A Companion to Impressionism
Edited by André Dombrowski
A Companion to Impressionism
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About the Editor

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Briony Fer is Professor of History of Art at the University College, London, and a fellow of the British Academy, specializing in modern and contemporary art. She is the author of *On Abstract Art* (1997), *The Infinite Line: Re-Making Art After Modernism* (2004), as well as books and exhibition catalogs on Eva Hesse, Gabriel Orozco, Richard Serra, Louise Bourgeois, and Anni Albers, among many other publications.

Marc Gotlieb is Halvorsen Director of the Williams-Clark Graduate Program in the History of Art at Williams College and the Clark Art Institute. His book *The Deaths of Henri Regnault* was published in 2017, and he is the author of *The Plight of Emulation: Ernest Meissonier and French Salon Painting* (1996). He is currently preparing a study on the role of the viewer in the art of Jean-Léon Gérôme, as well as a study on the poetics of mortality in nineteenth-century artistic biography.
Gloria Groom is Chair of Painting and Sculpture of Europe, and David and Mary Winton Green Curator at the Art Institute of Chicago. She is an internationally acclaimed and widely published scholar of nineteenth-century French painting. Since joining the Art Institute in 1984, she has been involved in numerous major exhibitions and catalogs and has led the museum’s initiative for monographic digital scholarly collection catalogs on the impressionist collection (covering, to date, Caillebotte, Gauguin, Manet, Monet, Pissarro, and Renoir), which bring together international teams of scholars, conservators, and scientists. Her current project is Cézanne, a retrospective exhibition with Tate Modern, opening in 2022.

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**Félicie Faizand de Maupeou** is currently working at the Labex Pasts in Present, coresponsible for a program on artists’ libraries. She specializes in the history of Impressionism, especially Claude Monet, and histories of exhibitions. Her book, *Claude Monet et l’exposition* (2018), is an innovative approach to the manifold ways that Monet used exhibitions to promote his career socially, economically, and aesthetically. She has also developed scholarship in the digital humanities as part of the research team at GeoMap, a digital repository of Parisian art dealers.

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Alex Potts is author of *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (1994), *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (2000), and most recently, *Experiments in Modern Realism: World Making, Politics and the Everyday in Postwar European and American Art* (2013). Currently, he is writing a book on labor and the picturing of the social in later nineteenth-century art. He taught at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where he was Max Loehr Collegiate Professor in the History of Art.

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Series Editor’s Preface

*Blackwell Companions to Art History* is a series of edited collections designed to cover the discipline of art history in all its complexities. Each volume is edited by specialists who lead a team of essayists, representing the best of leading scholarship, in mapping the state of research within the sub-field under review, as well as pointing toward future lines of enquiry.

This *Companion to Impressionism* aims to move beyond established histories to assemble examples that have proliferated over recent decades both of the various approaches to interpreting impressionist art and of new ways of experiencing and examining the works themselves as physical objects. Attention is paid to how and why Impressionism became a near-global phenomenon around 1900. Essays trace how the style spread to across continents, and the ways in which its underpinning concepts spoke to different cultures.

Impressionist painting as practised by the principal artists who participated in the eight impressionist exhibitions between 1874 and 1886 is the main concern of this volume. The tight focus on these artists (and their international followers) opens up the rich range of approaches to Impressionism that have evolved over recent decades. The thematic and methodological interconnectedness of the essays in the seven sections of the volume underscore the depth of this investigation. And this detailed enquiry is intended to show how the movement was in fact an artistic and intellectual challenge to the art world in the nineteenth century.

Together, these essays combine to provide an exciting and challenging revision of our conception and understanding of Impressionism that will be essential reading for students, researchers and teachers across a broad spectrum of interests. *A Companion to Impressionism* is a very welcome addition to the series.

Dana Arnold, 2021
I owe my unwavering conviction that Impressionism deserves the highest level of academic inquiry to my training with T.J. Clark at Berkeley and the late John House at the Courtauld. Both scholars, along with others, instilled in me the belief that what academia understands as merely pleasing, benign, and somewhat vacuous (such as it currently tends to regard Impressionism proper), requires a special ingenuity to make complex and ambivalent. First and foremost, I thank the contributors to this volume for having achieved just that. Working with such a large group of eminent scholars over the past few years on Impressionism as this volume developed and was completed has been an immense privilege that I will cherish for the rest of my career.

My thanks go to the Series Editor, Dana Arnold, and my editors at Wiley, Liz Wingett, and Catriona King, for their expertise, care, and patience, as well as their colleagues with whom I had the pleasure of interacting over the years. I also thank my colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania for their manifold support during the time I worked on this volume. The final stretch of this project was completed during a year of leave in 2020–2021 as Paul Mellon Senior Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. My deepest thanks go to Ramey Mize, PhD candidate in the History of Art at the University of Pennsylvania, who helped me read, edit, and polish the contributions. Ramey has the most exacting eyes and mind I know, and it has been a privilege to oversee the coming into being of this volume with her. I would also like to thank Hollis Clayson for her guidance, as well as Lindsay Grant and Naoko Adachi. Finally, my warmest gratitude to my partner, art historian Jonathan David Katz, not only for the excellent contribution in this volume that was our first exercise in limited co-authorship, but also for all the many issues and questions he helped me think through on the spot.
Introduction

André Dombrowski

We think we know Impressionism well. Its history told many times over since the late nineteenth century as a crucial episode in the rise of modernist painting in France, it pleases museum-goers at an ever more frenetic pace as impressionist exhibition chases impressionist exhibition. Celebrated for its painterly bravura, accelerated sense of life and depiction, and innovative modern subject matter, among other aspects, Impressionism pushed the world of art to new sensuous heights and realms of pictorial openness and possibility. But after receiving much scholarly attention during the heyday of the revisionist art history of the 1970s to 1990s – through the social history of art and feminist art history in particular – academic interest in Impressionism has since diminished, along with interest in European art and visual culture of the nineteenth century more broadly. This volume does not mourn this fact or try to return us to an art historical place and time when the art of Édouard Manet and the painters that followed in his footsteps served as a litmus test of art history writ large. Instead, it seeks to give an account and an overview – and hopefully a fresh introduction for a new generation of scholars less burdened by the art historical canon of the past 50 or so years – of what critical issues the study of Impressionism might productively entertain in the twenty-first century.

Those issues are broad and varied, and this volume seeks to showcase the wide-ranging topics and methodologies relevant to the study of Impressionism now. They include old favorites such as analyzing the period conceptions of an “impression” and the impressionist eye itself, the vexed chronologies of the movement, as well as the particular forms of avant-garde collectivity and exhibition culture the group of artists brought to the fore. Impressionism’s early critical reception and its collecting history receive as much attention as do new interpretations of key paintings. Analyses foregrounding the thematic, historical, and contextual frames of Impressionism return with an updated set of examples and concerns, and new feminist questions are front and center as well. Impressionism as a form of modernist painting is analogized to a
host of the period’s new media and its visual culture more broadly construed, which the style often emulated, at times even directly incorporated, despite being primarily represented by the easel picture.

This volume, containing a total of 34 new scholarly contributions, expands the study of Impressionism into other new territories. A large section is devoted to how and why Impressionism became a near-global phenomenon around 1900, spreading its stylistic propositions and ideological tenets to a host of other continents, countries, and cultures with different social, economic, political, and religious paradigms. Several contributions consider impressionist paintings as objects, emphasizing the materiality of representation through new approaches in conservation and heightened attention to description and close observation, while others explore new digital methods and the environmental humanities. The result is a volume that is not a history of Impressionism in the traditional sense of the term and should not be consulted with that expectation in mind, even though an overall picture of Impressionism will surely emerge. Rather, it assembles new examples of the manifold approaches to interpreting impressionist art that have proliferated over recent decades, trying to give a representative, though certainly by no means exhaustive, survey of current studies in Impressionism.

What “Impressionism” comes to mean in this volume can best be taken as the sum total of those varied interpretations. But from the outset, it has been this editor’s intention to keep the focus relatively narrow in order to broadcast a diversity in approach instead. Centering on the group of artists (and their international followers) who constituted the core of those participating in the eight impressionist exhibitions between 1874 and 1886 means that artists like Édouard Manet and Paul Cézanne, whose careers intersected with Impressionism at times, are more sparsely represented. Stretching from the 1860s to World War I, there is only a limited number of studies falling outside this chronological parameter, except when it comes to issues of reception. Although other media are discussed, impressionist painting stands at the heart of this volume. Therefore, the various ways in which Impressionism infiltrated other disciplines or was influenced by them (such as impressionist music, film, literature, and philosophy) are not of central concern to this book, even though, of course, highly worthy topics of inquiry.

* * *

Besides providing an overview of the current landscape of impressionist study in art history, this volume set for itself the goal to re-evaluate the intellectual stakes of impressionist art and to analyze the style’s artistic risks as well as practical and conceptual innovations anew. Despite its often pleasing, fashionable, and innocuous-seeming content, Impressionism opened a view onto some of the most vexing and crucial questions of the late nineteenth century. It is mostly for that reason – and not merely for its pleasing character – that Impressionism became the aesthetic force it turned out to be, sustaining its import for as long and as widely as it did.

Two critics visiting the first impressionist exhibition in 1874 had rather strange – even preposterous – responses to what they saw. They were not alone in verbalizing the experience that year, as is well known, but what they said was remarkable enough to make one pause. The first is the poet Henry Hardy (using the pseudonym Henri Polday), penning a mixed review of the art on display for the art journal La Renaissance littéraire et artistique on 3 May 1874. In an early usage of the word “impression” in this context, Hardy says:
It is painting of impressions. And the impression being as variable as nature itself, [the Impressionists] paint less what they see than what they have seen. – Take an evening effect. Would you be able to stop the sun and clouds? The time it takes to put your objects in place, grab the palette, and prepare your colors, the sun sets, the clouds drift away or transform. At the second stroke of the brush, the sky has changed, yet your canvas is not fully covered while twenty effects have appeared: it would have been necessary to start over twenty times. Do you come back the next day to the same place, at the same time? You will find nothing but a silhouette, and only memory can resuscitate yesterday’s spectacle.¹

Impressionism appears in Polday’s words as a conceptual failure, a set of unfulfilled promises, delayed responses, and ghostly traces of memory – hardly an affirmation. It epitomized a kind of painting of what had just been and what had just departed, making room for a visual experience of loss and absence as much as presence.

The second comes from the art writer Philippe Burty, in La République française of 25 April 1874, more positive and equally prescient:

Even though one finds some faults in these works, and even though the transcribed sensations are sometimes as fugitive as the sensations themselves – the freshness of undergrowth, a puff of the warmth of straw, the length of an autumn evening, the scent of the seashore, the redness of young cheeks, or the shine of a new outfit – one has to be grateful to these young artists for pursuing and fixing them in the first place.²

The power of Burty’s reading lies in the synesthetic metaphors with which he fills the impressionist instant. For him, Impressionism captured the uncapturable, made us see what could hardly be seen otherwise, giving the barely there, the almost nothing, visual terms and setting aside mass, substance, duration, and even essence itself.

Both these quotations contain hefty propositions about art and take us quickly to the impressionist heart of the matter. As one spoken from a more doubtful perspective and the other from a more supportive angle, the true impact of Impressionism must surely lie somewhere in between. Broadly speaking, much painting of the prior decades and centuries understood itself in terms of transcendence and atemporality, establishing a presumably stable relationship between viewer and depiction (fictitious as that position was of course). What Impressionism, including its forebearers, achieved was to turn this position on its head. The Impressionists introduced an explicit nonallegorical temporality into the process of painting (unlike, say, the allegorical representation of time via the god Chronos or the many memento mori that populate Old Master paintings), instating a deep-seated instability into the processes of making and viewing art.

After all, an impressionist picture does not merely upset academic standards of completion and fetishize the sketch and a sketch-like look (even in its more “realist” and composed practices like those developed by Frédéric Bazille, Edgar Degas, Mary Cassatt, and Gustave Caillebotte), it throws any preconceived ideas about what starting and finishing meant generally into question. It tends to interrogate the duration of any undertaking – any act of the hand, the eye, and even consciousness – destabilizing the imaginative confidence that helps us unify actions, objects, and selfhoods. It turns the eye into a restless, mobile entity – and a collective, communal one at that – that