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Milwaukee Art Museum Highlights Impressionist Masters: Degas, Van Gogh, Cézanne and more

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By Curtis L. Carter (by-author-146-1.html)



More than 100 works will be on public display in "Impressionism: Masterworks on Paper," Oct. 14-Jan. 8, 2012, at the Milwaukee Art Museum. The loans are from museums and private collections across the world, including the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim in New York, the Albertina in Vienna, and the Tate in London. Among the 21 artists represented are Degas, Cassatt, Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Manet, Morisot, Pissarro, Redon, Renoir, Seurat and Toulouse-Lautrec.

The exhibition offers rich choices for visitors' enjoyment: Degas' ballet dancers, Cézanne's landscapes, Gauguin's Tahitian beauties, even Van Gogh's *Cemetery in the Rain*.

Given the many blockbuster Impressionist exhibits of recent memory, why another Impressionist show? The Milwaukee Art Museum and its co-organizers at the Albertina point to the significance of drawing for the Impressionists and note that this exhibit is the first to highlight Impressionist drawings.

Drawings were initially valued as technical byproducts used in the preparatory work of, or to record, finished paintings, but have been recognized as independent works of art since 1500. Impressionists gave drawings an even more significant role as the media for drawing expanded from pen and ink to include brightly colored chalk, charcoal, gouache, pastel and watercolor.

Given the popularity of Impressionist art today, it is difficult to imagine its role as an avant-garde movement a century or so ago even by the most advanced critics of its time. It was not a complete break with tradition, as the artists were trained in the Academy, and held onto drawing as a shared link to art's past. Yet their use of line, color and light changed art sufficiently to open the doors to modern art in ways not then imagined. Like the artists of every new generation, the Impressionists, and after them the Post-Impressionists, visually enriched the changing stream of new ideas inspired by literary, musical and scientific genius. These like-minded artists were determined to develop a new art language appropriate to the changing modern world.

The Milwaukee exhibition offers a window into the intimate regions of the artists' minds as they explore with their respective stylistic differences the potential of drawing for artistic expression. It remains special to see and feel these figures, landscapes and still-life images as they are rendered in the delicate lines and rich colors of the Impressionist masters.