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*Early Impressionism and the French State (1866–1874)* explores the reception of modernist painting in the years that preceded the Impressionist exhibition of 1874. Opening with an extensive analysis of the ministry of fine arts and the politics of the Salon, the study considers the Salon experiences of Courbet, Manet, and the group that became known as the Impressionists: Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, Degas, Morisot, Cézanne, and Bazille. This book also examines how art was politicized during the period and how politics affected the Impressionist exhibition of 1874.

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Claude Monet, *Boulevard des Capucines,* 1873. Oil on canvas. The Nelson–Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. (Purchase: The Kenneth A. and Helen F. Spencer Foundation Acquisition Fund, F72-35. © 1995 The Nelson Gallery Foundation, all rights reserved.)

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*This book is dedicated to*
*Katherine Roos*
*and to the memory of*
*Katherine and Arthur Mayo.*

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# Preface

THE OPENING of the first Impressionist exhibition gave us one of the great mythic moments in the history of modern art. For a four-week period in the spring of 1874, thirty artists exhibited their works in a gallery on the boulevard des Capucines. Organized by a cooperative calling itself the *Société anonyme des artistes peintres, sculpteurs, graveurs, etc.,* the exhibition included some two hundred works, which were installed in galleries several floors above the street. Among the exhibitors were Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Berthe Morisot, Edgar Degas, Paul Cézanne, Camille Pissarro, and Alfred Sisley, to name but a few of the artists whose reputations have endured into the twentieth century. Édouard Manet chose not to send works, and Gustave Courbet had gone into exile the year before.

History was made when Louis Leroy published his review in the pages of *Le Charivari.*[1] In an article entitled "Exhibition of the Impressionists," he recounted how he had gone to the exhibition with the landscape painter Joseph Vincent, and he supposedly "recorded" the reactions of his friend. The article has been so well rehearsed that we know it almost by heart: how an innocent man came to the studio expecting nothing out of the ordinary and how the paintings he saw agitated him to the point of delirium. From Pissarro to Morisot to Cézanne to Monet: work by work, he grew increasingly unhinged. Pissarro produced "palette-scrapings," Morisot produced chicken scratches, and Cézanne's *Modern Olympia* made Manet's *Olympia* look like a "masterpiece of design." The worst culprit was of course Monet, whose *Impression: Sunrise* was sloppier than "wallpaper in an embryonic state." As the common legend holds, it was from Monet's painting, via Leroy's article, that the designation "Impressionism" entered the lexicon as the pejorative metaphor by which the works of these artists were known.

In the time since "Exhibition of the Impressionists" appeared, Leroy's disparaging remarks have been passed along from one generation of historians to the next. In many accounts, well into the twentieth century, the negative aspects of the exhibition have remained a major ingredient – have become, in fact, the episode's narrative theme – and Leroy's version of history has been "made" over and over again. Though written for *Le Charivari,* a rambunctious paper with a slapstick edge, the article has been treated as if it were both representational and reliably historical and has come to stand for an entire discursive field.

John Rewald, whose *The History of Impressionism* (1973) remains the classic consideration of the group, heavily quoted the reactions of Leroy, and Rewald's text presents a version of the first exhibition that emphasizes the hostility of the critics and the failure of the cooperative's efforts.



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In chronicling the show, Rewald characterized the outcome of the exhibition in overwhelmingly negative terms, stating that "the group gained nothing but ridicule,"[2] that "the critics were extremely harsh in their comments or simply refused to consider the show seriously,"[3] and that "the gallant enterprise of the group" ended only in the liquidation of their cooperative.[4]

I have always wondered about the Impressionists' failure, in the sense that it sounded too good to be true.[5] What a perfect set piece for modernism, that a group of revolutionary artists should bravely hang their works and invite the public to come, only to have the critics savagely attack the show, while the uncomprehending public, driven mad by modern art, laughed in front of the works. Equally vital to the tale is the idea that none of the artwork sold and that the cooperative had to be dissolved at the end of 1874.

The bleakness of this history now seems curious to me, as does the powerlessness it assigns to the modernists under review. We seem to repeat over and over again key episodes of modernist failure – whether they be the difficulties of Courbet, Manet, or the Impressionists – each with a little feel-good lesson that plays well to a late-twentieth-century audience. Confronted with the profound dislocations of the culture of the 1990s, we search through the past and, locating other moments when a public encountered the shock of revolutionary art, we offer ourselves the illusion of more courageous thought. The isolation of the modernists as a failed avant-garde, engaged on a quest for "pure" art, art for art's sake, seems nothing less than a solipsistically mythic inscription to free ourselves from the disturbing entanglements of money and painterly practice. In the cynical late twentieth century, the museum has become our place of worship, the monograph our sacred text, and the artist our contact with the divine. Under the guise of disinterested art history, we can effectively canonize our heroes and excoriate our foes.

In researching this book, I took a closer look at Rewald's chapter on the exhibition of 1874, and the subjectivity of his narrative struck me with unusual force. Rewald's chapter IX is devoted entirely to the exhibition and the preparations that preceded it. The formation of the cooperative is described in detail, and the reactions of the participants are fully documented with references to letters and first-hand accounts; the show is opened, the paintings are discussed, and the reviews of Leroy and Castagnary are quoted at length.[6] A remark by Camille Pissarro is then cited, to the effect that the exhibition "goes well . . . . It is a success," and is dismissed as having had a bitterly ironic intent. Instead, the emphasis is made to rest on a further comment by Pissarro, to the effect that he is going back to work because "one learns nothing from" the critics' remarks.

Quotation marks open and close Pissarro's comments, which were excerpted from a letter to Théodore Duret, and Rewald's text continues:

> Indeed, the only thing to be learned [by the Impressionists] from the critics was how to suffer the sting of their attacks and carry on just the same, accomplishing a task which more than any other required serenity. Yet this is easier said than done. The reviewers' blatant injustices or perfidious insinuations, their cruel sarcasms or vulgar mockeries find artists particularly vulnerable since their selfless devotion to their ideals leaves them ill-prepared for such baseless assaults. It requires tremendous courage and limitless faith to overcome such adversities; to find the necessary strength the individual has to draw on his reserve of vitality, a reserve better poured into his work. How hard it must be for the timid, and even for the self-confident and ambitious, for the poor, and even for the rich, to stand up under constant derision without being paralyzed in their creative efforts! This is not merely a question of right or wrong, it is a question of sensitivity exposed to merciless poundings. It is also an experience which, translated into everyday life, poses uncounted problems. To arise in the morning of a beautiful day, filled with eagerness and joy for the work ahead, and to read at the breakfast table shameless and stupid criticisms which accuse one of painting in a state of delirium tremens . . . that is more than enough to ruin the day if not the entire week. Few are the creators in literature, in art, or elsewhere who are

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> impervious to ridicule and rudeness, who have the faculty of simply shrugging them off. And as if it were not enough to dampen their ardor through these offenses, the critics also seriously impair their material existence, since biting comments are hardly designed to encourage collectors to invest money in works publicly disparaged.[7]

Noticeable to me in recent readings of the passage was the puzzling discursive break that occurs in the paragraph's second sentence, when the verbs shift from past to present tense (from "was how to suffer" to "this is easier said than done"). At this point, Rewald the historian has slipped into a different relation to his narrative, and I found myself thinking of the question that Roland Barthes had asked of Balzac's *Sarrasine*: "Who is speaking thus?"[8] Reading through Rewald's long paragraph, I kept wondering about the nature and origin of that voice. Was the voice a historical one, still drawing inferences from documents of the period? Was the voice a private one, interpreting the past from more personal reserves? Whose beautiful morning had been ruined? Who had been hurt by the critics? Who, poor or rich, was trying to get on with the business at hand? The chapter closes with the comment that "Without hesitation the impressionists continued in complete isolation their daily efforts toward creation, like a group of actors playing night after night to an empty theater," and here I could only wonder whose isolation and emptiness it was.[9]

I did not start out to write a book about Impressionism or about the implications of the Impressionists' relation to the state. The research began as a study of painting in France in the 1870s, with an emphasis upon the individuals who set artistic policy: Charles Blanc and Philippe de Chennevières, who served successively as Director of Fine Arts. The thesis of the manuscript in its earliest version concerned the connections that could be made between art and politics, through an analysis of the officials who evolved and effected their country's policies. Under the early Third Republic, specific and explicit ideologies could be swiftly converted into artistic practice, as they were transmitted downward from the head of state, through the men he had chosen to run the administration of fine arts, and into the regulations for the Salon.

As I worked with the material, it became apparent to me that the dynamics of the 1870s had their origins in the political rhythms of the Second Empire, and it was this earlier history that gradually became the focus of research. Since much of the material would concern policies set in relation to the Salon, I hoped to begin the study with an analysis of the Salon of 1870, the last Salon under the empire of Napoléon III. However, as I read through the accounts of this Salon, I realized how atypical it had been: the exhibition occurred during a period of unusual liberalism within the administration of fine arts, and by 1870 the regulations for the Salon had undergone serious reform.

So the manuscript forced itself back further in time, which is never a comfortable vantage point from which to write, and after a frustrating series of false starts, I settled on the Salon of 1866. This exhibition was the last Salon before the liberalizations of the late Empire, and I intended to use it as the basis from which the following chapters could proceed. I started to write what I thought would be a short discussion of the Salon's regulations, but the material came to fill a long chapter about the nature and implications of the rules. It grew further when I began to link the analysis of the Salon with an analysis of the works on view and to look specifically at the experiences of the modernists. The Salon of 1866 was the first exhibition to which Courbet, Manet, Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, Bazille, Degas, Morisot, and Cézanne all submitted works, and it represents the moment when the modernists began to converge in the public eye. It should be recognized that these were artists at different stages of their careers: Courbet had begun to send paintings to the Salon in 1841, Manet in 1859, whereas the group that became known as "the Impressionists" were only rank beginners. As it turned out, Manet's paintings were rejected (*The Fifer* and *The Tragic Actor*), Courbet nearly

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came to blows with the Superintendent of Fine Arts over his *Woman with a Parrot,* and Cézanne wrote the first of the group's letters of protest to the administration of fine arts. From this vantage point, 1866 is the year in which the modernists' revolt against the state began.

It could be argued that modernist exhibition practice in the 1860s and 1870s forms one of the least studied episodes of the nineteenth century. In terms of the history of their exhibitions, one tends to skip through the second half of the century, from the Salon of 1849, when Courbet made his realist début; to the Salon of 1863, when Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* stood out among the *refusés;* to the Impressionists' exhibition of 1874, when the Société anonyme launched its attack on the Salon. The moral usually drawn concerns the unchanging character of the government's artistic policy and the powerlessness of those in the modernist camp. References to the history of the Salon assume that it changed very little in the second half of the nineteenth century, until 1881, when running the exhibition was turned over to the Society of French Artists.

The history I began to construct had different emphases and a different narrative line. As I looked closely at exhibition policy in the late 1860s, I began to lose sight of the standard history that pits a small group of rebels against an obdurate administration and locks them in hand-to-hand combat over the democratization of artistic policy in France. Peculiar to this myth is the idea of an administration that refused to change and of a brave band of artists who were vocal but impotent in their efforts to liberalize the rules. My research began to suggest something a great deal more complex: a government that was capable of changing when it was pushed, and an artists population that could successfully organize and press the establishment for reform. Beyond this, I found a great deal of variability in the degree of openness or authoritarianism to the government's policies, even in the brief eight years that are the subject of this book. More than any other factor, the politics and ideology of individual administrators determined the nation's policies in relation to the arts. Thus there was increasing liberalism under the changeable and opportunistic Alfred-Émilien Nieuwerkerke, a reactionary tightening under the platonistic and authoritarian Charles Blanc, and a restoration ethos under the marquis de Chennevières.

The more I worked with the material, the more I began to focus on the Impressionists and to see that their landmark exhibition in 1874 was the outcome of the protests that had begun in 1866. Why an action begun in 1866 had its realization eight years later had everything to do with the institutional context in which these artists worked. They neither painted nor exhibited in a vacuum, and during this eight-year period they actively worked to implement change. Their relations to the system, their politics if you will, form the subject of this book, which ends with the opening of the exhibition at Nadar's.

Framing the study with the years 1866 and 1874 has the added advantage of bridging three administrations (those of Nieuwerkerke, Blanc, and Chennevières) and crossing the arbitrary historical boundary that usually separates the Second Empire from the Third Republic.[10] What the current project became, then, was an attempt to write a slightly different sort of book, one that would catch the French art world in a specific period of change rather than begin and end within the framework of a single administration. Thus, when I chose to cover an eight-year period, moving through the last four years of the Empire and into the first four years of the Third Republic, I specifically wanted to leave the outer margins loose, not hard and fast and not sharply defined. I aimed at framing the study with what I came to think of as a cropped historical edge, which would leave a little indeterminacy on the borders of the account. Here, it was my intent that the structure of the text would acknowledge a sense of the incompleteness, as well as the necessary selectivity, of historical practice. For similar reasons, I adopted a sometimes arbitrary approach to the book's organization, mixing long and short chapters and shifting the depth of field from closely studied segments on individual works or epi-

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sodes to more broadly treated discussions of the Salon. Finally, I want to mention that I purposely requested that the book's illustrations be in black and white rather than color. This decision was made to resist the production of yet another "pretty" book on Impressionism and to stress as clearly as possible the distinction between the work of art and its representation.

The subject of exhibition practice has been the focus of a good deal of innovative analysis in the past decade, and I have greatly profited from the work of historians who have opened and extended this area of research.[11] All through *Early Impressionism and the French State,* I have drawn upon their writings, as will be seen in the endnotes to each chapter. Patricia Mainardi's work in particular has been extremely helpful throughout the project, and I wish both to acknowledge my debt and to signal the difference of my own research. In brief, her studies have concerned the exhibition policies of the French government but have emphasized the careers of artists who remained in closer contiguity with the academy. The present study moves through some of the same historical terrain, but concentrates on the Salon works of the modernists and on the modernists' relation to the administration of fine arts.

Also, I would like to acknowledge my debt to John Rewald's *History of Impressionism,* on which – though I may take issue with the concealed subjectivity of some of its readings – I have drawn gratefully over many years. In disagreeing with aspects of his approach, or with some of the conclusions he reached, I nonetheless recognize that it is much easier to criticize a text than to assemble the ideas against which other people set themselves to read. My analysis makes no attempt to replace his extensive study but is intended as a work that isolates and views at closer range one aspect of the history he set out.

Several final observations remain. First, on the subject of early Impressionism and the state, I consider the relation not in terms of the possibly political meaning of an individual painting or the voting affiliation of an individual artist, but in terms of the reaction of the modernists to the cultural institutions that both comprised and reflected artistic discourse. In analyzing the cultural matrix of which the works were a part, I will take into account the personal histories of the men who set artistic policy and the ideological positions reflected in their publications on the visual arts. Blanc and Chennevières, in particular, wrote voluminously about past and present art, and the administrative documents that issued from their hands were but the end result of cultural attitudes that they explicated fully in other forums.

Second, I have brought together the very different histories of Courbet, Manet, and the Impressionists during this eight-year period, which are often separated into individual narratives and given a similarly negative spin. Thus, we usually read that Courbet gave up on politics and political art after 1855 and then wasted his energy in the production of landscapes for the commercial market. For him, the 1860s supposedly amounted to a downhill slide, propelled by his own avarice and conceit. Alternatively, we encounter the idea of Manet's conservatism toward the establishment and read how he courted the Salon's juries to satisfy a bourgeois need for recognition and praise. In his attitude toward the Salon, he is seen as being more cowardly than the Impressionists, though they are usually faulted for having waited so long to organize the first group show and for producing a failure when they finally opened the gallery doors. In every case, the situation was more complex, if less dramatic, than a tightly plotted narrative is able to permit. In designating the works of these artists, I have most often used the term *modernist* because it seemed to me the only adjective that could embrace their differing concerns. The choice is in keeping with the study's intent, which is to draw Courbet and Manet into the history of early Impressionism because of the way in which their careers necessarily affected the public perception of Impressionist works.

Third, in terms of my attitudes toward history, I remain committed to the idea that the past can be assembled in meaningful ways. When I began

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the research in 1987, I had only begun to come to terms with the impact of poststructuralism, gender theory, and deconstruction on the practice of art history. As the project evolved, I became entranced by the dark ecstasy of critical theory and lost confidence in the seemingly prosaic validity of traditional art-historical practice; but the narcissistic thrill of so many stranded and evacuated signifiers passed quickly and left me melancholic in the end. In addition, I grew suspicious of the elitism of obscure language and resentful of the orthodoxy of much current theoretical practice. Thus, I came to believe that even though the shaping of history is necessarily selective, biased, and synecdochic, the idea that the historian can never achieve objectivity and can never say everything about the past does not mean that nothing can be said at all. My concern with problems of subjectivity and linearity remained, however, and led me to organize the structure of the book in the ways I outlined above.

Over the past years, art historians have given their attention to the difficulties posed when we attempt to establish linkages between the different fields of inquiry that form the subjects of our discipline. To phrase the matter simply: how do we validly move from art to history – from objects to context, say, from paintings to events? To me, the emphasis on institutional history seems to address this problem directly, particularly as it concerns the Salon. Because the regulations for the Salon were set by men who had been appointed by the government, politics passed straight downward from the country's rulers, through the administration of fine arts, and into the Salon's regulations. These regulations not only affected how art was exhibited and received, but also politicized that reception throughout the period covered by this study.

The chapters that follow start with an analysis of the institutional structure of the art world in France in the nineteenth century, rather than beginning with the art and looking to the context for confirmation. Chapter 1 consists of a close reading of the regulations for the Salon, an aspect of the exhibition that is full of implications and usually unavailable to an exclusively English-speaking audience. Chapter 2 examines the situation of women at the Salon, as well as the way in which Salon paintings played to the ideological cravings of the time. I may well have included the analysis of the woman artist's relation to the Salon in the first chapter, except that I wanted to make clear how very different her situation was. Thus, though Chapter 2 is short, I wanted it to stand alone. Chapter 3 treats the organization of the Salon, taking the exhibition from its very earliest phases through its closing and the distribution of prizes. Chapter 4 considers the Salon of 1866; Chapter 5, the Salon of 1867. Chapter 6 takes a brief digression to consider the paintings of Paris by Manet, Monet, and Renoir, which were executed in 1867 and which position these artists in relation to the cultural institutions that governed artistic practice in France. Chapter 7 analyzes the Salons of 1868 and 1869, and Chapter 8 the extremely liberal Salon of 1870. Chapter 9 comprises another digression from exhibition practice per se, this time to consider the affair of Courbet and the Vendôme Column. Chapter 10 studies the Salon of 1872; Chapter 11, the Salon of 1873 and the formation of the Société anonyme of the Impressionists at the end of 1873. Chapter 12 covers the exhibition of 1874, analyzes the ways in which the naming of Impressionism was bound up with issues of politics, and considers the implications of Leroy's review. From this perspective, the exhibition of 1874 can be seen to have resulted from a specific set of circumstances that occurred in the late Empire and early Third Republic, and, concurrently, reactions to the show can be seen to have been colored by the way in which exhibition practice had been politicized in the period.

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