15 paintings by French masters of the nineteenth century, lent by the Louvre and the Museums of Albi and Lyon

Author
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Date
1955

Publisher
The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL
www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3323

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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
NEW YORK

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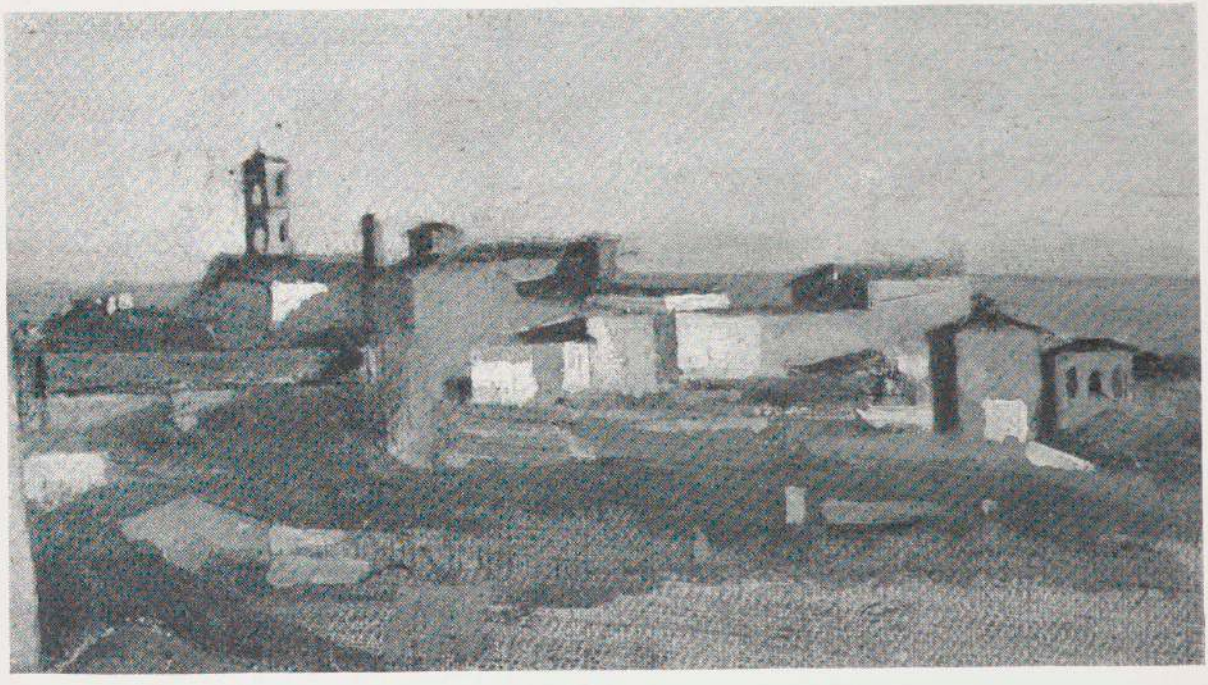


COROT: *Trinità dei Monti* (page 11), detail

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART NEW YORK

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART BULLETIN VOL. XXII, NO. 3 SPRING, 1955

The Museum of Modern Art is honored to be able to present during its Twenty-fifth Anniversary Year a loan exhibition of work by the great French masters of the nineteenth century sent for this occasion by the National Museums of France.

We deeply appreciate the generosity and the spirit of warm friendship which prompted the officials of the Ministry of Education and of the Office of the National Museums of France to make this loan possible, and are eager to acknowledge with gratitude the wonderful cooperation given to us by M. Jacques Jaujard, Director General of Arts and Letters in the Ministry of Education, by M. Georges Salles, Director of the National Museums of France, by M. Germain Bazin, Chief Curator of Painting at the Palais du Louvre, by M. Julien, Chief Curator of the Museum of Albi, and by M. Jullian, Chief Curator of the Museum of Lyon.

In presenting this exhibition, the Museum of Modern Art is paying tribute to the genius of those masters whose work made nineteenth-century French painting one of the great periods in Western art and contributed importantly to the development of the arts of our day.

RENÉ D'HARNONCOURT

FOREWORD

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, could anyone have foreseen even in part the jagged, lightning path French painting was to follow during the succeeding hundred years? Jacques-Louis David was active, of course, and had broken the long, slender, graceful back of the Rococo tradition, loved in his youth. But David was alone in his strength and no true prophecy could stem from his achievement. Antoine-Jean Gros was never again a wholly satisfactory disciple after Josephine Bonaparte met him in Genoa and carried him off to see Napoleon and to paint the latter's campaigns. Ingres, more artist than reformer, soon felt that David had misled him as to the real meaning of classicism, and preferred Raphael's disciplined equanimity to Jacques-Louis' moralistic use of history and allegory.

Presently the romantics clambered onto the scene via their neo-baroque ladder—Gros first, with his tumultuous paintings of Bonaparte's faraway triumphs in battle, and after him the inspired Géricault, carried helplessly to early death by his passion for horses, as if he were himself the Mazeppa he liked to paint. Then Delacroix, the epitome of the artistic in person, thought and attainment. Afterwards, perhaps needing respite from the giddy succession of schools, French painting produced Corot and Daumier, neither of them consciously a founder of program. Next came Courbet, who detested the word "artist"; wished to be known simply as a painter, and worked with magic in his swollen, deft hands. Courbet's realism was barely established when Manet, the elegant, appeared, opening the way to impressionism and, with the help of others, to post-impressionism in its many forms.

The sequence is dazzling. The generations of important artists seemed to be in hot pursuit of one another; in matters of esthetic theory reaction was followed almost at once by counter-reaction. The painters of earlier centuries would perhaps have been bewildered by the variety and pace of nineteenth-century French art. From the vantage point of retrospect we understand today the inevitability of this art's progress, a progress not to be judged by the standard of cumulative authority within a given style, but by counting the outbursts of idiosyncratic vision. Even so, the links between differing artists were often unexpectedly strong. We should remember, for example, that van Gogh copied a work by Delacroix and that Degas, steadying the aging Ingres on a dark staircase, afterwards cried proudly: "I have held Ingres in my arms!" If the major figures in French art of the past century were constantly rebelling against their seniors, they were aware of tradition's value and of the inexorable continuum to which they belonged.

The present exhibition of thirteen paintings from the Louvre, and one each from the distinguished museums at Lyon and Albi, gives an impressive if necessarily incomplete account of certain main tendencies in nineteenth-century French painting, from Géricault to Lautrec. Géricault's portrait of a woman obsessed by envy is the earliest picture in the show, its subject's eyes beady with the incalculable calculation of madness. For the romantics insanity held an irresistible fascination (as it did for the surrealists a hundred years later), and Géricault's series of portraits of the mad, painted for an alienist at the Salpêtrière hospital, reaches a climax in his picture from the Lyon Museum (page 9). Delacroix, too, was much preoccupied with madness. But whereas Géricault in his portraits had treated the subject with quasi-scientific objectivity, stressing the physiognomic symptoms of mental illness, Delacroix thought of insanity as a dramatic situation involving others, as when he painted Tasso disconsolate in his asylum among gibbering lunatics, or when he showed Medea in her fatal, jealous rage against her children and Jason's (page 10).

To turn from such images to the blissful serenity of Corot's *Trinità dei Monti* (page 11) is something of a relief. Indeed, confronted by this luminous work, one wonders whether any painter since Vermeer had understood so well the eloquence to be achieved within humility's bounds. Corot might well have been awed by Rome, like Poussin and Ingres before him. Instead he treated its landscape and architecture as though they constituted a treasured picnic-ground, remembered from youth; his freshness and intimacy of perception, no less than his natural solidity of form, are unforgettable. In later years Corot sometimes gave way to a weakness for blurred effects, particularly in landscape. Not so his friend Daumier, whose contours in both painting and drawing are deeply incised, and who made the human grimace a vehicle of satire or used it for affectionate commentary on the drama of the stage, as in *Crispin and Scapin* (page 12). If neither Corot nor Daumier became a *chef d'école* in the traditional sense, painting has been immeasurably richer for their guidance.

Courbet, on the contrary, was born to lead the reaction against romanticism's ecstasies and grandeur. Though he was far more interested in formalistic pictorial solutions than he would ever admit, he usually worked with headlong bluntness, counting on his uncanny sense of texture, color and light to hold our attention. *The Wave* (page 13) is an especially revealing case in point. One might expect monotony from this thoroughly horizontal composition, relieved only by the diagonal thrust of the shore and boats. But the froth of the sea is magnificently alive and the sky a subtle foil. Despite his claims to the contrary, Courbet always knew how to go nature one better. With water he felt an almost mystic communication, as when in his final years he swam for hours, impossibly bloated and ill, in the lake near his Swiss home in exile.

With Manet what we think of as "modern" art begins. A master of elision, bold, provocative and immensely skilled in his juxtapositions of color, Manet opened the

door for a procession of fine artists from Monet to Matisse. It is easy to deplore his lack of invention in subject matter and composition. That does not alter the fact that Manet re-emphasized the autonomous validity of painting on which more recent artists in great number have insisted. *The Balcony* (page 14) is one of the most beautifully painted of all his works, its virtuosity tending to obscure its interest as a document of the *haute bourgeoisie* of the time. Manet was not much interested in psychological interpretation. But he recorded his subjects' costume and postures with acumen and flair, and he foretold that devotion to contemporary epoch which characterizes not only his immediate successors, the impressionists, but also later artists like the "Nabis." Without Manet's example, Bazille's *Studio in the rue de la Condamine* (page 15), with its delicious informality, could perhaps not have been created—at least not so early.

Monet's *The Luncheon* (page 16), shimmering and radiant, was presumably painted about two years before the first exhibition of the impressionists in 1874. Yet already there is evident that tight clustering of flecked, opposing tones which Monet was soon to develop and refine. The picture's linear structure is relatively firm compared to that of later works by the artist. But the play of sunlight on figures and objects is its real theme and, in the handling of the seated child in the foreground, we are aware of that curious hide-and-seek melding of contours which must have fascinated Bonnard and Vuillard at the turn of the century. With Renoir's *Rising Path, Tall Grasses* of c. 1875 (page 17), the impressionist esthetic is pushed still further. This is admittedly not a major work, but it is exceptional in its spontaneity.

Degas for his part seems never to have stopped worrying about impressionism's sacrifice of linear definition, as was natural for one who deeply admired Ingres. His *Absinthe* (page 18) was executed during the first heady years of the impressionist movement, yet retains a strict control of space and volume through line. Degas' genius was many-sided, forbidding easy generalization. In the famous *Absinthe*, however, the casual, "snapshot" asymmetry of the placing of the figures is perhaps to be especially noted and the depiction of mood is intense. In sociological terms, this image is the absolute reverse of Manet's trio of self-assured citizens on their prosperous balcony.

Lautrec inherited Degas' love of incisive line—to such a degree in fact that for a considerable period of time he was thought of primarily as a brilliant graphic artist. The Albi Museum's *In the Salon, rue des Moulins* (page 19) reveals in full measure how original and inspired was his cacophonous use of color; the acid, rainbow palette he invented was by no means the least of his achievements. Needless to say, Lautrec was also a superb designer, and it is significant that his posters and prints are to be found in the studios of some of the leading abstract painters of our own time. An element of irony enters here in that Lautrec's subject matter meant so much to him and was an integral part of his style.

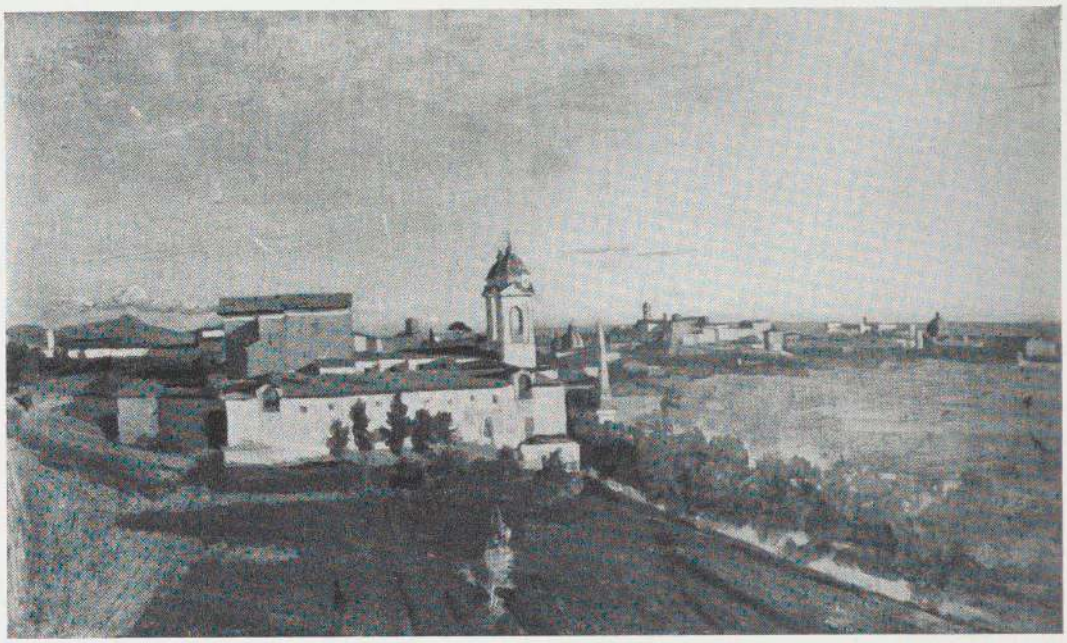
With Seurat, Cézanne and Gauguin (and also van Gogh, unfortunately missing

from this exhibition), the later nineteenth-century rebellion against academicism became a full-scale revolution. Seurat, who seemed to dissolve form in his neo-impressionist crucible, only to pour it forth in a new, marvelously durable shape and substance; Cézanne, creating a spatial synthesis of overwhelming importance and beauty; Gauguin, whose insolent, flat color has nourished a host of modern painters—these were formidable personalities, and art is not likely soon to forget their lessons. And finally, in the present exhibition, there is the Douanier Rousseau: a so-called "primitive" of infinitely sophisticated instinctive wisdom, and possibly the most forceful reminder we have had in recent centuries that great art is a human rather than a scholastic mystery.

JAMES THRALL SOBY

THÉODORE GÉRICAULT (1791-1824). *The Madwoman.* c. 1822-23. Oil on canvas, 27½ x 22″. Lent by the Museum of Lyon

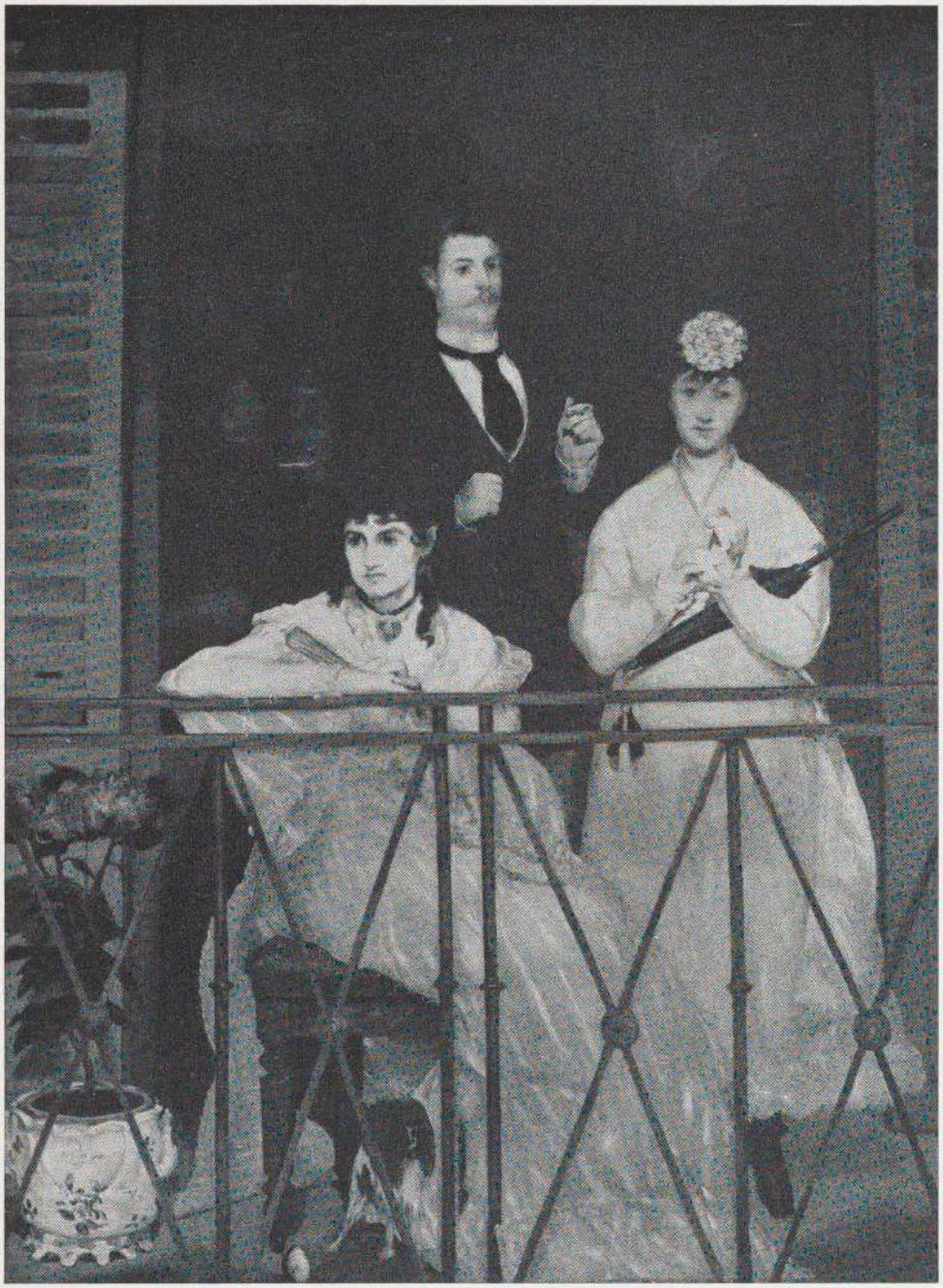
EUGÈNE DELACROIX (1798-1863). *Medea.* 1862. Oil on canvas, 48¼ x 33¼″. Lent by the Louvre Museum, Paris



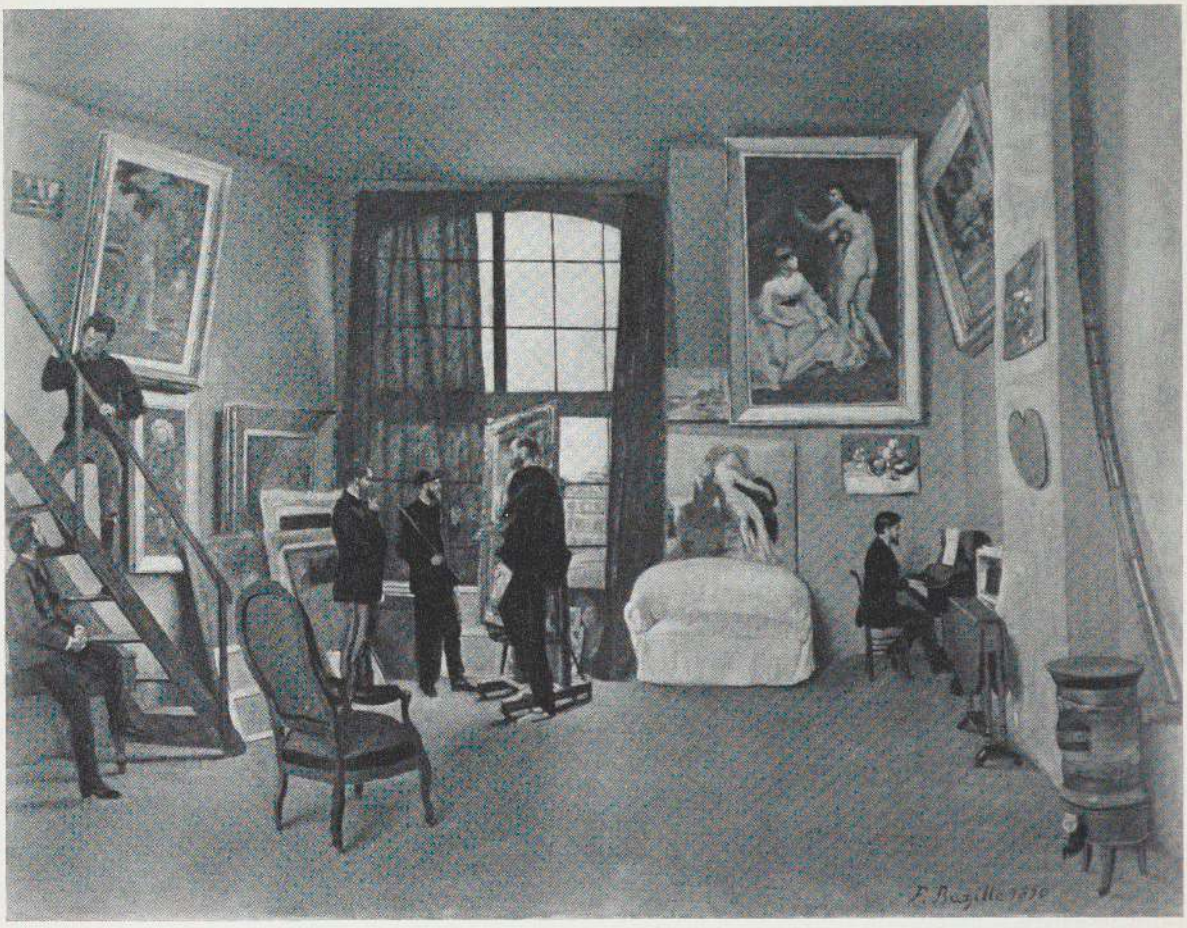
CAMILLE COROT (1796-1875) *Trinità dei Monti*. Rome, 1826-27. Oil on canvas, 17¾ x 29⅛". Lent by the Louvre Museum, Paris

HONORÉ DAUMIER (1808-1897). *Crispin and Scapin.* 1865-70. Oil on canvas, 23⅝ x 32¼″. Lent by the Louvre Museum, Paris

GUSTAVE COURBET (1819-1877). *The Wave*. 1870. Oil on canvas, 46 x 63″. Lent by the Louvre Museum, Paris



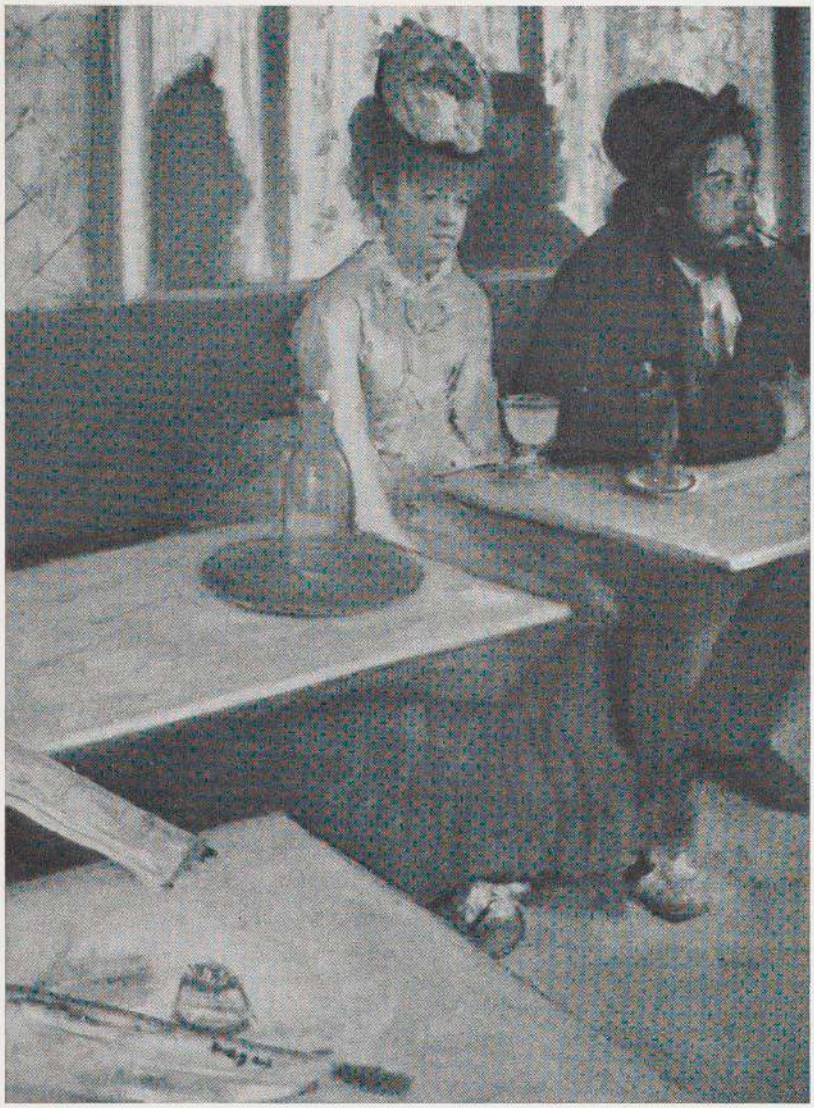
EDOUARD MANET (1832-1883). *The Balcony*. 1869. Oil on canvas, 66½ x 48⅞". Lent by the Louvre Museum, Paris



FRÉDÉRIC BAZILLE (1841-1870). *Studio in the rue de la Condamine*. 1870. Oil on canvas, 38⅝ x 50½". Lent by the Louvre Museum, Paris

CLAUDE MONET (1840-1926). *The Luncheon.* c. 1872. Oil on canvas, 63¾ x 80⅛". Lent by the Louvre Museum, Paris

AUGUSTE RENOIR (1841-1919). *Rising Path, Tall Grasses*. c. 1875. Oil on canvas, 23¼ x 29⅛". Lent by the Louvre Museum, Paris

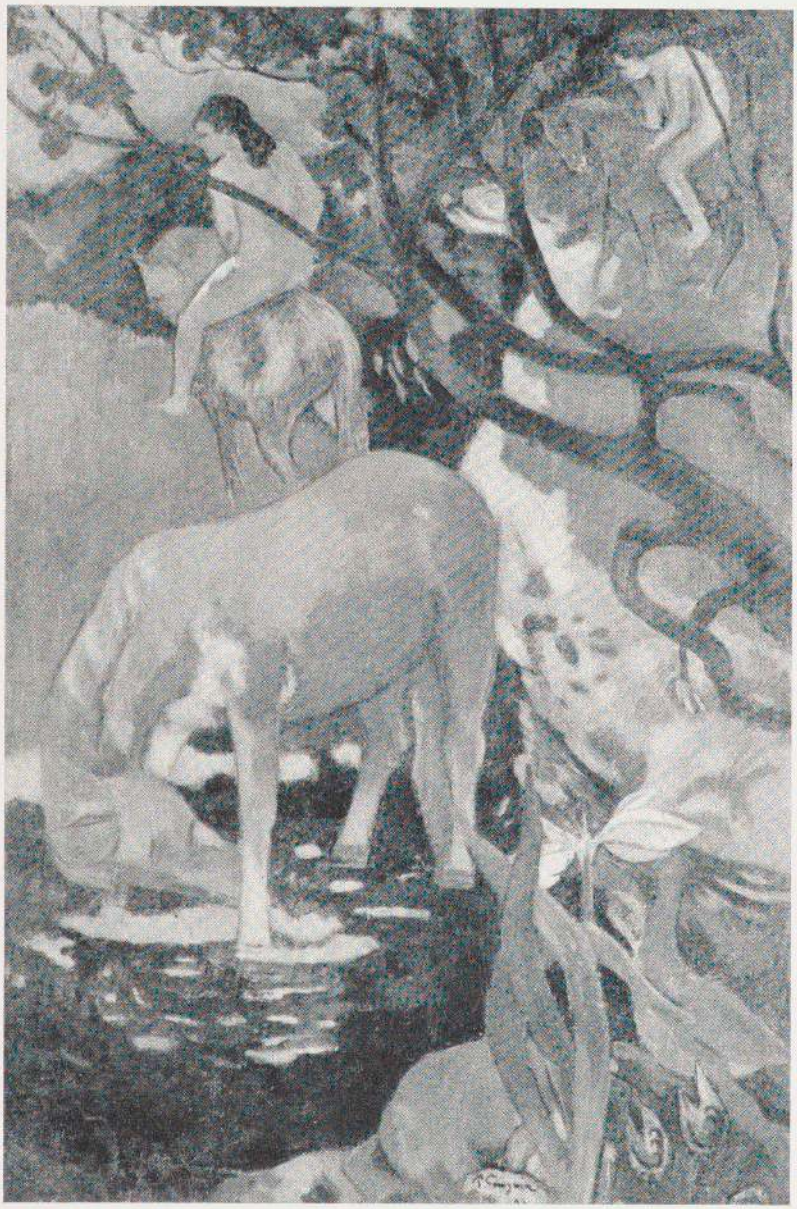


EDGAR DEGAS (1834-1917). *Absinthe*. c. 1876. Oil on canvas, 36 x 27¼". Lent by the Louvre Museum, Paris

HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC (1864-1901). *In the Salon, rue des Moulins.* 1894. Oil on canvas, 40⅛ x 52⅜". Lent by the Museum of Albi

GEORGES SEURAT (1859-1891). *The Model*. (Study for *Les Poseuses*). 1887. Oil on wood, 9⅞ x 6¼″. Lent by the Louvre Museum, Paris

PAUL CÉZANNE (1839-1906). *Still Life: Apples and Oranges*. 1895-1900. Oil on canvas, 28¾ x 36¼". Lent by the Louvre Museum, Paris



PAUL GAUGUIN (1848-1903). *White Horse*. 1898. Oil on canvas, 53¾ x 34⅝". Lent by the Louvre Museum, Paris

HENRI ROUSSEAU (1844-1910). *Serpent Charmer*. 1907. Oil on canvas, 65¾ x 74⅜". Lent by the Louvre Museum, Paris