

Midwestern Visions of Impressionism: 1890 – 1930

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There have been many discussions about American Impressionism in the last few decades, so consideration here might seem somewhat redundant. However, a brief overview is necessary to establish the role Impressionism played in the arts in America, including the Midwest.

Between 1880 and 1920, after French Impressionism was introduced in Europe, the American art world was dominated by Impressionism. However, it is important to note that American Impressionism was different from its French counterpart. In France, Impressionism was not a long-lasting movement, but it did have a long-lasting influence.

The first major introduction of French Impressionism is usually attributed by scholars to the exhibition of 300 paintings organized by the French Impressionist artists' dealer Durand-Ruel in 1886 in New York City. What is often not discussed is that these Impressionist paintings were displayed alongside other styles, exposing the American people to the major trends in the development of art in all of Europe.

In addition to exhibitions, Americans became acquainted with Impressionism through the many artists who studied abroad. Indiana-born William Merritt Chase studied at the Munich Royal Academy, and eventually taught in New York City, where he influenced numerous aspiring artists, many of whom were from the Midwest. Chase, Frank Duveneck and John Twachtman, among others, studied academic art in Paris and Munich, while also being exposed to the nonacademic traditions in these cities. As their styles evolved, they incorporated this exposure into their artwork, resulting in a form of Impressionism that combined academic style with Impressionist color palettes and brush strokes. Thus, a style influenced by European trends was also a style born of their own interests and adapted to the American scene.

The initial reaction to Impressionism in America was not positive, however. Many critics and artists alike reacted negatively. So one might wonder how it came to be the established style for so many decades.

At the turn of the century, America was in the throes of rapid change—from an agrarian society to an industrialized urban society. The influx of immigrants led to rapid growth in many cities. Industrialization widened the gap between the wealthy and the poor. As some scholars have stated, Impressionism became a way to distract viewers from their worries; it was seen as a search for order in a country gripped by chaos.

The turning point in the American artists' engagement with Impressionism was at the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago, the last and greatest of the 19th century's World's Fairs. Designed to be a celebration of Columbus' voyage 400 years prior, the fair was actually an object lesson in American culture and society at the turn of the century. It was a product of both elite and popular culture, and it appealed to a wide audience. The fair became a vehicle to explore the immense changes occurring in America, while also celebrating the evolution of American society. It embraced both tradition and progress, both the academic and the modern.

At this time of increasing fragmentation and confusion, a search for an identity on both the personal and national level was emerging. American critics were looking for an American art style, and this style became Impressionism. American Impressionism would offer tranquility and solace in times of turmoil. In many cases, it became the alternative to urban life.

So how does the Midwest fit into this broader discussion of Impressionism? In America, Impressionism offered a counterpoint to the academic art traditions and the opportunity to establish a new artistic voice for Americans. Midwestern landscape painters were able to embrace their native settings through the Impressionistic technique. The Midwest landscape offered peaceful settings and changing seasons, important aspects to capture in this style of painting.

Because American Impressionism is so largely defined in terms of style, technique and meaning, it is difficult to discuss its specific regional aspects. After a thorough study of this exhibition, one will be able to draw his/her own conclusions about whether or not there is a true Midwestern Impressionist style. What is evident is that the landscape and artistic training many of the artists found in the Midwest was carried through in aspects of their careers. The Midwest gave them an opportunity to embrace a new American style while also celebrating the natural and local landscape around them—whether that landscape was the Midwest, the East Coast or even France.