

LESSONS

LESSON ONE: Painting Modern Life



IMAGE ONE: Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas. French, 1834–1917. *At the Milliner's*. c. 1882. Pastel on paper, 27 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 27 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (70.2 x 70.5 cm). Gift of Mrs. David M. Levy

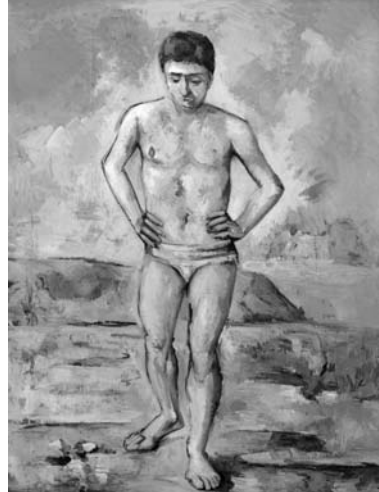


IMAGE TWO: Paul Cézanne. French, 1839–1906. *The Bather*. c. 1885. Oil on canvas, 50 x 38 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (127 x 96.8 cm). Lillie P. Bliss Collection

INTRODUCTION

The artists associated with the Impressionist movement chose to depict modern (meaning contemporary), everyday life over mythological, religious, or heroic subject matter. Post-Impressionist was a term assigned to a group of artists working after the Impressionists who wished not only to depict modern life, but also to reveal its emotional and psychological effects. They achieved this in a variety of styles. The two art works in this lesson are distinctively modern but in very different ways. Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas's *At the Milliner's* focuses on a moment between two women in a hat shop, and with numerous details carefully highlights the mundane activity of trying on the latest fashion in hats. *The Bather*, by Paul Cézanne, also captures a moment in time, depicting an adolescent boy about to take a step forward, but the painting includes no reference to late-nineteenth-century contemporary life and is quite traditional in its subject matter—a male figure in a landscape. Unlike traditional painters, Cézanne did not use this unheroic body in its barren, ambiguous setting to tell a story; rather, this composition permitted him to explore new ways of painting.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will compare and contrast two paintings.
- Students will understand the term *modern* as used in an historical and art historical context.
- Students will become familiar with the terms **foreground**, **middle ground**, and **background**.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Ask your class to brainstorm definitions of the word “modern.” “Modern” can mean related to current times, but it can also indicate a relationship to a particular set of ideas that, at the time of their development, were new or even experimental.
- Prior to the nineteenth century, artists were most often commissioned to make artwork for a church or a wealthy person. These artworks usually represented a biblical or mythological scene; they told stories and were intended to instruct the viewer. During the nineteenth century, many artists started to make art about people, places, or ideas that interested them and of which they had direct experience. Sometimes these new subjects led them to explore new ways of creating images. They experimented with color, technique, and different **mediums**. This art looked different from the established norm, and had quite different subject matter. At The Museum of Modern Art, this kind of art made after 1880 is considered “modern,” meaning that it is related to a new way of thinking about making art.
- Think about the places where you see art—in museums, in libraries, on buildings, in buildings used for religious worship. Does the art tell a story or teach people about an idea? What do you think inspired the artists?
- In *A Fine Disregard* (1990), the art historian Kirk Varnedoe recounts a story about a group of soccer players in England in 1823. In the story one of the players, William Webb Ellis, decides to pick up the ball with his hands, which is not allowed in soccer. This, legend has it, is how the sport of rugby was born. Can you remember a time when you were inspired to break a rule? What inspired you? What were the consequences? Would you do it again?

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Give your class a couple of minutes to look at *At the Milliner's*. Ask the students to tell you what they see. Ask them to describe the people in the drawing. Where might they be? What might they be doing? To help students explain what they are seeing, it may be useful to introduce them to the terms *foreground*, *middle ground*, and *background*. In this image a chair is in the foreground, the figures are in the middle ground, and there appears to be a wall in the background.
- Ask your students to focus on the figure to the right. Ask them to come up with five words each to describe the person. Ask them what they see that made them choose those words. Ask the class to focus on the figure to the left. Ask them what they can tell about this person just by looking. Have them compare the figure to the one on the right. How are they the same? How are they different? Degas has intentionally made it more difficult to describe the figure on the left. Ask why and how he might have done that.
- Inform the class that a milliner is someone who makes hats, that this scene takes place in a hat shop, and that the woman on the right is trying on hats. The woman on the left works at the hat shop and is bringing hats for the first woman to try on. Ask your students if knowing this changes their initial ideas about the drawing. Ask them why or why not.

To Degas, painting modern life meant painting what happened every day in Paris, where he lived. He often went for walks through the city with his friends, such as the American artist Mary Cassatt, who is the model for the woman trying on the hat. Degas thought that depicting many specific, detailed small scenes, such as this moment in the milliner's shop, would create a deeper understanding of modern life.

- Ask your class to imagine that they can see beyond the frame of this picture. What else might they see?
- Ask your students to make a drawing of a small scene encapsulating one aspect of their life. What would they draw?
- Now show your students the image of *The Bather*. Ask them to take a couple of minutes to look at the painting.
- Ask them how the image is similar to *At the Milliner's*. Ask how it is different. *At the Milliner's* is a drawing and *The Bather* is a painting, a difference that is hard to recognize in a reproduction.
- Ask how the central figures (the woman trying on the hat and the bather) are similar and how they are different.
- Ask what is going on in *The Bather*. Have your students look at the foreground, middle ground, and background. Ask them what they see that tells them what is happening in the painting.

Cézanne did not include much information in this painting. He painted from a photograph of a man standing in a studio in a bathing suit rather than from something that he had seen in real life. It is hard to tell where the painting takes place and who the person is. This uncertainty is one of the reasons why *The Bather* is considered to be a modern painting. Instead of telling a story or representing a specific place, the painting seems to capture a sense of ambiguity or uncertainty that is typical of the modern experience.

- Ask your students how they might convey an idea about life where they live (i.e., is it crowded and noisy or desolate and quiet?) without showing a specific place or activity.

ACTIVITY/PROJECT

Write about a small scene that takes place where you live. Could that scene tell us something more about life in that place? How?