

SPECIAL PROJECT

SELF EXPRESSION THROUGH TIME
AND SPACE.

BHAVANA SHETH

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SEMINAR PROJECT TOPIC

SELF EXPRESSION THROUGH TIME AND SPACE

Illustrated through a movement in ART-IMPRESSIONISM

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782. AUGUSTE RODIN.
The Kiss. 1886-98.
Marble, over lifesize.
Rodin Museum, Paris

IMPRESSIONISM



764. GUSTAVE COURBET.
The Stone Breakers.
1849. 63 × 102".
State Picture Gallery,
Dresden

IMPRESSIONISM

Painting:

"Can Jupiter survive the lightning rod?" asked Karl Marx, not long after the middle of the century. The question sums up the dilemma we felt in Carpeaux's The Dance. The French poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire was addressing himself to the same problem when, in 1846, he called for paintings that expressed "the heroism of modern life". At that time only one painter was willing to make an artistic creed of this demand: Baudelaire's friend Gustave Courbet (1819-77)

Courbet and Realism

Proud of his rural background - he was born in Ornans, a village near the French-Swiss border - and a socialist in politics, Courbet had begun as a Neo-Baroque Romantic in the early 1840s; but by 1848, under the impact of the revolutionary upheavals then sweeping over

Europe, he had come to believe that the Romantic emphasis on feeling and imagination was merely an escape from the realities of the time.

The modern artist must rely on his own direct experience ("I cannot paint an angel because I have never seen one," he said); he must be a Realist. As a descriptive term, "realism" is not very precise.

For Courbet, it meant something akin to the "naturalism" of Caravaggio (colorplate 75). As an admirer of Louis Le Nain and Rembrandt he had,

in fact, strong links with the Caravaggio tradition, and his work, like Caravaggio's was denounced for its supposed vulgarity and lack of spiritual content. The storm broke in 1849, when he exhibited

The Stone Breakers (fig 674), the first canvas fully embodying his programmatic Realism. Courbet had seen two men working on a road,

and had asked them to pose for him in his studio. He painted them

lifesize, solidly and matter-of-factly, with one of Millet's overt pathos or sentiment; the young man's face is averted, the old one's

half-hidden by a hat. Yet he cannot have picked them casually: their

contrast in age is significant - one is too old for such heavy work, the other too young. Endowed with the dignity of their symbolic status, they do not turn to us for sympathy. Courbet's friend, the socialist Proudhon, likened them to a parable from the Gospels.

Manet

Courbet's Studio helps us to understand a picture that shocked the public even more: Manet's Luncheon on the Grass (fig.7), showing a nude model accompanied by two gentlemen in frock coats. Edouard Manet (1832-83) was the first to grasp Courbet's full importance - his Luncheon, among other things, is a tribute to the older artist. He particularly offended contemporary morality by juxtaposing the nude and clothed figures in an outdoor setting, the more so since the non-committal title offered no "higher" significance. Yet the group has so formal a pose (for its classical source, see figs.8,9) that Manet certainly did not intend to depict an actual event. Perhaps the meaning of the canvas lies in this denial of plausibility, for the scene fits neither the plane of everyday experience nor that of allegory. The luncheon,



766. EDOUARD MANET.
A Bar at the Folies-Bergères.
1881-82. $37\frac{1}{2} \times 51''$.
The Courtauld Collection, London



767. AUGUSTE RENOIR.
Le Moulin de la Galette.
1876. $51\frac{1}{2} \times 69''$.
The Louvre, Paris

as a visual manifesto of artistic freedom, is much more revolutionary than Courbet's ; it asserts the painter's privilege to combine whatever elements he pleases for aesthetic effect alone. The nudity of the model is "explained" by the contrast between her warm, creamy flesh tones and the cool black-and-gray of the men's attire. Or, put it another way, the world of painting has "natural laws" that are distinct from those of familiar reality, and the painter's first loyalty is to his canvas, not to the outside world. Here begins an attitude that was later summed up in the doctrine of Art for Art's Sake, and became a bone of contention between progressives and conservatives for the rest of the century (see page 613)

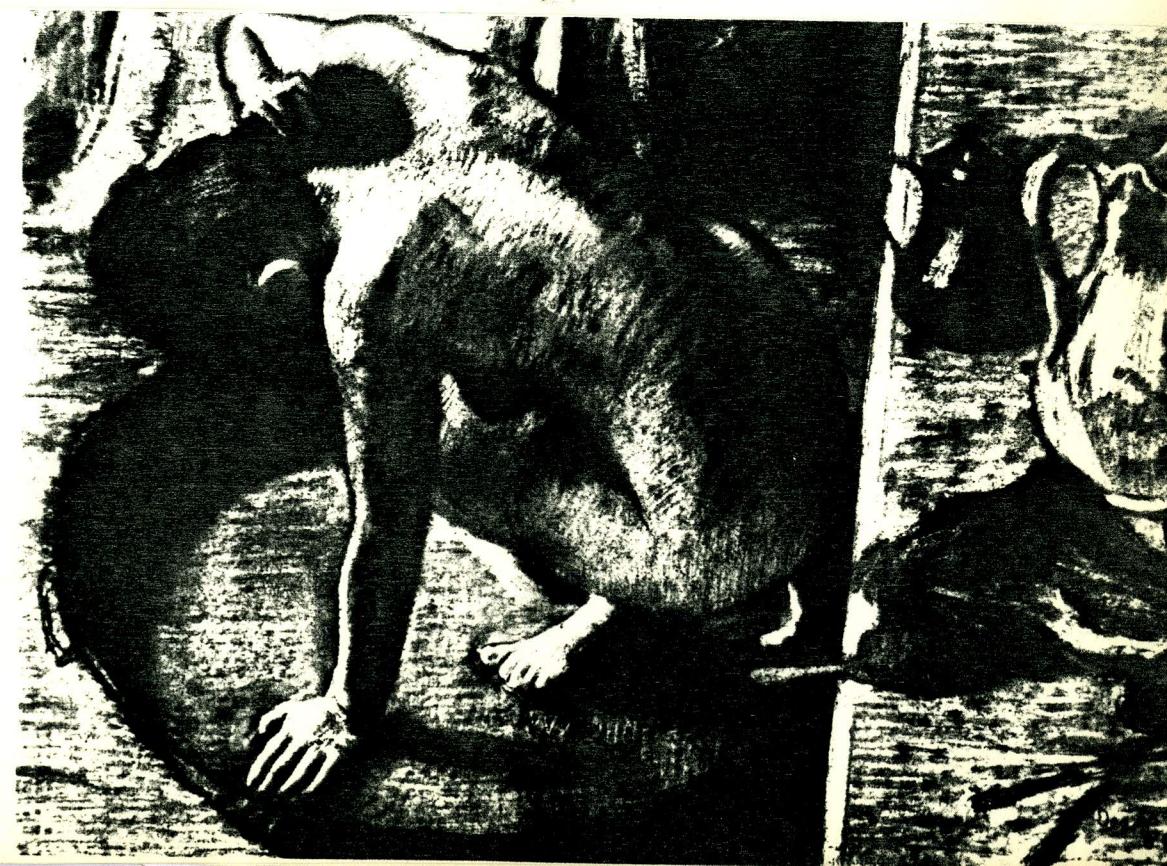
Monet and Impressionism

What brought about this "revolution of the color patch"? We do not know, and Manet himself surely did not reason it out beforehand. It is tempting to think that he was impelled to create the new style by the challenge of photography. The "pencil of nature", invented a quarter-century before, had vindicated the objective truth of

Renaissance perspective, but it established a standard of representational accuracy that no hand-made image could hope to rival. Painting needed to be rescued from competition with the camera. This Manet accomplished by insisting that a painted canvas is, above all, a material surface covered with pigments - that we must look at it, not through it. Unlike Courbet, he gave no name to the style he had created: when his followers began calling themselves Impressionists, he refused to accept the term for his own work. The word had been coined in 1874, after a hostile critic had looked at a picture entitled *Impression: Sunrise*, by Claude Monet (1840-1926), and it certainly fits Monet better than it does Manet. Monet had adopted Manet's concept of painting and applied it to landscapes done out-of-doors. Monet's *The River*, of 1868 (colorplate 97), is flooded with sunlight so bright that conservative critics claimed it made their eyes smart; in this flickering network of colour patches, the reflections on the water are as "real" as the banks of the Seine. Even



772. CLAUDE MONET. *Water Lilies, Giverny*. 1907.
 $36\frac{1}{2} \times 29$ ". Collection Jocelyn Walker, London



771. EDGAR DEGAS.
The Tub. 1886.
Pastel, $23\frac{1}{2} \times 32\frac{1}{3}$ ".
The Louvre, Paris

more than The Fifer, Monet's painting is a "playing card"; were it not for the woman and the boat in the foreground, the picture could hand upside-down with hardly any difference of effect. The mirror image here serves a purpose contrary to that of earlier mirror images (compare fig. 473): instead of adding to the illusion of real space, it strengthens the unity of the actual painted surface. This inner coherence sets The River apart from Romantic "impressions" like Constable's Hampstead Heath (see fig. 732), or Corot's Papigno (see fig. 753), even though all three share the same on-the-spot immediacy and fresh perception. The latter qualities came less easily to the austere and deliberate Manet; they appear in his work only after c. 1870, under Monet's influence. Manet's last major picture, A Bar at the Folies-Bergères, of 1881-82 (fig. 766), shows a single figure as calm-and as firmly set within the rectangle of the canvas - as the fifer, but the background is no longer neutral. A huge



770. EDGAR DEGAS. *Prima Ballerina*. c. 1876.
Pastel, $23 \times 16 \frac{1}{2}$ ". The Louvre, Paris



769. EDGAR DEGAS. *Edouard Manet*. c. 1865.
Pencil drawing. The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York (Rogers Fund, 1918)



773. DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI. *Ecce Ancilla Domini*.
1850. $28 \frac{1}{2} \times 16 \frac{1}{2}$ ". The Tate Gallery, London

shimmering mirror image now reflects the whole interior of the night club, but deprives it of three-dimensional reality. (The mirror, close behind the barmaid, fills four-fifths of the picture.) The barmaid's attitude, detached and touched with melancholy, contrasts so poignantly with the sparkling gaiety of her setting, which is not permitted to share. For all its urbanity, the mood of the canvas reminds us oddly of Daumier's Third-Class Carriage (see fig. 750)

SCULPTURE

Rodin

Impressionism, it is often said, revitalized sculpture no less than painting. The statement is at once true and misleading. Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), the first sculptor of genius since Bernini, redefined sculpture during the same years that Manet and Monet redefined painting; in so doing, however, he did not follow these artists's lead. How indeed could the effect of such pictures as *The Fifter* or *The River* be reproduced in three dimensions and without color ? What Rodin did accomplish is already visible in the first piece he tried to exhibit (it was rejected, as we might expect), *The Man with the Broken Nose* of 1864 (fig. 779). Earlier, he had worked briefly under Barye, whose influence may help to explain the vigorously creased surface (compare fig. 762). These welts and wrinkles produce, in polished bronze, an ever changing pattern of reflections. But is this effect borrowed from Impressionist painting ? Does Rodin dissolve three dimensional



779. AUGUSTE RODIN. *The Man with the Broken Nose*.
1864. Bronze, height $9 \frac{1}{2}$ ". Rodin Museum,
Philadelphia Museum of Art



780. AUGUSTE RODIN. *The Thinker*. 1879-89. Bronze,
height $27 \frac{1}{2}$ ". The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York (Gift of Thomas F. Ryan, 1910)

form into flickering patches of light and dark ? These fiercely exaggerated shapes pulsate with sculptural energy, and they retain this quality under whatever conditions the piece is viewed. For Rodin did not work directly in bronze; he modeled in wax or clay. How could he calculate in advance the reflections on the bronze surfaces of the casts that would ultimately be made from these models ? He worked as he did, we must assume, for an altogether different reason: not to capture elusive optical effects, but to emphasize the process of "growth" - the miracle of dead matter coming to life in the artist's hands. As the color patch, for Manet and Monet, is the primary reality, so are the malleable lumps from which Rodin builds his forms. And conservative critics rejected The Man with Broken Nose and Impressionist painting on the same grounds - it was "unfinished", a mere sketch. Sculptors, of course, had always made small, informal sketches (the plastic counterpart of drawings), but these were for the artist's private use, not for public display. Rodin was the first to make of

unfinishedness an aesthetic principle that governed both his handling of surfaces and the whole of the work (The Man with the Broken Nose is not a bust, but a head "broken off" at the neck). By discovering what might be called the autonomy of the fragment, he rescued sculpture from mechanical verisimilitude just as Manet rescued painting from photographic realism.

This sculptural revolution, proclaimed with such daring by Rodin at twenty-four, did not reach full force until the late 1870s. For his living, the young artist had to collaborate with officially recognized sculptors on their public commissions, mostly memorials and architectural sculpture in the Neo-Baroque style of Carpeaux. In 1879 he was at last entrusted with a major task, the entrance of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris. Rodin elaborated the commission into an ambitious ensemble called The Gates of Hell, its symbolic program inspired by Dante's Inferno. He ever finished the Gates, but they served as a matrix for countless smaller pieces

that he eventually made into independent works. The most famous of these autonomous fragments is The Thinker (fig 780), intended for the lintel of the Gates, whence the figure was to contemplate the panorama of despair below. The ancestry of The Thinker goes back, indirectly at least, to the beginning phase of Christian art (the brooding Adam of the Byzantine ivory in fig 781 reflects an Early Christian source); it also includes the action-in-repose of Michelangelo's superhuman bodies (see fig. 555, 559, colorplate 60), the tension in Puget's Milo (see fig 689, especially the feet), and the expressive dynamism of The Man with the Broken Nose. Who is The Thinker? Partly Adam, no doubt (though there is also a different Adam by Rodin, another "outgrowth" of the Gates), partly Prometheus, and partly the brute imprisoned by the passions of the flesh. Rodin wisely refrained from giving him a specific name, for the statue fits no preconceived identity. In this new image of man, form and meaning are one, instead of cleaving apart as in Carpeaux's

Dance. Carpeaux produced naked figures that pretend to be nude, while The Thinker, like the nudes of Michelangelo, is free from subservience to the undressed model.

The Kiss (fig. 782), an over-lifesize group in marble, also derives from the Gates. Less powerful than The Thinker, it exploits another kind of artful unfinishedness. Rodin had been impressed by the struggle of Michelangelo's "Slaves" against the remnants of the blocks that imprison them; The Kiss was planned from the start to include the mass of roughhewn marble to which the lovers are attached, and which thus becomes symbolic of their earthbound passion. The contrast of textures emphasizes the veiled, sensuous softness of the bodies. But Rodin was by instinct a modeler, not a carver like Michelangelo. His greatest works were intended to be cast in bronze. Even these, however, reveal their full strength only when we see them in plaster casts made directly from Rodin's clay originals.

783. AUGUSTE RODIN.
Balzac (portion). 1892-97.
Plaster, 9' 10".
Rodin Museum, Paris



The Balzac Monument, his most daring creation, remained in plaster for many years, rejected by the committee that had commissioned it (fig. 783). The figure is larger than life, physically and spiritually; it has the overpowering presence of a specter. Like a huge monolith, the man of genius towers above the crowd; he shares "the sublime egotism of the gods" (as the Romantics put it). Rodin has minimized the articulation of the body, so that from a distance we see only its great bulk. As we approach, we become aware that Balzac is wrapped in a long, shroud-like cloak. From this mass the head thrusts upward—one is tempted to say, erupts—with elemental force. When we are close enough to make out the features clearly, we sense beneath the disdain an inner agony that stamps Balzac as the kin of The Man with the Broken Nose.

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