

Life & Times Exhibition

Impressionists in London: French artists in exile 1870–1904

*Tate Britain, London,
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MIXED IMPRESSIONS

It is difficult to read the introduction to this show at the beautiful Tate Britain without a thought for our present difficulties with the European Union. Following the destruction of Paris in the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune, thousands of French people, including over 3000 Communards and their families, were able to cross to Britain and settle here without restriction. They were welcomed with open arms. Among these exiles were many artists, and the stories of some of them, by no means all paid-up Impressionists, are told in this intriguing, mostly enjoyable, but inaccurately titled exhibition. After all, the Paris Salon where Monet's *Impression: Sunrise* was first exhibited, and gave its name to the movement, did not happen until 1874.

This exhibition starts with horror and destruction and concludes with some of the most sublime paintings. The shocking carnage, the ruins of the Tuileries, and Corot's nightmare of Paris burning capture the disasters that war had brought to France in 1870. All of Camille Pissarro's paintings had been destroyed, so he moved to South London, where he had family, and painted Upper Norwood, Sydenham, and Lordship Lane. Monet and Daubigny lived in Central

Camille Pissarro (1830–1903), Kew Green (1892). Oil paint on canvas, 460 × 550 mm. Musée d'Orsay.



Claude Monet (1840–1926), Houses of Parliament, Sunset (1904). Oil paint on canvas, 810 × 920 mm. Kaiser Wilhelm Museum.

London and painted Westminster and the Thames, while James Tissot's connection with the editor of *Vanity Fair* took him to St John's Wood.

Alfred Sisley was more interested in the area around Hampton Court. As well as memorable studies of London's streets and parks, the artists were also shrewd observers of the Victorian social scene, particularly Tissot, who was emphatically not an Impressionist, and who often seemed to be smirking at English society.

There is quite a lot of sculpture in the middle section, some of it not very good, largely by Jules Dalou who, with Alphonse Legros (who became Slade Professor of Fine Art in 1876), linked many of the émigrés with Burne-Jones and

Rossetti. John-Baptiste Carpeaux, the third sculptor on show, lucratively plumed the Victorian appetite for sentimentality and received commissions from the Queen and the Duke of Westminster.

Oscar Wilde said of London's fogs:

'They did not exist until art had invented them'

and London's striking atmospherics are integral to many of the graphic records of the city left by Impressionist painters. Although, in many ways, Whistler had beaten him to it, Monet's studies of the Thames at Westminster, painted from a covered terrace on the riverside at St Thomas' Hospital, are the pinnacle of these achievements. Six of them hover on the walls of the penultimate room, almost abstract, Rothko-like. Unforgettable.

Roger Jones,
Editor, *BJGP*, London.
E-mail: roger.jones@kcl.ac.uk

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