

Impressionists in London

French Artists in Exile (1870 - 1904)

Tate Britain, London
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Robin Richmond



Monet: Houses of Parliament, London, 1900-1901

Tissot: The Ball on Shipboard, 1874

Let's face it. This show at Tate Britain is not really about Impressionism in London. Yes, it dutifully - and at times ravishingly - includes members of this most amorphous and heterogenous artistic "club", amongst whom is the very greatest of them all (and we know who that is). It also includes a huge mix of the others. Romantic Whistler, decadent Tissot, work-a-day Pissarro all take their place in this mini survey of this misnamed artistic group, who themselves abjured the very concept of Impressionism.

Any show with the "I" word in its title seems designed and destined to have hordes of visitors. This could be considered cynical programming on #Tate Britain's part, giving it also the British connection that this branch of Tate celebrates. But this misses the point. The most significant aspect of the show is a historical one and it's truly fascinating. The core of the show is devoted to the work of the cultural diaspora, and is the work of refugees. They are in exile post 1871, post the Franco-Prussian war, post the Fall of the Second Empire, post the siege of Paris, post the Paris Commune, post the ensuing civil war, post the deaths of over 100,000 men in battle, and 20,000 men, woman and children in reprisals.

Three thousand, three hundred Communards and their families fled to Britain and were welcomed. No restrictions: accompanied by an indefinite right to remain. Remind you of anything? Artists were among them. Alphonse Legros, Jules Dalou, Carpeaux, Daubigny, and most importantly Claude Monet all crossed the Channel in the 1870's. Monet's

seminal painting *Impression, Sunrise* is dated 1872, one year after the end of the war that propelled this avalanche of artistic immigrants, alienated and disaffected by starvation and privation. These French artists flocked to Victorian London, a city indisputably affected by gigantic inequalities and privation herself. Dickens, chronicler of such despair, died in 1870 and one can only wonder what the great social observer would have made of the famously gourmet and gourmand Parisians back in Paris under siege eating their pet dogs and cats, verminous rats and raiding their famous zoo for food.

The stand out room, and worth the crossing of continents, is devoted to an incantatory collection of Monet's series of the Houses of Parliament. His admonition to British Victorian painters that they painted London "brick by brick, bricks they did not see, bricks they could not see" might be a mission statement for Impressionism, the pictorial experiment that occupied him from 1872 to 1926. A foggy, red sun: a shimmer of lilacs, rose pinks and lichen greens in a pulsing sky, a glittering Thames....these avant garde masterpieces have not been seen together in 40 years, and will probably not ever be seen together again.

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