

A Great Impressionist and Irregularist

Prepared by John Horsefield, Cowra U3A

As a celebrator of beauty, and especially feminine sensuality, it has been said that 'Renoir is the final representative of a tradition which runs directly from Rubens to Watteau'.

Pierre-Auguste Renoir was born on 25 February 1841 in Limoges. He was the sixth child of Léonard Renoir (1799-1874) and Marguerite Merlet (1807-1896).

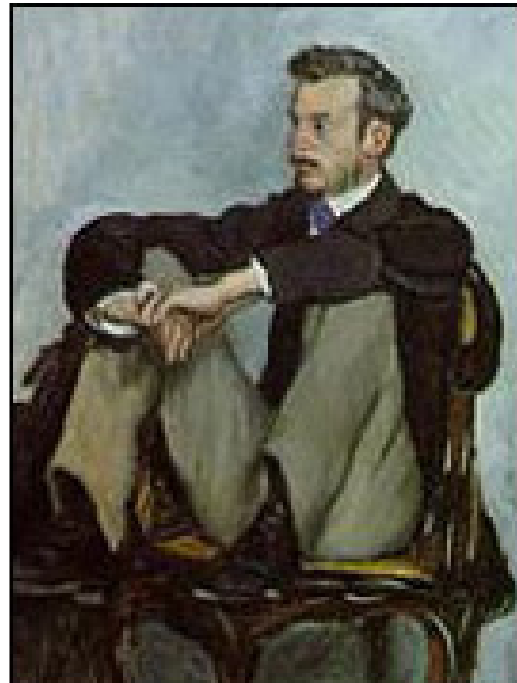
In 1844 the family moved to Paris where Léonard Renoir earned his living as a tailor. In 1854 Renoir left school and began his apprenticeship as a porcelain painter at the firm of Lévy frères. His precocious talent for painting assured him a career as a porcelain painter but the firm went bankrupt in 1858.

He also painted hangings for overseas missionaries and decorations on fans. After that Renoir dabbled in a number of different jobs but it seems that he may have decided to become a full-time painter around this date.

On January 24, 1860 Renoir was granted permission to copy in the Louvre, a practice that he maintained for the next four years. At times during the 1860s, he did not have enough money to buy paint. At this time Renoir had a taste for 18th century masters, including Fragonard, Lancret, Watteau and above all Boucher. Boucher's *Bath of Diana* was the first painting that he adored and he continued to love it all his life.

By the following year, 1861, Renoir had begun attending the studio of Marc-Gabriel-Charles Gleyre, a Swiss teacher who offered practical instruction to a number of artists. At the same time Renoir enrolled at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and he was there from 1 April 1862. In 1863 he may have submitted a work to the offi-

cial Salon (an annual exhibition of paintings chosen by the jury) but if he did it seems that the jury refused it.



Renoir, painting by Bazille, 1867

At the Salon the following year Renoir had his first success with the painting *Esmeralda Dancing with her Goat around a Fire Illuminating the Entire Crowd of Vagabonds*, which he destroyed after the exhibition.

At the Gleyre's studio Renoir worked with other young artists with whom he had become friendly and these were the future Impressionist painters Claude Monet (1840-1924), Alfred Sisley (1839-1899) and Jean-Frédéric Bazille (1841-1870).

Other artists whom he met around this time were Henry Fantin-Latour (1836-1904), Camille Pissarro (1830-1903) and Paul Cézanne (1839-1906). By 1863 the nucleus of the future Impressionist group was formed.



Lise with a parasol, 1867



Diana, 1867

Typical of Renoir's work from this period include *Mother Anthony's Inn at Marlotte*, which although pointed in the forest at

Fontainebleau is a genre scene painted indoors, and *Jules le Coeur in Fontainebleau Forest*, a work which was clearly painted in the studio, perhaps based on sketches done in the open.

Jules le Coeur (1832-82) owned a house in Marlotte at which Renoir was frequently a guest at this time. At the end of 1865 Le Coeur introduced him to the 17-year-old Lise Tréhot who became his lover and model until her marriage in 1872. She posed for a number of works and modelled for the paintings Renoir submitted to the Salon, such as *Diana*, *Lise with a Parasol*, *Summer*, *Bather with Griffon* and *Woman of Algiers*.

Because those works were destined for the Salon they tended to be rather conventional in their composition and very smoothly executed. However, at the same time Renoir was painting much more informal works in which the traditional distinction between sketch and finished painting was gradually being eroded.

In 1869 Renoir and Monet worked together and produced what are usually regarded as the first landscape paintings in which the impressionist style of painting is properly evident. Working at La Grenouillère on the Seine near Bougival, Monet and Renoir executed a number of works and seven are known today.



Flowers in a pot, 1866

The Renoir works at La Grenouillère are painted on fairly small canvases and their lack of finish betrays a rapid execution typical of works done out of doors, capturing the essentials before the light changes dramatically. Compared with another early landscape painting, one of the most dramatic changes in the works done at La Grenouillère was in the artists' use of colour.

In the late 1860s, through the practice of painting light and water *en plein air* (in the open air), he and Monet discovered that the colour of shadows is not brown or black, but the reflected colour of the objects surrounding them. Several pairs of paintings exist in which Renoir and Monet, working side-by-side, depicted the same scenes (*La Grenouillère*, 1869).

Both Renoir and Monet increased the general brightness of the work by the use of complementary colours, particularly the juxtaposition of red and green in the boats. One of the principal tenets of the impressionist method—that the local colours of objects are affected by their neighbours—is observed here.

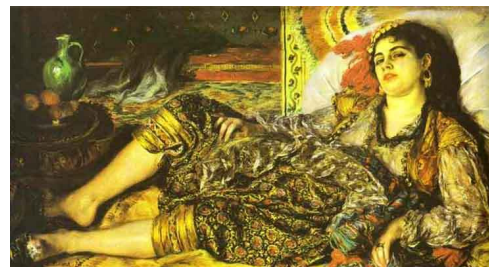


Dancer, 1874



Banks of the Seine at Champrosay, 1876

The composition is a very conscious construction, held together by the lines of the horizon and the jetty.



Woman of Algiers

The following year Renoir had two figure paintings accepted at the Salon: *Bather with Griffon* and *Woman of Algiers*, for both of which Lise had posed. Certain conventions in the depictions of North African themes had been established by Delacroix (1789-1863), among



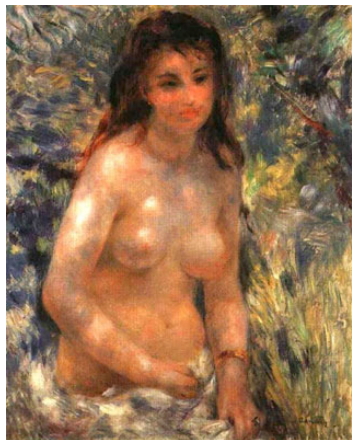
The swing, 1877

others, after French colonization in the 1830s. These would have helped to lend to the works appear and accessibility. The availability and sensuality of *Algerian woman* was seen as indisputable.

On 19 July 1870 France declared war on Prussia and the following month Renoir was mobilized. Whether because of family commitments or out of an unwillingness to support Napoleon III's political régime, most of his artist friends avoided being drafted.

During the Paris Commune in 1871, while he painted on the banks of the Seine River, some members of a commune group thought he was a spy, and were about to throw him into the river when a commune leader, Raoul Rigault, recognized Renoir as the man who had protected him on an earlier occasion. In London, Monet met a Parisian picture dealer, Paul Durant-Ruel, whom he introduced to Renoir in the summer of 1872. That year Durant-Ruel bought a flower still life and the *Pont des Arts* from Renoir.

Shortly thereafter, Renoir moved into a studio at 74 rue Saint-Georges, where he painted some of his most memorable scenes of Parisian life and which was to be the centre of his life for the next decade. Renoir decided not to submit to the official Salon the following year but to stage an independent exhibition with his friends.



Nude in sunlight, 1877

In the summer of 1873, Renoir went to stay with Monet 9 km north-west of Paris on the Seine. Renoir and Monet continued the practice established at Gleyre's studio and painted together in the open air. Once again their close artistic collaboration was to prove fruitful, and each produced a number of works in which their practice is similar.

In *Monet Painting in the Garden at Argenteuil*, Renoir demonstrates how far these private works have departed from the more ponderous style he adopted for Salon paintings such as *Riding in the Bois de Boulogne*. The following summer Monet, Manet and Renoir all worked together; this work is a testament to the impressionist credo.

After the failure of the 1873 Salon, Gleyre's former students and artists like Pissarro and Cézanne began seriously to consider holding an exhibition of their work which would be free of the constraints of the Salon system.

The financial independence which the purchases had offered the group meant that it was only Renoir who had continued to send to the Salon in 1872 and 1873. His continued allegiance to the Salon demonstrates that he considered it much more than simply a means of generation sales but as an important testing for his pictures.

By the end of 1873 Renoir, Pissarro, Monet, Cézanne, Sisley, Berthe Morisot (1841-95), Degas (1834-1917) and other artists, some of whom had already had a measure of success at the Salon, had registered themselves as a joint stock company. Manet did not join them, preferring to pursue his career at the Salon where he was beginning to have some success. Renoir exhibited seven works, including *Dancer*, *La Loge* and *the Parisienne*.

The exhibition opened on 15 April 1874 at a prestigious venue at 35 Boulevard des

Capucines, one of the great boulevards. The main aim at the exhibition was the freedom to exhibit work without the constraints of a jury system and any practical decisions which had to be made in the hanging of the works were taken democratically.

The works were hung alphabetically; works were generally hung on one level, rather than according to the more hierarchical system adopted at the Salon. Renoir experienced his initial acclaim when six of his paintings were hung in the exhibition. In the same year two of his works were shown with Durand-Ruel in London.



Blonde bather, 1881

Although some of over 50 articles or notices in the press about the exhibition were critical, most found something worthwhile to say, if not about the works themselves, then about the artists challenge to the stranglehold of official art exhibitions. A number of writers used the word 'impressionist' in their articles to designate the group.

The exhibition was judged to be a success in terms of visitors but was a financial failure and Renoir was put in charge of the

liquidation committee. They had no choice but to dissolve the company.

In 1874, a ten-year friendship with Jules Le Coeur and his family ended, and Renoir lost not only the valuable support gained by the association, but a generous welcome to stay on their property near Fontainebleau and its scenic forest. This loss of a favourite painting location resulted in a distinct change of subjects.

Because of the need to clear their debts and in order to gain some publicity Morisot, Monet, Renoir, and Sisley decided to hold a public auction of their work in the Hôtel Drouot, the Parisian auction house on 23 and 24 March 1875. Renoir sold 20 paintings for a total of 2251 francs, some of them for as little as 50 francs, less than their reserve price.

Shortly after the auction he received a commission from Victor Chocquet. Chocquet was one of the most important early collectors of works by Impressionist painters, particularly Cézanne, Monet and Renoir. His first commission was a portrait of his wife Caroline. That some year Renoir was commissioned by the industrialist Jean Dollfuss to copy Delacroix's *Jewish Wedding* in the Louvre for 500 francs.

In April 1876 the second Impressionist exhibition was held. Renoir exhibited 19 works, six of which were loaned by Chocquet and two by Dollfuss. Manet was listed as the owner of Frédéric Bazille's *Painter Killed at Beaune-la-Rolande*.

That summer Renoir began work on a major painting, sketching at the Moulin de la Galette in Montmartre and in



Caroline Choquet, 1875



After the luncheon, 1879

the garden of a new studio he had rented at the top of the hill near the picturesque windmills. At that time Montmartre, with its market gardens, still retained some of the charm of its original village atmosphere, although the areas around were increasingly industrialized.

It seems that from the outset, Renoir regarded this work as a major artistic statement, akin to a Salon painting in conception if not in finish. He tackled it with the same degree of single mindedness, working it up from rough sketch through a much larger oil sketch to the finished picture.

The *Moulin de la Galette* took its name from one of the old windmills which contributed to the rather rustic atmosphere which still prevailed at Montmartre at this time. Every Sunday afternoon young people from the north of Paris contributed in the dance-hall and in the courtyard behind it in fine weather.



Irene Cahen-Danvers, 1879

In 1877 the group realized the third independent exhibition and published its own journal. *L'impressionniste* was never properly a manifesto, and did not survive beyond the four issues produced for the exhibition, but it demonstrates the artist's commitment to exerting as much control as possible over the promotion and reception of their works.

Renoir contributed to *L'impressionniste* with two letters. However, most of the

journal was written and edited by Revière. Much at that we now know about Renoir's work on the *Moulin de la Galette* derives from the account left by the civil servant and writer Georges Revière, who knew him well at this time.

In 1878 Renoir was accepted for the Salon, the first time for eight years, with *Le Café*, a genre painting of a fashionable young woman enjoying a cup of coffee. He showed four works at the Salon in 1879, including the large society portrait of *Madame Charpentier and her Children*. The portrait was hung in a prominent place at the Salon, mainly because of the intervention and influence of Monsieur Charpentier, and was critically well-received due to writing of Zola and Pissarro who related that Renoir had a 'great success at the Salon'.

Marguerite Charpentier was the wife of the publisher Georges Charpentier and hostess of one of the most fashionable salons in Paris, at which Renoir was a regular guest. At the beginning of the Third Republic the most fashionable salon in Paris attracted a number of writers including Zola, Floeberg, Maupassant, Turgenev, the artist Manet, and the politician Léon Gambetta. In April 1879 Georges Charpentier founded the weekly journal *La Vie Moderne*, devoted to art, literature, and society gossip and for which Renoir provided a number of illustrations.

In January 1881 Durand-Ruel had begun purchasing far greater numbers of Renoir's paintings than previously and that year he spends 16 000 francs on them. This offered Renoir an unprecedented degree of financial security and he did not have a family to support which left him free to spend the money on foreign travel.

In 1881, he travelled to Algeria, a country he associated with Eugène Delacroix, then to Madrid, Spain to see the work of Diego Velázquez. Following that he travelled to

Italy to see Titian's masterpieces in Florence, and the paintings of Raphael in Rome. The trips were to destinations common for 19th-century artists.

For least part of that time, he was travelling with Aline Victorine Carigot. He had met Aline at the end of 1879 or the beginning of 1880. She had recently arrived in Paris, where she lodged with her mother, from the village of Essoyes in Champagne.

It is not clear when she and Renoir become lovers, but the first painting for which she modelled was the ambitious *Luncheon of the Boating Party* painted 1880-1. Renoir did not marry Aline until 1890 when their eldest son was five years old, ten years after their first meeting.

If the trip to Algeria was in a sense a confirmation of his earlier work, then



The skiff (the Seine at Asniers), 1879

the Italian journey was to be influential for Renoir's art through the remainder of the 1880s, the most experimental and troublesome decade of his career.

The important reason for the change in Renoir's art at that time was the impact of the masters of the Renaissance whom he studied in Italy. For the next several years he painted in a more severe style, in an attempt to return to classicism. This is sometimes called his 'Ingres period', as he

concentrated on his drawing and emphasized the outlines of figures.



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