

Atlanta's Impressionism exhibit elicits high spirits

Barbara Brannon

A *Newsweek* article a few weeks back bemoaned the inaccessibility of some of the mega-exhibitions that have been drawing crowds to the nation's art museums. And the writer wasn't talking about understanding Jackson Pollack. The real problem, in his opinion, was the sheer difficulty of obtaining tickets, and the unsatisfying experience of viewing paintings across a sea of earphone-crowned heads. Were museums genuinely interested in bringing art to the people — or merely making lots of (ahem) Monet?

So I was prepared for the worst, when I and my college-aged children had a few hours to ourselves in Atlanta, the day after the much-anticipated Impressionism show opened at the High. Now, persuading them to spend a sunny afternoon in an art museum was an unlooked-for achievement in itself. I doubted luck would hold at the box office.

Not only were tickets readily available, the public viewing hours were extended for the evening. We were welcomed right in.

The focus of this exhibition, the largest Impressionist show ever held in the Southeast, is different from that of the big single-artist showcases. The more than 60 works by a dozen-plus artists illustrate the very origins of their own fame, by brilliantly highlighting the history of the collectors, dealers, and museums that forged the painters' reputations and careers.

But in no way are the paintings themselves overshadowed. Familiar names are here — Renoir, Manet, Degas, Cassatt, Monet — and viewers will have the chance to see some less-familiar works. The line between Impressionism and post-Impressionism (fuzzy in any case) is ignored, to encompass Cézanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh. Lesser-known lights of the Impressionist circle are also represented, giving viewers a close look at the splendid work of Berthe Morisot (who exhibited in almost all the Impressionist shows), the pioneering influence of Frédéric Bazille, or the heartbreaking story of Marie Bracquemond (who abandoned her art after her husband criticized its avant-garde direction). Each of the artists represented, except Manet and Van Gogh, took part in at least one of the eight Impressionist group shows from 1874 to 1886.

As my son and daughter and I talked together or spent moments in solitary reflection, we began to understand something of the spirit of the works in their original setting. Art should evoke just such an individual and shared response. It should get people talking — whether one of shock and distaste, as was the case with the Parisians of more than a century ago, or of admiration and delight, the customary view today. In the spacious, friendly galleries of the High, we felt ourselves a part of a long thread of fascination with these paintings, reaching back to the rooms of Durand-Ruel and the collectors who first risked purchases. We could also appreciate the vast differences among these works so casually labeled "Impressionist." I noted approvingly that the museum has taken special care to make the exhibit interesting and enlightening even for families with young children; there is a "family" version of the audio tour, and a specially designed booklet that anyone old enough to read would enjoy.

Asked to name their favorites, Beth pointed to Renoir's intimate and intriguing canvas, "The Conversation." Steve, less taken with loose brushwork and everyday scenes, admitted that he still preferred the dramatic Barbizon-school sunset included for context in the "Monet & Bazille" exhibit. As for me, my best sympathies lie with Bracquemond's bittersweet portraits.

When we finally left the dream-world of Impressionism, the sun had set and the white building was enveloped in darkness. We stayed to visit the permanent-collection galleries that were familiar territory to me but new to my children. To see the world through fresh eyes, in the shimmering light of discovery: that is what the Impressionists were about. At their best, it is what shows like this one, however hyped and oversold, can still help us do.

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"Impressionism: Paintings Collected by European Museums" and "Monet & Bazille: A Collaboration" are on exhibit from February 23 to May 16 at Atlanta's High Museum of Art. For more information, call the High at (404) 733-5000 or visit www.impressionism.org.

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