The year 1871 was a watershed year in the history of Europe. After a crushing defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, the French discarded their Second Empire by overthrowing Napoleon III and proclaiming the Third Republic. Thus two centuries of French domination of the continent came to an end. George Bernard Shaw is reported to have said that it was a marvelous victory, for the most arrogant and warlike people on the continent had been defeated by the most gentle
and peace-loving. A new day had dawned over Europe; the German hour had come. Long divided by religion and politics, the princes and diplomats of Germany now marched into the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles and proclaimed their own Second Empire. It was a smugly appropriate place for such a transfer of power.

In many ways, France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War was as important in ushering in a new era for her as it was for Germany. France had long been the greatest military power on the continent. She was the first great nation-state in the Middle Ages and dominated the political scene during the religious wars of the seventeenth century. Under both Louis XIV, and Napoleon Bonaparte, France's armies had brought confusion and destruction to her enemies. The combined forces of all the nations of Europe finally brought about Napoleon's defeat in 1815, but France quickly recovered and once again became a looming presence. Another revolution in 1848 deposed the last Bourbon monarch and set up a Second Republic. This one, like the First, quickly became an Empire under a member of the Bonaparte family. This time it was Napoleon's nephew, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, who was crowned Napoleon III (Napoleon I had an infant son who reigned for three weeks when the old emperor abdicated). His Second French Empire was a conscious attempt to capture the glories of the past, and the new Emperor favored art that was as big and bombastic as his ego.

But his defeat at the hand of the Germans in 1870 brought an end to these glories. Napoleon was traded for a Third Republic, the pretensions of the Second Empire were abandoned, and French decided that if they could not be the masters of the world militarily, the door was still open to them culturally.

These political changes were accompanied by two technological advances that were to permanently change the face of art. The first of these was the invention of the camera. Since the Renaissance, the ideal for a painter was the ability to capture, as accurately and realistically as possible, the form, colors, features, and personalities of the things of the natural world:

The camera changed all of that. Henceforth no painter would ever be able to compete with this device for sheer accuracy and lifelike imitation.
Painters would have to find some other purpose if the art form was to survive.

The second technical invention was metal tubes to hold oil paint. Up to this time painters had to mix their own paint, and since it would dry in a few hours they could only make enough for immediate use. Nor could they toss some pots of paint in the wagon and bump down the road into the country. This tied artists to their studios. But now a painter could easily pack a kit, throw in his tubes of paint, and head out of town.

Both of these changes are reflected in the work of a group of 19th-century painters that have come to be known as the Impressionists. This group centered on the work of Edouard Manet (Ma-nay) (1832-83), whose avowed purpose was to rid painting of any practice that he considered stale and meaningless. Conventional painters of Manet’s day claimed that they had discovered the secret of representing nature; Manet didn’t agree. Traditional painting, he said, represented men or objects under very artificial conditions—models posing in the light of a studio, and the painter using the interplay between light and shade to create a sense of solidity and roundness:

The public had become so accustomed to this manner of representation that they forgot that things don’t really appear this way in real life. In real life, Manet maintained, the contrasts between light and shade were not nearly so even. The lit parts are much brighter than in the studio, and the unlit parts are dappled into various shades of gray. According to Manet, “if we look nature in the open, we do not see individual objects each with its own color but rather a bright medley of tints which blend in our eye or really in our mind.” This same holds true with line: the old paintings were concerned to show all details of all the subjects with equal attention. But Manet realized that in reality the eye does not see things that way. In fact, the eye tends to focus
on only a small area, while the rest of its view tends to be blurred and unclear.

Manet abandoned the principle of mellow shading in favor of strong and harsh contrasts, and caused an outcry among traditional artists. In 1863 the academic painters flatly refused to show his work at an exhibition at the Paris Salon. Following an uproar, the authorities showed all the condemned works in a special show that they called the “Salon of the Rejected.” Among the painters who joined Manet was Claude Monet (Mo-nay) who urged his friends to abandon the
studio once and for all, and never to paint a single stroke except for in front of the “motif.” He had a little boat fitted out as a studio to allow him to explore the moods and effects of river scenery. Monet painted him in this attitude:

Monet’s demands that a painting be finished on the spot not only changed the painter’s work environment, but changed the ideals of painting. In order to catch a fleeting moment, the painter had no time to mix and match colors, but rather paint them in rapid strokes, abandoning detail in favor of a general effect. And that, at its heart, is the essence of the movement: catching the moment. Light changes everything and a moment later the entire scene will not be the same. While this apparently sloppy approach enraged the critics, it enabled Monet to see things with a new set of eyes. It was this new style that was called Impressionism, after one of Monet’s paintings: *Impression: Sunrise*.

Monet became famous for his landscapes, but others of his associates applied the same principles to people. Auguste Renoir captured the high life of the Parisians of his day. Faces and dresses in the swirling crowd.

To look at an Impressionist painting step back a few paces and watch the brushstrokes fall into place. Impressionism is the art of giving the eye only the minimum of what it needs to fill in the blanks. The picture it creates is not so much on the canvas,
but in your mind: It’s all about the moment.

It took little to convince the public this was great art. Some of today’s most admired paintings come from this era. The critics who had laughed were shown to be short-sighted and out of step with where things were headed. The struggle of the Impressionists became one of the most treasured legends in the history of the art, and future innovators could always point to the failure of the critics and public to understand their work. Soon this very misunderstanding became a stock in trade for artists everywhere, even to the point where artists and critics alike began to believe that the wider an artwork’s appeal, the less valid it was.

A parallel to Impressionism was the symbolist movement in poetry. Like Impressionism, Symbolism sought to transfer thoughts and feelings from the mind of the poet directly to the mind of the reader. Symbolists sought to use words not as concrete ideas, but rather as symbols that summoned up various
Impressionism

emotional connections. These emotions were often rather disconnected, and logic and descriptive narrative took a back seat or were ignored completely. Paul Verlaine (1844-1896) is regarded as one of the

Il pleure dans mon coeur
Comme il pleut sur la ville.
Quelle est cette langueur
Qui pénètre mon coeur?

O bruit doux de la pluie,
Par terre et sur les toits!
Pour un coeur qui s’ennuie,
O le chant de la pluie!

Il pleure sans raison
Dans ce coeur qui s’écoeuère.
Quoi! nulle trahison?
Ce deuil est sans raison.

C’est bien la pire peine,
De ne savoir pourquoi,
Sans amour et sans haine,
Mon coeur a tant de peine.

There is weeping in my heart
Like the rain falling on the town.
What is this languor
That pervades my heart?

Oh the patter of the rain
On the ground and the roofs!
For a heart growing bored,
Oh the song of the rain!

There is weeping without cause
In this disheartened heart.
What! No betrayal?
There’s no reason for this grief.

Truly the worst pain
Is not knowing why,
Without love or hatred,
my heart feels so much pain.

pre-eminent Symbolist poets.
Many of his poems speak of ennui, a kind of depressed boredom that sets in once all passions have been sated and all desires met. We’re left asking, “What’s next?” This feeling is characteristic of the post-Romantic age: after all the sound and fury of Wagner many artists were left feeling empty. “How do you top that?”

Music too found its Impressionism with Claude Debussy (Deb-u-see), although Debussy never applied the term to himself, and preferred to think of himself as a Symbolist.

Nevertheless, his music with its whole tone and pentatonic scales created a hazy, dreamy sound. Its lack of a firm tonality leaves the same feeling as the artists’ blurring of line and color. *Prelude à l’apres-midi d’un faun* (Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun) is one of Debussy’s most famous works; it also became the definitive work of the Impressionists. The piece is an orchestral work based on a literary text—a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé, another poet of the day.

Debussy captures the hot, lazy, hazy summer afternoon, and the sensuous feelings of the faun’s dream. Everything about the work is slow and hazy; you can feel the heat.