



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 5 EPISODE 12 (Dec 2023)

150 ANNIVERSARY OF IMPRESSIONISM- JULIE EWINGTON

Tim Stackpool:

What is it about Impressionism that makes it relevant today?

Julie Ewington:

Remarkably, Tim, it's 150 years next year since the Impressionists held their first exhibition on the Boulevard des Capucines. The work is beautiful, of course. What sets them apart is that they brought a modern way of looking at the world to their painting and they actually led a breakaway movement. They broke from the state system of big official salon exhibitions. They set out as independents and, basically, that's been the model ever since: artists working independently with independent visions.

Tim Stackpool:

So, for the time, they were breaking the mould?

Julie Ewington:

They were radical. It was a really big deal. They set up as an independent company, quite official actually, and they really, really challenged what the state wanted to do through the academy and The Académie des Beaux-Arts. It was a big rupture. It wasn't terribly successful financially, hardly anything sold. The critics were scathing and one of them said of a painting by Monet, "Oh, it's called Impression and I have the impression that there's something there, but I can't really tell." The word Impressionism stuck and the rest is history.

Tim Stackpool:

Why then does it remain relevant today?

Julie Ewington:

It's only relevant, I think, despite the great beauty of many of the paintings... If you think about how the painters were looking at their own world, they wanted to show what they saw. And Monet said, "Forget everything, just paint what you see." Well, that's a bit false naive, I reckon, but they didn't want gods; they didn't want masters; they didn't want emperors; they didn't want aristocrats. They wanted modern life, so they wanted people dancing in the equivalent of our discos. They wanted people having a beer by the side of the Seine, which you can still do today. They wanted people in the streets. They painted the railway stations, the harbours, they even painted the gas reservoirs and the railway lines. So, they wanted to look at the world as it was, not the world as it was officially supposed to be, and that's what makes them important.

Tim Stackpool:

How long was it from that period of originating Impressionism painting, as it was coined, before it started to be recognised as being something special?

Julie Ewington:

Oh, not very long at all. Not very long at all. But the interesting thing is it wasn't the French that really took it up. The people who really understood the radicality of it all were the Americans. The American Impressionist, Mary Cassatt, was really important because she persuaded rich Americans to look at the paintings of the Impressionists.

The Japanese were a very early enthusiasts because they understood how radical it was. They also could see that the Impressionist painters were keen collectors of their own woodcuts, and that Impressionism owed a lot of Japanese ways of seeing the world, and they really appreciated that. In fact, I was in Monet's garden in Giverny only a couple of weeks ago and there were a lot of Japanese there looking at the water garden, the Japanese style water garden, and totally on board.

Tim Stackpool:

It seems incredible that that was a influence so long ago, travel wasn't all that extensive. Perhaps the artist didn't have the opportunity to actually feel that Japanese influence. How do you think that came about?

Julie Ewington:

Oh, it's very simple. It's really incredible. Commander Perry sailed into Yokohama Bay, I think it was Yokohama Bay, in 1853. By 1868, Japanese prints are all over the background of Manet's portrait of his friend Emile Zola, the novelist. So the prints travelled in huge numbers, the fabulous Japanese Fujiko ukiyo-e floating world prints that we know and love.

Manet had more than 200, and many of them, copies of them, are still in the house at Giverny. Van Gogh had a huge collection and they've all been catalogued, so the artists were onto it. They're onto it in a flash. I'd say the prints were in Paris probably in the early 1860s.

Tim Stackpool:

Wow, amazing. I'm just wondering, using modern parlance, did those artists, do you think, had a mind explosion when they saw this work coming in from Japan?

Julie Ewington:

No question. The other way their minds exploded was the usefulness of photography. So people like Manet and Degas were both keen photographers and you can actually compare some of Degas' photographs with the paintings. He used them to make notations. The way that in his Impressionist paintings, the horses back out of the frame and people are cut off, all of that owes to the way a photograph will inadvertently cut people off. So Japanese art, photography, new technologies actually, and new technologies in painting, it all came together in the late 1860s, early 1870s. This was part of the modernity of it all, part of the painting of modern life.

Tim Stackpool:

We've spoken about a couple of artists already. Monet, Renoir, we think of them as Impressionists. Cézanne too. How extensive was this?

Julie Ewington:

It's interesting now. That first exhibition in 1874 had more than 30 artists, and all of the people that you named. Pissarro had to argue hard to get Cézanne in because Manet said he wouldn't show with that buffoon. Anyway, they could give as good as they got. In fact, Manet didn't ever show with the Impressionists, but there were about 30. But the key ones, the leaders of the pack are Renoir, Degas, Berthe Morisot, Alfred Sisley, Pissarro. Have I said him? They were the key ones because they formed a limited company. It was all very official.

Tim Stackpool:

Wow.

Julie Ewington:

But there were another 20-odd and they showed about 200 pictures. The ones who became famous are the names that you mentioned. So Cézanne did show with them at the beginning, though we don't think of him as a very good Impressionist, but he was certainly one of the artists whose art took off from working with them and learning from them and being part of that new independent explosion of energy that there was.

Tim Stackpool:

Sometimes Van Gogh is put into the collection with these other artists, but strictly, you wouldn't necessarily agree with that?

Julie Ewington:

No, we wouldn't think of Van Gogh as an Impressionist, but he was really stimulated and inspired by what he saw by their colour. His work absolutely took off in those four short years after he came from Holland to live in France before, unfortunately, he met his well-known end in that cornfield.

Now that was in a place called Auvers-sur-Oise and our art cruise is going to go there. It was a little town on the Oise, but not very far from the Seine, a tributary at the Seine. He was close to Pissarro and the artist Daubigny had a place there. Artists used to go out there and, in fact, Van Gogh went there to stay with a doctor who was an amateur artist and a modern painter.

He wouldn't have been the painter he was if he hadn't come into contact with the Impressionists. In fact, their influence was so broad that I'd say Streeton and Roberts and the Impressionist painters in Australia were beginning to show that they'd come into contact with the new forms of painting.

Streeton makes a painting of Coogee in 1890 when he first comes to Sydney and calls it "a place of passion, fruit and sunshine" or something like that. That's only 16 years after the first exhibition, so it caught on like wildfire, not only in France, but right across the world.

Tim Stackpool:

And this goes back to that original question as to why it's so important today, and why it continues to invade the psyche. When people think of the classics, they think of so much Impressionism because it splinters off and inspires so many other movements. But it's an unfair question, but is Impressionism your favourite movement?

Julie Ewington:

That's the favourite child question. So I'm going to say that, at the minute, I am so fascinated. The 150 years anniversary of Impressionism means that I've come back to a movement that I taught years ago when I was teaching art history, and that I looked at a number of times, particularly with the work of our wonderful Virginia Spate, the world expert on Monet, who was the professor here in Sydney. I worked with her when I taught art history. But coming back to it and rethinking its significance and looking at the way this was one of the key modern moments, I'm completely head down and bum up, if you'll forgive me, in Impressionism at the minute. It's fascinating.

Tim Stackpool:

The next question, of course, is do you have a favourite artist from that movement? Is that fair to ask?

Julie Ewington:

It is fair to ask and I have a whole list of them. Monet, Degas, a great favourite with me, Mary Cassatt. And even though he wasn't a member of the group officially, he refused to show with them, Manet, who was a leading person in that particular group. Those are my favourites for their intelligence.

I love Berthe Morisot. She's an astonishing painter, unfortunately died too young, but open, generous, brushy. There's air in her painting, the beautiful and intelligent work. Manet for the beautiful shots of people shots. I'm talking about the influence of photography - beautiful paintings of people boating on the Seine, people at leisure, the boats, the people sitting about idly sitting in cafes just being together. And Degas, so much more than a painter of pretty ballet scenes, always intelligent, a acerbic eye, tough. Wonderful artists, always rewarding.

Tim Stackpool:

In all your research of these artists, and there is the standard history that most of us know of, but in your study of them, is there anything you came across which surprised you a little bit; or you uncovered something that you didn't know but you realised, "Well, that's why the artists were influenced in the way that they are"?

Julie Ewington:

I had a visit to the Musée d'Orsay in Paris on my last trip, just a couple of weeks ago, and that's the great repository of the work. They are mounting a big show in 2024 called Paris 1874, Inventing Impressionism. The way they're thinking about Impressionism has absolutely reorganised my head because they look at the painters at that town, in that time, with everything that was around them. So I became aware of how astonishing the railway stations were to them. And then I saw that Monet painted the Gare Saint-Lazare more than 10 times I think. The Gare Saint-Lazare is where you leave if you're going to Auvers or if you're going to Giverny. It's the train station that you go to even today. So there's connections in space as well as in time between where we are in Paris and what the painters looked at. So, for me, being there and visiting the places, seeing the light, seeing the pictures, it was a renovation for me in my head of how I looked at the pictures.

There's something else really important to say. They were painting with new paints, so I was tempted to call one article Trains, Pleins and Tubes Of Paint, but I wasn't allowed to have my way. So the trains that were very new, that took the painters out into the countryside along the Seine and along the Oise, places that before that were a whole day's journey and not really feasible, took the painters to cheap studio places in the country. The pleins were prepared canvases, which started to be made in industrial numbers in different sizes, which are still common today. And the tubes of paint were only available from about the 1830s, 40s, really the 1840s, and that was a different kind of oil paint in tubes.

It not only allowed people to be portable and take their little painting boxes out into the country on plein air to paint in nature, it meant that the paint was actually physically different. It came out in stronger colours and in more opaque colours, so oil painting was different. Oil painting had to become different. And the way that the Impressionists painted was different - out in the air.

So when Monet paints his wife and little kid in a field of poppies in 1874, he's doing it with a different set of technologies, the trains, the portable canvases and the tubes of paint, which suggested bright orange next to bright green instead of layers of oil painting like before. It was a new kind of painting, and that's what I got this time more than I ever had before. I feel as though I've learned it again.

Tim Stackpool:

I haven't quite identified the feeling that you get, as you say, visiting the places where these artists stood and worked. I felt that on my most recent trip as well, particularly in Paris. I also felt that in Berlin as well, standing in front of a painting that I adore so much.

This is one of the great things about touring with people who are like-minded and taking these tours, which are focused on, in this case, Impressionism. And there are other tours as well that Renaissance undertake, but what do you recognise when you're touring with these people and they're such like-minded people. It's a different experience to just being a tourist and flying into Paris.

Julie Ewington:

It's fantastic. I've taken some tours for Renaissance over the last couple of years, but I've also gone, oddly enough like you, on a couple of tours for the first time myself, tours to India about textiles. Being with somebody who's been there and knows the road means that you have informed company. Well, I find the tour groups that I lead really interesting because the questions that people ask, and the different knowledges that they bring... I always hope I have a quantity surveyor on my tours because they can always estimate distances, so that people bring different knowledges. That's what makes it really interesting. There's no telling, before the group gets together, who has what interests.

Of course, we're all there because we want to look at that country and that part of France this time through the lens of art that we're all interested in. So we're not a cricket tour; we're an art tour. And we're not a wine tour as it happens, though we will have good wine. We're interested in the arts. People have made that decision and that commitment, so we've got a common purpose in exploring together. I really, really enjoy the groups for that reason. It's always a complete revelation.

Tim Stackpool:

Sometimes one of the things I find when showing people through galleries here in Sydney is that their interpretation of the work is completely different to perhaps what the artist was intending. Do you find that as well? Do you get surprised at what people read into some of the art when they're actually in the location, perhaps seeing the work for real for the first time?

Julie Ewington:

Actually, I want to be surprised. What you want is for people to come and to leave behind any preconceptions and to respond to the work. What I enjoy is watching people do the work: coming around the corner, seeing the thing, coming to grips with it, and having the conversations. We all have some baggage and particularly we have baggage with something we think we know like Impressionism, but that's the real joy.

I took a group to New Zealand at the beginning of the year. We went into Auckland Art Gallery. They all went like lemmings over to the painting by the great Colin McCahon. I felt like they were the best students I'd ever had. They picked up the key, beautiful, wonderful, extraordinary thing that not many of them had seen before, so it's that kind of thing. The fancy word for it is situated learning, but really, being on the spot and exploring for yourself, it's very rewarding. It's really rewarding watching other people do it.

Tim Stackpool:

It's very satisfying as well. I think I found that too. What do we need to look forward to with what you are doing next year?

Julie Ewington:

Oh well, good company, but we are going to do Impressionism from M to M, that is to say from Monet to Monet. We are starting in Paris at the Orangerie to see his great lake water lilies sequence. That's the first thing, and we'll end up on the last day of the tour about 11 days later, looking at his studio in Giverny, the place where he painted the water lilies, and we'll go to the garden.

But in-between that, we'll go to the Musee d'Orsay and see the big 1874 exhibition. We'll understand the context. We'll go out into the country. We'll visit Auvers, the little villages. We'll go to Auvers where Daubigny and Van Gogh were. We'll go to Rouen and we'll come back to Monet again because he painted that cathedral so many times. I saw five of the paintings on one wall the other day in Paris.

Then, we'll go up to where Le Havre where Monet was born and the notorious impression, sunrise is a picture of the Le Havre water, the harbour where he was born: grey and misty. It's a channel port after all. We'll go to Etretat, which is a place of wild coast on the Atlantic that inspired so many artists, and then we come back to Giverny and the beautiful garden. So what we are going to see is the Seine Valley, the beautiful, broad, important, Seine River, which brought all of the world's goods down to Paris and which is the main artery.

The little towns where they all stayed are oddly enough, they're still a bit of a hike from Paris. If you want to go to Fontainebleau or the bar where the Barbizon painters were, or any of the others. It's a minimum hour-and-a-half round trip. I know it sounds like it's not far, but it's a bit of a hike and they're not that close to each other. But if you go on the boat, we can hop on and off the boat and we can see the beautiful country, and the leisurely aspect. I'm thrilled that we don't have to put bags on and off a bus. It's just so, well, luxurious actually.

Tim Stackpool:

I actually wanted to ask you about the boat. There's a practical consideration there. As you say, you're not lugging luggage on and off the boat because you do live and stay on the boat.

Julie Ewington:

Yes, it's very relaxed. We are going to have our talks about the artworks and the culture on the boat. We will get on and off the boat to go to the various little expeditions, so people will get a chance to stretch their legs. But I think it will be a little floating world of our own and we will concentrate on looking at that beautiful rich countryside and see the Île-de-France and the Seine Valley, Normandy. I don't know if we'll be in time to see the linen in bloom, the fields of linen with the blue flowers, but I hope we'll see the fields of the orange poppies that Monet painted so memorably.

Tim Stackpool:

That would be lovely. And then, beyond that as well, you've got an add-on tour, which is to do with Brittany?

Julie Ewington:

Oh, I so hope we can go to Brittany. Of course, Brittany's so far west. It's so far west that there's a Celtic language there, which is close, as we know, to Welsh and to Cornish, so I've got fellow feeling there. It's a very wonderful place. It was considered wild at the time of the Impressionists. Actually, some of it's still pretty wild. It's a long way from Paris. It's a long way from the Sun King.

So our first stop is Rouen, which is 300 kilometres, but we're going to go to Pont-Aven, which was the very, very rustic village visited by Gauguin, and Émile Bernard, and Van Gogh. And then we're going to go to Belle Île off the coast where Monet lived and where the Australian Impressionist John Russell lived.

The other thing we're going to do is go to the largest field of megaliths in the entire of Europe at a place called Carnac, spelt C-A-R-N-A-C. There's another famous Carnac. Carnac is 4,500 years before the common era. It's the oldest, greatest, hugest field of megaliths. So we're talking about a place that has been occupied, of course, for thousands and thousands of years that we know of, but it's a very, very long way from Paris. Plenty of people out there still speak Breton language and plenty of people send their children to bilingual schools where they can learn Breton, so it's culturally different.

And so we don't come back through Paris, we come back through Nantes, which is the gateway between Brittany and the Loire Valley. So I'm very thrilled that we can see two distinct regions plus Paris. We can see Normandy in the first tour, but Brittany, beautiful Atlantic coast of Brittany, which is such a wild and different place.

I love France and I like going to different parts of the country. There's a pretence, I suppose, that France is one country, but it's a coalition of different parts with their own languages, and dialects, and pride, and ways of doing things. So going to different parts of France like Normandy and Britney, and later on in the year to the south, what a pleasure.

Tim Stackpool:

So much to see and take in. I've certainly suffered from this museum fatigue and architecture fatigue as well because you are just presented with the most incredible monuments minute after minute, can I say hour after hour. The same in the museums - just terrific work after terrific work. Do you have advice on how to cope with that museum fatigue?

Julie Ewington:

Indeed, I do. First of all, wear comfortable shoes. That's really important. Second of all, go in the morning when you're fresh, and also go in the morning because peak visitation time is 3:00 PM and you do not want to battle with the crowds. In fact, we'll have lots of private visits on our tour, which is just gorgeous because there's nothing like being in an empty museum. It's a great luxury. So go in the morning and wear the comfortable shoes, after a nice little breakfast.

But sometimes you just have to be prepared to push through the fatigue until you come round the corner and you see, "Oh, my God, that's here and I didn't know," and then you feel really grateful that you felt cranky and querulous 15 minutes before. And then you come round the corner and you see a great painting by Delacroix, or you see a beautiful portrait by Berthe Morisot and you think, "I'm rewarded for my fortitude."

I do some other things on my tours. I like to mix it up, so I like to surprise people with unexpectedly fabulous small shops or it's just something different like we might find something funny or a garden, or we'll find something unexpected. So if people know that there are a few surprises and we're going to look at the world in general, not just at the pictures on the wall, I think they'll get through it. Besides these are art-ready people who've already trained, they can do this.

Tim Stackpool:

Yes. But let me ask about you, if I could just swing the conversation that way. You've done this often. You obviously enjoy it, but how do you maintain your spontaneity and freshness doing these tours?



Julie Ewington:

On this trip to France, I went to quite a few places that I'm going to take the group. So everywhere was fantastic. I want to go back and look again with the group. I expect to be delighted again. I'm thrilled to be going back to Monet's garden again with the group and to the Gare Saint-Lazare, to all the places that we go to.

I did go to the Boulevard des Capucines to have a look at what the site of the first Impressionist exhibition, but unfortunately, it's being redecorated, so I don't know what's going to happen there. If you go back, your knowledge deepens and that's the reward for me. And because I'm going with a group, they're going to ask me questions and they're going to have points of view that are going to make it all new again for me. So, I don't know. I guess I'm an art junkie.

Tim Stackpool:

Well, it's like when you hear a new music album and you want to share it with somebody else, or you see a film and you want to take someone else to go and see it. You talked about it earlier in this conversation where people come around the corner and you see their reaction to the art that's hanging on the wall. You just love to see how that work moves and how people respond to seeing it for real, for the first time.

Julie Ewington:

Yes, there's a painting at the exit of the Impressionist rooms at the Musee d'Orsay. If you come from one direction, you will see it first. I saw it at the end and it's a painting by Maximilian Luce from 1903. It's of the Paris Commune. It's a bright sunny day and dead people are lying in the street in bright colours, so he's a post-Impressionist painter painting what he saw as a young man. That was at the time when Monet fled to England because politics was getting too hot.

That reminds us all that all of those Impressionist paintings were done at a time of terrific political turmoil. The emperor was bundled off, Paris became a commune for a couple of months. The Republic started. Courbet was put in prison for his role in the Commune. It was a very turbulent time and to see how seriously the painters strove to paint modern life in their own way as the Impressionists is truly impressive because it was not a peaceful time in France. It was a time of turbulent change. That's I think what we're getting out of the 150 years. So much beauty, but dealing with so much change, it's impressive.

Tim Stackpool:

It is impressive, Julie, as is your history in the arts. So just before we wrap up, what else are you doing at the moment, apart from undertaking these tours? What's next for Julie Ewington?

Julie Ewington:

I'm writing catalogue essays for artists, some of which I cannot speak about, but it's wonderful to work with artists. So I'm doing a catalogue essay for a museum in New Zealand and one here. And so, to have the possibility of speaking to artists, working with them, going to studios, understanding the work, that's an enormous pleasure. So I've got a busy summer ahead writing and possibly also helping with editing a book as well. I do editing, writing and editing, and very occasionally, curating like the exhibition I did for Wagga Wagga Art Gallery in the middle of the year. So those wonderful jobs that I'm asked to do, keep me more than busy, Tim.

Tim Stackpool:

Terrific to speak to you today. And look, I hope the tour goes well. Everyone will have a great time, I know, and I really appreciate your time on Inside the Gallery.

Julie Ewington:

Thank you so much. It's been challenging. You've made me think. Thank you.