

HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS

PHILIP NORD

# Impressionists and Politics

art and democracy in the nineteenth century



# Impressionists and Politics

*Impressionists and Politics* is an accessible introduction to the current debates about impressionism. How revolutionary were the impressionists? Is the term “impressionism” itself a good word for the movement that took the mid-nineteenth century art world by storm?

By providing an historical background and context, this book places impressionism’s roots in wider social and economic transformations and explains its militancy, both aesthetic and political.

*Impressionists and Politics* is a concise history of a major art movement, from its youthful inception in the 1860s, through to its final years of recognition and then crisis.

**Philip Nord** is Professor of History at Princeton University

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Art and Democracy in the  
Nineteenth Century

Philip Nord



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for my Mother and my Father

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## Series editors' preface

**Historical Connections** is a series of short books on important historical topics and debates, written primarily for those studying and teaching history. The books offer original and challenging works of synthesis that will make new themes accessible, or old themes accessible in new ways, build bridges between different chronological periods and different historical debates, and encourage comparative discussion in history.

If the study of history is to remain exciting and creative, then the tendency towards fragmentation must be resisted. The inflexibility of older assumptions about the relationship between economic, social, cultural and political history has been exposed by recent historical writing, but the impression has sometimes been left that history is little more than a chapter of accidents. This series will insist on the importance of processes of historical change, and it will explore the connections within history: connections between different layers and forms of historical experience, as well as connections that resist the fragmentary consequences of new forms of specialism in historical research.

**Historical Connections** will put the search for these connections back at the top of the agenda by exploring new ways of uniting the different strands of historical experience, and by affirming the importance of studying change and movement in history.

*Geoffrey Crossick*  
*John Davies*  
*Joanna Innes*  
*Tom Scott*

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I dedicate this book to my parents, Del Nord and Henry Nord, lovers of art both, who have passed on their enthusiasm to me. It would not have been written without their example.

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## Introduction

The impressionists, according to standard interpretation, worked a revolution in the artworld of mid-nineteenth-century France. In this account, the artists are cast as embattled innovators who challenged and overthrew the institutional and aesthetic orthodoxies of the day.<sup>1</sup> The premier venue for the public exhibition of paintings in mid-century France was the annual Salon, run until 1863 by the Academy of Fine Arts and thereafter by a mix of state appointees and elected representatives, most of them in fact Academy members. The coterie of bureaucrats and academicians who administered the Salon favored conventional genres, historical landscapes and classical nudes. The impressionists, so the story goes, fought to break into this world and, in so doing, broke it open altogether. The Salon was undermined and bypassed. A new art regime, “modern” in its contours, took the place of the old. Painters, once hamstrung by the oligarchical exhibition practices of the Salon, now reached out to a wider art-buying public through an independent network of dealers and galleries. And they appealed to that public in a new aesthetic idiom. Gone were the bituminous canvases of yesteryear, so over-refined in execution, so encumbered by allusion to the great masters of the past. Instead, artists turned to contemporary themes drawn from everyday life, and they painted them in a sketchy, “impressionist” style ablaze with luminous color.

This version of the new painting’s origins, what might be called the heroic legend of impressionism, has been subjected to heavy criticism in recent art historical literature. Alternative stories have been proposed, three of which will be canvased here.

The first, much favored by Francophone art historians, questions just how revolutionary the impressionists were. In the 1860s, it is pointed out, when the movement was still in its infancy, the painters were far from advocating the overthrow of all existing art.<sup>2</sup> Edgar Degas revered Ingres.