

WALL TEXTS

RENOIR. ROCOCO REVIVAL.

IMPRESSIONISM AND THE FRENCH ART OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

2 MARCH TO 19 JUNE 2022

Exhibition annex

Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919) was among the outstanding artists of the nineteenth century. His use of a vibrant palette and often loose and sketchy brushwork to capture fleeting impressions on canvas made him the quintessential Impressionist painter. His depictions of modern life in late-nineteenth-century Paris still inform our image of that epoch today. Yet Renoir took inspiration not only from his everyday surroundings, but also from the art of past eras. French eighteenth-century painting was especially important to him. In fact, he and his contemporaries held it in such high regard that we meanwhile speak of a ‘Rococo Revival’.

Renoir’s references to the eighteenth century are many-faceted. To begin with, he shared the Rococo predilection for certain motifs such as the park or riverfront promenade, moments of repose in the outdoors, and the garden party. Another recurring theme in his art is domestic life: moments of family togetherness as well as more intimate situations such as bathing, reading, or musicmaking. He also took inspiration from the art of the previous century in his loose painting style and employment of certain drawing mediums. And finally, Renoir subscribed to the Rococo affirmation of art’s decorative function—and the idea that it should enhance all areas of life.

The exhibition takes a closer look at this tradition-oriented side of Renoir’s work and examines his oeuvre from the perspective of the nineteenth century’s generally keen appreciation of the Rococo. Juxtapositions with works of the eighteenth century, but also comparisons with artists of the Impressionist circle offer an opportunity to rediscover the work of Renoir.

Renoir, the ‘New Watteau’

‘Just as Watteau created the feminine charm of the eighteenth century, so did Renoir create the feminine charm of the nineteenth.’

It was the French writer Octave Mirbeau who arrived at this assessment in 1884, thus associating Renoir with one of the most important exponents of Rococo painting:

Antoine Watteau (1684–1721) had come to great fame in the eighteenth century for inventing a new pictorial type, the so-called *fêtes galantes*. They depict fantasy landscapes in which sumptuously attired couples take leisurely strolls, engage in mutual wooing, and seek distractions and amusements. These utopian dream worlds mirror eighteenth-century aristocratic society's desire to flee the constraints of the rigid ceremonial practised at the French court. Watteau's most well-known work is the *Embarkation for Cythera*, which he developed in altogether three variations. The earliest is in the Städel Museum collection, the significantly larger second version in the Paris Louvre, where Renoir admired it, and the third now in Berlin. Watteau's compositions also became widely known in printed reproductions.

During his apprenticeship as a porcelain painter, Renoir decorated fans and plates with Watteau's motif—and he would go on to take inspiration from Rococo painting all his life. While he no longer made direct copies after becoming an independent artist, he continued to infuse his works with the flavour of the eighteenth century. Paintings such as the *Promenade* look like blown-up details of Watteau's dreamy gallant sceneries. And they provide striking explanations of why contemporary art critics considered Renoir a successor to Watteau.

What does Rococo mean?

The term 'Rococo' was not common in the eighteenth century. It only became established in the early nineteenth as an amalgamation of the words *rocaille* (shellwork), *coquille* (shell), and *barocco* (Italian for Baroque) used to refer to a style prevailing between 1715 and 1780 in architecture, interior furnishings, art, and arts and crafts. Rococo introduced a light and playful quality to the splendid formal language of the Baroque. Owing to the intimacy of its motifs as well as the formats—usually adapted to the scale of private interiors—it differed distinctly from the history painting genre of the time. It concentrated on worldly themes such as festivities, shepherd scenes, and courtship among elegantly clad couples. A heyday of French art, the Rococo brought forth a spectrum of very different artistic figures. Yet already the nineteenth century narrowed the focus to a handful of outstanding exponents who still shape our image of the epoch today. Since that time, the works of Antoine Watteau (1684–1721), Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin (1699–1779), François Boucher (1703–1770), and Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806) have been considered the quintessence of Rococo art.

Renoir's Training

Renoir's deep preoccupation with the art of the eighteenth century has its roots in his training as a porcelain painter from 1854 onwards in the workshop of Lévy-Frères et C^{ie} in Paris. The company decorated porcelain with motifs frequently based on works by Rococo painters such as Watteau, Boucher, and Nicolas Lancret (1690–1743). Renoir studied their paintings in the Louvre and developed independent interpretations in drawings which he then transferred to the porcelain blanks. In the framework of his work as a décorateur, he thus came into contact with the Rococo early in life, and it would serve him as a source of inspiration from that time forward. Only few works by the artist have come down to us from that early period, among them sketchbook pages with studies of cartouches and garlands as well as figures dressed in eighteenth-century fashions. The painted decoration of an extant Lévy-Frères product, a vase-shaped candleholder with bronze mounts, is also the work of Renoir. Looking back, he himself described his training years as formative for his artistic self-conception: he firmly believed that art and the crafts were as closely interlinked as they had been in the eighteenth century.

What does 'Rococo Revival' mean?

Renoir's artistic disposition as well as his motivic and stylistic borrowings are to be seen in the light of nineteenth-century Europe's comprehensive reassessment of Rococo painting. Whereas the courtly art of the eighteenth century was long regarded as frivolous and immoral, opinions in France began to change around 1830, and the Rococo rose continually in estimation from that time onwards. Especially after the defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870/71), the eighteenth century came to be idealized as a splendid era of French culture. Feminine grace, fashionable elegance, and sensuality—all characteristics of Rococo works—were now in demand. However different their painting styles, many artists now produced works that met these requirements. Renoir's elegant couples, genre and boudoir scenes, nudes, and still lifes were beautifully suited to bourgeois interiors decorated with Rococo-style furnishings. This is illustrated, for example, by a view of art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel's salon.

An important factor in the rediscovery of the Rococo was its ever-increasing visibility in public presentations and collections. In July of 1860, the Galerie Martinet in Paris opened a trailblazing special exhibition on the art of the French eighteenth century that attracted interest far and wide. Not long afterwards, through donations such as that by Louis La Caze (1869), numerous works by Boucher, Chardin, Fragonard, Watteau, and other masters found their way into the Louvre, whose holdings in this area had hitherto been rather negligible. Art writers, among them the Goncourt

brothers, responded prolifically, helping to bring about a new awareness of the art of the eighteenth century.

The Goncourts & the Rococo

The increasing interest in the Rococo was mirrored not only in the visual arts, but also in literature. From the 1830s onwards, France saw the publication of numerous articles by authors who vehemently championed the art of the Rococo, for example Théophile Gautier, Arsène Houssaye, and Théophile Thoré. The texts by the brothers Edmond and Jules de Goncourt (1822–1896; 1830–1870; photo) also contributed decisively to the positive reassessment of the style. Starting in 1859, they published a large number of texts on the ‘French century par excellence’. They considered the Rococo the age of ‘delicious decadence’, distinguished by great artistic ability, feminine charm, and gallantry. Among other things, they put out a series of articles on the art of the eighteenth century that proved especially influential and later came out in book form (‘L’Art au XVIIIe siècle’, 1859–1875, continued by Edmond after the premature death of Jules). The Goncourts also wrote books on Marie-Antoinette (1858), the mistresses of Louis XV (1860), the role of the woman in the eighteenth century (1862), and love in that era (1875). As active collectors, the two brothers moreover purchased numerous Rococo drawings.

Modern *Fêtes Galantes*

The term *fêtes galantes* (gallant parties) is closely associated with Watteau; it denotes a pictorial type he developed in the early eighteenth century. The images depict couples in love, dancers, musicians, and actresses engaged in mutual wooing and other amusements, usually in lush natural settings. Continued by Watteau’s only pupil Jean-Baptiste Pater (1695–1736), it eventually became established as a genre in its own right and the absolute epitome of French Rococo painting. When the latter began to rise in estimation again from the 1830s onwards, the *fêtes galantes* also enjoyed renewed notice. In this room, works by Narcisse Virgile Diaz de la Peña, Henri Baron, and Adolphe Monticelli—modern interpretations of the *fêtes galantes* executed in very different manners and painting styles—serve as examples of the nineteenth century’s early artistic exploration of the Rococo. Many of Renoir’s works can also be regarded in the context of this tradition. We often encounter in them the state of limbo characteristic of this pictorial type: the scenes show moments of delight, enjoyment, and diversion without offering a storyline, let alone seeking to edify. Rather than developing a narrative, they invite us to fill them with our own

thoughts. This involvement of the viewer lent Rococo painting a modernity that met with great interest on the part of the artists associated with Impressionism.

Renoir & Modern Leisure Culture

Whereas the *fêtes galantes* of Rococo painting play out before idealized natural backdrops, the settings depicted by Renoir and his contemporaries can often be precisely identified. The same is true of the scenes' protagonists, who were often friends and acquaintances of the artist's. We encounter them in the parks and cafés of Paris and the box seats of its opera house, as well as at popular excursionist destinations on the Seine, for example on the Île de la Grenouillère near Bougival or rowing in Chatou. In these works, Renoir formulated a modernized, personal interpretation of the gallant scenes invented by Watteau, Lancret, and Pater in the eighteenth century. And he replaced Cythera—the ancient island of love those artists visualized as an other-worldly sphere—with accessible places of happiness. Already contemporary observers addressed themselves to this elective affinity. Writing in 1877 about Renoir's painting *The Swing*, for example, Georges-Rivière commented: *'You have to go back to Watteau to find a charm similar to that of the painting The Swing. One recognizes in it something of the Embarkation to Cythera with a particular nineteenth-century touch.'* Comparisons to Watteau were soon a recurring motif in art criticism, and in Renoir's case had a sales-promoting effect.

Renoir & Impressionism

Impressionism emerged around 1870 in Paris, where the eight so-called 'Impressionist exhibitions' took place between 1874 and 1886. Apart from Renoir, who showed works in four of them, the participants included painters such as Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Berthe Morisot, and Camille Pissarro. Impressionism can be understood as the artistic response to the comprehensive changes in the very conditions of existence brought about by industrialization. Its artists no longer took their motifs from history, the Bible, or literature, but from everyday life and their own immediate surroundings. Views of the landscape and scenes of city life—on the boulevards, at the opera, in the cafés—were the subject matter of the new age, as seen here in the works by Édouard Manet and Degas. The modern themes called for a new mode of artistic expression. With the aid of an open, sketchy-looking formal language meant to convey the transience of the moment, the artists reacted to the fast pace of their time but also to the latest scientific findings on human visual perception. In the process, they were far less interested in representing the world around them in all detail as in conveying their impressions. Already then, art

critics therefore referred to Impressionism as a novel and markedly contemporary manner of painting ('La Nouvelle Peinture'). Yet the artists also studied art-historical tradition in great depth—not only the Rococo, but also, for example, seventeenth-century Dutch and Spanish painting as well as the plein-air painting practised in the 1830s by the Barbizon school.

Renoir the Draughtsman

In addition to his activities as a painter, Renoir was also an avid draughtsman. Some 800 works on paper dating from between 1857 and 1919, the year of his death, have come down to us. Depicting landscapes, still lifes, portraits, nudes, bathers, and multi-figural scenes, they are devoted to essentially the same themes as his paintings. The variety of the motifs is matched by that of the drawing mediums: Renoir worked with pencil, charcoal, (pastel) chalk, ink, and watercolour. He was especially fond of eighteenth-century drawing techniques: pastels and so-called 'trois-crayons', the combination of red, black, and white chalk. Like his predecessors Watteau, Lancret, Boucher, and others, Renoir used this triad both for sketches and for drawings conceived as works of art in their own right. Pastels, on the other hand, served him primarily in the execution of portraits. Works of eighteenth-century draughtsmanship were by all means present in Renoir's world: there were reproductions of them in books and magazines, and the originals were not only on view in exhibitions but also had a firm place in the presentation of the collection at the Louvre.

Renoir's Amazon

Fashionably dressed as a so-called 'Amazon' for her morning ride in the Bois de Boulogne, the equestrienne gazes boldly out at the viewer. It is Henriette Darras (1837–1910), the wife of a captain at the Parisian école militaire. The latter had provided Renoir with the opportunity to study horses and their movements there, thus enabling him to render his motif in as realistic a manner as possible. As a model for the boy on the pony, Renoir chose the thirteen-year-old Joseph Le Cœur, the son of his patron Charles Le Cœur. With this imposing work he created a classical equestrian portrait in the format of a monumental history painting. He thus adopted a pictorial type that had become established over the centuries for the depiction of the French kings. In the eighteenth century, Marie-Antoinette (1755–1793), among others, repeatedly had herself portrayed as an equestrienne as a way of underscoring her status as an emancipated and self-determined regent. Yet Renoir applied this traditional formula for the ennoblement of a pictorial subject dating from

the Ancien Régime—that is, the period before the French Revolution—to the world of the late nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. The result is a depiction that lends royal splendour to a member of the upper middle class. For the Impressionist painters, this device was a decisive factor in expanding their ‘product line’ with works that would appeal to more conservative customers. Renoir, who continued exhibiting at the Paris Salon in addition to participating in the ‘Impressionist exhibitions’, submitted this painting there in 1873 by way of application. Although it was not accepted by the jury, he was able to sell it to Henri Rouart, a painter and collector of Impressionist art, the following year.

Renoir & Decoration

Renoir penned his rare theoretical writings from the end of the 1870s onwards. They revolve around the significance of the crafts. Over the course of industrialization, the manual crafts were increasingly replaced by mass production. Renoir felt a growing desire for a return to the close alliance between art and crafts that had distinguished the eighteenth century. His deliberations on the meaning and purpose of art accordingly also revolved around the idea of a decorative synthesis of the arts—a notion likewise firmly established in the Rococo. ‘The purpose of painting is to decorate walls’, Renoir remarked pithily in a conversation. In his early years he had adorned cabinets, painted fans, and designed wall paintings for domestic interiors. Even later in his career, he frequently carried out decorative paintings, often in direct connection with his large network of friends, patrons, and customers. The majority of these works have not survived. All the more instructive is the example of the Château de Wargemont. In this castle to the northeast of Dieppe belonging to his friend and patron Paul Berard, Renoir realized numerous works that are well documented in historical photographs. Among other things, he decorated two doors of the library with bouquets of flowers and painted hunting trophy still lifes on the wood-panelled walls of the dining room. He also repeatedly portrayed the estate’s inhabitants. Renoir’s preoccupation with decoration was moreover manifest in the wide range of media he employed. In addition to painting and drawing, he carried out illustrations for books and magazines as well as sculptures.

Boudoir

In Renoir’s day, the boudoir was considered the quintessence of the Rococo. In the homes of the Parisian haute bourgeoisie, no other room was furnished as consistently in the eighteenth-century style as this one. Whereas the study (cabinet) was reserved for the gentleman of the house, the boudoir was the woman’s domain.

It offered a means of withdrawal and, at least in fantasy, formed the backdrop for erotic debaucheries—which earned it the epithet ‘empire of frivolity’. In the visual arts, the intimate boudoir scene had become established as a genre of its own from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. The compositions often depict women resting on a bed or chaise longue. Another frequent theme is grooming or dressing. In the nineteenth century, motifs in this vein were associated above all with one artist: François Boucher. In addition to eighteenth-century works by Boucher, Vigée-Lebrun, and Greuze, this room features paintings by Renoir’s contemporaries Meissonier and Winterhalter. Taking their orientation from academic norms, these two artists produced portraits intended for a conservative public. Like the paintings by Renoir on view here, they usually leave us in the dark about what type of room it is that forms the setting. Yet the informal attire and the private nature of the scenes steer the viewers’ thoughts in the direction of the boudoir, virtually casting them as voyeuristic intruders in the process. In contrast, Renoir’s female artist colleague Berthe Morisot invented a decidedly feminine variety of boudoir painting. With her models she shared not only gender but also social milieu, and in her works she offered an intimate perspective on modern femininity.

Reading & Handiwork

Depictions of women engaged in everyday occupations such as reading or handiwork are closely related to the boudoir setting. These subjects have their origins in seventeenth-century Dutch painting, which had a large following among French artists and collectors alike from the eighteenth century onwards. Whereas in Rococo painting, reading was understood as a sign of education and status, in Renoir’s works it fulfils a different function. He used the motif to show his models in an intimate moment of concentration. The absence of eye contact frees the viewer’s gaze for a closer look at the painterly execution. By comparing the paintings assembled here, we can moreover retrace the change in Renoir’s painting technique from loose and sketchy Impressionist-style brushwork to the painterly modelling of three-dimensional figures in his later years.

Nudes & Bathers

A core subject of the visual arts since antiquity, female bathers were an extremely popular motif in the nineteenth century. The female nude also represented a key theme in Renoir’s oeuvre throughout his career. He looked above all to compositions by Boucher for orientation, especially *Diana Leaving Her Bath* (fig. 1). This was the first work by Boucher to be purchased by the Louvre (1852). It was soon one of the

most frequently copied paintings in the museum, and from 1864 onwards was also available to artists in the form of a printed reproduction. Not long afterwards, numerous Rococo paintings entered the Louvre with the bequest of the physician Louis La Caze (1869). Until then, the museum had had only very few French eighteenth-century works in its holdings. The La Caze collection also included a scene of bathers by Fragonard (fig. 2) that would likewise play an important role for Renoir. The sensuality of the two Rococo artists' nudes, their free and vibrant brushwork and pastel palettes all had an immediate impact on Renoir's painting style. Like his eighteenth-century predecessors, he usually depicted his bathers in indeterminate settings far removed from reality. The scenes revolve not so much around the actual act of bathing as around the idea of touching the skin and bodies. Contemporary art critics and artist colleagues such as Morisot, but also members of the following generation like Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and Henri Matisse (1869–1954) appreciated Renoir for the characteristic female type he created. Starting in the 1980s, however, his nudes came to be assessed far more critically. They were perceived by feminist art history—but also, far more recently, in conjunction with the Me Too debate—as depictions that treat women as passive objects. Renoir's bathers, however, can be understood above all as a form of insistent devotion to sensuality. The artist considered the female body consummate and it accordingly formed the ideal point of departure for his painterly exploration of beauty.

Landscape and Facture

Renoir is far better known as a figure painter than as a landscapist. Yet landscape played an important role for him as a motif, especially on his travels. He particularly appreciated the quality of the light 'en plein air', as it presented him with shades of colour much different from those he encountered in the dimness of the studio. At the same time, owing to the inconstancy of the weather and with it the light conditions, he found it cumbersome to work out of doors.

This room unites landscapes in various mediums, from oils and watercolours to pen drawings. Altogether they exhibit great variation in the handling of the brush and pen (*facture*). What is more Renoir's style also underwent frequent fundamental changes so that, all in all, one did not encounter 'the same mode of painting twice in any of his works', as his brother Edmond remarked. The depiction of a wave bears striking testimony to his free employment of the paints: thanks to the gestural brushwork, the colour has become the sole vehicle of expression. Particularly in his own comments about his manner of painting and drawing, Renoir referred repeatedly to the eighteenth century. And critics likewise saw a resemblance between the loose brush

style of his compositions (and Impressionist paintings in general) and the sketchy brushwork of Rococo painting, above all the works of Fragonard.

Still Lives

Over the course of his career, Renoir painted nearly six hundred still lifes. The majority depict flowers or fruit, but there are also a few decorative arrangements of crafts objects as well as several on the theme of the hunt. Renoir intensified his focus on still-life painting in the mid-1860s, and thus at a point in time when the genre had become extremely fashionable and accounted for a significant share of the works on view at the Paris Salon. A decisive factor in this development was the oeuvre of Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin (1699–1779). This artist had already changed the perspective on the still life back in the eighteenth century. In place of the symbolic content common until then—with references to the ephemerality of everything earthly—, now the concern was with the objects themselves and their perception. Chardin's still lifes are distinguished by their concentrated compositions usually featuring just a few objects in an austere setting. This mode of depiction directs the viewer's attention to light, colour, and surface textures and their painterly representation. Renoir and his contemporaries followed in Chardin's footsteps in that they treated the still life as a laboratory for experimentation: it offered liberties in artistic formulation and prompted an exploration of painting as such. What is more, small and medium-sized still lifes were very popular with buyers and provided the Impressionists with a good source of income.

Genre Paintings & Figures in Costume

Whereas his fellow artists in the Impressionist circle usually concentrated on landscape painting, Renoir referred to himself as a 'figure painter'. In his paintings of people, there is often no clear line between portrait and genre depiction. The latter usually revolves around everyday scenes and seeks to capture a certain figural type: in Renoir's case, for example, the fashionably attired Parisienne, the reflective young woman, an actress in costume, or a role portrait. The subject's factual identity is irrelevant here. On the contrary, the models serve as a pretext for appealingly designed scenes that cater to the tastes of the time. In the 1890s, Renoir began to devote increasing attention to the theme of musicmaking, which had already held high significance in the eighteenth century. Like the Rococo *fêtes galantes* painters, he drew inspiration from the costumes and established roles of the commedia dell'arte, a form of Italian popular theatre. Yet whereas there we usually encounter women grouped around ensembles of musicmaking men in a natural setting, singing

or just listening, Renoir usually depicted his musicmakers alone and in a domestic environment. And even if many of these scenes offer a glimpse of a contemporary interior, they convey a sense of timelessness, quite in accordance with the endeavour—discernible throughout Renoir’s late oeuvre—to reconcile the modern and the classical.

Peinture morale

In addition to his cheerful motifs from the context of bourgeois leisure culture, Renoir also devoted himself to depictions that suggest a moralizing reading. Here again, he took orientation from works of the eighteenth century, especially those of Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805). Unlike the sensual motifs of the *fêtes galantes*, Greuze’s works call for a return to virtue. Referred to as *peinture morale* (moral painting), they demonstrate the consequences of an unprincipled lifestyle. Renoir produced a number of compositions that invite interpretation as a continuation of this eighteenth-century genre. In the paintings on view here, the line between figural depiction with moralizing undertone and implicitly erotic snapshot from the everyday life of a young woman is fluid. Motifs of this kind enjoyed great popularity on the art market.