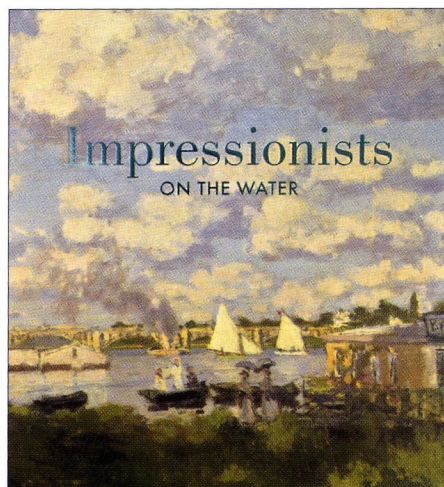


Impressionists on the Water by Phillip Dennis Cate, Daniel Charles and Christopher Lloyd. New York: Skira Rizzoli, in association with the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2013. 224 pages, illustrated. Hardcover, \$50



Review by Gail Leggio

In art books and exhibitions, Impressionism has an immediate appeal. The paintings have art historical credibility but do not overly challenge mainstream audiences. The subject matter is generally attractive, and the felicities of the dashes-and-dots brushwork have become so familiar that it is hard to imagine how shockingly slapdash the style looked to mid-nineteenth-century viewers accustomed to academic finish. For today's presenters of Impressionism, the problem becomes finding fresh perspectives on a well-worn body of work. The authors of

Impressionists on the Water—the companion book to an exhibition at the Legion of Honor in San Francisco (June 1–October 6, 2013) and the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts (November 9, 2013–February 9, 2014)—have chosen a clever point of entry. They focus on boating imagery, a strikingly pervasive theme, and expand the discussion to explore the social and literary context. This approach offers fascinating insights into the Impressionist enterprise, enhancing the reader's enjoyment of this beautifully produced book.

The Impressionists' enthusiasm for water grows out of their primary investigation of optical effects—transparency, distortion, reflection and the play of light. As plein-air artists, they were drawn to riverbanks and beaches, but they were also holding up the mirror to their own time by depicting life in the new resorts. The railways facilitated travel among all classes. Eugène Louis Boudin chronicled fashionable society congregating—in top hats, crinolines and parasols—by the seaside, in paintings such as *The Beach at Trouville* (1863). The middle and lower classes became day-trippers in search of waterside leisure activities. Pierre-Auguste Renoir's best painting, *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1880–81), captures the casual camaraderie of young people dining under an arbor at the restaurant Fournaise, with a view of the river, dotted with sailboats, behind them. In the catalogue, Christopher Lloyd also points out the sordid side of the culture of recreation, quoting from Émile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), in which Thérèse and her lover walk through the down-market resort town of Saint-Ouen, after murdering her husband in a staged boating accident.

This dark note does not undercut the general sunniness, literal and figurative, of Impressionist art. But the authors note that the later view of these

paintings as idyllic or bucolic does not coincide with nineteenth-century perceptions. For example, the town of Argenteuil appears in paintings by Renoir, Édouard Manet, Alfred Sisley and Gustave Caillebotte, among others. Claude Monet lived there from 1871 to 1878 and painted seventy-five views of the town. As Lloyd notes, Argenteuil was a suburb of Paris, “neither city nor country,” with restaurants and boat- and bathhouses but near to factories. Argenteuil’s bridges—which feature prominently in Monet’s *The Railway Bridge* and *The Bridge at Argenteuil* (both 1874), as well as in works by Caillebotte, Manet and Sisley—were modern constructions. Daniel Charles contrasts the Romantic love of wild nature with the Impressionist taste for “Nature-the-improved-by-Progress,” outlining the reasoning: “Modernity was beautiful; industry was modernity; therefore, industry was beautiful.”

The Impressionists were not just interested observers of the nautical mania; they were active participants. Monet grew up in the harbor town of Le Havre, studied with Boudin and was a friend and admirer of the Dutch artist Johan Barthold Jongkind, noted for his scenes of working docks. Monet often painted from the water, a habit Manet documented in *Claude Monet Painting on His Studio Boat* (1874). While we think of the Impressionists dissolving detail into prismatic scims, they often took care to get nautical details right, as Monet does in *The Bridge at Argenteuil*, with the three clippers in the foreground yoked in a common mooring. Other Impressionists were involved with ships in a significant way. Camille Pissaro, born in the Virgin Islands, crossed the Atlantic four times, and Frédéric Bazille was a champion rower.

The Impressionists clearly understood the aesthetic appeal of crisp white triangular sails and sleek hulls in a composition, but they also knew their way around the technical aspects of boating. “From a yachting historian’s point of view,” Charles writes, “the boats painted by the Impressionists are among the best graphic information on this period.” Caillebotte is a crucial figure, since his reputation as a competitive sailor and yacht designer outshone his fame as an artist. His *Regatta at Argenteuil* (1893) includes a self-portrait. This book outlines his career in “Gustave Caillebotte (1848–1894): The Intersection of Art and Sailing, Boating Chronology,” compiled by Gilles Chardeau. Caillebotte designed canoes and rowboats as well as yachts, and his practical expertise gives authenticity to his striking compositions, such as *Skiffs* (1887). Two vessels skim across emerald green water, in the steep perspective characteristic of the artist. The single rowers in the two skiffs look nearly identical in their white shirts and pale yellow hats. But the boat in the foreground appears much larger, an almost Baroque effect of forced perspective. The sharp diagonals of the golden-yellow oars establish a dynamic counterpoint. The elegant, leaf-shaped paddles are reflected in jazzy ripples in the cool, dark water.

The authors note a few international manifestations of the French mania for boating (*canotage*), notably among American artists such as John Singer Sargent and Thomas Eakins. Phillip Dennis Cate contributes a chapter on

boating in popular prints, which range in tone from picturesque to satiric. A large section of the book, however, is given over to a gallery of images, many clearly related to the main essays but with some suggesting further areas for exploration. The first image in the gallery—Claude Joseph Vernet's *The Batbers* (1786)—belongs to the Romantic era. With its picturesque figures and harbor framed by the rocky proscenium of a cave, it seems pure stagecraft. The last images in the group, by André Derain and Maurice de Vlaminck, have familiar boating subjects, but are essentially blasts of Fauvish color.

You can trace a similar shift away from realism by comparing paintings by Caillebotte and Édouard Vuillard. Caillebotte's *Oarsmen Rowing on the Yerres* (1877) closes in on the boat and its two rowers. The lower edge of the painting cuts the boat in half, with the diagonal oar extending nearly the width of the picture. You can feel muscles strain as they propel the craft. In Vuillard's *The Boatman* (1897), the man in the boat rests, gazing off at a shoreline of stylized golden trees across the teal water. Vuillard, an introspective artist obsessed with pattern, paints nature as a luxurious interior.

Sailboats evolved, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, from signs of progress to decorative or symbolic motifs. In Théo van Rysselberghe's *The Regatta* (1892), neat little shark-fin sails are grace notes in a Pointillist seascape. In Henri Rivière's color lithograph *Night at Sea* (1897), stylized sailboats drift through a blue nocturne. Maurice Denis creates a perfectly flat wallpaper design (1893) with hieratic boats and serpentine waves. The Symbolist Odilon Redon evokes myths of journeys to the unknown in *The Yellow Sail* (c. 1905), a pastel depicting two robed female figures with a cargo of multicolored flowers. Redon's image is a visualization of a dream world, apparently far removed from the modern zest and physicality of Impressionist boating pictures. There are other works well worth exploring here, including three photographs, *The Brig* (1856), *The Breaking Wave* (1857) and *Lighthouse and Jetty, Le Havre* (1857)—all albumen silver prints by Gustave Le Gray. Photographs carry some expectations of realism: painters and photographers in the Victorian era often vied with each other in capturing naturalist detail. But Le Gray's photographs, despite their wonderful sense of light and space, are intriguingly off-kilter. They are actually surreptitious collages, with sky and sea taken from different exposures. Like this often-revelatory book, they make you think about the curious relationship between art and reality.