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# THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History  
of Modern Europe, 1500-2000





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## 7.1.2 Experiments and Avant-gardes in Modern History (ca. 1800–1900)

*Jochen Hung, Anna Sidó, and Dániel Veress*

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### Introduction

During the nineteenth century, Europe underwent a profound social, political, economic, and technological transformation. The continent's cities grew into global centres of industry and were at the same time shaken by waves of social unrest and political revolutions. New modes of transport such as locomotives and steamboats offered increased mobility to a growing number of people, while the electric telegraph sped up global communications. These changes were not always welcomed: the misery of the growing working class in particular gave rise to radical ideas of social reform and practical experiments of more communal and egalitarian ways of living.

During this tumultuous time, an understanding of the 'avant-garde' as an opposition to dominant bourgeois norms and values, and of the artist as an agent of change took shape. This idea reflected the feelings of upheaval that European societies were experiencing and closely linked art and society. Following the ideas of the French theorist Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825), it was another Frenchman, the mathematician and social reformer Olinde Rodrigues (1795–1851), who first used the term 'avant-garde' in this sense in 1825. The revolutions of 1848 and the Paris Commune of 1871 were defining moments in which art attained a new status as a force for change.

While the idea of a socially engaged art was an important aspect of the avant-garde, many progressive artists focused more on formal revolution and innovation, leading to a long succession of artistic 'isms'—realism, impressionism, naturalism—which would come to be seen as an essential characteristic of modern art. According to the influential literary scholar Peter Bürger, it was during the nineteenth century that art became an autonomous institution. Rather than merely serving the Church or the aristocracy, art was now practised for its own sake, invested with purely aesthetic value.

## Social Utopias

The social and economic disruptions caused by the development of capitalism and industrialisation in nineteenth-century Europe sparked a wave of utopian ideas and experiments that aimed at imagining and practicing a different world. Most of these utopias were based on ideas of solidarity and egalitarianism, addressing rising inequality in rapidly industrialising European societies by sharing the fruits of labour more equally with the workers and the poor.

These radical ideas, formulated by thinkers like Saint-Simon, the British social reformer Robert Owen (1771–1858), and the French philosopher Charles Fourier (1772–1837), inspired the founding of communes and cooperatives in Europe and the rest of the world. One example is the Guise Familistère, a utopian community founded in 1859 by French industrialist Jean-Baptiste André Godin (1817–1888). Godin wanted to create a “perfect society” ruled by “freedom, equal rights for all citizens, fraternity in all human relations.” Following Fourier’s ideal of a “phalanstery”, the Familistère housed families working at his nearby factory, which he turned into a worker production cooperative. For Godin, the Familistère made it possible to create “equivalents of wealth”, meaning all the conditions of comfort and health that the bourgeoisie afforded itself through money and that the residents of the Familistère could now afford through cooperation. The building consisted of 558 flats and 350 houses, with a central courtyard under a glass roof. By contemporary standards, the residents had a very comfortable and luxurious life: all houses and flats had running water, a rubbish chute, and two toilets. There were also collective services like allotments, a nursery and a school, shops, a laundry room, a theatre, and even a swimming pool. However, putting Godin’s ideas of cooperative work into practice was not without its obstacles: a series of experiments in shop-floor democracy, in which the workers for example had to vote on who among them had earned higher pay, failed after they often chose whoever would return the favour next time. The factory was eventually turned into a listed company in 1894, with the shares owned by the workers.

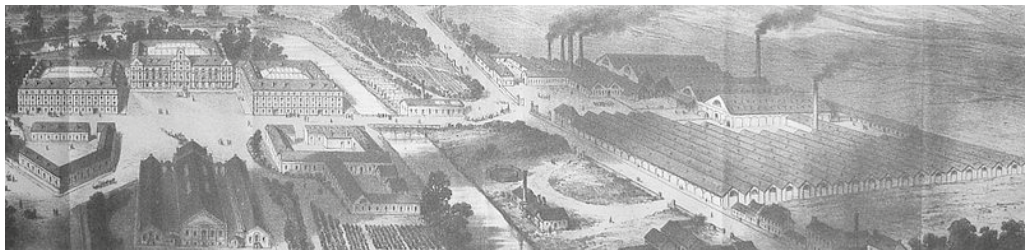


Fig. 1: J.B.A. Godin, *Overview of the Familistère* (1900s), Public Domain, Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Familist%C3%A8re\\_1.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Familist%C3%A8re_1.jpg).

The search for alternative ways of living was also reflected in the rise of early science fiction novels, such as *News from Nowhere* by the British artist William Morris (1834–1896). Published in 1890, the novel is set 200 years in the future, after a violent socialist revolution has brought about a society without private property, a monetary system, marriage or divorce, courts, and prisons. There are no big, polluted cities anymore, and poverty and misery have disappeared.

The ideas of Saint-Simon and Fourier also had an important influence on the French Revolution of 1848 and the Paris Commune of 1871. Arguably, the Commune, the short-lived revolutionary government that seized power in the French capital following the defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871, was the most famous and influential utopian experiment of the century. The Commune drew up an ambitious programme of socialist self-rule based on collaboration and cooperation, including measures like free education, the nationalisation of church property, and the liberalisation of marriage laws. Although it was crushed after a little over two months and only a few of the planned measures were implemented during its existence, the Commune became an important inspiration for socialist movements around the world.

## Painting and Sculpture

During the revolutionary upheavals that shook the continent, art was seen as a force for social change. This sentiment was reflected in the military origins of the term ‘avant-garde’, which put artists in the same category as the revolutionaries fighting on the barricades. For example, during the days of the Commune, the Federation of Artists was established to support young artists and unorthodox styles.

The jurors of the ‘*Salon*’—the annual exhibition at the Academy of Fine Arts in Paris that exerted a major influence on the European art world during the nineteenth century—disapproved of this idea of a socially engaged art. They rejected many innovative works that are now considered masterpieces, and by the 1860s the ‘*salons*’ were seen as staid and outmoded. In a review from 1866, the French novelist and journalist Émile Zola (1840–1902) decried the conventional nature of most exhibited works, which, in the face of the changes of their time, amounted to escapism: “Confronted with the invasion of science and industry, artists, in reaction, throw themselves into a dream, into a shoddy heaven of tinsel and tissue paper”. By then, the mounting public pressure had led to the establishment, in 1863, of an associated exhibition of the rejected works—the so-called *Salon des Refusés*. This official acknowledgement is often seen as the birth of the avant-garde, marking its beginning as the dominant force in European art and culture.

Avant-garde artists, according to the critic Clement Greenberg, saw it as their primary mission to push artistic and aesthetic boundaries. They did this by “narrowing and raising [art] to the expression of an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or beside the point.” The results of this continuous narrowing of the meaning of art were the birth of the concept of ‘*l’art pour l’art*’ (art for art’s sake) and, ultimately, abstraction. In fine arts, the path toward abstraction led through realism and impressionism. The French painter Gustave Courbet (1819–1877), who took an active part in the Commune and acted as the President of the Federation of Artists, argued that “realism is essentially democratic art”. He believed that the unvarnished presentation of the existence of workers and peasants could truly help in their struggle for social advancement. From an aesthetic point of view, his paintings can be termed realist since he not only endeavoured to record the nature and the life of workers with visual fidelity, but also abandoned composition, thus the accentuation of any detail.

Despite the long-lasting impact of the socially committed art of Courbet, succeeding generations of the French avant-garde were rather receptive only toward the aesthetic legacy of realism. From the 1860s until the beginning of the following century, progressive painters and sculptors were decisively apolitical and regarded autonomy as their essential principle besides progression. Historically, the last four decades of the nineteenth century seem like a course toward abstraction that can be thought of as a purification process toward pure art, in other words, the gradual attrition of content *vis-à-vis* expression. Around 1860, paintings and sculptures were unanimously lifelike, figurative and meaning-bearing. That is to say, artworks (a) represented visual forms that people could similarly identify as objects taken from their familiar environment (life-world); and (b) bore meaning that referred also to the very life-world in which they were at home.

That consensual understanding of visual art was first broken by the French painter Édouard Manet (1832–1883) whose paintings *The Luncheon on the Grass* and *Olympia* (both 1863) were rejected by the official *Salon*. They caused scandal not because of their sexual overtones but because they depicted nonsense in the eyes the Parisian public, who could not place them in the traditional context of artistic interpretation. Even though Manet painted with almost photographic precision, he can be considered as one of the most important forerunners of abstraction since his works did not seem to express an obvious meaning beyond their formal aspects of forms, colours, light and composition. This is why he is regarded as the first representative of ‘*l’art pour l’art*’. While Manet abandoned concrete meaning from his paintings, the impressionists gave up the principle of realistic depiction. Impressionists, named after *Impression, Sunrise* (1872), a work by the French painter Claude Monet (1840–1926),



focused on how the world appeared to them at a certain moment in time. Accordingly, they challenged the contemporary convention of the naturalistic portrayal of perspective, flora and fauna, and the human body, a tradition stemming from the Renaissance, and paved the way for a completely new concept of art dominated by personal perceptions and emotions, that is to say, by subjectivism above all. Nonetheless, impressionists remained faithful to the observable life-world by focusing on nature and the built environment.



Fig. 2: Édouard Manet, *Olympia* (1863), Public Domain, Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Manet,\\_Edouard\\_-\\_Olympia,\\_1863.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Manet,_Edouard_-_Olympia,_1863.jpg).



Fig. 3: Claude Monet, *Impression, Sunrise* (1872), Public Domain, Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Claude\\_Monet,\\_Impression,\\_soleil\\_levant.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Claude_Monet,_Impression,_soleil_levant.jpg).

The year 1882, when the eighth and last impressionist exhibition took place, marked the beginning of the phase that immediately prepared abstraction and that we label as post-impressionism. These following decades embraced the activity of *les Fauves* ('the Wild Beasts'), a group of painters officially existing between 1905 and 1908, who further developed the simultaneously fuzzy and vibrating formal language of impressionists. While the starting point for *les Fauves* was also the subjectively observed view, they, unlike Monet and his group, did not stop there and associated the view with bold, radically unnatural colours that matched their actual sentiments. Some of the Fauvist paintings were overcome by emotions to such an extent that the compositions fell apart in almost unidentifiable masses of brush strokes. The French painter Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), who did not associate himself with any of the avant-garde groups and schools, contributed at least as much to the birth of abstraction as *les Fauves* together. In the course of this quest to explore new avenues of visual expression, including the famous series of *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (1904–1906), Cézanne reached a stage where his paintings became nearly grid-like compositions encompassing elemental geometrical forms, circles, triangles and cubes. He died in 1906 but his innovations had laid the foundations for cubism, the first abstract art style, invented only a year later by the Spanish artist Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), and the French artist Georges Braque (1882–1963).



Fig. 4: Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (between 1885 and 1887), Public Domain, Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Montagne\\_Sainte-Victoire,\\_par\\_Paul\\_C%C3%A9zanne\\_106.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Montagne_Sainte-Victoire,_par_Paul_C%C3%A9zanne_106.jpg).



In many ways, the move towards higher levels of abstraction in fine art, from realism to cubism, was a reaction to the changes in European society in the nineteenth century. The confrontation with new technology, most importantly photography, but also with new ideas about individualism and the inner self, seemed to make the conventional European tradition of painting obsolete and demanded a new mode of expression.

## Literature

In literature, likewise, realism and impressionism were stages in the process of abstraction. Literary realism aimed to represent the totality of contemporary society by depicting the quotidian, ordinary lives of people of all classes. In their attempt to portray reality truthfully and objectively, realist writers embraced the growing importance of science and technology in nineteenth-century society. The French novelist Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) sought to emulate the scientific method of observation in his writing, and, in a similar vein, the British writer George Eliot (1819–1880) defined realism as “the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature.” In her works, Eliot went to great lengths to capture the specific regional dialects of her characters. While her novels were mostly set in the countryside, many realist writers focused on the conditions of the urban poor. The French author Victor Hugo (1802–1885) and the British novelist Charles Dickens (1812–1870), whose works often focused on the misery and squalor of the underclass in Paris and London respectively, were arguably the most influential artists of their time, shaping popular opinion on the needs of social reform.

Naturalist authors, such as Zola and the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov (1860–1904), took this reformist impulse even further. Influenced by the theory of evolution formulated by the British biologist Charles Darwin (1809–1882), naturalism sought to identify the underlying forces that shaped the actions of its characters, rather than just describing subjects truthfully.

In many ways, literary impressionism was a direct outgrowth of realism and naturalism. The aim was still to observe and represent a subject in as much detail as possible; however, the focus was no longer on the material or social world, but on subjective impressions and experiences. Rather than social totality, literary impressionism aimed for perceptual totality. This subjective viewpoint makes the meaning and even the course of events ambiguous and leaves much room for the reader to draw their own conclusions. Works by literary impressionists, such as the Polish-British writer Joseph Conrad (1857–1914) and the French author Marcel Proust (1871–1922), experimented with many formal innovations, such as stream of consciousness, non-linear timelines, multiple narrators, and visual imagery.

## Opera and Classical Music

In the field of nineteenth-century music, if we consider the break with and the reinterpretation of traditions, the renewal of the forms of expression and the appearance of artistic freedom—that is to say, if our topic is manifestations of the avant-garde attitude—then we have to refer first and foremost to the German composer Richard Wagner (1813–1883). Wagner renewed the operatic genre that was dominated by the popular Italian composers of his time, above all Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901). Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (a “total artwork”), attempted to free art from commercialisation—the process in which pieces of art became consumer goods. In accordance with the ancient Greek idea of art, Wagner advocated for pure, autonomous art whose branches are united and not hermetically separated from each other. This understanding was manifested in his notion of *Musikdrama*—as he named his mature works instead of using the standard denomination of ‘opera’. The four-opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (The Ring of the Nibelung), premiered as a whole in 1876, was outstanding even among his own work. Wagner's radical innovation in the composition of this tetralogy was the merging of different branches of art, striving to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in which music, text and visuality were fused. He was one of the few composers who wrote both the music and the *libretto* (script) for his operas, and oversaw the visuality and the conceptual details of the stage design. His vision even extended to the architecture of opera houses: Wagner planned and implemented a venue for his own artworks, the *Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth, with many unique features designed specifically for his operas, such as a hidden orchestra pit. Like many artists of the time, Wagner aimed to show the inner life and inherent nature of the human being in all of his works. Besides the revelation of personal psychology, Wagner also tried to confront society's inner mechanisms and the driving forces that work below the surface. He expressed the above-mentioned ideas in the framework of narrative, through the use of slowly developing musical themes. In his music dramas, Wagner introduced the *Leitmotif*, a recurring short musical phrase referring to characters, dramatic situations, or cultic objects. In terms of music, the other highly avant-garde means of expression was atonality, which he experimented with first in *Tristan und Isolde* (1865). Wagner's musical innovations influenced many modern composers such as Arnold Schoenberg and Igor Stravinsky, while his aesthetics had an important influence beyond the sphere of music, inspiring writers such as Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, Thomas Mann, or Friedrich Nietzsche.

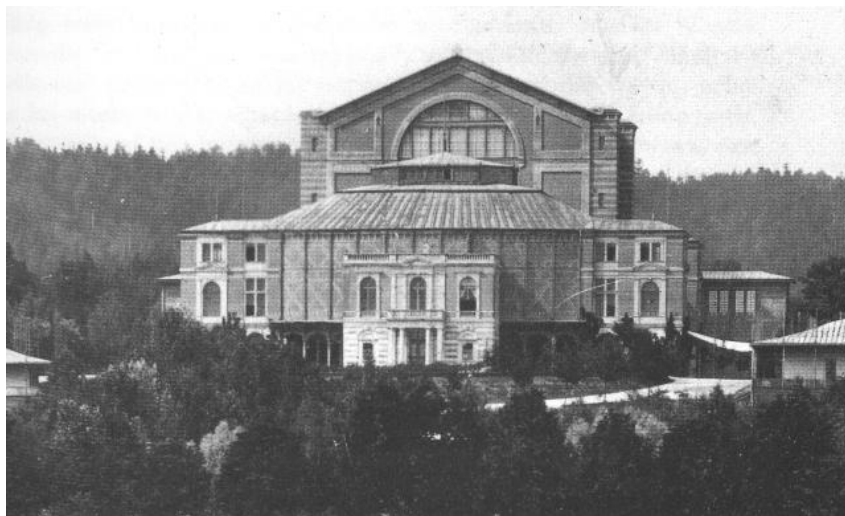


Fig. 5: Richard Wagner's Bayreuth Festival Theatre (1882), Public Domain, Wikimedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bayreuthfest.jpg>.

Wagner also had an important influence on the French composer Claude Debussy (1862–1918), who first embraced and later rejected the work of the German master. Debussy is often seen as the first impressionist composer, a label he himself vigorously rejected. Like in fine art, impressionism in music focuses on the subjective perspective of the artist, conveying moods and evoking feelings. Impressionist composers rejected tradition, emphasising static harmony, instrumental timbres that created a shimmering interplay of 'colours' and unusual chord combinations. With this, they laid the ground for developments in abstraction and atonality in the twentieth century.

## Conclusion

The nineteenth century gave rise to the idea of the 'avant-garde'—a small group of innovators challenging society's norms and conventions and pushing artistic, moral, and political boundaries. In many ways, the avant-garde artists and thinkers of the time reacted to the profound changes they experienced, from the growth of the industrial working class to the spread of photography and the advent of the railroad. Science and new technologies of observation and reproduction inspired them to focus on new perspectives to express the sensory totality of this modern world. While the avant-garde often seemed to abandon socio-political engagement for formal innovation and 'art for art's sake', the continuous revolution of '-isms' mirrored the waves of political and social transformation and the contemporary feeling of change as a sign of the times.



## Discussion questions

1. What does 'l'art pour l'art' mean, and why did artists follow this trend in the nineteenth century?
2. Why did people use a military term—the avant-garde—to describe the innovative artists of the nineteenth century?
3. Much of the avant-garde art of the nineteenth century developed towards higher levels of abstraction. Why do you think this was? Which broader societal changes or developments were reflected in this trend?

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