National Gallery of Ireland: Impressionism to Abstraction

What is Impressionism?
An art movement which originated in France in the late 1860's whose artists attempted to achieve a high degree of naturalism through the exact analysis of tone and colour and through the meticulous depiction of light on the surface of objects.

Key Impressionist Artists:
Claude Monet (1840-1926) Camille Pissarro (1831-1903) Edgar Degas (1834-1917)
Gustave Caillebotte (1848-93) Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) Berthe Morisot (1841-95)
Alfred Sisley (1839-99) Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919)

Key Elements of Impressionism:
• Artists usually picked subjects from everyday life.
• Paintings often depicted modern-day urban scenes, particularly of Paris and its environs.
• When painting landscapes, the artists usually worked outdoors rather than in the studio. This was facilitated by the availability of oil paint in tubes.
• Colours were applied with as little pigment mixing as possible. The intended effect was to provide a vibrant experience for the viewer.
• Paint was applied in short, thick strokes, usually in a sketch-like form. The essence of a subject was to be captured rather than all of its details.
• Darker shades of a colour were made by mixing with complementary colours. Black pigment was used only as a colour in its own right.
• Instead of waiting for successive applications to dry, wet paint was painted onto wet paint in order to produce softer edges and better intermingling of colours.
• Impressionist painters emphasized the play of natural light on an object and were concerned with the way in which colours reflect from object to object.
• In outdoor paintings, shadows on the ground were usually painted showing reflections of the blue of the sky on their surfaces, thus providing a sense of freshness and open space.

Impressionist works in the National Gallery of Ireland:
Argenteuil Basin with a Single Sailboat (1874) Claude Monet
Chrysanthemums in a Chinese Vase (1873) Camille Pissarro
Le Corsage Noir (1878) Berthe Morisot
Two Ballet Dancers in a Dressing Room (c1880) Edgar Degas
The Banks of the Canal du Loing at Saint-Mammès (1888) Alfred Sisley
**Neo-Impressionism** and **Post-Impressionism**

These terms are used to describe the work of these artists working in new styles from c. 1880 to the end of the century. By the 1890’s a number of different styles (that were either a development of Impressionism or a reaction to it) began to emerge. Many of the artists involved were aware of each other’s work and often shared ideas and even worked together for a time. However, unlike the Impressionists, they were not an organized group and much of their work is unrelated.

**Post-Impressionist**
- Paul Cezanne (1831-1906)
- Paul Gauguin (1848-1903)
- Vincent van Gogh (1853-90)

**Neo-Impressionist**
- Georges Seurat (1859-91)
- Paul Signac (1863-1935)

**Neo-Impressionists** employed the use of dots (a development of the short thick brushstrokes of Impressionism) in a new technique called optical mixing. **Divisionism** is a term that refers directly to the separation of colour. It is a term that was invented by Paul Signac. It follows the rules of colour contrasts which were intended to produce maximum brilliance scientifically and avoid muddiness caused by physically mixing colours before applying them to the canvas. This style is also referred to as ‘pointillism’ which specifically refers to the technique of dots.

**Post-Impressionists** took elements of Impressionism and used them to develop new approaches to painting. **Cezanne** concentrated on reducing objects to their basic shapes, but retained the bright, fresh colours of Impressionism. The subject was less important than what he called “the sensations of nature in an intelligent, clear and orderly fashion”. His aim was to restore order and return structure to painting. He influenced the Cubists and the development of abstract art. **Vincent van Gogh** used colour and vibrant swirling brush strokes to convey his feelings and his state of mind. **Paul Gauguin** applied colour in broad flat areas outlined in dark paint, emphasizing the emotive and symbolic qualities. Both artists influenced the Fauves and Expressionists.

**Neo- and Post-Impressionist works in the National Gallery of Ireland:**
- *Lady on the Terrace* (1898) Paul Signac
- *La Montagne Sainte Victoire, (near Aix-en-Provence)* (1901-6) Paul Cézanne
- *Rooftops in Paris* (1886) Vincent van Gogh
- *Boy eating Cherries* (1895) Pierre Bonnard

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Expressionism

Expressionist works, full of distortions and flat patterns and painted in violent colours, reflected the expressive colour of van Gogh and the intense highly charged colour of Gauguin. German Expressionists were also influenced by the work of Edvard Munch.

Like the Cubists, they discarded the rules of painting laid down by their predecessors. They worked with great freedom, using strong colour to indicate shadow; they looked for unusual colour harmonies and rejected traditional methods of light and shade in favour of shapes constructed with only line and colour. Expressionist artists were influenced by primitivist art and aimed to express emotion through vivid colour and pattern.

In France, Expressionism is associated with les Fauves (the Wild Beasts):

The paintings of the Fauves were characterised by seemingly wild brush work and discordant colours, while their subject matter had a high degree of simplification. This was a short-lived art movement (1905-1907) but was very influential on the development of modern art.

In Germany there were two separate Expressionist groups:

**Die Brücke** (The Bridge)  **Der Blau Reiter** (The Blue Rider):
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938)  Gabriele Münter (1877-1962)
Hermann Max Pechstein (1881-1955)  Vasily Kandinsky (1866-1944)

Die Brücke (formed in 1905) is sometimes compared with les Fauves, as they share an interest in primitivism, and using unnatural and arbitrary colours to express emotion. However, their subject matter is very different, with an emphasis on violent and disturbing imagery and an underlying sense of unease. Der Blau Reiter (1911-1914) displayed the expressionist approach to colour and brushwork, but tended towards a more lyrical and optimistic subject matter, linking their painting to spiritual expression and music.

**Expressionist works in the National Gallery of Ireland:**
*Stella in a Flowered Hat* (c. 1907) Kees van Dongen
*Girl with a Red Ribbon* (1908) Gabriele Münter
*Two Women in a Garden* (1915) Emil Nolde
*Departing Boats, Nidden* (1920) Hermann Max Pechstein
Cubism


Cubism essentially involved the flattening out of space and the breaking up of a shallow background. Cubist artists also fragmented everyday objects, bringing them almost to the point where they no longer existed as recognizable objects: almost to the point of abstraction. When painting the figure, they employed a similar approach of breaking it up and stripping it of all human feeling and emotion. Figures and objects were often shown from several different viewpoints at once. Between 1907 and 1914 Braque and Picasso broke with the Renaissance system of perspective, and under the influence of Cezanne, succeeded in representing form in space in a new and exciting way.

Cubist works in the National Gallery of Ireland:

*Still Life with a Mandolin* (1924) Pablo Picasso  
*Pierrot* (1921) Juan Gris

Futurism was an art movement based in Italy influenced by Neo-Impressionism and Cubism. The artists (eg Boccioni) were fascinated by modern life, speed, dynamism, technology and often painted modern urban scenes.

Abstract Art:

A work of abstract art is independent of the natural world, although it may have had its origins in Nature. The “formal” aspects of painting are afforded greater importance i.e. colours, shapes, lines etc. become the subject of the work. Fully abstract work did not emerge until just before the First World War c. 1910-1911.

Key artists:

Originally a member of the Blau Reiter expressionists, Vasily Kandinsky (1866-1944) is usually credited with having produced the first abstract pictures in about 1910. Kandinsky developed a completely non-representational style in which he used line, shape and colour with only the vaguest references to subject-matter. The Russian painter Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935) experimented with cubism and futurism before developing a geometric abstract art he called ‘Suprematism’. The Dutch painter Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) became the leading exponent of a completely abstract style based entirely on horizontal and vertical lines with areas of primary colour and grey. He called this style ‘Neo-Plasticism’.

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