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Le Carnet de France: Impressionism: 150 years ago

By Martine Dulles

It was 150 years ago, on April 15, 1874, when the first exhibit of the *Société anonyme des artistes, peintres, sculpteurs et graveurs* was held in the atelier of the famous photographer, Félix Nadar (1820-1910), at 35 Boulevard des Capucines near the Palais Garnier. This was a very busy area of Paris at the beginning of the 20th century. This year, many museums in Normandy and in the Ile de France — including the Musée d'Orsay in Paris — are celebrating this anniversary.

But why? Well, it was then that the French art world took a major turn. For centuries, artists had to make their own pigments and colors and therefore, they had to paint and draw in their ateliers. But in the mid-19th century, tubes of paint were created in England, which changed the art scene — the paint lasted longer and the tubes could be carried anywhere.

Louis-Eugène Boudin (1824-1898) (born in Honfleur in Normandy) was a painter and the owner of a printing-stationery store in nearby Le Havre. He enjoyed going out and painting the beautiful surrounding landscapes. It was in this shop that he met a customer named Claude Monet (1840-1926) who showed him some of his drawings. Again, Boudin recognized that Monet was a gifted artist and invited him outside to paint the harbor and the cliffs along the English Channel.

Later, Monet admitted that he owed a lot to Boudin, who really encouraged him to pursue his passion and suggested that he go and study in Paris. In 1859, Monet decided to go back to Paris, where he was born. He enrolled in art classes at the Académie Atelier Charles Gleyre (1806-1874), an art school created by a Swiss artist and gentleman in Paris.

At the Atelier, Monet met, among many other painters, Camille Pissarro (1830-1903), Edgar Degas (1834-1917), Alfred Sisley (1839-1899), Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), Auguste Renoir (1841-1919), and Frédéric Bazille (1841-1870). They all came from different backgrounds, but their

friendships lasted many years.

From the 17th century on, the place for artists to be discovered in Paris was the “Salon de peinture et de sculpture,” simply known as “Le Salon.” It was very successful with large numbers of visitors, but for the artists, it was not always easy. Thousands of paintings were hung in the Salon Carré in the Louvre, some very high up near the ceiling, where it was almost impossible to admire them. The Académie des Beaux-arts selected the paintings according to particular criteria and genres (religious subjects, portraits, still life and more), but many paintings were refused. So many, that in 1863, the Emperor Napoléon III created the “Salon des Refusés.”

Monet, his friends and his colleagues did not escape these harsh selections. Making ends meet was very difficult for some of them. However, Frédéric Bazille, who was born in Montpellier in a very prominent Protestant family, was the wealthiest, and he helped his friends financially, especially Monet and Renoir. In 1870, tired of having their paintings refused, Bazille suggested they should organize their own “group,” and together with Édouard Manet (1832-1883) “Le Groupe des Batignolles” was created. (Batignolles is an area in the 15th arrondissement of Paris, where Manet had his studio and where they all met).

In 1870, the Franco-Prussian war was declared. Bazille enrolled in the army and was unfortunately killed in December. Monet, Pissarro and Charles-François Daubigny (1817-1878) went into exile in London. Daubigny belonged to the “École de Barbizon,” an artistic movement that was active from 1830 to 1870. Its name came from the village of Barbizon, southeast of Paris outside the Forest of Fontainebleau, where they painted. They were interested in landscape painting in a “realist” style. Daubigny, who always had lots of admiration for his friends, introduced them to the art merchant Paul Durand-Druel, who also escaped the war and lived in London. Durand-Ruel already represented the artists from L'École de Barbizon. After the war, Durand-Ruel had galleries in



IMAGE PROVIDED

Henri Fantin-Latour: “Un atelier aux Batignolles” 1870. Édouard Manet (painter at the easel), Auguste Renoir (wearing hat), Émile Zola (next to Renoir, glasses in hand), Frédéric Bazille (tall red hair), and Claude Monet (far right). © Musée d'Orsay, Paris

London and in Paris.

The war ended, and Monet and Pissarro went back to Paris. In 1873, together with Renoir, Degas and Sisley, they created “La Société anonyme des artistes peintres, sculpteurs et graveurs.”

Their first exhibit opened on April 15, 1874. They also accepted artists who did not belong to their group. A total of 31 artists exhibited 165 works of art. Manet did not join them as he had been accepted at “Le Salon.” On the other hand, Berthe Morisot (1841-1895), the first lady impressionist painter, who had to struggle with her parents to allow her to paint, was invited to join them. At that time, painting was not considered a “proper” profession for a lady from a bourgeois family. Berthe Morisot painted mostly her family members, especially her sister and her niece, and she later married Manet’s brother, Eugène Manet. Durand-Ruel, and the two well-known writers, Emile Zola and Guy de Maupassant, backed them up, but other critics did not like their art. Only four pieces were sold.

Monet exhibited his famous painting: *Impression, Soleil levant*, which his friend, Ernest Hochedé, purchased. From this painting and following a negative review by the journalist Louis Leroy, the group’s art style came

to be called “Impressionism.” For the Impressionist painters, the aim was to emphasize the feelings they felt while painting, unlike the “realist” movement that tried to reproduce exactly what they saw.

Seven more exhibits were organized until 1886. Success came later, thankful to Paul Durand-Ruel, who opened a gallery in New York, and to the interest of American collectors to whom he sold many paintings.

Today, in Giverny, northwest of Paris, Monet’s house and his famous water lilies garden are now open to the public. Thousands of visitors come every day between April and November.

The Musée de l’Orangerie in Paris displays eight huge panels painted by Monet of his pond and the water lilies. Monet gave these magnificent paintings to the French state on November 12, 1918, the day after the World War I armistice. He, unfortunately, never saw them installed — he died in 1926, one year before they were finally hung.

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