



Something fishy going on. Right, Claude Monet, *Bathers at La Grenouillère*, 1869; below, Monet, *Still Life of Fish*, 1870. All works oil on canvas

Below: courtesy Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University; left: National Gallery, London

# Trick of the Light

A new show at the National Gallery offers a fresh look at Impressionism by asking how quickly Monet, Renoir and co actually painted. Not before time, says **John House**



The stock image of the Impressionists is that they painted quickly, trying to capture in paint the most transitory natural effects before they changed before their eyes. Monet fostered this image, constantly lamenting that the changing light and weather prevented him from achieving his goals. However, recent writing on the Impressionists, as Richard Brettell points out in the catalogue of the National Gallery's "Impression: Painting Quickly in France 1860-1890" exhibition, has moved away from this view. The focus, instead, has been on their subject matter and, when technique has been

studied, it is the complexity and deliberation of their procedures that have been stressed. "Impression: Painting Quickly" seeks to redress the balance.

Yet it is not a simple return to an outmoded view. At the centre of the project lies the distinction between pictures that are painted quickly and those that look as if they were painted quickly – pictures whose surfaces parade vigorous, seemingly rapid brush-marks, but which may, in fact, have taken a long time to paint. The exhibition includes these, alongside canvases that do, indeed, seem to have been executed with great speed. So "Impression: Painting Quickly" raises

**“Impression” raises two questions. First, why paint quickly? Second, why make it look as if you have been painting quickly when you haven’t?**



two central questions. First, of course, why paint quickly? And second, and very different, why make it look as if you have been painting quickly when you haven’t?

The history of art offers us a number of reasons for painting quickly, reasons that might be technical, or in other senses material, or practical, or theoretical. Working in fresco demanded that the painter complete work on each day’s section of plaster before it dried, so time was of the essence. For painters working on routine commissions, time was money and, like the portrait draughtsmen in Leicester Square or on the banks of the Seine, they might charge by the hour. The Impressionist concern with changing light first became an issue with the rise of outdoor oil sketching in the later 18th century, but the problem was greatly aggravated when in the mid-19th century painters began to try to execute larger, exhibition-sized pictures out of doors, rather than merely small studies. At the same time as this, changing notions of artistic inspiration led some artists to view the initial creative urge, rather than the measured precision of academic methods, as the core of their genius and thus to place the highest value on their most impromptu work. But this last issue leads us to the

second question, why artists sought to make it look as if something was painted quickly; for this cult of immediacy led painters to seek to retain – or to superimpose – visibly informal, seemingly spontaneous brushwork on to the surfaces of even their most ambitious and elaborated canvases – Eugène Delacroix and Manet’s teacher Thomas Couture are prime examples. Yet this was not the only reason for wanting to make a picture appear to have been painted quickly. Apparent quick painting might also express an attitude to the modern world – a desire to capture its essential character in a technique that evoked its mobility and the fleeting, fragmented glimpses that, together, made up the experience of life in the city. Though this may seem similar to the practical problems of painting changing light effects, its basis was rather different, since the quick paint-mark stood for the glimpse in more metaphorical terms, rather than being a shorthand notation of the experience itself.

“Impression: Painting Quickly” will raise these issues and many more. Of course, Monet is at the heart of the show, but represented by very diverse works. How different the ebullient but exceptionally complex *Bathers at La Grenouillère* is from the small and very

Time to party. Above, Berthe Morisot, *Le Corsage Noir*, 1878; right, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *La Grenouillère*, 1869





direct *Still Life of Fish*, painted at around the same date, and how diverse the open-air scenes painted at Argenteuil during the 1870s. Renoir and Berthe Morisot are here, both as landscapists and figure painters, and challengingly so is Degas, though he famously insisted that “no art is less spontaneous than mine.” Provocatively, too, a significant group of works by Manet are included. Occasionally, as in his *Snow-Effect at Petit-Montrouge*, he did evidently work rapidly out of doors, but generally the informality of his mark-making was a studiously cultivated effect, often achieved after repeated erasures of prior attempts. Even his small outdoor scenes were often produced in the studio – he certainly was not standing in the middle of a race-track with galloping horses hurtling towards him as he painted *The Races at Longchamps!* As a coda to the show, a group of canvases by Van Gogh remind us that quick painting might remain a crucial means even for an artist who was seeking to go beyond what he saw as the expressive limitations of Impressionism. Matisse’s work, which is beyond the confines of the present show, reiterates the same point.

Monet’s *Still Life of Fish*, and the other still lifes in the show, raise a further puzzle: why paint still life quickly, when it remains still in front of the painter for as long as he or she chooses? Of course, fish will go off and flower petals will fall; but,

beyond these practical concerns, it seems that the ambition to evoke the rapid glance could even be carried over into the quiet and privacy of the painter’s studio.

One central issue that “Impression: Painting Quickly” raises is the question of “finish”. Clearly none of the Impressionists’ paintings was finished in the sense that academic practice in the 19th century would have demanded; but, even within the Impressionists’ work, there are clear distinctions between more or less elaborately executed canvases. The selection here focuses on the more informal works, but also for the most part on those that the artists considered finished in some sense – whether because they signed them or exhibited them or sold them or gave them away.

Yet the pictures in the show differ greatly in their status – in the position that they occupied in the artists’ production and the value that they attributed to them at the time of their making. Some are explicitly preparatory studies for other pictures, like Manet’s small *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (though its forms are unlike the final picture, x-rays of this show that in its first stages it was virtually identical to the study); some, like Monet’s little figure-scenes of his wife on Trouville beach during their honeymoon in 1870, are evidently private works; some were sold to supportive collectors – the painter Gustave Caillebotte bought Monet’s *Regatta at Argenteuil*,




Animal antics. Top, Edouard Manet, *The Races at Longchamps*, 1866; above, Vincent Van Gogh, *Crab on its Back*, 1889. Facing page: above, Van Gogh, *Seascape*, 1888; right, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *La Piazza San Marco, Venice*, 1881

still one of the most shocking of all Impressionist canvases in the raw energy of its handling; and some remained in the artists’ studios for many years until changing tastes made their roughness more palatable and encouraged the artist to dispose of them.

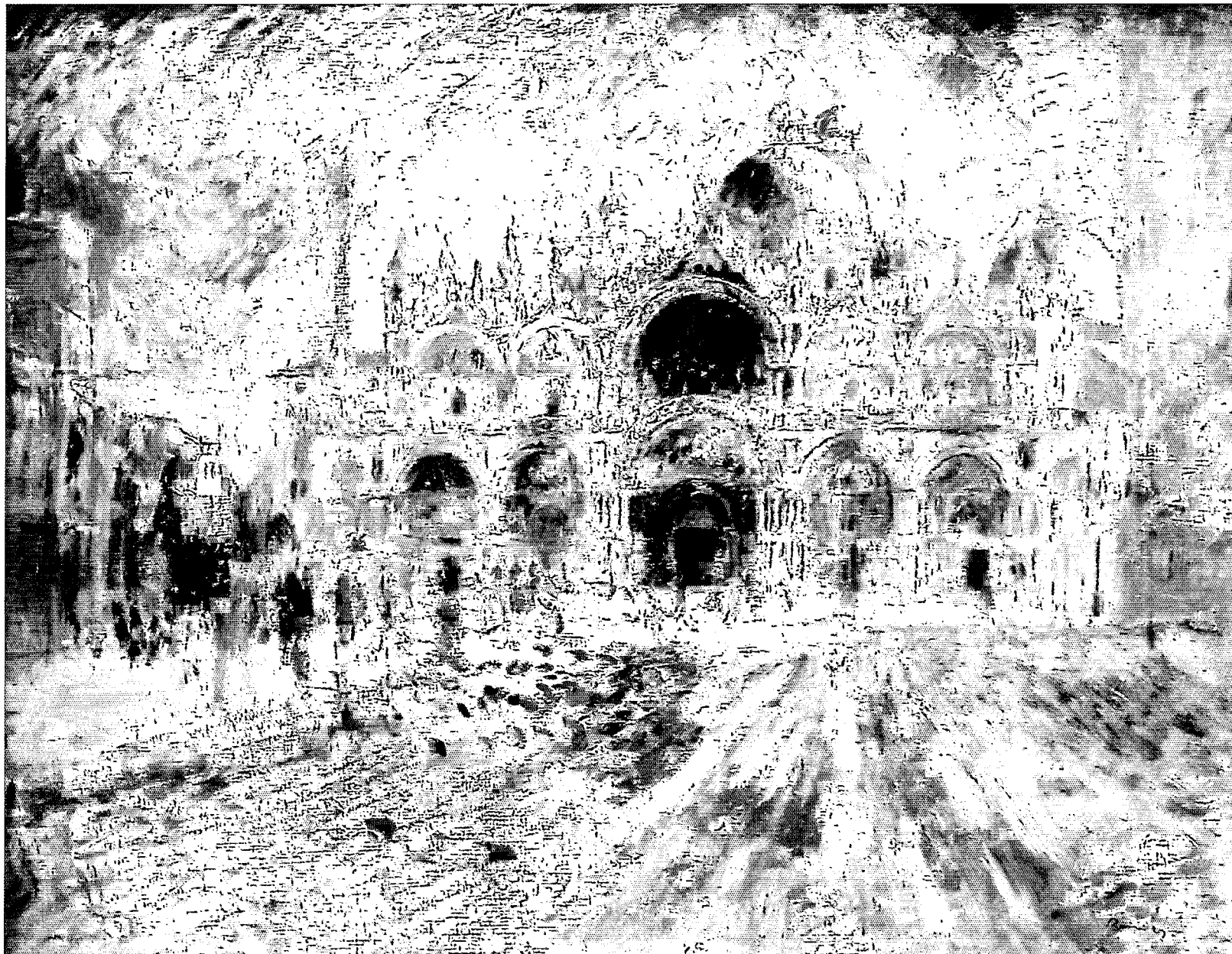
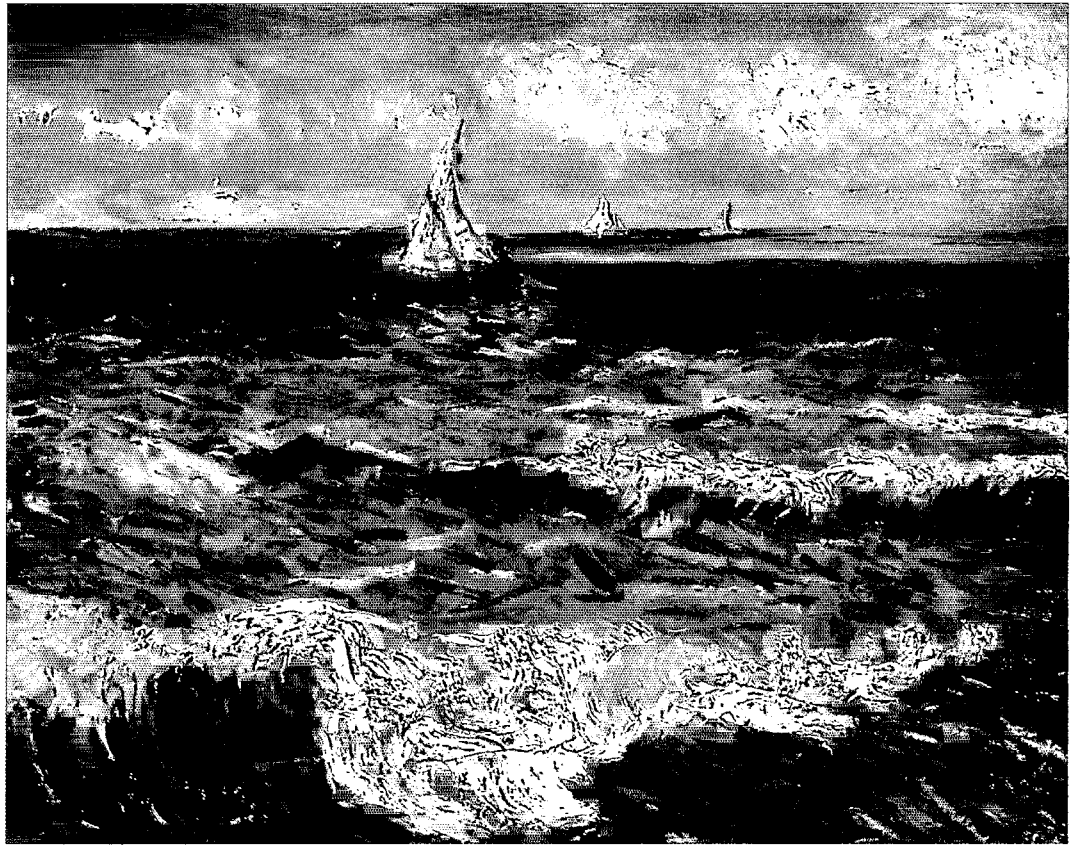
Strictly speaking, these different types of work cannot all be judged by the same criteria; but how will they look when brought together in the exhibition? Will we see some underlying similarity in their appearance, resulting from their informality and from the paraded “manual dexterity” that they all share? Is there some essential quality to a “quick painting”? Or will it become apparent that they belong to different categories of work that demand to be viewed in different

terms? The project of the exhibition invites us to ask these questions; only when we see the pictures on the wall will we begin to glean the answers.

But, whatever their effect, the paintings in "Impression: Painting Quickly" will offer us a fresh insight into a key moment in the history of art – the moment when the most informal and virtuoso "quick paintings" first came to be presented in public as complete works of art. Controversial when they were first seen, they are now among the most hallowed forms of art: what does this tell us about our own culture? 

*"Impression: Painting Quickly in France 1860-1890", sponsored by UBS Warburg, National Gallery, London WC2 (020 7747 2885), 1 Nov-28 Jan. The exhibition catalogue, written by Richard R Brettell, is published by the National Gallery and distributed by Yale University Press at £16.95(hb), £10.95(pb).*

*John House is Professor of History of Art at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London and is the author of "Monet: Nature into Art", published by Yale University Press*



A vertical bar on the left side of the page, consisting of a series of yellow and orange rectangular segments, with a small red diamond at the top.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Trick of the light  
SOURCE: Art Review (London, England) 52 N 2000  
WN: 0030604391006

Copyright Art Review, Ltd. USA and Canadian subscription to Art Review are handled by agents: International Media Service, 3330 Pacific Ave., Ste. 404, Virginia Beach, VA 23451, 800-428-3003. Annual subscription price \$79, Canada \$85. Our Internet address is <http://www.art-review.co.uk>.

Copyright 1982-2001 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.