

Pierre Auguste Renoir (1841 - 1919)

Renoir was born into a family of artisans. His father, a tailor who had seven children, moved with his family to Paris about 1845. Renoir demonstrated his gift at an early age. Quickly recognizing his talent, his parents apprenticed him, at age 13, to work in a porcelain factory, where he learned to decorate plates with bouquets of flowers. His skill and the great pleasure he took in his work soon convinced him he should study painting in earnest. Having saved a little money, he decided, in 1862, to take evening courses in drawing and anatomy at the *École des Beaux-Arts* as well as painting lessons at the studio of Charles Gleyre, a Swiss painter who had been a student of the 19th-century Neoclassical painter Ingres. Although the academic style of his teacher did not suit Renoir, he nevertheless accepted its discipline in order to acquire the elementary skills needed to become a painter.

Renoir felt a much greater affinity with three students who entered the studio a few months later: Alfred Sisley, Claude Monet, and Frédéric Bazille. All four students dreamed of an art that was closer to life and free from past traditions. The shared ideals of the four young men quickly led to a strong friendship. Soon Paul Cezanne and Camille Pissarro became part of their group. Circumstances encouraged Renoir to attempt a new freedom and experimentation in his style. The convention of the time was that a painting—even a landscape—had to be executed in the studio. In the spring of 1864, however, Gleyre's four students moved temporarily to the forest of Fontainebleau, where they devoted themselves to painting directly from nature. Conditions were ripe for the birth of a new pictorial language, and Impressionism, bursting upon the scene, attracted notoriety with the first Impressionist exposition of 1874, held independently of the official Salon.

Renoir's work is a perfect illustration of this new approach in thought and technique. By using small, multicolored strokes, he evoked the vibration of the atmosphere, the sparkling effect of foliage, and especially the luminosity of a young woman's skin in the outdoors. Renoir and his companions stubbornly strove to produce light-suffused paintings from which black was excluded, but their pursuits led to many disappointments: their paintings, so divergent from traditional formulas, were frequently rejected by the juries of the Salon and were extremely difficult to sell.

Renoir, because of his fascination with the human figure, was distinctive among the others, who were more interested in landscape. Thus, he obtained several orders for portraits and was introduced, thanks to the publisher Georges Charpentier, to upper-middle-class society, from whom he obtained commissions for portraits, most notably of women and children. Renoir mastered the ability to convey his immediate visual impressions, and his paintings showed great vitality, emphasizing the pleasures of life despite the financial worries that troubled him.

In 1881 and 1882 Renoir made several trips to Algeria, Italy, and Provence, and these eventually had a considerable effect on his art and on his life. He became convinced that the systematic use of the Impressionistic technique was no longer sufficient for him and that small brushstrokes of contrasting colors placed side by side did not allow him to convey the satiny effects of the skin. He also discovered that black did not deserve the opprobrium given to it by his comrades and that, in certain cases, it had a striking effect and gave a great intensity to the other colors.

With his financial situation appreciably improved; he married in 1890 to Aline Charigot, and an exposition was organized for him in 1892 by the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel with great success. Renoir's

future was assured, and his work of that period reflected his new security and also his confidence in the future.

Renoir had his first attack of rheumatism in 1894, and, as the attacks became more and more frequent, he spent more and more time in southern France, where the climate was better for his health. About 1899 he sought refuge in the small village of Cagnes; in 1907 he settled there permanently, buying the estate of Les Collettes, where he spent the rest of his life. In 1910 he was no longer able to walk. Although his infirmity became more and more constraining, Renoir never ceased to paint; when his fingers were no longer supple, he continued by binding his paintbrush to his hand.