



## Impressionism

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Robert L. Herbert's avowed intention is to "rewrite the history of Impressionism." He wishes to replace interpretations that are formalist (concerned with style or technique) and biographical (concerned with the alienated artist) with an interpretation that relies upon the sociocultural context. His thesis is that Impressionism was the foundation of modern art because its subject is modern urban culture, especially the culture of leisure activity. In the works of Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Edouard Manet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and other self-proclaimed Impressionists, Herbert traces a fascination with cafes, concerts, theaters, picnics, and vacations by the shore.

Between 1850 and 1880, Paris changed from a dark, mazelike old city into an open, patterned metropolis, in response to entrepreneurial ambitions and imperial visions. The Impressionists record the changes in social relationships and in landscape which follow from the transformation. To support his case, Herbert "reads" the paintings with the help of guide books, memoirs, travelers' accounts, and other contemporary writings. He often identifies the precise geographical locale of a painting and argues the significance of the viewer's perspective. By showing what could actually be seen from a particular spot, Herbert adroitly distinguishes a painting's fact from fiction--and draws fascinating conclusions from the artist's manipulations.

Accompanying Herbert's text are 311 illustrations, most of them in color. Herbert reads renewed significance into numerous classics of Impressionism and convincingly presents the interweaving of style, content, and social context. The book's seven chapters are arranged topically and brim with intriguing comparisons and contrasts between artists.

The subject matter, the handsome printing and reproductions, and the aggressive thesis makes Herbert's book an important one to critics and historians. Its straightforward theory--art is the product of a society, best understood by knowledge of that society--and engaging discussions of familiar masterpieces make Herbert's book a rewarding encounter for the general reader.

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