Claude Monet And Edgar Degas As Major Artists Of Impressionism

Impressionism is regarded as one of the most influential and innovative art movements throughout the history of art to so many artists. This art movement had originated in France during the 1870's thanks to artists like Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Edouard Manet, and Edgar Degas. These artists are celebrated for being independent of the academic traditions, and challenging and rejecting the academic traditions when painting. Academic art was considered to be a "type of painting that follows the conventions and principles of the official Academies of painting and sculpture established across Europe from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century." (Beard, L., 2018, P. 90). This type of art involved a large amount of history and mythology. Academic artists like idealised bodies and plenty emotion in a fantasy-like composition. It is nearly like a mix of romanticism and neoclassicism; emotions from the romanticism and the mythological aspects inspired by the old Greek and Roman art from neoclassicism.

Instead of following the previous academic artists traditions and techniques, the Impressionists used distinct, loose brushstrokes to capture subtle impressions of light, shadows or movement. They would also use brighter colours compared to the Academic artists and paint en plein-air; which was the practice of painting outside. This technique was best used to capture a fleeting moment of light. Impressionists like Monet wanted to capture light as it changes through time and understand the effects of the different lighting changing colours in nature. Painting outside became popular with Impressionists not just because of light but because architect Baron Haussemenn remodelled the entire city of Paris in seventeen years during the nineteenth century. Haussemann removed the narrow streets of Paris and replaced the streets with parks and wider paths and avenues. He also cleaned up the Paris sewer system and made Paris a beautiful looking city by adding bandstands in the new parks, gas lamps, etc. (Willsher, K. 2016). The Impressionists liked the new streets of Paris because it showed people enjoying life in the city, like socialising in cafés or going to the countryside for the day.

The industrialisation of the railway changed the lives of many people back in the nineteenth century, including artists. The new railways had opened up Paris to everyone. Artists could travel out to the countryside to paint landscapes en plein-air, helping them to capture the change in light and the weather. This was such a drastic change in people's lives, it was new and exciting. "It has often been said that early train travel included a thrilling attraction, that the pleasure brought by speed was combined with fear, because the passenger had surrounded himself to the mercy of technology." (Salmi, H., 2008). Before the railway opened artists could not paint scenes of landscapes while experiencing being in the atmosphere, they had to paint in their studio with nothing to look at but sketches. By physically being in the area the artist could replicate the atmosphere and capture all the changes in the light.

One more social change that helped Impressionists break away from the traditional methods was the availability of paint in metal tubes. Synthetic pigments became a commercial product available to artists. These paints were easier to access as artists used to have to mix their own paints with pigments and oils. These paints would dry very quickly so artists would make it in small batches and when they mixed the colours again very few colours would look exactly the

same. With these new paint tubes artists could paint wherever they wanted and they came in a variety of colours so artists could capture the intense colours of the Parisian landscapes. One more way paint became easier to access was through how they were sold, “metal paint-tubes, which were far more convenient than the skin bladders or syringes in which paint had previously been supplied.” (Gilbert, Loxley, Seymour-Ure and Walisiewicz, 2017, P.260). This helped artists get out of their studios and paint outside in nature or the urban city life of Paris.

One problem with painting outside was the pressure of trying to complete a painting under the shifting light and changing weather conditions could be frustrating. The artists would tackle this problem by keeping their paintings smaller than usual and painting much quicker. This would mean the composition would be quite simple and ‘sketchy’, everything would be in its simplest form. There would not be as much definition or detail but that was what Impressionists loved.

The term Impressionism was coined on the 25th April 1874 by an art critic Louis Leroy when he wrote a review in a French satire magazine titled ‘Le Charivari’. The review was based on the first exhibition by the Impressionists and the term ‘Impressionists’ was based on Leroy’s opinion of Monet’s painting ‘Impression, Sunrise’.

“Impression, Sunrise. Impression - I was certain of it .... A preliminary drawing for a wallpaper pattern is more finished than this seascape.” (Arthive, 2016)

Oscar-Claude Monet was a French painter born in 1840. He is known as a standout character for representing Impressionism in art history and can be referred to as the ‘Master Impressionist’. Monet painted various landscapes using vibrant colours and loose brushstrokes. He did not paint any extreme details or strong outlines; everything was in a simple form, which attracted some negative comments as the work was considered ‘sketchy’ to some people who were not used to the Impressionist style. Monet would work quickly on small canvases to try and capture the changing light or even the weather of the landscape. One of Monet's most famous works was Impression, Sunrise, it was exhibited at the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874 and became the inspiration behind the Impressionists title.

The painting Impression, Sunrise depicts a seascape from the harbour at Le Harve, France at dawn. The main focal point of the painting is the sun in the misty/foggy sky and the fishing boat in the foreground. The sharp bright orange sun is a key element with the muted pale blue of the sky as they are contrasting colours. There are other boats with tall masts in the background along with chimneys and smoke, painted like silhouettes in the hazy sky. The two boats in the water do not have the sharpest definition due to the style of painting. But the definition and detail are not needed because without the detail the scene becomes atmospheric. It is almost like an abstract or sketch-like representation of the landscape. The boat that is positioned more towards the left side of the painting looks as if it is drifting off into the mist of the cold morning. The brushstrokes add movement to the piece, for example the rippling effect in the water or the mist in the sky. The blue and violet shades of paint contrast with the bright orange /red of the sun and reflection in the water and help to create a cool atmosphere. The artist combined both the blue and orange colours to create the colours in the sky and it adds depth to the painting. It is evident that the depiction and the representation of reality was not Monet's main objective but to showcase his ability to capture this fleeting moment. This painting caused a revolution in the art world because Monet showed that he could capture a single moment of changing light and keep it fixed onto a canvas forever. This painting is not to be taken as literal representation of a scene but as a suggestion or idea of the scene.

Although Monet and Degas are grouped together as Impressionists the two artists have totally different styles and outlooks when it comes to art, they started their artistic careers with nothing in common but the era they were around. Monet would use vibrant colours that blended well together and Degas would use colours that show contrast between the foreground and background in his work.

Edgar Degas was a French artist born in 1834, known for his drawings, sculptures, prints and paintings. Degas can be regarded as one of the founders of Impressionism to many people, even though he himself liked to be referred to as a realist. He did not use many Impressionist techniques like painting ‘en plein-air' but he did paint scenes of Parisian life like the other Impressionist artists at the time. Impressionists tried to depict scenes of modern-day entertainment, whether it was at a cafe, the racetracks or the ballet. Degas would paint with a controlled manner unlike other Impressionists and he would paint models in his studio where he was in full control. When Degas painted scenes from the ballet he always looked for “a novel slant, preferring to paint rehearsals or dance classes rather than performances.” (Wilkins, D., 2005, P. 356).

Edgar Degas' Two Dancers at Rest is one of many art works done by Degas that depicts dancers. In this particular drawing Degas has two dancers in blue ballerina dresses and yellow slippers resting or stretching on a bench. One dancer has brown hair tied up and the other dancer has bright orange hair tied up, the brown haired dancer is facing the viewer and the orange haired dancer has her back to the viewers. The viewer cannot see the dancers faces and the brown haired girls face is not very detailed or sharp. Both dancers are positioned towards the centre or positioned more towards the left side with the only part of their blue tutu skirts is being cropped out. Degas used vibrant colours for this piece as the blue, yellow and red tones stand out and are quite bright. Both dancers seem to be exhausted as they message their sore feet. Degas liked to show the dancers hard at work practicing in the studio or backstage.

“Forced to spend long hours practising the strenuous and disciplined balletic moves, the dancers were often painted by Degas in a state of near collapse; dozing on crossed elbows, leaning against a wall, or messaging thier aching muscles.” (Kane, L. 2011, P. 159).

He would never paint dancers that were famous, instead he would paint or draw the backup dancers getting ready backstage, anxiously waiting in the stage wings ready to go on stage or dancing in the studios. Degas would create a look similar to a snapshot, the girls cut off at the edges would create almost a frame. The viewer can see that Degas was heavily influenced by photography as his figures were usually cut off at the edge or they were positioned off centre.

Both artists have a love for colour, both pieces of work use contrasting colours like blue and orange to add excitement to the work. Both pieces are not smooth or perfectly detailed as the viewer cannot see Degas’ ballet dancers face clear and the background in Monet's sunrise is not sharp, the viewer can see Monet's thick brushstrokes and Degas’ lines from the pastels. Both Monet and Degas have different styles for artists that are bulked together in the Impressionist category. Monet was known for painting beautiful landscapes with choppy brushstrokes and bright colours whereas Degas was known for his pastel drawings of ballet dancers, his race horses and his sculptures. Monet’s sunrise has a cool atmosphere and more movement compared to Degas’ dancers. But Degas’ dancers have more colour and look livelier than Monet’s sunrise.

The practice of réglementation in Paris during the nineteenth century was a big social issue at the time. Réglementation was basically the name given to tolerated prostitution during the nineteenth century and it was a technique to try stop the spread of some sexual diseases. Prostitutes were categorised into two groups of registered and unregistered and then the registered women either worked inside brothels or they could work anywhere and had to carry an identification card stating when their last health check was. The reason réglementation is relevant to Degas' work was because at the ballet men would buy a ticket to get them backstage to watch or chat to the dancers. Women that engaged with prostitution would spend time there to find clients. Degas would often observe interactions between the men and either dancers or prostitutes but he had painted very few men into the backgrounds of his works. The men who had bought backstage tickets also thought that the dancers were also prostitutes because they were working women, to the Parisian public dance was a suspicious occupation.

"The ambiguity and confusion between women at work and women engaged with prostitution, which regulationists feared and which Degas' images exploited, is what also connects this theme in his painting to modernity in general: that is, the belief that in modern economic life, all work is prostitution." (Kane, L., 2011, P.160).

One major social change that influenced the Impressionist artists during the nineteenth century was the invention of photography. Photography had a huge influence on some artists like Degas as his compositions show he was heavily influenced by the language of cinema style techniques, like cropping and 'shutter drag'. He would crop his composition and figures at the edges and positioning the main focal points off centre.

"Long exposures with a camera were required to capture the image, which created 'shutter-drag', allowing for beautiful fluid movement and gracefully blurred selections." (Kiama Art Gallery, 2015).

Degas would try replicate a motion blur from a photo in his work, whether its horses running or dancers at the ballet or dance studio. Motion blur/shutter drag happens when someone or something moves while a picture is being taken with long shutter speeds and large exposures and it adds a ghostly looking blur to whatever was moving in the photo. Photography has given a sense of creative freedom to some artists by letting them experiment with things like composition and perspective.

These social changes really helped Impressionists experiment with photography, colour and even painting outside. Without the railways the Impressionists would not have been able to paint outside immersed in the countryside, and without the influence of photography artists like Degas would not have thought to experiment with motion blur. The production of paint in metal tubes made working so much cheaper for artists and easier to transport and paint with. Understanding the social mores of the nineteenth century helped the viewer get a better understanding of what might have been going through the artists minds or what was happening in the world around them. Impressionism is such a famous art movement in history and there were so many great artists all bulked into one group even though they all have differences in technique, preferred subject matter and medium. Monet and Degas are two examples because they are both very different and have very distinct styles.