

# Pierre Auguste Renoir

## Biography



Pierre Auguste Renoir was born in Limoges, France on February 25, 1841, the sixth child of a tailor. When Renoir was four years old, the family moved to Paris, to a humble apartment that was near the Louvre. He showed a talent for drawing at an early age, using his father's tailor's chalk to sketch portraits of his family on the floors and walls of the family home. At the age of 13, he became an apprentice in a porcelain factory in Paris, painting designs on china. Soon improvements in porcelain technology made hand-painting uneconomical, and Renoir spent another year or two painting on fans, lampshades, and blinds. At the age of 21, he resolved to study art more seriously, and he enrolled in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts (the College of Fine Arts), and entered the Paris studio of the Swiss painter Charles Gleyre. In Gleyre's studio, Renoir met Claude Monet, Alfred Sisley and Frederic Bazille, who were also students and who were to play a vital role in his development as an artist.

Renoir began his career at a time when being successful meant having one's paintings accepted at the Salon, France's annual artistic showcase. Paintings accepted for exhibit at the Salon were traditionally immaculately finished, and based on historical, religious, mythological or literary subjects. In 1863, the gap between the official standards for Salon acceptance and the new

styles of art were evident when the Emperor, Napoleon III, decreed that the thousands of rejected works of art were to be shown at an alternative Salon--the Salon des Refusés. This one-time show exhibited examples of a more modern art, with its sketchy technique and concentration on modern landscapes and contemporary views of Parisian life.

Renoir's first submission to the Salon was in 1864. His entry, entitled "*Esmeralda Dancing with a Goat*" (taken from Victor Hugo's novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*) was accepted because its subject matter was favored by the Salon jury. Although he continued to submit paintings for the next several years, his works were rejected, and he became irritated by the academic atmosphere of the Salon, believing that the fixed rules of academic painting were too restrictive.

During the late 1860s, Renoir often found himself in the company of the friends he met while a student. He came increasingly under the influence of Claude Monet, and they often painted together, with Monet leading the charge to paint outdoors. Monet was absorbed with the exact analysis of the colors in light and shadow as seen in bright daylight, and this influenced Renoir's own work for more than a decade. The landscapes they painted combined all the elements that would later define the Impressionist movement. The subject matter was ordinary people enjoying leisure pastimes. More often than not, the scene was near water, as the reflections on the surface of water embodied the momentary and fleeting light sensations the artists sought to capture. Finally, traditional modeling and the definition of forms by contour lines were abandoned in favor of quickly applied touches of color, a technique that was the logical development of the artists' desire to work quickly to capture the scene in front of their eyes before it changed.

By 1874, after years of rejection by the official Salon, Renoir and his friends joined together to mount an exhibition of their own, in defiance of the art establishment. It was held in the studio of Parisian photographer, Paul Nadar, and was scheduled to open two weeks before the official Salon. Renoir helped to organize the show, supervising the hanging of the paintings and

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overseeing financial arrangements. (It was at this exhibition that the term "Impressionism" was first used by an art critic.) The exhibit was a critical, as well as financial disaster, but with the help of art dealer, Paul Durand-Ruel, Impressionist exhibits were again attempted in 1876 and 1877. One of Renoir's early masterpieces, "Le Bal au Moulin de la Galette," an open-air scene of a café with its daring effects of broken sunlight, was included in the 1876 exhibit. These exhibitions were again met with hostility and abuse from the critics, but courageous art dealers, such as Durand-Ruel, continued to support the Impressionists, including Renoir.

By the late 1870s, Renoir gained critical recognition and achieved financial security for the first time in his life, largely through his friendship with the wealthy publisher, George Charpentier. Charpentier and his wife hosted "salons" where Renoir was introduced to many leading figures of the political, literary and artistic world. Charpentier commissioned Renoir to paint a portrait of his wife and children, and the painting was accepted at the Salon of 1879. It was prominently hung through the influence of Mme. Charpentier, and became Renoir's first major critical success.

By the early 1880s, Renoir began to feel that the tenets of Impressionism had become as restrictive as those of the academic establishment. With his newfound prosperity, he was able to fulfill a desire to travel and make further study of the masters. He made two trips; first to North Africa, where the scorching sun and wealth of colors attracted him, and then to Italy, where he was able to study the sound drawing and composition of the classic tradition which he felt had been sacrificed by Impressionism. Returning to France, Renoir spent his time with stylistic experiments. He exhibited very little and accepted only a few portrait commissions. He painted outdoors less and less, preferring to sketch a scene and then complete the painting in his studio. Despite returning to the studio and to traditional methods of composing and preparing a picture, he continued to paint with the sunlit colors of an Impressionist's palette. He wrote to a friend, "I am going to paint outdoor pictures in the studio."

Unlike many of his artist friends, Renoir was not a womanizer. He was looking for a simple woman with no intellectual pretensions who would devote herself entirely to his well-being. Following his trip abroad, he settled down with Aline Charigot, a young dressmaker who had been his model during the 1880s. They had a child in 1885, and following their marriage in 1890, Aline had 2 more sons (Jean, born in 1894, became a famous film director).

In the late 1880s, Renoir was chiefly preoccupied by the human figure, and began a series of female nudes. These reveal his extraordinary ability to depict the lustrous, pearly color and texture of skin, and to impart a lyrical feeling to his subjects, removing them from any specific time or place. These were the paintings that had the greatest impact on subsequent generations. They were created without the slightest hint of lust, rather with a chaste sensuousness that was natural and naive.

During the last 20 years of his life, Renoir was crippled by rheumatoid arthritis; unable to move his hands freely, he continued to paint by using a brush strapped to his arm. Renoir died at Cagnes, a village in the south of France, on December 3, 1919 at the age of 78.

## Bibliography:

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