

Impressionism is a style of painting that began in Paris, France in the mid-1800s. Unlike artists before them, the impressionists painted most of their paintings outdoors and liked to portray natural subjects like trees, fields, and oceans. Impressionists often painted outdoor what they saw. This is called painting “en plein air.”

When impressionists painted pictures of people, they made them look like people you would see everyday. Rather than painting religious figures or royalty, impressionists painted people like the local tavern owner, a girl awaiting the beginning of a play, or workers resting. They often used their own family and friends as subjects in their paintings.

Before the impressionists, painters usually placed the main subject of their painting in the center. It was the first thing the viewer looked at and the background was not nearly as important. Before the impressionists, the main focus was, more often than not, placed in the middle of the painting. Impressionists often put more emphasis on the scene than on the person or main subject of the painting. To do this, they painted the main subject off to the side rather than in the center of the painting. An impressionist painting looks more like a photograph in this way. A photograph captures not only the main subject, but everything around the subject and everything in the photo is important. Photography was just becoming popular in the mid-1800s and influenced the way the impressionists looked at things.

The style was called impressionism because the artists were not as exacting about painting a realistic picture. They used many short brush strokes, applying paint thickly, to create the idea, or impression, of a subject. Vincent van Gogh is a good example of this technique. The paint on his canvases is



often so thick it looks 3D. Because of the quick, short strokes, if you stand very close to an impressionist painting and look at it, often the painting won't look like anything but a bunch of paint blobs. When you back away from it, though, you can see the whole picture.

Another characteristic of impressionist painting is the study of light. The way light changed the shadows and colors of subjects was of much interest to impressionists.