

## IMMERSIVE MONET AND THE IMPRESSIONISTS – AUDIO GUIDE

*Listen and learn about the background of the artists in this piece written and voiced by Lighthouse Immersive's Creative Consultant, Richard Ouzounian:*

Paris needed some magic in 1874.

Ever since the French Revolution began in 1789, the city had been going through nearly a century of total social upheaval. Kings and emperors came and went, political movements were born and died, and Paris remained at the centre of it all.

Finally, the Franco-Prussian War put the city under siege and brought it to near starvation, with the residents having to eat horses, dogs, cats, rats and even the elephants from the Paris Zoo.

No wonder people looked to the skies for relief.

That's where the hot-air balloons which had been invented 20 years before continued to provide relief and fantasy. During the war, they had been the only way mail and provisions could cross the enemy lines and now they served as a liberating reminder of the resilience of the human spirit.

An author/inventor named Gaspard-Félix Tournachon had been their champion – under his pseudonym, Nadar – and authors like Jules Verne had promoted the dream engines in his *Five Weeks in a Balloon* as well as in his giant 1874 success *Around the World in Eighty Days*.

But Nadar thought the time had come for something different.

A new style in art had been slowly but steadily making its way into the country's consciousness, a style built on delicacy, light, a glorification of the ordinary. Its disciples were Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, Edgar Degas and Pierre-August Renoir.

It was scorned by the establishment, most notably in 1863 when the Salon de Paris rejected Edouard Manet's now-classic *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* on grounds of immorality. A naked woman having a picnic with two clothed men outraged the Art Establishment. But in response, Emperor Napoleon III created the Salon des Refusés for all those who had failed to meet establishment approval.

It was an extremely popular experiment, but it was not repeated and as this new wave of artists continued to find their voices being unheard, 30 of them united as “The Anonymous Society of Painters, Sculptors and Engravers.”

Nadar came to the rescue, offering the artists a home in his own salon at 35 Boulevard des Capucines where the artists presented their exhibition on April 15, 1874.

There was a great deal of initial interest, but it soon proved to be from people who had come to mock the new style of painting. This became clear a week after the opening when *Le Charivari*, an influential illustrated magazine which carried enormous weight in Paris from 1832 to 1937, offered their review of the exhibition by Louis Leroy.

He attacked the whole experience brutally, but saved his most devastating scorn for Monet’s *Impression, soleil levant*. “What does this canvas represent? Look at the catalogue: *Impression: Sunrise*. An impression, nothing more. Wallpaper in its embryonic state is even more accurate than this painting.”

He went on to mockingly call his whole review *The Exhibition of the Impressionists*. Ironically, the term caught on, and soon many people were using the name “Impressionism” to describe these artists and their works.

But first, it almost seemed as if Leroy might have been correct about the value of their work, because when the exhibition closed, it had generated so little revenue that the 30 members of “The Anonymous Society of Painters, Sculptors and Engravers” had to pool their resources to pay their debts and disbanded their company.

But before many years had passed, Impressionism seemed to have captured the spirit of Paris in this period of liberation after so much strife.

Three elements of its style caused this to happen: Light, Movement and Life.

If there is one thing that defined the work of the Impressionists, it was their use of light. A realistic depiction of the time of day soon became a trademark of their most celebrated works and prompted them to use shorter brush strokes to convey the quality of the light they were trying to represent and many of them began to paint *en plein air* to capture the fleeting moment of a sunrise or sunset.

While it is true that much of Impressionism was devoted to portraits and landscapes, movement was also a major force and many of its artists took the opportunity to capture the sense of liberation that spread across Paris in those years following the Franco-Prussian War, using the freedom of their new techniques to capture the vitality that could be felt all around in the people of the city.

And the final element that Impressionism embraced was life. One of the major changes it brought to art was that anything was now a fit subject for a painting. It didn't have to be classically inspired, morally correct or formally structured. High-born, low-born, sinner or saint. If it came from life, if it was real, it belonged on a canvas.

As the Impressionist Movement evolved and changed and grew it came to include many artists like Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Paul Cezanne who could more properly be called Post-Impressionists or even Cubists, or even some from the Romantic era of the past like J.M.W. Turner.

But to Massimiliano Siccardi, who created this show, they are all part of this time and place, and so he has included them in the list of 20 artists who help tell his story

There are 10 painters whose works appear most frequently and each fits into a different part of the complex mosaic that makes up Impressionism.

Magic. Beauty. Romance. Tranquility. Energy. Sensuality. Abundance. Joy. Nature. Paris.

## **J. M. W. TURNER - "MAGIC"**

Born: April 23, 1775 London, England.

Turner began painting at a very early age and was enrolled in the Royal Academy of Arts at the age of 14.

At a time when most of his contemporaries painted indoors, Turner embraced working in the open air and celebrated the joys of natural light.

He left behind 550 oil paintings, 2,000 watercolors and over 30,000 sketches from his prolific career.

Died: Dec. 29, 1851. Chelsea, England.

“The sun is God.”

### **CLAUDE MONET - “BEAUTY”**

Born: November 14, 1840 in Paris

Monet began painting in adolescence, but his family offered no financial support. When he was struggling with extreme poverty, he grew so depressed he jumped off a bridge into the Seine.

He continued to suffer depression, especially after his beloved wife, Camille, died of cancer at the age of 32

Monet’s masterwork is universally agreed to be his series of paintings of water lilies, which he created over 30 years in the garden of his home in Giverny.

He died on December 5, 1926.

“I would like to paint the way a bird sings.”

### **EDOUARD MANET - “ROMANCE”**

Born: January 23, 1832 in Paris.

Manet started painting at the age of 18. His initial works depicted the everyday life of Paris, especially in the streets and cafes.

The friendships he formed with Monet and Degas led him into Impressionism, with an increasing emphasis on the varieties of light.

Critics were divided about the merits of his work although he did achieve a measure of success in the last decade of his life.

His health began deteriorating due to syphilis and he died on April 30, 1883.

“One must be of one’s time and paint what one sees.”

### **EUGENE BOUDIN - “TRANQUILITY”**

Born: July 12, 1824                      Honfleur

Boudin grew up on the Normandy coast. By the time he was 22, he was painting full-time in Paris, but he never lost sight of his roots.

He was known for his generosity of spirit and his influence on his contemporaries, always urging them to follow his lead and paint outdoors.

He produced 4,000 paintings and over 7,000 drawings and watercolours in his lifetime.

He died on August 8, 1898,

“Three strokes of the brush in front of nature are worth more than two days of work at the easel.”

### **EDGAR DEGAS - “ENERGY”**

Born: July 19, 1834 Paris

Degas knew he wanted to paint from an early age, trained at the conservative École des Beaux-Arts and then travelled to Italy for three years.

He would become best known for his paintings of dancers and turned out roughly 1,500 of them in his career.

His eyesight disintegrated throughout his life and he compensated by using broader strokes and bolder colors.

As he grew older, he cut himself off from all his friends, and died on September 27, 1917.

“Art is not what you see, but what you make others see.”

### **HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC - “Sensuality”**

**BORN:** November 24, 1864 Albi, France

Toulouse-Lautrec broke both of his legs in adolescence but they never healed properly. His legs ceased to grow but the rest of his torso developed normally.

He studied art extensively in Montmartre where he became famous for his posters of the Moulin Rouge.

His alcoholism led to his dying at the age of 36 on September 9, 1901, but he created 750 paintings in his short lifetime.

“I paint things as they are. I don’t comment. I record.”

### **PAUL CEZANNE – “ABUNDANCE”**

Born: January 19, 1839 Aix-en-Provence

Cezanne grew up in a wealthy family, but his father refused to support his artistic ambitions. He rebelled and moved to Paris, participating in the first Impressionists’ exhibition in 1874.

His father’s death in 1886 left him with a huge fortune and he withdrew to the countryside where he started to paint more and more along the lines of cubism.

He died of pneumonia on Oct. 22, 1906.

“The day is coming when a single carrot, freshly observed, will start a revolution.”

### **MARY CASSATT – “JOY”**

BORN: May 22, 1844 Allegheny City, USA

The daughter of a well-off family, Cassatt was exposed to the art of Delacroix, Corot and Courbet by the age of 11.

She eventually moved to Paris and joined in with the Impressionist movement.

Degas became her mentor and she was very successful, both with the critics and the public.

DIED: June 14, 1926. Paris.

“ I think that if you shake the tree, you ought to be around when the fruit falls to pick it up.”

### **CAMILLE PISSARRO - “NATURE”**

Born: July 10, 1830 St. Thomas, Danish West Indies

Pissarro’s father sent him to boarding school in Paris at the age of 12, where he developed an appreciation for the French art masters.

During the Franco-Prussian War, Pissarro and his family had to flee to England and almost all of the 1,500 paintings he had left behind were destroyed.

Shortly after that, he became the father figure behind the collective of artists who would create the first “Impressionist” show.

He died on November 13.

“The whole world is beautiful. The art is in the seeing.”

### **PIERRE-AUGUST RENOIR - “PARIS”**

Born: February 25, 1841 Limoges, France

In his youth, Renoir apprenticed instead as a porcelain painter in his native Limoges.

He eventually moved to Paris and became very friendly with his fellow student, Claude Monet, joining with him and the other members of the first “Impressionists” Exhibition in 1874.

He developed rheumatoid arthritis and spent the last 27 years of his life in increasing pain, but continued to paint, even when an assistant had to place the brush in his hand.

He died on December 3, 1919 in Cagnes-sur-Mer, France.

“The pain passes, but the beauty remains.”

Paris at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A city which had been suffering for close to a hundred years finally got to open its eyes to the beauty of the world around it.

Is it any wonder the artists of Paris responded by creating a new style where color and light were the order of the day?

Monet's water lillies, Degas's dancers, Renoir's revelers, Manet's picnickers, Boudin's bathers – they are all part of the new bohemians who looked at the world through different eyes.

Join them now. The party is about to begin.