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# VOYAGE AU TEMPS DES IMPRESSIONNISTES

**Chateau d’Auvers, France**

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Perched upon a hilltop overlooking the river Oise is the château d’Auvers sur Oise, a seventeenth century Medici banker’s estate. Its shadow looms imposingly over the sleepy city of Auvers-sur-Oise, a quintessentially French commune that was once the home of a most renowned post-Impressionist artist, Vincent van Gogh. The pathway to the château is surrounded by lush, green foliage and directs pedestrians through a narrow ravine, bringing them ever closer to the Voyage au temps des Impressionnistes museum, where a sensory journey awaits. [see figure 1]

After purchasing a ticket to the museum, the visitor is led through an underground tunnel towards the first exhibit, where a miniature panorama of war-torn, post-revolutionary Paris awaits. The voyageur learns that Paris was radically rebuilt and transformed in the mid-nineteenth century by Baron Haussmann, Emperor Napoleon III’s chief architect. A short multimedia presentation is projected onto the wall, and contrasts pre and post-Haussmannian Paris. The remnants of civil strife and pestilence are juxtaposed with wide boulevards, cobblestoned streets, and perfectly manicured gardens. Within mere moments, the city is transformed before the visitor’s eyes as he is taken back in time to the 1860s; he is told that the major art movement of the time, l’impressionnisme, emerged from the dynamic changes in the cityscape. The voyageur is now a contemporary of the Impressionists, of Manet, Degas, Pissarro, Monet, and Renoir, and visits the Café Guerbois, where the artists frequently met in the Batignolles

district in the seventeenth arrondissement. The visitor sees the place where the Impressionists pioneered an art movement that contradicted the standards of the revered French Académie des Beaux-Arts and captured the essence of fluidity, movement, and sensualism like few other movements had done before. [see figure 2]



Figure 1: Voyage au temps des Impressionnistes  
(Château d'Auvers sur Oise, Auvers-sur-Oise, France)



Figure 2: Emperor Napoleon III's pre-Haussmannian Paris

The voyageur soon finds himself in the Salon des Refusés, an institution that was established by Napoleon III to accommodate the growing numbers of artists whose works were rejected from the prestigious Palais de l'Industrie. Newspaper clippings and editorials plaster the room's white-washed walls, and a golden chandelier cascades overhead

to symbolize the austerity and grandeur of art movements such as Romanticism, Neoclassicism, Academicism, and Realism that had emerged from the rigid conventions of the Académie des Beaux-Arts. Audio-visual recordings play overhead and heckle the Impressionists, whom were, as the visitor learns, a small group of artists who rejected the conventions of classical art and began to circulate their work by means of several wealthy patrons. [see figure 3] He learns that the pioneer of this departure from traditional notions of high art is Edouard Manet. His controversial painting, “Déjeuner sur l’herbe”, which depicts a voluptuous nude woman luncheoning on the grass with two fully-clothed men in a contemporary setting, led to widespread critique by his rivals; they, in turn, satirized his style by calling him an Impressioniste, a term coined in 1874.



Figure 3: Salon des Refusés: the birthplace of the radicalism of Impressionism

Several strides later, the visitor enters a bourgeois sitting room where a plush couch, a chaise longue and an armchair sit on a floral carpet. A fireplace is draped with gathered red velvet and a gilded mirror hangs gaudily overhead. Heavy, powder blue curtains cascade from the ceiling and floral wallpaper plasters the walls. A floor-length mirror is propped against the posterior wall and doubles as a digitalized canvas by displaying various neoclassical toiles that depict aristocratic scenes. [see figure 4] The privileged upper class is then dramatically contrasted by Parisian street society by means of a short film. The film depicts the arduous social conditions of post-revolutionary, post-Napoleonic war Paris in an attempt to emphasize the dichotomy between the social strata. The visitor learns that the socio-political climate of Napoleon III’s Paris was

latent with hostile sentiments towards the bourgeoisie and was characterized by a collective desire to break away from traditional modes of thought. The bourgeois sitting room thus commands the visitor's attention by immersing him in a socially-fragmented Haussmannian Paris, where *la vie quotidienne* took place in the streets amongst the working and emergent middle classes. This shift in perspective, therefore, catalyzed the surge in popularity of Impressionist art and the consequential decline of conventional high art.



Figure 4: Academicism and *la vie quotidienne* of the bourgeoisie

The mood radically shifts as the visitor approaches the next exhibit. [see figure 5] Dim, red lights and a winding corridor made of plush, burgundy velour beckons the visitor and creates a sensually charged atmosphere. Small screens in the walls depict cabaret dancers and courtesans who hide coyly in hidden doors and dark alcoves. Sketches of Manet's *Olympia* and Degas' cabaret dancers personify the space's promiscuity. Here, too, the subtleties of the artists' perspectives are exposed. *Olympia*'s unabashed gaze extends far beyond the canvas and pierces that of the viewer. Degas' dancers, though more subtly promiscuous, are cast in semi-shadow beneath stone alcoves, a testimony to the hidden decadence of nineteenth century Paris.

The sensualized ambiance of the alcove lingers overhead as the visitor descends a winding staircase into a labyrinth, where yet another sensory experience lurks behind closed doors. [see figure 6] The doors open and the visitor is ushered into the Moulin Rouge, where tables and chairs, illuminated by oil lamps, face a stage with closed curtains. Suddenly, the lights dim and the curtains open. A digital projector depicts

scantly clad cabaret dancers scurrying across the stage. Music begins to blare and Toulouse-Lautrec's cancan dancers appear, their legs lifting provocatively in perfect unison. [see figure 7] The atmosphere electrifies as real dancers and painted dancers begin to oscillate in rapid sequence to create the effect of a live cabaret show. The juxtaposition of the real and the surreal effectively plunges the visitor into the realms of the Impressionists. He gains insight into the artists' perspective through innovative display techniques that set the stage for the rest of the exhibit.

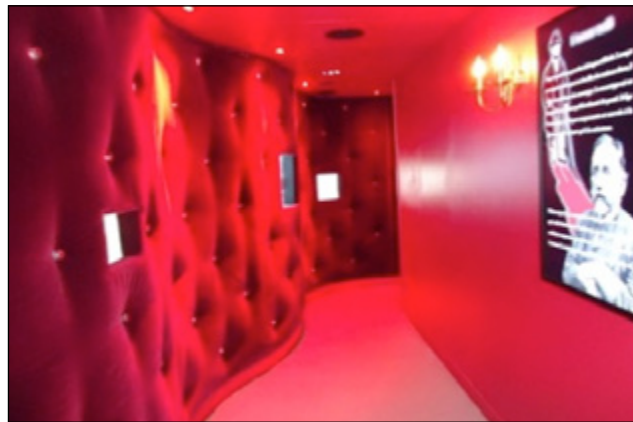


Figure 5: The hidden side of Paris is brought to light in the Secrets of the Alcove



Figure 6: A Parisian cabaret, a muse for many Impressionists.



Figure 7: The fluidity and dynamism of the cancan is captured by the mere flick of a paint brush

Upon leaving the Moulin Rouge, the visitor walks into a Parisian sidewalk café. Ashtrays are scattered on marble tables, and red leather banquet seats line the mirrored walls. [see figure 8] Hats are perched on tabletops and coat hangers, and paint a portrait of Parisian society by revealing the nature of the French social hierarchy. Two top hats, symbolic of the bourgeoisie, are perched on a coat stand. Next to it, a soldier's hat lies on a table. Finally, a worker's cap is placed symbolically at the far end of the café, thus giving the visitor insight into the class divisions of late nineteenth century France. The café epitomizes the Bohemian lifestyle of the Impressionists. Since they were marginalized and criticized by their rival contemporaries, the café symbolizes the location where the artists frequently met to discuss innovative ideas and aesthetics, and where they were to revolutionize genres of art for decades to come.



Figure 8: A portrait of Parisian society through the perspective of a Bohemian café

After leaving the café, the visitor descends a flight of stairs and walks down a platform towards Paris' iconic train station, Gare St. Lazare. [see figure 10] After climbing a second flight of stairs, he finds himself in the train station, where a pile

of musky luggage awaits patiently for the arrival of the next train. Passengers are encouraged to tour the room, where posters advertise trendy vacation destinations on the sea and in the countryside, such as Haute Normandie, and, ironically, Auvers-sur-Oise [see figure 11] Suddenly, a bell rings to signal the arrival of the next train. Passengers scurry towards the platform and begin to board the locomotive, their destination unknown. The lights dim and the sound of a train chugging plays overhead. Digital images of landscapes and city life are projected onto a parallel screen to give passengers the allusion that the stationary wagon is in motion. Soon, the landscapes project faster, mimicking the movement of an actual train. Scenes of city life, such as pedestrians strolling through perfectly manicured gardens with parasols, begin to roll by. Shortly thereafter, Impressionist landscape paintings of Île-de-France Val-d'Oise, and Normandy zoom by at alarming speed. [see figures 12, 13, 14, 15] The voyageur suddenly finds himself in the countryside. Billowing, golden haystacks dance in the wind. People chat animatedly in rowboats on a calm, serene lake, their reflections cast subtly in the azure water. Smoky clouds jut above a pillared bridge, their grey, industrial texture reflecting that of the infrastructure below. The visitor watches the rolling scenery in awe, while the landscapes are rapidly juxtaposed alongside one another in real time in order to mimic the tempo and sensations of the train. The passenger is literally given a medium through which he sees what the Impressionists might have seen. The fluidness of a single flick of a paintbrush brings the canvas to life and gives the visitor the impression that he truly is traveling through French communes like Pontoise, Giverny, and Asnieres, where the paintings of the landscapes finally come alive after nearly a century of stagnancy.



Figure 10: The platform to Gare St.- Lazare



Figure 11: Visitors wait in the train station before embarking on a dynamic sensory journey.



Figures 12, 13, 14, and 15: the scenic sensescape from Paris to Normandy



The voyageur's final journey to the time of the Impressionists immerses him in one of the most central components of Impressionist art, that of water and its movement. [see figure 16] A series of digital projections emphasize the primordial essence of water's fluidity by allowing the visitor to watch Claude Monet at work, cloaked in shadow, as he perches over a canvas to paint the seascape in front of him. The reflection of the sea is projected around the visitor's feet as the sound of the gentle lapping of waves plays overhead, thus acting as a constant reminder of the intensely sensual nature of Impressionism.



Figure 16: Claude Monet's surroundings frame and contextualize his work.



Figure 17: Impressions of the seascape

Several strides later, the visitor comes across a massive panoramic screen onto which paintings of the seaside are projected. The digital projection creates the illusion of a real seascape and depicts it in the ways that it was interpreted and depicted by the Impressionists. [see figure 17] It becomes evident that the seaside was a location of numerous social affairs, and that the artists were drawn to the energy and dynamism

of Normand resort towns. Women, clad in the latest fashions, stroll the terrace with a parasol in tow. Their skirts ruffle in the wind, and each fold and curve is gracefully depicted while simultaneously capturing the fabric's movement. Suddenly, the panorama changes suit. Sailboats are caught in media res as they sail towards the shore. Rowboats, half perched on the shore, bob over the gentle ebb and flow of the tide. A group of sailors huddle together and talk amongst themselves while smoking cigarettes. [see figure 18] A woman, her face hidden by a parasol, is superimposed over the group of sailors. She lounges on a garden terrace while gazing at the sea. Both scenes depict natural imagery in flux, a property that becomes especially evident in the reflections on the water.



Figure 18: The voyageur is immersed in a panoramic sensescape

Suddenly, the calm becomes calamitous, and the sea becomes violent and ravaging. Movement is explored through the depicting of water in its most primal form. Waves are brought to life by broad, aggressive strokes in an attempt to recreate the tumultuous seas of Bretagne and Haute Normandie. Soon thereafter, smaller and subtler strokes cover the screen, and depict the picturesque resort towns of Honfleur and Deauville in Basse Normandie. The various natures of water then move and flow as different angles and perspectives are projected in rapid sequence. An accented melody accompanies the sound of waves crashing against the shore, as the sights and sounds that envelop him drown the voyageur's senses. A canvas, perched on an easel in a corner, showcases a smaller version of the seascapes that are being projected panoramically in an attempt to give the visitor insight into the realms of movement and composition. The Impressionists' signatures mark the bottom of the canvases. [see figures 19, 20, 21]

A final crash of a wave brings the visitor's voyage to the time of the Impressionists to an end. He leaves the museum with new perspectives on Impressionism and with new impressions on perspective. Through digital technology, Voyage au temps des Impressionnistes challenges the display techniques of conventional art museums by sensualizing artwork and the contexts from which they emerged. Art is thus given perspective through the artist's perspective and is projected onto the very screens that may quite possibly become the canvases of a digitalized age.



Figure 19: Auguste Renoir



Figure 20: Edouard Manet



Figure 21: Claude Monet