



# Illuminations: a new gallery looks at art, light & life

By Mary Brooke-Shaw

Bee Art Correspondent

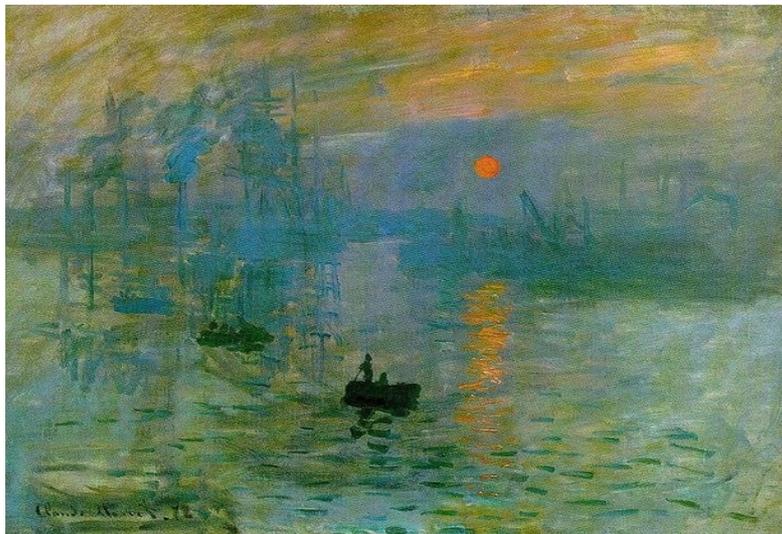
Published: Friday, June 25, 2012 - 12:00 am

Albert Wolff was a lucky man. Upon seeing the abuse that Wolff, a 19<sup>th</sup> century French art critic, had written about one of his wife's paintings, Eugene Manet's friends and family had to physically restrain him from challenging Wolff to a duel to the death. Wolff wasn't the only critic in 1874 to mock the radical paintings of the new Impressionist artists.

It's different these days. Only postcards and prints of works by Da Vinci outsell those of the Impressionists.

So who were the Impressionists? Why was Wolfe so critical of them? The new Sacramento **Illumination Gallery** and its debut exhibition – **Art, Light and Life** - provides a few answers.

Illumination is the product of almost two years hard work by the curator, **Miranda Chartwell** and the private owner of the gallery who, Miranda hints, is the daughter of a Hollywood actress. The collection was brought together by the work of Miranda, the owner, the generosity of several wealthy donors of paintings and close cooperation with five major American and European galleries.



'Impression, sunrise' painted in 1872 by Claude Monet, is one of the rare paintings going to be on show for a once in a lifetime exhibition at the new Illuminations Gallery, Sacramento

The physical grandeur of the project hits you once you're inside. On the outside the gallery is a drab and mediocre example of 1980's Internationalism. But once inside the visitor will be stopped in their tracks by the quality of the light. You won't fail to be enthralled by "Impression, Sunrise." This painting gave a name to an entire art movement and is on a rare loan from the Musée Marmottan Monet in Paris, France.

The Impressionists, Miranda explains, were an ambitious group of young French artists whose radical

approach to painting and politics scandalised 19<sup>th</sup> Century Paris. The group was founded in 1874. Calling themselves the “Anonymous Society of Painters, Sculptors, Printmakers, etc” the eight men and one woman organized an independent art exhibition in Paris which launched the movement. Its founding members included Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, Camille Pissarro, Eugene Manet and his more famous brother, Eduard, and Renoir – who captured the life and struggles of the raunchy dancers of the Moulin Rouge. At its peak the group could count 30 members or more. It inspired countless others all over the world.

Between 1874 and 1886 they held eight exhibitions and transformed art by their avant-garde approach. The group was unified only by its independence from the official annual Salon, for which a jury of artists from the Académie des Beaux-Arts selected artworks and awarded medals. These young independent artists, despite their diverse approaches to painting, appeared to contemporaries as a cohesive group. Conservative critics, like Wolff, constantly ridiculed the art for its unfinished and sketchy appearance.

The Impressionists painted with a technique of short, broken brushstrokes that hinted at solid forms with pure and unblended colors and trying to capture the immediate effects of light. To do this they used the newest types of paint so they could work straight from nature, often in the open air. They shunned the neutral whites, grays, and blacks of traditional art. Impressionists would even render shadows and highlights in color. Loose brushwork tried to capture spontaneity and an effortlessness that was often carefully constructed compositions. Their radical techniques and bright colors were just too shocking for eyes accustomed to the more sober colors and formality of Academic painting. But within the decade this new style was widely accepted, even by the official Salon. It became the only way possible to depict modern life especially in America.

Today the power and beauty of their work is undimmed. The colour leaps out from the walls.



A portrait of Berthe Morisot by Claude Manet – also on loan from the Musée Marmottan Monet, France

Miranda won't reveal how much the project has cost, she insists it was worth it and. I can't fault her in this. The exhibition draws together some of the more well known and less famous works of the Impressionists. Though all of them make a bold use of color. Illuminations truly shows these works in an entirely new light.

You won't find the cramped corridors or the dead ends of traditional galleries. There are newly painted walls and floors of a subdued grey along with carefully crafted artificial lighting to create a space almost like a wishing-well of light.

"These paintings were always intended to be hung on walls in homes, not in museums," she says, adding "they were painted by men and women who loved life in all its forms. They didn't live in a stuffy and closeted world of the academic painter and his tired mythological and aristocratic subjects. The Impressionists were young. Living and loving the world they painted. They got drunk with the prostitutes of the Left Bank and were just as likely to paint them as the girl who worked in the local hat shop or the farmers

at work in the fields at dusk. They'd paint the gamblers and jockeys sweating over their fates at the races or a steam filled Parisian railroad terminal. Subjects the everyday person would recognize. You didn't need an expensive education to understand this art. You just had to look out of your window."

I listen as Miranda talks and I can see, looking about the paintings, just what she means. Those 19th-century painters who lived in the time just before the electric light bulb became common would appreciate the modern artificial light employed to show their work to extraordinary effect.

Developing artistic and scientific techniques to capture on canvas the way that light transformed landscapes and objects became an almost complete obsession for the Impressionists. They wanted realism. Not just "optical realism" but to be true to life itself. Miranda quotes Claude Monet, the founder of Impressionism: "Light is the principal person in the picture."

Monet never forgot this and spent his whole life constantly working. Painting the light on the River Thames in London or the cathedral at Rouen in France. Everyone knows his water lilies on the pond at his home in Giverny. He'd paint the same scene over and over – trying to capture the light at different times and weathers.

Miranda explains some of the new technology. "We installed lighting which pretty much transforms everything. By combining halogen lights with the next-generation of diode lamps we produce a whole new richness of color. It mixes with sunlight to illuminate the paintings and reflect the colours and details. We literally see these works in a new light. That's our mission. Not just for this exhibition, but all the ones we plan to host."

She added, "Like the Musée d'Orsay did in 2008, we abandoned the concept, popularised by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, of hanging paintings on white walls. White walls kill pretty much any painting done outside the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. When you place an academic or Impressionist painting on a white background, the white light forms a halo around the work. That light will swallow up the subtle contrasts the artist struggled to include. Using a special grey paint we've made it possible for people to appreciate the rich and varied Impressionist palette."

My attention is drawn to the windows and roof skylights as Miranda shows more of the gallery. "We wanted to make full use of natural light by filtering it so we installed windows which use a special fractured glass technique to help diffuse sunlight."

Formally an office complex for business administration, the gallery building now boasts a temporary collection of 4 Manet's, 2 Monet's, 3 by Degas, 6 Cézanne's and 3 Sisley's among others - including two works by Madam Berthe Morisot, the woman for who's honor Eugene Manet was prepared to fight.

As we walk out Miranda smiles saying, "During the war between France and Prussia Degas and some of his fellow artists fled to America. The Americans embraced the Impressionist style. Some of these paintings are really coming home."

## **ART, LIFE and LIGHT**

**Where:** Illuminations Gallery 2400 22<sup>nd</sup> Street Sacramento 95818-2540

**When:** 11:00 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday-Sunday from July 1

**Cost:** Free

**Information:** (530) 758-xxxx