

French Art: Power and Dissent

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Introduction

The progression of fine art and architecture in France has been shaped by various power regimes including the Church and religious figures, royal powers and arts institutions. However, dissidence towards these regimes and a rejection of their influence over the artistic world has also prompted notable progressions in the French arts. Most pertinent is the work of the Impressionists and their defiance of traditional art modes, laying the foundations for modernism in the process.

Chapter 1: Politics, Prestige and Power

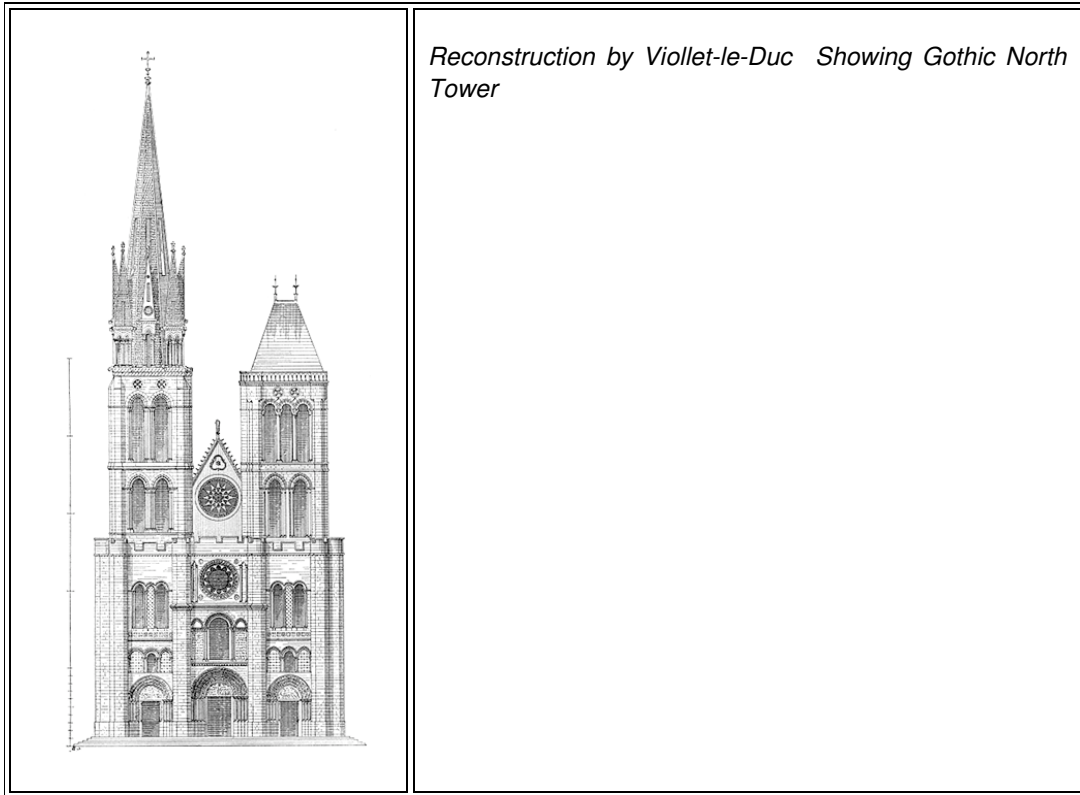
Up until the 18th century French art and architecture was constructed and shaped by numerous power regimes.

Religion and Power

Catholicism remained a powerful influence over the production of French artistic creations until the 18th century. The king remained close to the church and was responsible for choosing people for church positions. It was essentially these churchmen and advisors who were responsible for the artworks produced in France during this time. One such advisor and personal friend to both Louis XIV and Louis XV was Abbot Suger. Suger, who also ran the country while Louis VII was in battle, was responsible for the planning and construction of portions of one of the largest and most important abbeys in France, the Basilica of Saint Denis. Following the construction of this structure, Gothic styled religious buildings sprang up all over France in recognition of the numerous pilgrim routes that passed through the country on their way to Catholic Spain or Italy. The structures were designed to impress the power, beauty and scale of the kingdom of heaven upon the observer. The Abby at Saint Denis was the first example of these buildings, bringing all the developing new styles together with the intention of creating such impressions upon the observer *.



West Façade



The renovations made by Suger began with a reconstruction of the West Front designed in the image of the triumphant Roman Arch of Constantine. Suger was responsible for constructing the two tall towers that stretch heavenward into the sky to signify the heights of heaven, only one of which has survived. Decorative portals covered the entrances in order to draw the observer into the building. The Central portal at of the West Front for example displayed stone scenes from the last judgment. The most significant feature of the new Western Façade was the centrally placed Rose Window, a feature similar to the round windows found in Italian Romanesque architecture that would develop into a key feature of Gothic architecture.

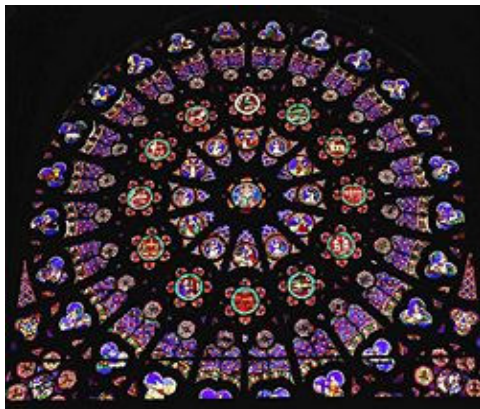


Inside the structures everything was designed to suggest height including the predominant use of light inside spaces. The importance of light in holy buildings, a key feature of the Gothic, also developed under Suger. In his construction of the eastern end of the building he created a choir (chancel) that was to be immersed with light. To create this Suger combined some of the developments of Romanesque architecture, the ribbed vault, the pointed arch, the clustered columns and flying buttresses. Such developments made it possible to include vast windows and much more immense light than in previous structures.



Interior Nave

In the early 13th century, when the Gothic style had developed into a more sophisticated form called Rayonnant Gothic, further rebuilding was done to the North Transept. The most significant of these included the creation of two huge Rose Windows, which decoratively display the Creation.



Rose Window

As the Gothic style developed into the High Gothic and the Rayonnant, the buildings soared to unprecedented heights. The effect of this was to dwarf the observer in the presence of God and

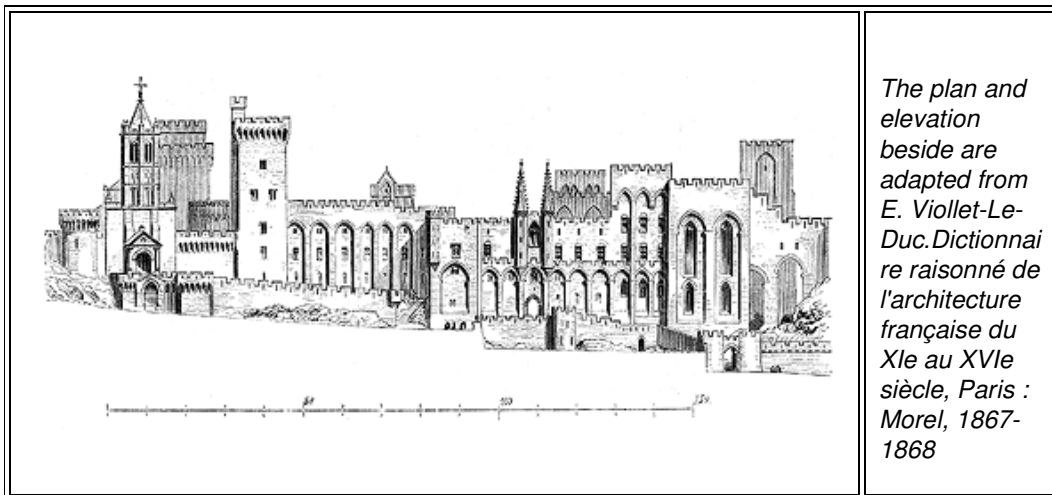
his monument. The Palais des Papes, one of the biggest Gothic palaces in Europe and the equivalent size of four gothic cathedrals, heavily influenced building at this time.



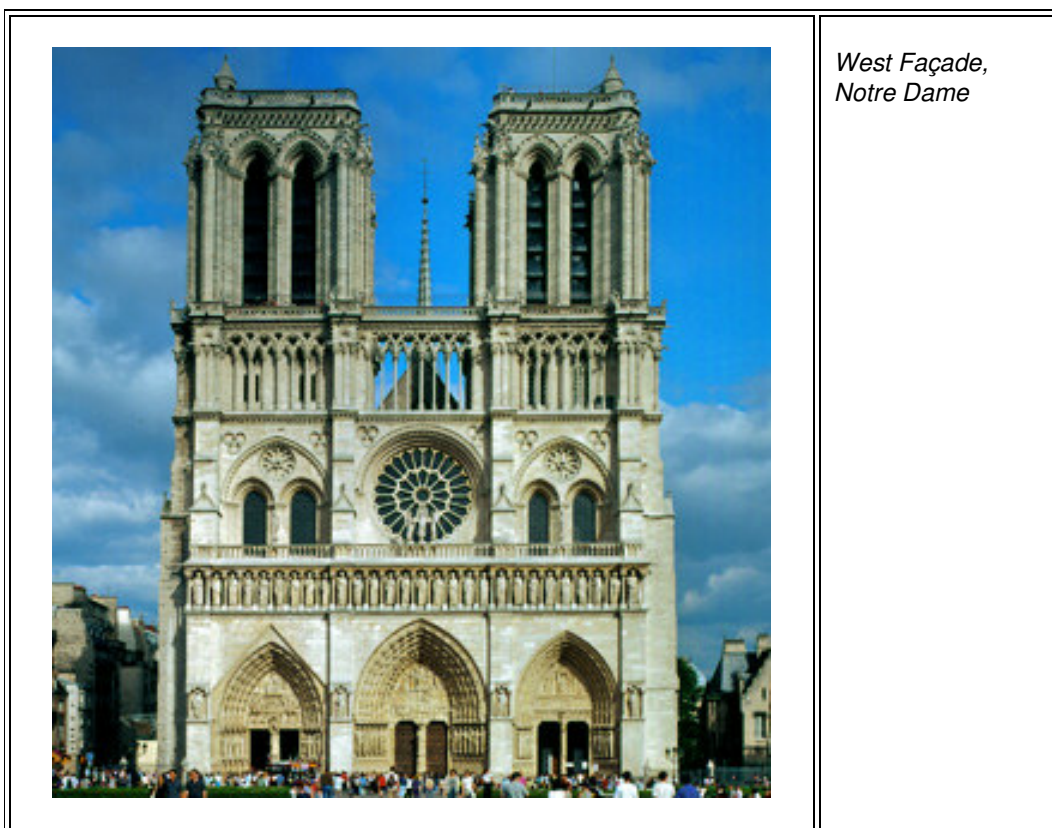
*West
Façade,
Palace
des
Papes*



*Cloister of
Benedict
XII,
Palace
des Papes*



A religious power figure was also responsible for one of the most famous buildings created in the French Gothic style, Notre Dame de Paris. The cathedral was built at a time when Paris was becoming central to France's economic and political growth as well as an intellectual and teaching centre. In response to these changes Maurice de Sully, bishop of Paris from 1160 to 1196, aimed to create a cathedral church dedicated to the Virgin Mary (Notre-Dame). Sully's aim was to create a space (in particular a square shape or parvis) that might serve to connect both the secular and sacred worlds, a space for catechism and learning through the architectural artworks such as the portal sculptures*.





*Centre of the Façade:
Rose Window: A Halo
is created around the
statue of the Virgin*

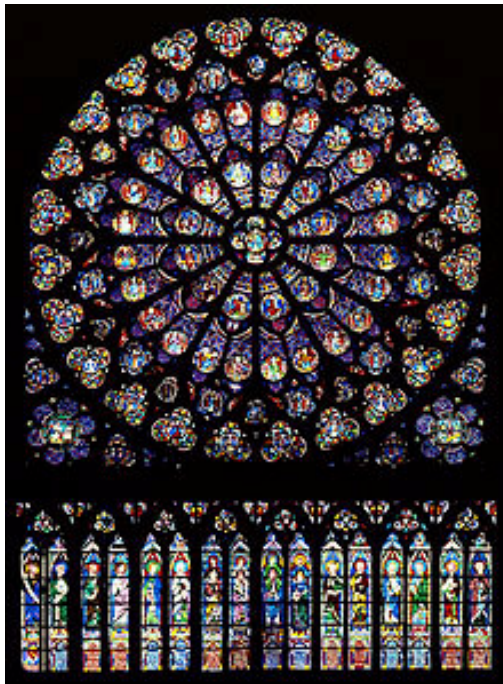


Portal of the Last Judgement Detail



Portal of The Last Judgement

As the Gothic movement grew in stature and skillful excellence so did the construction of Notre Dame. Highly regarded architects, masons and sculptors such as Jean de Chelles, Pierre de Montreuil, Pierre de Chelles, Jean Ravy, Jean le Bouteiller, were chosen to embellish the building: The transept arms were expanded and spectacular rose windows were incorporated at both the North and South ends. The South Rose Window, almost 12.90m in diameter designed by Jean de Chelles and Pierre de Montreuil symbolises a triumphant Christ in heaven and his witnesses below. Presented as a gift from King Louis, it contains eighty-four panes divided up into circles which are further divided according to the symbolic number four and its multiples, twelve and twenty-four. This symbolism is repeated throughout the window.



The South Rose Window



*La
claire-
voie de
la Rose
Sud*

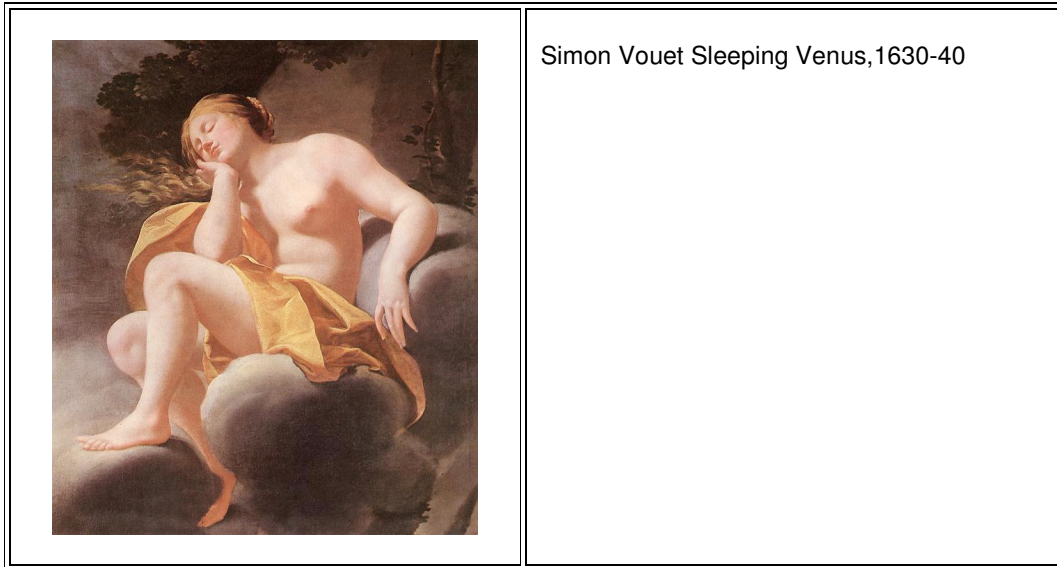


*Saint Laurent reconnaissable au gril,
instrument de son supplice*

Other alterations included the construction of choir chapels and the erection of large flying buttresses to support it. The walls of the cathedral were extended to even greater heights and more buttresses were added for their support*.

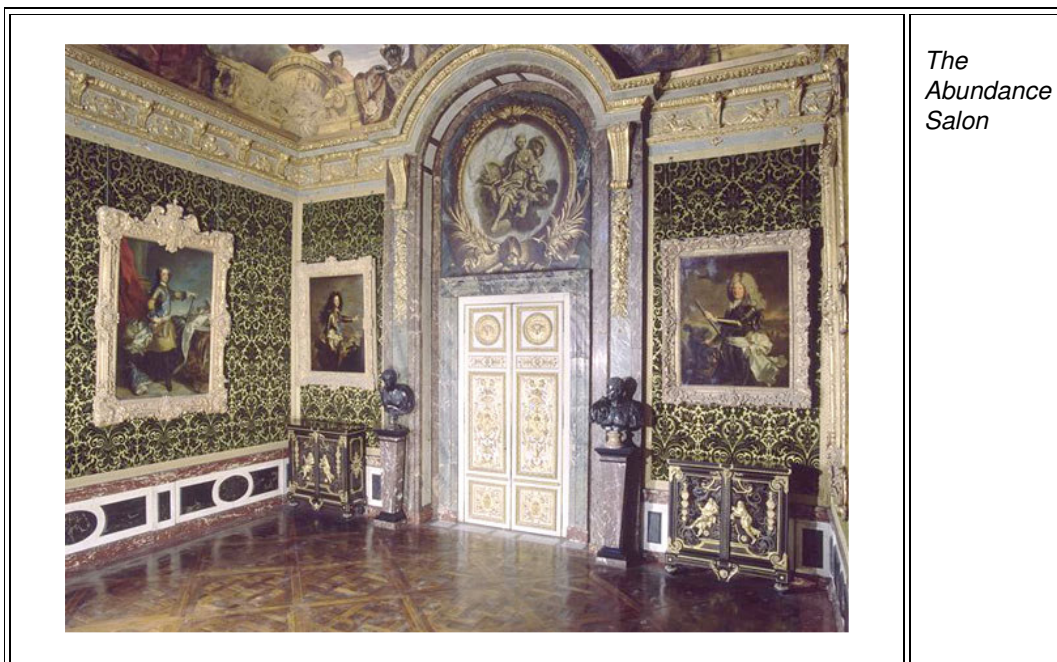
Religious power motives were instrumental in the embracing of the Baroque style in France. In the atmosphere of the Protestant Reformation, iconoclasm and criticism of devotional imagery, the Catholic Church in Rome developed concern over the lack of appeal of the Mannerist style amongst the general population. This resulted in church pressure to restrain religious imagery and the ensuing Council of Trent created the first decree on the production of art. The decree restricted the communication of religious themes to a more holy sense of involvement, stripping the art of unnecessary distractions and any adornment that could incite impure feeling. Unusual images were to be moderated in consultation with bishops, giving them the newly acquired role of artistic censor*. The initial simplicity of Baroque art certainly fulfilled these requirements and as such was favoured and promoted by the Catholic Church, and was supported throughout Catholic Europe, including France. The direct and dramatic religious depictions of Baroque subjects were unobstructed in their message, unlike the unfamiliar allusions of the Mannerist style. Due to the unearthing of new Biblical stories and episodes, the Baroque artists, while operating within the limits of the decree, considerably widened their scope of subject matter. The new subjects included: the Sacred Heart of Jesus, The Immaculate Conception of Mary and the Assumption of Mary. The Death of the Virgin almost became extinct in Catholic art.

Simon Vouet (1590-1649) was one of the first French Baroque painters, and helped introduce the Baroque style to France:



Royal Power

Where Baroque imagery was promoted by the church, Baroque architecture was endorsed enthusiastically by the French aristocracy. This demonstrates a further and more regal mode of power influential in the shaping of the French arts. The courts of Baroque palaces, with their facades and grand staircases were designed to impress the visitor. The dramatic style of the Baroque was employed to strike guests with the sense of power and control of the host*. The best example of this is the Palace of Versailles, which was designed and commissioned by Louis XIV as a present to himself:



Regal power and taste was again to affect the popularity and development of a new French style in the early 18th century, that of the Rococo. Louis XV's tastes for pastels and natural patterns, displayed through his apartments and courts, quickly developed from the decorative arts into painting and sculpture. Although the Rococo was short lived (being replaced by Neoclassicism by the end of the century), Louis XV's succession had brought a change from the excesses and drama of his predecessor Louis XIV. The style held lighter elements, more naturalistic than religious in nature, and with a focus on carefree aristocratic life, nature, curves and patterns:



The Bed Chamber of Louis XV

When court life was moved from Versailles during the Régence, the style became well established and welcomed by aristocratic society as a relief from the heavy Baroque before it. Good examples of three artists of this period include Nicholas Pineau, Antoine Watteau and François Boucher:



*Antoine Watteau,
Merry Company in
the Open Air,
1716-19*



François Boucher, The Afternoon Meal, 1739

Academic Power

During the Baroque period more authoritative control was taken over the arts when artisan control was given to the king's minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert. The result of this was the creation of an academy of painting and sculpture that maintained a hierarchy of genres of painting and a ruling that France would no longer purchase foreign luxury goods and would instead produce them herself.

The academic control over French art would continue until the reactionary Impressionists of the 19th century, and after the French revolution had created possibilities, realisations and new ideas of dissent against authority and controlling powers.

Chapter 2: Progression through Dissent

Dissidence towards these regimes and a rejection of their influence over the artistic world has prompted notable progressions in the French arts. It was the defiance of established art modes, in the face of both institute and tradition, and the production of a new style of conceptual art that inspired a continuing wave of experimentation in both subject matter and form, and laid the foundations of the modern art world.

The French Revolution saw absolutist power successfully questioned and overthrown, not by another institutional power but by a new and different sought of power, that of a self aware population. This is echoed in the art scene in France. It was not rival schools of thought that

brought about change, but rather students of an academy who questioned traditional methods of art production and presented new responses to its subjects.

Rejection of the Rococo and Royal Frivolity

The progression of art is often denoted by the rejection of the methods and style that preceded it, in France it wasn't until the late 18th century that a clear rejection of the previous mode can be seen. As distinct as early French styles may now appear, their progression was slow and usually involved an evolution of style, incorporating elements of the previous movements into the new designs. Neoclassicism however, developed towards the end of the 18th century in a clear reaction to the Rococo style.

The most preeminent painter of this era was Jacques-Louis David:



Jacques-Louis David, The Death of Socrates, 1787

Rejection of the Academy

If the artists of Neoclassicism were displaying the reactionary air of the revolution then the Impressionists demonstrated its results. The rejection of the traditional modes, celebrated by the finest academy in Paris, reflected the new found confidence in dissent of authority in France.

The Impressionist movement grew up amongst young artists in reaction to the dominance the Académie des Beaux-Arts had over the French arts scene in mid 19th century Paris. The young group of artists, including Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Alfred Sisley, Frédéric Bazille and later joined by Camille Pissarro, Paul Cézanne, and Armand Guillaumin, joined together in the face of rejection from the academy, its traditional and conservative standards and its paintings of historical or religious nature. Although never fully embraced by the public, the movement gained momentum throughout the century.



*Claude
Monet,
Reflection of
Clouds on
the Water
Lilly Pond,
1920*

By the 1880s a number of the original Impressionists such as Degas rejected the 'purest' impressionism of Monet, Sisley, Morisot, and Pissarro, focussing on the primacy of drawing over shape or colour:



*Woman
Seated
Behind a
Vase of
Flowers,
1865*



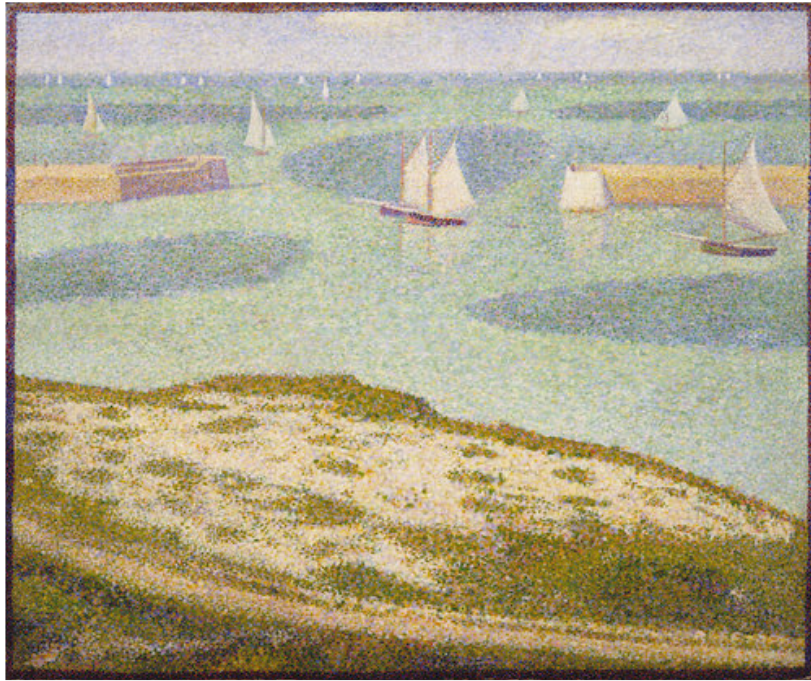
Edgar Degas, The Dance Class, 1874

Reaction to the Impressionists: rejection of the boundaries of painting

By the end of the century the Post-Impressionists were rejecting the limitations of Impressionism while extending its fundamental ideas, such as emphasis on geometric forms for expressive effect. The Post-Impressionists, although all dissatisfied with the limits of Impressionism, could not agree on how it should progress. Paul Cezanne tried to find a durable and solid basis for Impressionism by reducing objects in his paintings to their basic forms, whilst Vincent Van Gogh concentrated on swirling brush strokes as a form of expression.



Paul Cezanne, Château Noir, 1903-4



Georges-
Pierre
Seurat, *Port-
en-Bessin,
Entrance to
the Harbor,*
1888



Vincent
Van Gogh,
*The Starry
Night,*
1889

The Postimpressionist rejection of Impressionism goes even further in establishing the foundation of modern art. The work of the Postimpressionists grasped onto the idea of rejection and experimentation in art, breathing confidence into a new era of artists.