

19th and Early 20th Century Art

The decades between 1800 and 1900 saw massive social, political, and economic changes. Artists moved further away from their traditional roles as retainers of the church or state, acquiring unprecedented freedom of expression. No longer tied to religious, mythological, and historical themes, they explored a range of subjects, from the politics of the day to the gamut of human emotions. By the 1840's, photography was widely in use, completely freeing painting from its documentary function. With art further released from pragmatic concerns, many artists rallied under the banner of "art for art's sake". This rich creative seedbed gave rise to a number of important and influential artistic movements including Romanticism, Realism, and Impressionism. The far-reaching influence of these movements can be seen in the works presented here. While the leading-edge of these movements was firmly planted in Europe, their ideas and adherents made their way to the New World, influencing American culture until the middle of the 20th century.



Dangerous Shore exhibit the high drama of Romanticism. An image of a shipwreck washed ashore, relays the majesty and beauty of nature as well as its destructive power. While Romantic artists often delved into fantasy, many were firmly rooted in political and social causes. There was a strong nationalist strain among these artists in both Europe and the United States. Many, like the Nazarenes and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, held Medieval Europe as a utopian ideal. Other artists played to the European audiences' fascination with North Africa and the Middle East.

As the 19th century progressed, some artists turned their attention from fantasy to exploring reality. The landscape, long seen as the least of all themes, became the central subject for many artists. Members of the Barbizon School, named for the village in which they worked, produced unpolished scenes of the French countryside that scandalized conservative sensibilities. Artists also turned their eye to contemporary life, portraying ordinary people in ordinary situations. The most radical of these artists used



their work to criticize the social order with stark images of the working class. All of these artists felt that art should reflect reality, whether as a scientific study of cloud formations or a politically charged sculpture satirizing the powers that be. This ethos carried from Europe to the United States, where it remained dominant until the 1940's in both Social Realism and Regionalism. Moses Soyer's *Girl in a Green Sweater* illustrates the Realist approach to portraiture. Soyer found humanity in the imperfections of his subjects. He presents an unvarnished study of his young sitter deep in thought.

In the 1860's, a small group of artists in Paris pushed their exploration of nature into new artistic territory. Influenced by photography and advances in color theory, they were interested in capturing the fleeting effects of light and atmosphere. These artists would exhibit together under the banner of Impressionism. These artists painted directly from the landscape, *en plein air*. Their work was identified by its loose, quick brushwork, inventive compositions, and innovative use of color. Impressionism spread across the Atlantic by American artists studying abroad.



The Bathing Hour by Edward Henry Potthast reflects the influence Impressionism had on American artists. His painterly application and use of color are all hallmarks of Impressionist painting.



Just as opportunities for artistic expression opened for fine artists, similar opportunities opened for craftspeople in the decorative arts, leading to innovations in styles as well as production methods. As the Industrial Revolution took hold, markets for decorative arts opened. The production of decorative works like ceramics, textiles, and furniture moved from royal manufactories to private firms. Artisans and entrepreneurs like Josiah Wedgwood industrialized production developing new techniques and styles. Newly opened markets also led to new styles resulting from a new diversity in tastes.

By the end of the 18th century, Wedgwood was manufacturing basalt ware and jasper ware inspired by ancient Greek and Roman pottery. At the end of the 19th century, the search for novel products to keep up with changing tastes, led further to innovations. In 1894, Louis Comfort Tiffany patented his technique for creating “favrite glass”, a translucent, iridescent glass that features an array of metallic colors. By this time, the production of decorative arts was fully industrialized and works were being produced for large markets.