

The Paris Salon

Called “The Exhibition of Living Artists,” the Paris Salon was the most esteemed artistic competition in Paris and one of the greatest spectacles in Europe; drawing bigger crowds than a public execution (averaging 23,000 visitors a day) it could establish or ruin an artist’s reputation. Sponsored by the government since 1673, it moved from the Louvre to the Palais des Champs-



Elyseés exhibition hall in 1855, where artists annually vied to be selected and displayed on the walls. Overseen by the Comte de

Nieuwerkerke—Louis-Napoleon’s director of museums—the Salon reflected the conservative tastes of the École des Beaux-Arts for historical and mythological subjects painted in meticulous *chiaroscuro* (carefully graduated contrasts of light and dark that gave the illusion of 3 dimensionality). Those rejected would receive a big red R (for refusé) on the back of the canvas. In 1863, 60% of the works submitted (including Manet’s *Le Dejeuner sur l’herbe*) were rejected, setting the stage for the Salon des Refusés.

Salon des Refusés

The backlash against Nieuwerkerke’s new regulations for the Salon, and the public outcry over the number of paintings subsequently rejected, led Emperor Napoleon III to permit a second exhibition to take place next to the Salon that would showcase those excluded. Known as the Salon des Refusés, but also called “Salon of the Vanquished,” “Salon of the Pariahs,” “Salon of the Banished,” and “Salon of the Heretics,”

it was a spectacle of its own that drew huge crowds. Manet’s *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe* was met with derision and shock since he juxtaposed classical forms with modern dress and nudity, painted with a coarser brushstroke. Though it may not have been a success for the participants, it revealed the growing unrest within the French art community and became the symbolic starting point for the Batignolle school of artists.

Repeated only in 1864, the Salon des Refusés did force changes in the rules of the Paris Salon, and younger, non-École trained artists received greater recognition by the jury (with a record 83% of works accepted in 1868).

Ernest Meissonier

Born in the same year as Waterloo, by 1863 Ernest Meissonier was 48 years old and the world’s wealthiest and most celebrated painter. Short, arrogant, and built like a gymnast, he was disparagingly called “ugly, little and mean” by some, while others, like Delacroix, predicted “surely it is he who is most certain to survive!” Living on an expansive estate northwest of Paris with yearly expenditures of nearly 60,000 francs, he was celebrated for his small canvases of *bonshommes*: idealized scenes of 17th and 18th century figures smoking, eating, and drinking. However, Meissonier “believed the painter’s task was to come to the aid of history, once claiming that had he not become a painter he would have been an historian.” He aspired to paint scenes depicting the glory of France, and particularly the military campaigns of Napoleon. In 1863 he undertook his most ambitious project yet, a rendering



of Napoleon at the Battle of Friedland in 1807. Taking 10 years to complete it exhausted all of Meissonier's skills as a draughtsman and meticulous researcher. He could spend months researching the smallest detail, such as the coat Napoleon might have worn, or the true way a horse moves at full gallop. Uncomfortable in the 19th century and its rapid technological development, he shunned the contemporary subject matter embraced by the next generation of painters like Manet, Monet, and Degas. Though not a graduate of the *École des Beaux-Arts* himself, he would by the 1860s be associated with the school's reactionary influence over the French art world.

A fixture at the annual Paris Salon, where he was an exhibitor as well as a judge, he saw his influence slip over the course of the decade; by 1868 he failed to make the Salon jury, a sign that his enormous commercial success and prosperity were no longer universally beloved by fellow artists. Outraged by the Franco-Prussian war and the ensuing Paris Commune, Meissonier felt French society was in need of moral and patriotic regeneration, and viewed an exhibition as "a work of patriotism." His campaign to exclude Courbet from the 1872 Salon as punishment for the latter's participation in the Paris Commune, further eroded Meissonier's status. Though he died wealthy and still popular with collectors, within 20 years his reputation would be in tatters; unfairly cast as Salieri to Manet's Mozart "Meissonier had vanished from the history of French art like a murdered enemy of Stalin airbrushed from an official Soviet photograph." In 1964, the disgrace was complete as Andre Malraux ordered a statue of Meissonier be removed from the Louvre.

Édouard Manet

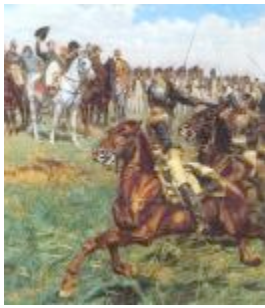
Born to a respectable family with some wealth, the 31-year-old Manet in 1863 chose to live in the working class and bohemian Paris enclave of the Batignolles. "Witty and sociable" but also "naturally sarcastic in his conversation and frequently cruel" the dandyish Manet (sporting yellow gloves and a walking stick) often held court at the Café Guerbois over a widening circle of influential artists and writers like Baudelaire and Émile Zola. Inspired by Old Masters like Titian, Velazquez, and Raphael, Manet would reinterpret their classic works in a confrontational modern style by depicting contemporary subjects with broad brushstrokes that flouted the traditional methods (like *chiaroscuro*) of the conservative *École des Beaux-Arts*. Though he demanded acclaim and desired money, his paintings were frequently too provocative to gain wide acceptance, whether in his depiction of the female nude in *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* or *Olympia*, or his mocking of Louis-Napoleon in the *Execution of Maximilian* (for which he was censored in 1869). He would exhibit infrequently at the Paris Salons throughout his career, evoking extreme reactions from jurors and critics alike: "Every year there is a Manet problem, just as there is an Orient problem or an Alsace-Lorraine problem." Even some of his peers greeted him warily, with Dante Gabriel Rossetti calling him a "French idiot . . . who certainly must be the greatest and most conceited ass who ever lived." Though he was an inspiration to the Impressionists, he could be dismissive of the movement's best known painters, and disliked their



commitment to painting *plein-air* (in open air). Only by the mid-1870s did he reach some level of success; he would die in April 1883, nearly 20 years after *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* was first shown to the public, though the painting would not officially be publicly displayed in the Louvre until 1934.

Friedland

“Few works in the history of art have consumed as much labor, generated so much rumor and anticipation, been showered with as much money, or simply taken so long to complete, as Meissonier’s *Friedland*.” Begun in 1863,



but not finished until 1873, it depicted one of Napoleon’s greatest victories in 1807. Tired of being known for his romantic paintings of

bonshommes, Meissonier wanted to paint “a patriotic scene celebrating both the genius of Napoleon and the supremacy of the French military.” Finally exhibited at the 1873 Universal Exhibition of Arts and Industry in Vienna, it perhaps suffered from the disgrace of Louis-Napoleon and his illustrious namesake in the aftermath of the Paris Commune. Though Meissonier’s British patron would retract his initial offer of 200,000 francs, he still would sell *Friedland* for the record price of 380,000 francs to the American department store magnate Alexander T. Stewart in 1876. Displayed for a time in Stewart’s mansion on 34th street (at the site of the present day Empire State Building), it now resides in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Olympia

“Easily the most notorious painting of the nineteenth century,” Manet undertook it in 1863 as a reinterpretation of Titian’s reclining



nude, *Venus of Urbino*. Using Victorine Meurent as a model, Manet’s modern rendering suggested a courtesan in repose. Shown at the Paris Salon of 1865, *Olympia* prompted “anger and fear” in critics and spectators alike, who found the figure of Victorine “unspeakably and offensively ugly,” and the placement of her left hand over her private parts particularly indecent. Salon officials had to deploy guards to protect the painting, and Manet wrote to his friend Baudelaire: “Insults are beating down on me like hail.” Through the intercession of Monet, it would be the first Manet painting to enter the Louvre in 1907. Only in 1934, would Manet’s other controversial masterpiece of the period, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, be publicly displayed in the Louvre as well.

Second Empire (1848-1870)

One of the “gaudiest and most vainglorious eras in the history of France,” the Second Empire was a time of unprecedented economic growth and commercial prosperity, which witnessed some of the most radical transformations in the 19th century: the invention of photography, the electric motor, and the steam-powered locomotive. Yet it also spawned an obsession with the past, and art of the day reflected a romanticism for the 17th and 18th centuries, whether in the paintings of Meissonier or the writing of Alexandre Dumas. Louis-Napoleon’s the Second Empire would eventually unravel over foreign policy:

first when the French were forced out of Mexico and its puppet Emperor Maximilian executed in 1867, and then when a unified Germany and the Prussian war machine led by Otto von Bismarck defeated France in the Franco-Prussian War and laid siege to Paris in 1870. Both Meissonier and Manet served in the National Guard during the war, defending Paris during its 130-day siege that ended with France's surrender in January 1871.

Emperor Napoleon III (1808-1873)

Napoleon's nephew, Louis-Napoleon became emperor after many years of exile in 1852. "A melancholy parrot" who "knew five languages and could be silent in all of them," he ruled largely with an iron fist and suppressed free speech, banishing writers like Victor Hugo (who called him a "disgusting dwarf"). Though he had little interest in art, his decision to create the Salon des Refusés inadvertently gave the early Impressionists their first taste of celebrity. Disgraced by defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and the subsequent Paris Commune, he died in exile in England in 1873.

Gustave Courbet

The infamous maverick of French art, who, as leader of the Realist movement, painted ordinary farmers, peasants and prostitutes. Largely self-taught, he was "a relentless braggart, self-publicist, and, in his own words, 'the most arrogant man in the world.'" In 1863, he was rejected by both the Salon and the Salon des Refusés, but by 1866 he had reinvented himself as a portrait painter to the idle rich, morphing from artistic pariah to Salon darling. After the Second Empire crumbled and the Paris Commune commenced in 1871, Courbet

became an advocate of revolution; as the Commune's artistic deputy he abolished the École des Beaux-Arts, shouting "we are avenged!" He argued that symbols of the Bonapartists should be eradicated, spurring the mob to topple the Vendôme Column—for which he would later be held financially accountable. After the Commune he was sentenced to jail for 6 months, where he painted dozens of works. Though he submitted several to the 1872 Salon, he was barred from exhibiting by Meissonier.

Impressionism

Émile Zola first categorized the École des Batignolles artists like Courbet, Manet, Monet, Renoir, and Degas as *naturalistes* and *actualistes*, "identifying them as a distinct group at the head of a new artistic movement. They were painters, he argued, who ignored traditional bourgeois tastes in favor of a courageous pursuit of the modern, the original, and the true." In 1874, 10 years after the last Salon des Refusés, a "Realist Salon" exhibited the art of a cooperative of painters, sculptors, engravers, and lithographers who included many of the people Zola had championed. Though Manet would not participate, many who did were clearly in his shadow, and this new school of art was quickly branded "Impressionism" by a discouraging critic. The Salon was not a success and few found buyers for their art, but the name stuck for good. "However, Manet cannot properly be called an Impressionist, not only because he refused to take part in any of the Impressionist exhibitions in Paris but also because of his different stylistic preoccupations, such as his fondness for the Old Masters and for rendering the human form rather than the effects of open-air light."