

## Manet, Monet, money

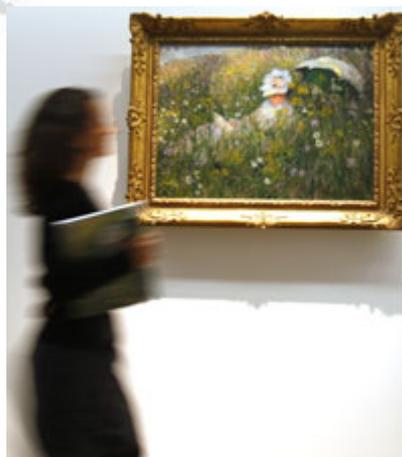
In the early 1870s a new school of painting was exhibited in Paris. Its exponents were known in its early days as Naturalists or even Intransigents, before settling into the label by which they have become known today: Impressionists.

By attempting a new way of painting light and its effects, so that it “palpitates with movement, light and life”, Stéphane Mallarmé, a 19th-century French poet, explained that Impressionism boldly turned its face away from the precise photographic finish of French academic art of the second half of the 19th century.

At first few understood what Edouard Manet, an Impressionist artist, and his followers were trying to do. Emile Zola in his 1886 novel, “The Masterpiece”, described the horror felt by much of the general public when they saw the pictures in the first avant-garde exhibitions. “That novel rendering of light seemed an insult to them. Some old gentlemen shook their sticks.”

In this delightfully readable book, Philip Hook, Sotheby’s senior director of Impressionist and modern art, analyses how the rebellion took different forms in different countries. But what it had in common everywhere was the younger generation’s desire to cleanse artistic vision by painting only what they saw about them, with broad brushstrokes and brighter, simpler colours. Many of the Impressionists eschewed black, for example, conscious that shadow was actually composed of other colours, mostly purples and blues.

Impressionism’s dissolution of form into colour and atmosphere was an alarming development for the conservative bourgeoisie. The earliest buyers tended to be the artists’ friends, men of modest means such as Paul Gachet, Vincent van Gogh’s homeopathic doctor, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir’s friendly customs officer, Victor Choquet. But what began as rebellion soon became the new fashion. Those who bought Impressionist works directly from the artists were crushed by a stampede of American millionaires and the new industrial aristocracy from France, Britain, Germany and Russia. On hand to reassure the newly moneyed about their purchases was a creature that had not been seen before, the art dealer—men such as Paul Durand-Ruel, who helped turn the patronage of artists into the commercialised market familiar today.



AP

*This one went to Brunei*

Rich industrialists gave way in the 1950s to such buyers as Stavros Niarchos, a Greek shipowner, and William Somerset Maugham, a British novelist and short-story writer then at the height of his fame, and in later decades to the Japanese and now the Qataris. Mr Hook is especially good at describing how the post-war directors of Sotheby’s (the less stuffy of the

two big auction houses) used a mix of public relations, celebrity journalism and naked opportunism to bring old collections to the market and to the attention of a whole new world of rich buyers. Ten van Goghs appeared in a 1956 biopic of the artist's brief unhappy existence, "Lust for Life", starring Kirk Douglas. Two years later stills from the film were so successful in publicising the sale of the pictures that even the queen herself came to view them at Sotheby's Bond Street saleroom.

Through two successive bull markets Impressionism has been the currency of new money, the gold standard of oligarchs and the international petrocracy who wanted instantly recognisable affirmation of their new enhanced status in the world. The big auctions in New York next week may be quieter than last year's, but demand for the Impressionists will return. Of that Mr Hook is quite certain.

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