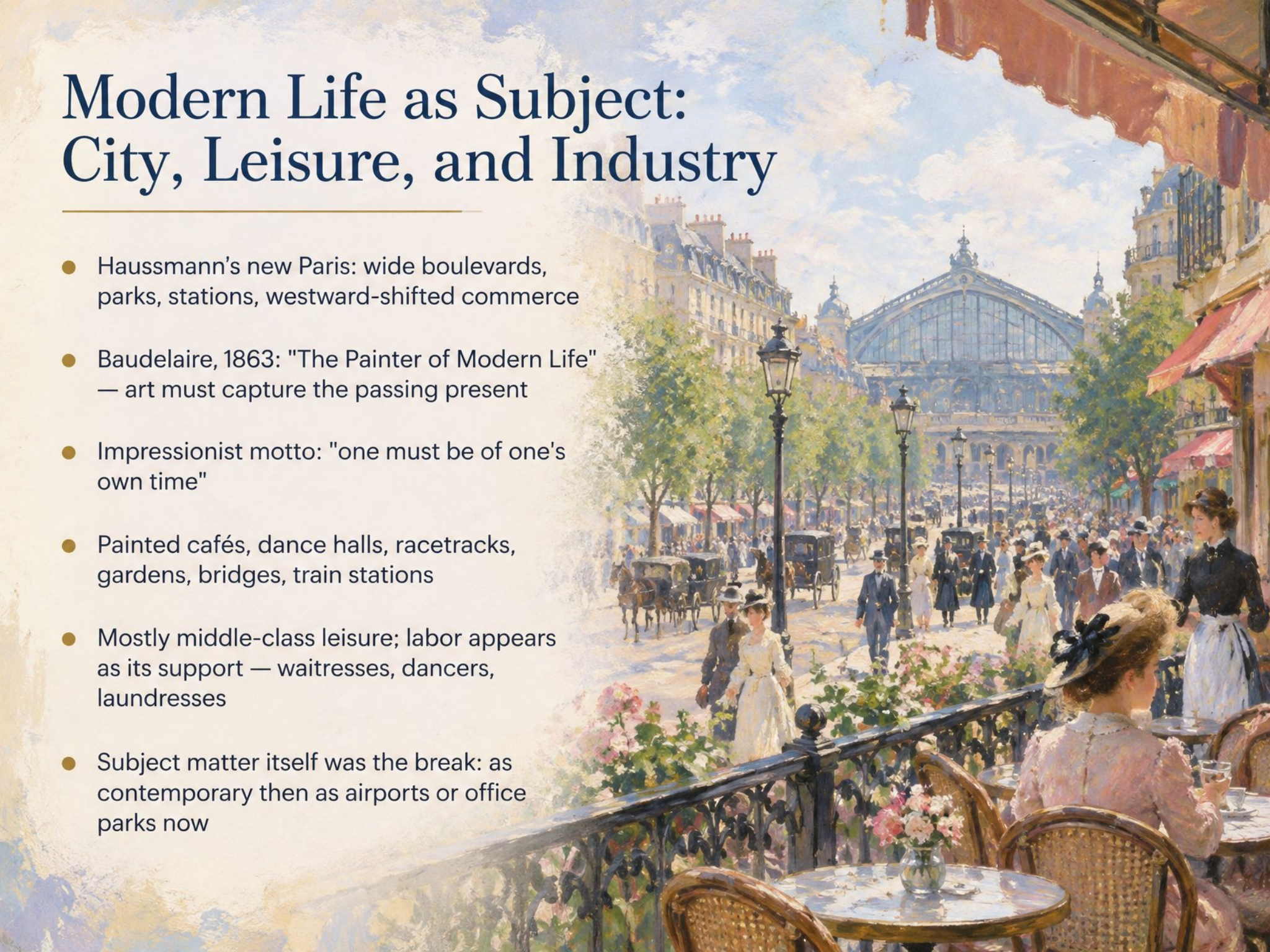
Painting Light: Technique and Materials

- Broken brushwork and thick dabs; forms merge when you step back
- Metal paint tubes (1841) and portable easels made plein air practical
- New synthetic pigments expanded the Impressionist palette
- Optical mixing: pure colors blend in the eye; shadows painted in color
- Light grounds and fast paintwork caught fleeting atmospheric effects



Modern Life as Subject: City, Leisure, and Industry

- Haussmann's new Paris: wide boulevards, parks, stations, westward-shifted commerce
- Baudelaire, 1863: "The Painter of Modern Life" — art must capture the passing present
- Impressionist motto: "one must be of one's own time"
- Painted cafés, dance halls, racetracks, gardens, bridges, train stations
- Mostly middle-class leisure; labor appears as its support — waitresses, dancers, laundresses
- Subject matter itself was the break: as contemporary then as airports or office parks now



Key Figures and Their Distinct Approaches



Monet

- Monet: one motif repeated across changing light — grainstacks, Rouen Cathedral, poplars



Renoir

- Renoir: sociable figures, dappled light, dance and leisure scenes



Degas

- Degas: backstage views, steep photographic cropping, pastels; never painted outdoors



Pissarro and Sisley

- Pissarro and Sisley: rural and suburban landscapes; Pissarro showed in all eight exhibitions



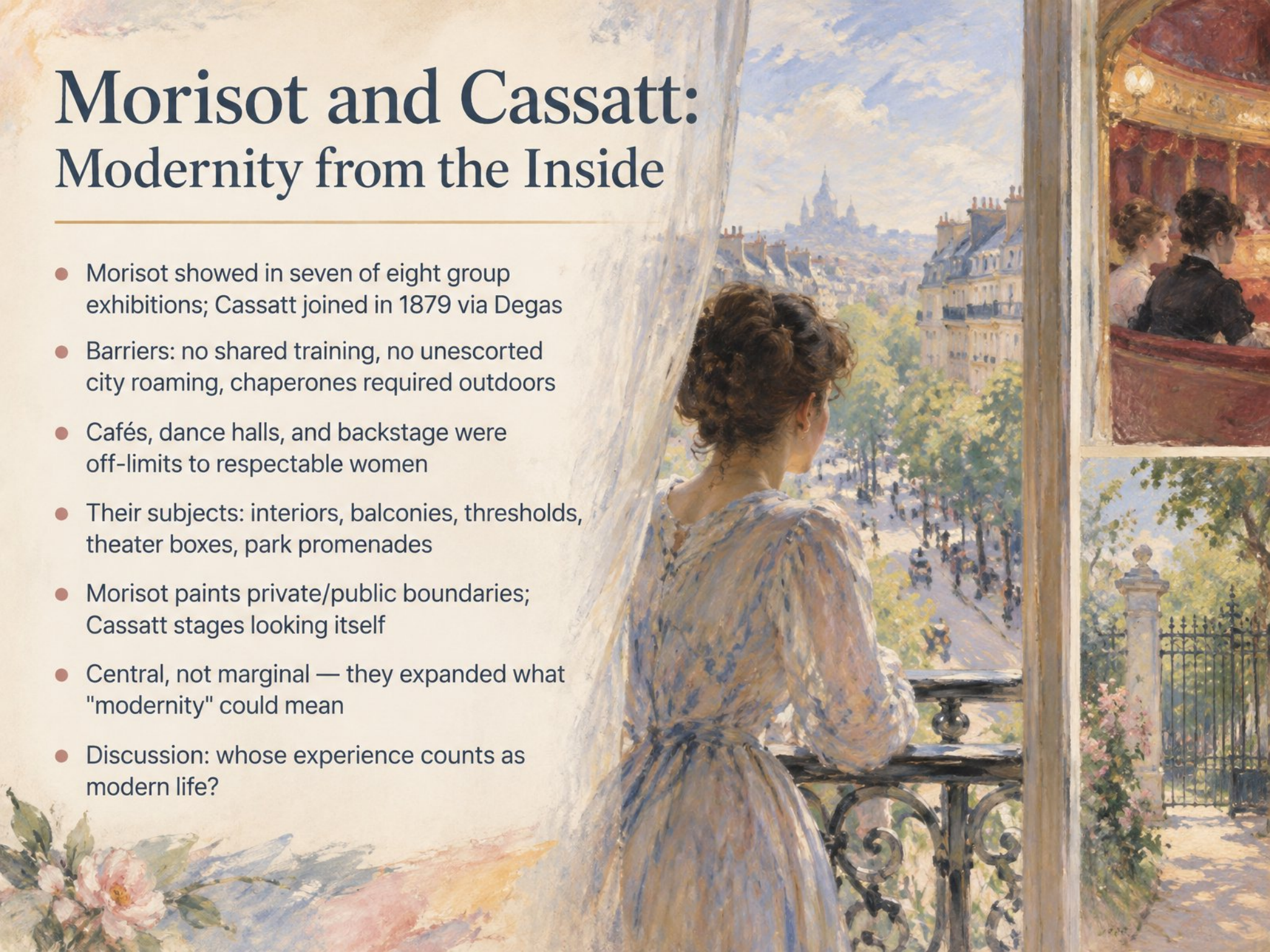
Caillebotte

- Caillebotte: modern subjects, bold viewpoints, and tireless promotion of the group

Note: Cézanne, Gauguin, and Seurat belong to Post-Impressionism

Morisot and Cassatt:
Modernity from the Inside

- Morisot showed in seven of eight group exhibitions; Cassatt joined in 1879 via Degas
- Barriers: no shared training, no unescorted city roaming, chaperones required outdoors
- Cafés, dance halls, and backstage were off-limits to respectable women
- Their subjects: interiors, balconies, thresholds, theater boxes, park promenades
- Morisot paints private/public boundaries; Cassatt stages looking itself
- Central, not marginal — they expanded what "modernity" could mean
- Discussion: whose experience counts as modern life?



Reception, Market, and the Path to Acceptance

- Early critics mocked ‘impressions’ as unfinished—even joked about wallpaper
- Paul Durand-Ruel bought and held thousands of works by Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, Sisley, Degas, and Cassatt
- In 1886 he took 300 paintings to New York, sold 49 for about $40,000
- American collectors like the Havemeyers, Palmers, and Alexander Cassatt shifted taste
- By the mid-1890s, hundreds of Impressionist canvases were in US collections





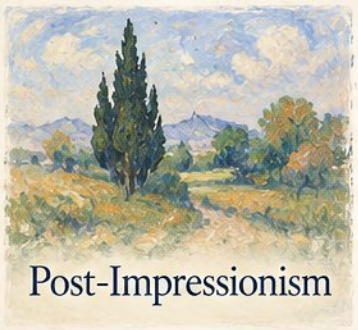
Looking Closely: A Guided Practice Session

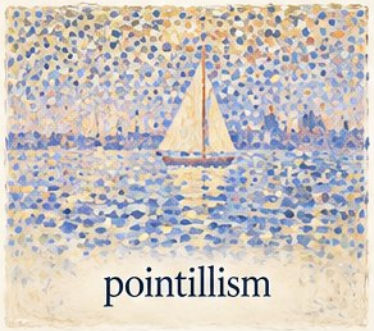


- Apply the routine to one work: What light? What moment? What modern life?
- Step back for overall effect; step close for broken color and colored shadows.
- Compare two versions of one motif; cite evidence for what changed.
- Hunt cropping, high viewpoints, off-center subjects: what does the frame exclude?
- Myth check: loose surfaces often mask carefully constructed compositions.
- Group exercise: offer three evidence-based observations, not opinions.

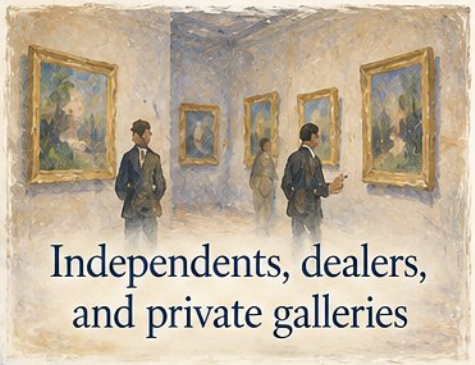
Legacy: From Impressionism to Modern Art













Spread to Germany and Belgium
to the United States

- Impressionist strategies fed Post-Impressionism, pointillism, and color practice verging on abstraction
- Independents, dealers, and private galleries became a template for the modern art world
- Spread from Germany and Belgium to the United States, shaping national collections
- Museum practice: fragile surfaces and works on paper constrain lighting levels
- Display decisions balance visibility with conservation

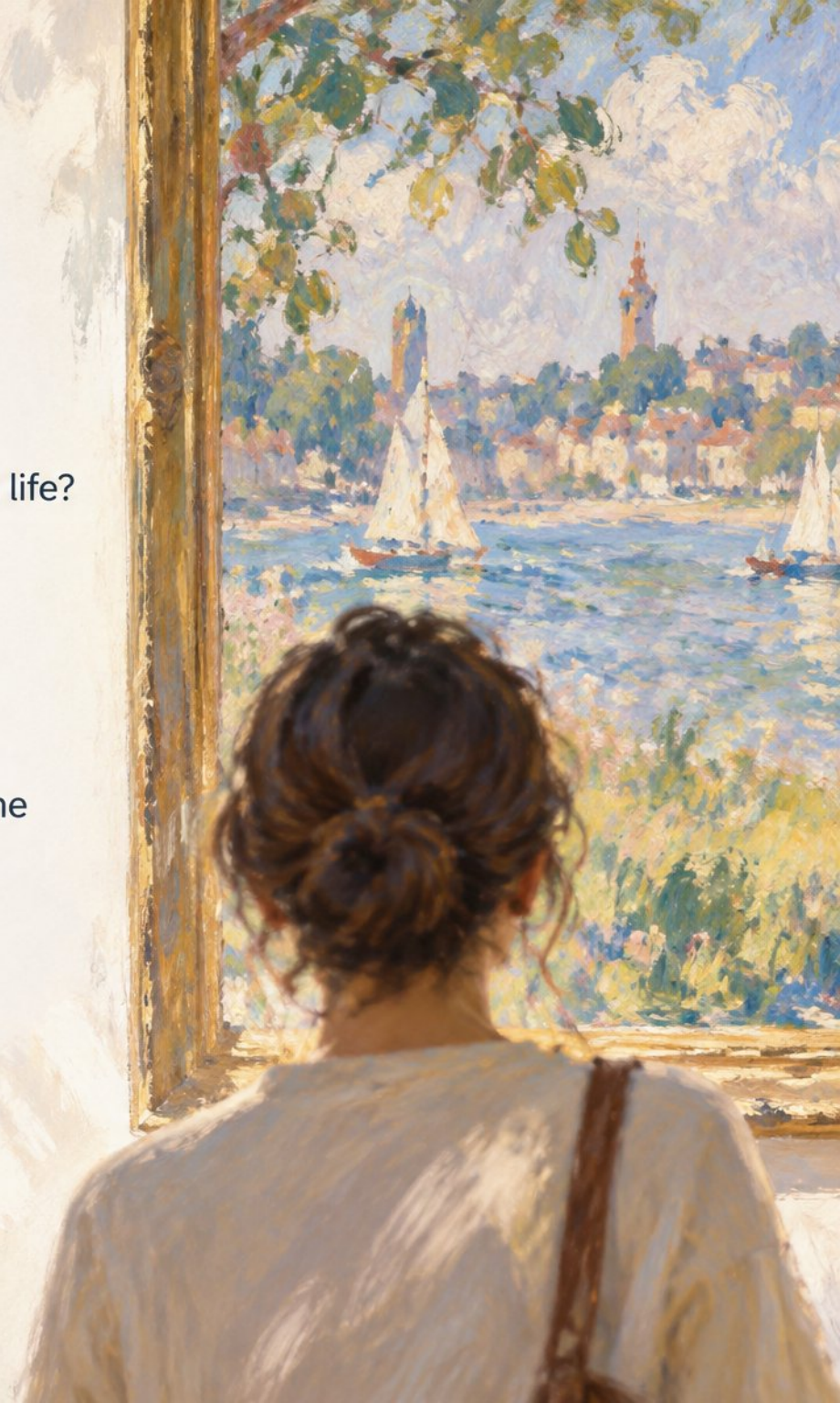
Impressionism in Today's Museums (2025–2026)

- Anniversary show 'Paris 1874' reunited works from the first exhibition, at NGA and Musée d'Orsay
- 'Into the Modern: Impressionism from MFA, Boston' runs at National Gallery Singapore through 1 Mar 2026
- 'Collecting Impressionism at LACMA' asks how museums and donors built Impressionist taste
- 'The Honest Eye: Camille Pissarro's Impressionism' opens in Denver, the first major US Pissarro retrospective in 40 years
- Takeaway: exhibitions now foreground collectors, dealers, gender, and environment over individual genius



Takeaways for Your Next Museum Visit

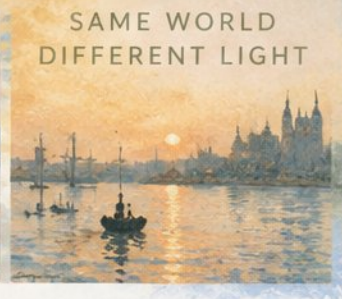
- Ask three questions of every painting: What light? What moment? What modern life?
- Get close, then step back — visible brushwork and color are the subject
- Notice who is included and who is not: class, gender, and access shape the scene
- Read the label for makers and markets: dealers, collectors, and donors shaped museum taste
- Reflection: name one painting you will now see differently — and why



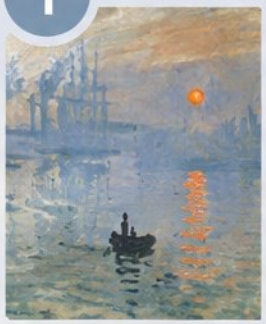
Quick Check: Test Your Looking Skills

LOOK CLOSER. SEE MORE.





1



Q1: Which critic coined "Impressionists" in 1874?

(Louis Leroy, from Monet's *Impression, Sunrise*)

2



Q2: Name two conditions that made plein air painting practical.

(Paint tubes, portable easels, new pigments)

3



Q3: Why did Morisot and Cassatt paint different subjects than Degas or Monet?

(Social restrictions on women's access to public spaces)

4



Q4: Which dealer brought Impressionism to the United States?

(Paul Durand-Ruel)

5



Q5: Myth check — did Impressionists paint carelessly?

(No: rapid brushwork sits on carefully planned compositions)

Close: one thing you will look for first on your next gallery visit.



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