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André Dombrowski, ed., *A Companion to Impressionism*. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021. 640 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$140.64 U.S. (hc). ISBN 9-78-1-119373896.

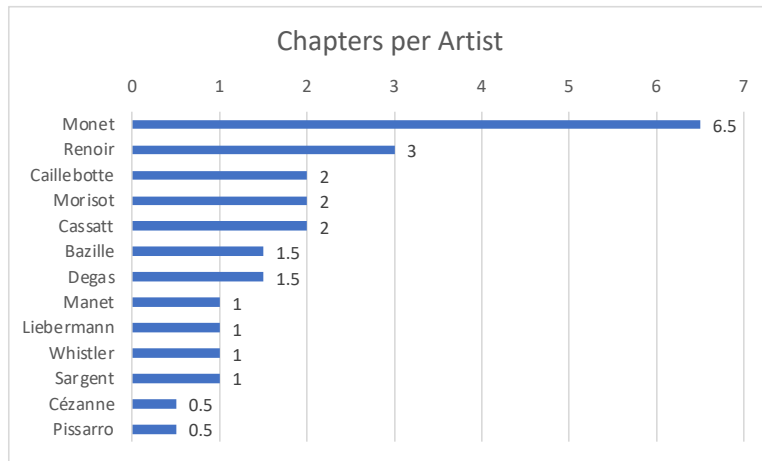
Review by Harmon Siegel, Harvard Society of Fellows.

There is something intrinsically strange about reviewing a 600-page book, with thirty-four essays from the field's heaviest hitters, definitively titled, *A Companion to Impressionism*. To review it effectively means asking the same questions as its editor, André Dombrowski: where has the field been and where is it headed? But the third-personal conventions of the academic book review convey an undue definitiveness, as though I could speak from on high and not, at best, as a thirty-fifth voice.

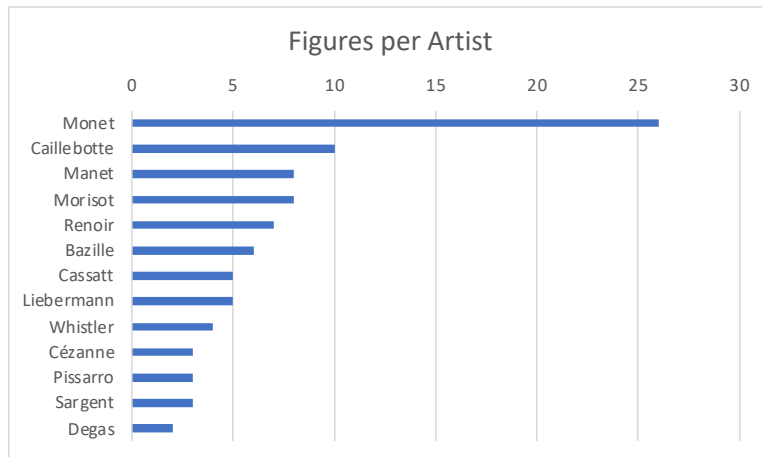
I will summon this faux authority just once, now, to pose the only question that matters for a book of this kind: does it do what it says on the tin? Will it be a reliable companion to impressionism? The answer is undoubtedly yes. It surveys the field, presents diverse approaches, and suggests new directions. It will thus be a necessary reference for anyone working on impressionism. It will also reward readers interested in nineteenth-century art more broadly, as well as early photography, museology, and the history of art criticism. Most importantly, it will be a valuable teaching tool—practically a ready-made syllabus, set for immediate adoption.

In his introduction, Dombrowski defines the book's core subject: "the group of artists (and their international followers) who constituted the core of those participating in the eight impressionist exhibitions between 1874 and 1886" (p. 2). He writes that, because he allowed the contributors the freedom to choose their own topics, "[he] had to accept certain trends, and also gaps" (p. 5). In my view, this method was a good one. Insofar as his stated goal is to give a representative survey of the field, it is more useful to get a ground-up sense of what prominent scholars find interesting than it would have been to insist on proportionate coverage.

To that end, consider the number of chapters devoted to each artist:



For the most part, this distribution affirms the existing pantheon. Consider too the number of figures allotted to each artist—which has a slightly different order—a rough proxy for which artists are given more formal versus contextual treatment:



There are some surprises: notably the low ranks of Degas and Pissarro and the high ones of Bazille and Caillebotte—which, I gather, attest the power of contributor Mary Morton’s major exhibitions to shape the field’s direction. [1] This is all good to know. For one thing, it indicates that our leading authorities generally do *not* believe that “new directions” means departing too much from the canon. As Dombrowski notes, Alfred Sisley is absent, as are those artists “who participated in the first impressionist exhibition but are largely forgotten today, or those who demonstrated some impressionist tendencies in their work but stuck to more traditional subject matter and technique” (p. 5). This sorting suggests the continuing power of modernist preferences for originality and aesthetic quality, which brings me to my first overarching topic: how our changing relationship to modernism refigures our view of the perceived conflict between social and formal methods.

References to this opposition recur throughout. Nancy Locke notes that “Impressionist painting was central to the methodological turn taken in the field of art history from the formalism prevalent up to the 1970s to the social history of art, and then beyond to feminism and gender studies” (p. 147). Similarly, Briony Fer points to the difference “between a so-called socially

engaged view of painting and a so-called formalist one, that was so generative a critical issue in the 1970s,” and which has become “art-historical orthodoxy.” Yet this opposition, she continues (speaking, I’d wager, for most of the contributors), is ultimately “impossible to hold in place in the face of painting itself” (p. 62).

Indeed, dichotomizing social versus formal methods generally overstates their incompatibility. While Marc Gotlieb, for instance, defends attention to what Kermit Champa called “painting as painting” (p. 46), his essay is deeply informed by social histories of French geography, which he seamlessly melds with his analysis of style. Conversely, the more socially oriented essays—clustered in the sections on “Impressionism and Identity” and “Public and Private”—support their interpretations with astute formal observations. Exhibit A: Hollis Clayson, in her essay on Cassatt’s identity, describing the artist’s “jigsaw puzzle-like assembly of flattened passages of paint” (p. 262). Such moments of precise ekphrasis appear throughout the volume, not limited to the more self-avowedly formalistic essays.

We might suppose that these contributors’ comfort melding the two idioms indicates the gradual erosion of the old dike dividing formal and social branches. Yet our usual paradigm of social art history, T. J. Clark’s *Painting of Modern Life*, hinges throughout on its analysis of painterly effects, so much so that Robert Herbert could assert, “Clark’s chief concern—though he might deny it—is style, and particularly the way in which Manet’s pictorial structures look forward to the loss, in the twentieth century, of a felt harmony [with] illusions of the social world.”[2]

This criticism makes Clark’s residual formalism a symptom of his presentism, his conviction that impressionism inaugurates a modernist project that continues into the historian’s own time. Herbert thus slyly brought the putatively opposed Greenbergs and Clarks under the same umbrella, defined by their underlying view that impressionism can be understood retrospectively as part of a continuous, *longue-durée modernism* spanning the century from 1860 to 1960.[3] We find such self-conscious linkages throughout the canonized texts of our field: Linda Nochlin’s *Realism* (1971) opens with a 1969 exhibit of Minimal sculpture, Griselda Pollock’s “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity” (1988) with the organization of MoMA’s collections, etc.[4]

In one way or another, these projects are all invested in *critique*. We distinguish “modern art” from art made in modern times because the former takes a critical stance on its own conditions of possibility, whether we construe those conditions formally (the qualities of each medium) or socially (*avant-garde* negativity). This distinction authorizes normative criteria for differentiating Manet (innovative/critical) from Monet (innovative/complacent), Raffaëlli (uninventive/critical), and the Pompieri (uninventive/complacent).[5]

Very few of the contributors exhibit such modernist commitments. Sylvie Patry, for instance—in her scrupulous documentation of collecting histories from 1880 to 1900—seeks to debunk the “heroic narrative” of Paul Durand-Ruel’s defiance of institutional opposition in his single-handed support for impressionism, which she shows to be a “modernist myth” (p. 567). To me, such arguments evince a wider decline in the perceived credibility of modernism as a normative project. Taking our distance, we may periodize its terms, noting echoes between, say, artworks like Barbara Kruger’s and books like *Dealing with Degas* (1992), such that modernist criticality appears as an object of historical knowledge and not a value to be claimed.[6]

There are notable exceptions, especially in the section on identity. Anne Higonnet's essay, "Critical Impressionism," for instance, continues her career-long project of uncovering female artists' contestation of gendered visual culture—here, Mary Cassatt's of porcelain and lace. It emerges also in Denise Murrell's groundbreaking research into black models, which cites Bazille's and Degas's "fitful phasing out of centuries-old conventions depicting black women as subordinates and accessories" as "key clues to why Manet and the Impressionists were foundational to modernist aesthetics" (p. 272). In both these cases, the authors invoke the social, not formal valence of criticality. Only Briony Fer defends the latter. Her essay on Manet's flower paintings self-consciously asserts continuity with twentieth-century modernism, asking how our familiarity with later abstraction influences our looking at Manet. This retrospective approach entails refusing "entrenched beliefs about what is old and what is new" whereby "the psycho-historical life of paintings is not only rooted in, and explicable by, the historical period in which it was made" (p. 61).

This remark brings me to my second overarching theme: the separateness of the art object from its historical interpretations. Consider the book's final essay, Martha Ward's analysis of the Museum of Impressionism founded in 1947. [7] It examines how the institution's approaches to "art historical narration [and] display practice" evinced "contradictions in the place accorded Impressionism at this time...when cultural supremacy was held to be key to France's international standing" (p. 585). Ward makes us care about this history, in part, for how it helps us reframe a deep contradiction in the initial vision for the Musée d'Orsay. There, a putative embrace of postmodern revisionism endeavored to challenge modernist hierarchies, but ultimately reiterated (I love this phrase) "Impressionist exceptionalism" in its selective adoption of "modernist display conditions" (p. 585). We thus get a picture of impressionism as a contested property, claimed by multiple interested parties, the legitimacy of ownership constantly being renegotiated in new socio-historical contexts. Its meaning, then, does not remain fixed in its original moment but includes the successive waves of beholders who have made it their own. Crucially, that history includes *us*. This realization calls for a mode of historicization that takes account of the scholar's position within their own material and conceptual fields.

Should we then think of the evolving historiography and reception of impressionism as a vinaigrette, where the interpretation and object tend to separate, changing our experience but not the object itself? Or should we think of it as a martini that, once shaken, cannot be unmixed? To adapt Stanley Fish's famous question: is there a Monet in this museum? This query becomes most salient in the three essays in section two, "Painting as Object: Tools, Materials, and Close Looking." Gloria Groom and Kimberley Muir employ tools such as x-rays, infrared, and automated thread counting to reconstruct Monet's working methods. Nancy Locke uses close-looking and historical documents to analyze Cézanne and Pissarro's use of palette knives. And Susan Sidlauskas moves from matter to materiality, untangling the "surface ontologies" of a portrait by John Singer Sargent (p. 170).

Groom's and Muir's technical research is exciting because it gives us access to what we cannot otherwise see. Infrared, for example, reveals something that is definitionally not part of the viewer's experience. Locke's style of close looking, meanwhile, is engrossing because it reveals subtleties in what we *can* see. As for Sidlauskas, a review of her evocative section titles—"Sargent's Restless Universe," "The Mutability of Matter," etc.—does more than sample the author's seductive prose. Rather, it points to her tactic of centering the *interaction* of artwork and beholder via the mediating "skin" of matter, implying that there *is* no painting—or, at least, no

fully realized one—until we see it. These differences do not merely indicate discrepant approaches to the same artworks but raise fundamental disagreement about whether any such common objects exist.

Thus far, I have outlined what I take to be two of the compelling, overarching problems that this volume raises: the fate of modernism and the historian-beholder's power to affect artistic meaning. These come together in the book's sixth section, "World Impressionism," which expands the field's purview beyond the hexagon. It includes two essays on French artists treating non-French subjects (Simon Kelly's on Degas's involvement in the global millinery trade and Todd Porterfield's on Renoir and his father in Algiers and India) and four on non-French impressionisms (Alex Potts on German, Takanori Nagai on Japanese, Laura Malosetti Costa on Argentine, and Ahu Antmen on Turkish).^[8]

The latter three chapters narrate the dissemination of impressionism via painters (e.g., Torajirō Kojima, Martín Malharro, Halil Pasha) who visited Paris and brought home what they learned. Each surveys multiple artists rather than just one, which means they are less invested in the particular qualities of individual paintings (no non-European artist met the three or more figures threshold meriting inclusion in the chart above). The disparity no doubt points to the field's (myself included) belated acquaintance with impressionists outside of Europe, such that we are still in the get-to-know-you phase. Ideally, informative essays such as these will soon get us sufficiently up to speed that we can start to attend to such artists with the singularity we afford to Monet, Renoir, etc.

Reflecting on the method of tracing non-European impressionisms to their origin in Paris, Antmen notes that it risks mapping them all to a single center, to which they stand as peripheries—ignoring that non-European artists "do not always regard modernism as the possession of a Western other, but rather a language they can transform." Consequently, she writes, we need to challenge "our generalized internalization of a 'European present' as modernity itself" (p. 495). This remark, I take it, invokes Dipesh Chakrabarty's well-known—but still challenging—criticism of the "'first in Europe, then elsewhere' structure of global historical time," whereby historians treat "modernity or capitalism... as something that became global *over time*, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside it."^[9] The dilemma is not overcome by pluralizing "modernities," for as Jonathan Hay writes, doing so ultimately "reinstates 'our' modernity as the reference point and standard. Difference is valorized within a refractive decentralization of the original paradigm."^[10] By transposing contextually-specific concepts like impressionism (and the historical methods we use to understand it) to non-European settings, we risk inadvertently recapitulating the expansionary logic of global capital. To avoid this fate, we might imagine comparing impressionisms *among* Japanese, Turkish, and Argentine artists, refusing to legitimate their practice via the Midas touch of an authentic French authority. But this approach would require an interpretive method that placed less emphasis on historical encounters, entailing different evidentiary practices. To be even-handed, we might then return to canonical French artists and attempt "a non-Eurocentric history of European modernism."^[11] What if, for instance, we privileged the Japanese theories of impressionism traced by Nagai over their French antecedents (Émile Zola, etc.) when interpreting *Monet*?

I am neither endorsing nor opposing this approach but attempting to follow the logic of world impressionism to its end. Doing so, I am compelled to confront a challenge to my own thinking—notably, my sincere conviction in modernist criticality. Like my teachers, I have juxtaposed

Manet's *Olympia* with Cabanel's *Birth of Venus* to illustrate the opposition of avant- and arrière-garde. But such procedures take as given principles tested by world impressionism. Antmen, for instance, shows how Turkish critics harnessed Euro-normative conceptions of progress to reject the "belatedness" of Turkish impressionists, whom they attacked not for importing European styles but for importing *old* ones, e.g., outmoded impressionism after the triumph of cubism (p. 494). To apply non-Eurocentric approaches to the European canon would accordingly mean rethinking criteria of value. And that would require reshuffling the deck, refusing to assume the priority of Manet over Cabanel on modernist grounds – be they formalist "quality" or social engagement. This may be salutary. But how far would it go? Would it apply equally to artists like Albert André, who continued to imitate Renoir even into the 1950s? Should criticality not factor into assessing the relative value of the Monets in the Met versus the impressionistic oils peddled across the street?

These are, to my mind, some of the exciting questions prompted by this volume. There are more. Alison Syme's "Morisot's Urbane Ecologies," for instance, points to a potentially rich vein of inquiry oriented toward environmental questions. But as I near my word limit, I feel I cannot conclude without praising one of the book's most important functions: its potential as a teaching tool. Soon, I hope, we will teach Patry on collecting histories with White and White, *Canvases and Careers*; Dombrowski on the *Société anonyme* with Robert Herbert on originality and *laissez-faire*; Jonathan Katz and Dombrowski on Bazille's queer painting with Bridget Alsdorf's *Fellow Men*; Murell on Degas's black models with Lorraine O'Grady on Manet's *Olympia*.^[12] Marnin Young's essay on the movement's critical reception provides a startlingly original compliment to Richard Shiff's well-known treatment of the same, and practically demands to be read alongside Louis Leroy's review of the first exhibition.^[13] The section on world impressionism will nourish several weeks' worth of lessons, especially if paired with Alexis Clark's and Frances Fowle's *Globalizing Impressionism*.^[14]

On the book's first page, Dombrowski writes that, after "the heyday of revisionist art history of the 1970s to 1990s--the social history of art and feminist art history in particular--academic interest in Impressionism, has since diminished, along with interest in European art and visual culture of the nineteenth-century more broadly." He goes on: "This volume does not mourn this fact or try to return us to an art historical place and time when...[impressionism] served as a litmus test of art history writ large. Instead, it seeks to give an account and an overview--and hopefully a fresh introduction for a new generation of scholars...of what critical issues the study of Impressionism might productively entertain in the twenty-first century" (p. 1). It more than does that. So why be so modest? The book shows that impressionism can uniquely provoke questions--about methods, about modernism, about chronology and geography--that remain central not only to specialists but to art historical thinking more broadly. Impressionism has more to teach us.

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Martha Ward, “The Museum of Impressionism, 1947”

NOTES

[1] *Gustave Caillebotte: The Painter’s Eye* (National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 2015); *Frédéric Bazille and the Birth of Impressionism* (National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 2017).

[2] Robert L. Herbert, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), xiii.

[3] We generally structure the historiography of impressionism by opposing the formalists like Clement Greenberg (concerned exclusively with the appearance of paintings) to the social art historians like T.J. Clark (concerned primarily with their socio-historical context).

[4] Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1971); Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity" in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).

[5] T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 156-79.

[6] See AnnMarie Perl, "Defining Criticality as Historical Object of the 1970s and 1980s," in *Beyond Critique: Contemporary Art in Theory and Practice*, ed. Pamela Fraser and Roger Rothman (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 35-54. Griselda Pollock and Richard Kendall, eds., *Dealing with Degas: Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision* (New York: Universe, 1992).

[7] Let me here disclose a conflict: Ward has been a mentor of mine since I was 18, a relationship that inevitably colors my view.

[8] That the essays on Cassatt, Sargent, and Whistler come in other thematic sections is itself interesting, highlighting how the field has always granted a few non-French artists honorary membership—such that England and the United States do not count as "world" in the same ways as Germany and Japan.

[9] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 7.

[10] Jonathan Hay in "Questionnaire on Global Methods," *October* 180 (Spring 2022), 3-80, at 50.

[11] Nikolas Grosos in "Questionnaire on Global Methods," *October* 180 (Spring 2022), 22.

[12] Harrison C. White and Cynthia A. White, *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Robert L. Herbert, "Impressionism, Originality, and Laissez-Faire," *Radical History Review* 38 (1987): 7-15; Bridget Alsdorf, *Fellow Men: Fantin-Latour and the Problem of the Group in Nineteenth-Century French Painting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," *Afterimage* 20, no. 1 (June 1, 1992): 14-15.

[13] Richard Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism: A Study of the Theory, Technique, and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Louis Leroy, "L'exposition des impressionnistes" *Le Charivari* (April 25, 1874): 2-3.

[14] Alexis Clark and Frances Fowle, eds., *Globalizing Impressionism: Reception, Translation, and Transnationalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

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