

Impressionist Painting En Plein Air

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers Impressionist Painting “En Plein Air.” By the end of this lesson, you’ll be able to identify and define today’s key terms, explain the motivation for painting “en plein air,” and identify examples of Impressionist painting. This will be accomplished through the exploration of:

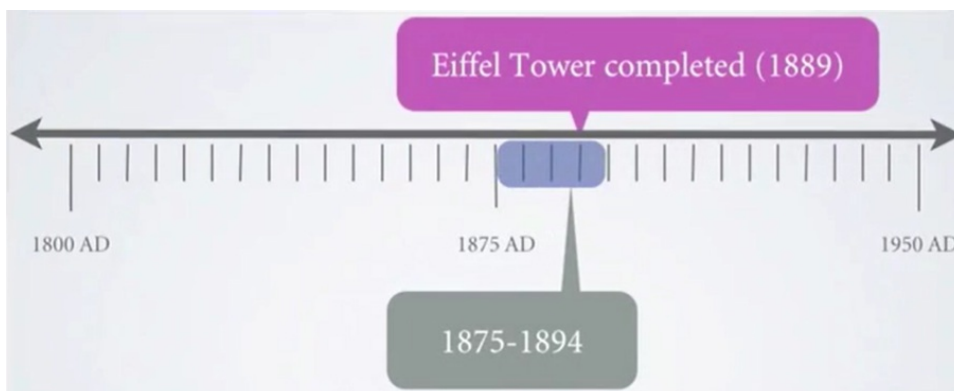


BIG IDEA

The idea of “in the open air” encouraged painters to paint outside and away from the studio—a practice made even more practical by the invention of tube-based paints.

1. Period and Location: Impressionist Painting “En Plein Air”

The artwork that you will be looking at today dates from between 1875 and 1894 and focuses geographically on London, England, and Paris, France.



2. Impressionist Painting “En Plein Air”: Motivating Factors in Development

As mentioned, “**en plein air**” literally means to be outside, and this is one of the major changes seen with respect to the painting process. Artists moved outside of the studio, and they could do this because of the invention of collapsible metal paint tubes.

Pigments could be very expensive, and the possibility of wasting paint or mixing on site was more trouble than it was worth. The collapsible metal tube kept paint fresh—it was pre-mixed, ready for action, and ultraportable.



This invention was so important that the Impressionist artist Renoir once commented that Impressionism would have been impossible without metal paint tubes.

The ensuing lack of restriction facilitated color experimentation and the ability to paint spontaneously. During the 19th century, there was an overall increase in the amount of leisure time. Artists such as Renoir used the advantages of painting “en plein air” to capture these spontaneous moments.

Another contributing factor to this style of painting was the “Haussmannization” of Paris, which literally opened things up outdoors, including the streets of Paris. The subject of urbanism, or the lives and activities of people in an urban environment, was a very popular subject matter for Impressionist painters.



En Plein Air

Literally “in the outdoors”.

3. Examples of Impressionist Painting “En Plein Air”

3a. Claude Monet

Claude Monet’s paintings are often explorations in capturing the effects of light in nature, such as on the surface of water or on a man-made object. An excellent example of Monet’s ability to capture the effects of light in fleeting moments is evident in his series of Rouen Cathedral paintings.

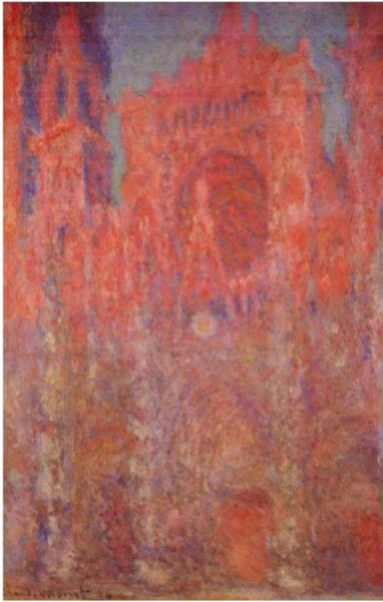


Rouen Cathedral: The Portal (Sunlight) by Claude Monet

1892-1894

Oil on canvas

Monet made a number of these, all essentially the same view and from the same vantage point, but painted them in different conditions and at different times of the day to explore how the appearance of the façade of Rouen Cathedral changed depending upon outside conditions. Here are two more examples from his Rouen Cathedral series.



Rouen Cathedral series by Claude Monet

1892-1894

Oil on canvas

3b. Female Artists: Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt

There are a number of very important and talented female Impressionist artists that drew attention during this period. Although women were becoming more and more prevalent in the artistic community, they still faced the restrictions of propriety that society placed upon them, which men didn't face. As a result, their scope of subject matter was much more limited.

Berthe Morisot was one such bourgeois—which is a social middle class—woman who took what was socially available to her and embraced it. Her themes focus on the lives of women and depict women engaged in female-centric leisure activities, celebrating the virtues of womanhood. Her painting “Summer's Day” shows a leisurely excursion onto a popular Parisian lake.



Summer's Day by Berthe Morisot

1879

Oil on canvas

Even though a man is controlling the boat, he isn't depicted. Rather, it emphasizes the closeness among the two friends in the boat, a fleeting moment of quality time spent together. The scene is depicted with a painterly skill and style that has come to be closely associated with Impressionist art.

Mary Cassatt was an American painter who set off to Europe in her youth to study painting. Like Morisot, she was a very talented and capable painter who was able to portray considerable depth within the limited scope of acceptable subject matter for women of the time. Within this painting titled "The Boating Party," Cassatt's composition draws the viewer into a more intimate, unspoken moment among the riders in the boat. The woman awkwardly holds the toddler as she gazes in the direction of the boat rower.



The Boating Party by Mary Cassatt

1893-1894

Oil on canvas

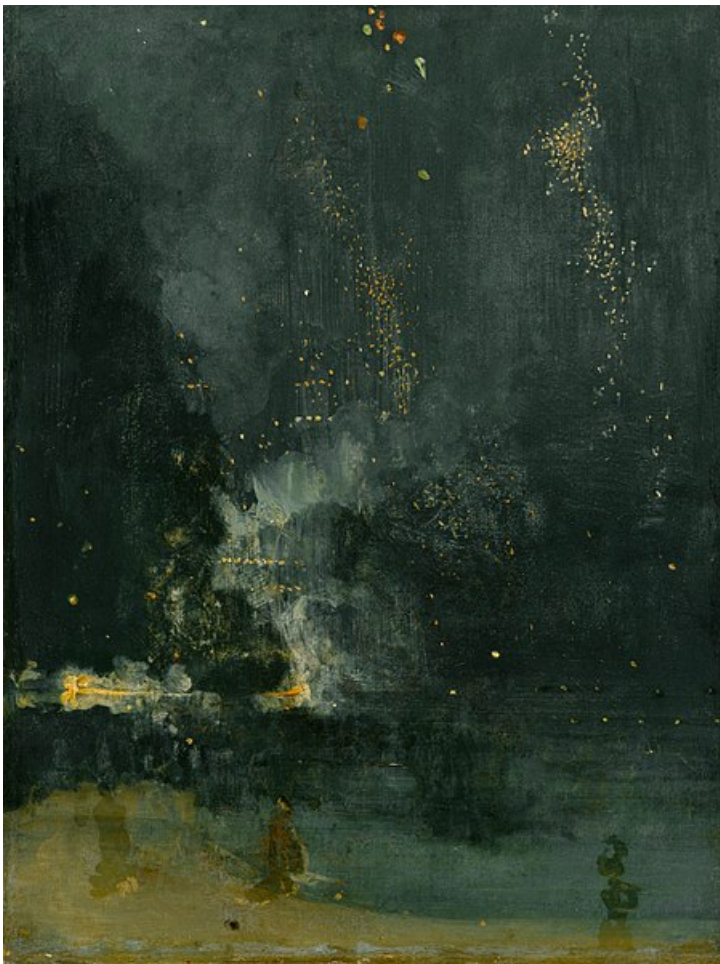


THINK ABOUT IT

What do you think the relationship is between the man and woman on the boat? Is she part of a larger party that is situated, like the viewer, behind the rower? Is she looking at the man rowing, and is he looking at her? Or is she staring through him, lost in thought, which could explain her awkward grasp on the child? Cassatt doesn't really offer any answers but simply sets the stage for the viewer's interpretation of this fleeting moment in time between two people.

3c. James Whistler

James Whistler's painting of "Nocturne in Black and Gold" is an example of an Impressionist painting "en plein air" that attempts to capture the atmospheric conditions and experience of watching a fireworks display at night. It's a form of Impressionism that almost borders on abstraction, but once the subject matter is made clear, things start to come into focus and a greater appreciation of Whistler's ability to contrast the dark evening with the light and smoke from the exploding fireworks can be had.



Nocturne in Black and Gold by James Whistler

1875

Oil on canvas

Like Monet's series of Rouen Cathedral paintings, this is a painting whose charm comes from its ability to capture the beauty of a passing moment—the immortalizing and sharing of an instance that may have otherwise simply faded away.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about **Impressionist Painting “en plein air,”** which means “in the outdoors.” You learned how to identify and define today's key terms and explored the **motivating factors** that led to the development of this style of painting—most importantly, the invention of collapsible metal tube paints. You also explored the artwork of Impressionist artists **Claude Monet, Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt, and James Whistler**, learning how to identify **examples of Impressionist painting “en plein air.”**

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Ian McConnell.



TERMS TO KNOW

En Plein Air

Literally "in the outdoors".