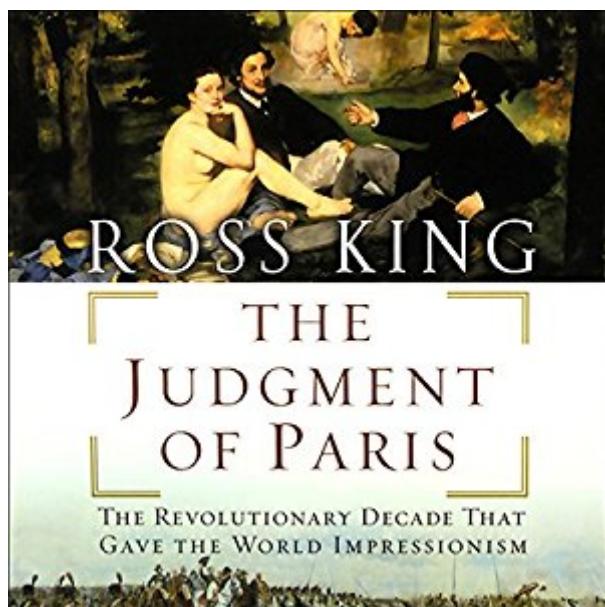


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# The Judgment Of Paris: The Revolutionary Decade That Gave The World Impressionism



## Synopsis

The fascinating new book by the author of Brunelleschi's Dome and Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling: a saga of artistic rivalry and cultural upheaval in the decade leading to the birth of Impressionism. If there were two men who were absolutely central to artistic life in France in the second half of the nineteenth century, they were Edouard Manet and Ernest Meissonier. While the former has been labelled the "Father of Impressionism" and is today a household name, the latter has sunk into obscurity. It is difficult now to believe that in 1864, when this story begins, it was Meissonier who was considered the greatest French artist alive and who received astronomical sums for his work, while Manet was derided for his messy paintings of ordinary people and had great difficulty getting any of his work accepted at the all-important annual Paris Salon. Manet and Meissonier were the Mozart and Salieri of their day, one a dangerous challenge to the establishment, the other beloved by rulers and the public alike for his painstakingly meticulous oil paintings of historical subjects. Out of the fascinating story of their parallel careers, Ross King creates a lens through which to view the political tensions that dogged Louis-Napoleon during the Second Empire, his ignominious downfall, and the bloody Paris Commune of 1871. At the same time, King paints a wonderfully detailed and vivid portrait of life in an era of radical social change: on the streets of Paris, at the new seaside resorts of Boulogne and Trouville, and at the race courses and picnic spots where the new bourgeoisie relaxed. When Manet painted *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* or *Olympia*, he shocked not only with his casual brushstrokes (described by some as applied by a "floor mop") but with his subject matter: top-hatted white-collar workers (and their mistresses) were not considered suitable subjects for Art. Ross King shows how, benign as they might seem today, these paintings changed the course of history. The struggle between Meissonier and Manet to see their paintings achieve pride of place at the Salon was not just about artistic competitiveness, it was about how to see the world. Full of fantastic tidbits of information (such as the use of carrier pigeons and hot-air balloons during the siege of Paris), and a colourful cast of characters that includes Baudelaire, Courbet, and Zola, with walk-on parts for Monet, Renoir, Degas, and Cezanne, The Judgment of Paris casts new light on the birth of Impressionism and takes us to the heart of a time in which the modern French identity was being forged. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

## Book Information

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## **Customer Reviews**

An excellent, literate history and analysis of the difficulties which the new 'impressionist' art had in gaining entrance into the institutional structure which was one of the most significant roads to financial and critical success for French artists in the 19th Century. Reviewers critical of the "lack" of aesthetic judgments seem to me to be asking King to write a book he did not set out to write. The general reader will be quite happy with the book, the author tells his story well with many colorful word-portraits of figures peripheral to his central focus: the contrast and relative success of the more 'conservative' (artistically) and more 'advanced' outlooks. The thesis is amplified by examination of the reception to the work of Meissonier and Manet. Other reviewers have tackled various aspects of the work from different angles; I will add only a few comments. First, stated better than I could, while the former is the example of the Great Success in his own lifetime disappearing in the face of the new after his death, this reader was convinced that his fate was undeserved, that the public has been poorly served by the critical desertion of his work. One need only stand aside watching the reception of what he thought of as his masterpiece still strikingly present on the walls of the Metropolitan Museum in NYC. Many who pass on their way to the Impressionists and other modernists, stop along the way to enjoy the striking view of Napoleon and his cavalry. (That he was later criticized for presenting an historically implausible situation hardly deters any of us.) So, I am quite happy that King provides us with an introduction to this painter whom later generations of critics and buyers has unfairly relegated to the scrapheap. Second, he does a fine job in exploring the influence of politics and institutional shortcoming in rewarding and punishing aesthetic production. The particular institutions may have changed over the years but still reward and punish whimsically so far as aesthetic value to the public is concerned. The message is brightly spotlighted

though not precisely spoken: don't take anyone else's word as to what you should like (although be aware that it will be reflected in what you have to pay if you buy and to what you will receive if you sell). So, in brief, for the general reader, a book well-worth reading for the knowledge it imparts and for the pleasure with which many will find in it.

A great backdrop to the lives of the Impressionists. I bought it as the required read for my local museum's new book club, and enjoyed it. It's not a cuddle-up and enjoy an afternoon kind of read, but rather a history book of the decade that created the Impressionists.

Ross King writes with skill about a time in France that saw both the fall of a political regime and rise of a new school of art. While many interesting bit actors are stuffed into this drama, the real focus is on Manet and the now forgotten Meissonier. Through their two lives the birth of Impressionism (and the decline of old art truths) and the companion political fate of the government of Louis-Napoleon are nicely described. In my judgement, this book will appeal to anyone with an interest in the striking art and political upheavals that centered on Paris in the 1860s and 70s--- while serving as a nice cautionary tale on the fragile nature of artistic fame.

I loved *The Pope's Ceiling* by the same author, so was looking forward to reading this. In the end I was disappointed. It was a slog to read.

The Paris Salon was the ultimate tribunal where French Art was judged during the 1800's. Thousands of artists submitted paintings, sculptures and other forms of art every year in hopes of being accepted. Being chosen or not could break or make an artists' career quite literally. Over the decades, the tribunal that selected the works had become a self-perpetuating institution with sclerotized ideas of what constituted Art- both in regards to content ( mostly mythological, classical or historical grand scenes with some sort of moral) and style (no trace of brush strokes and soft chiaroscuro transitions). In 1863, driven by the outrage that resulted from the rules imposed by the Count of Nieuekerke and which resulted in controversial refusals, Napoleon III ordered the opening of the *Salon des Refuses*: an exhibition that was to display many of the works refused by the official Salon. Napoleon III knew how to distract the population from his dictatorial government after all. This book follows the fortunes of two painters that were deeply involved in the Salon controversy: Meissonier, a very successful painter of excruciating detail and accuracy; and Manet, a representative of a more direct and modern style. In a very accessible style that flows quite well, the

book delves into the state of French Art of the nineteenth century. The panorama that emerges is a lot more nuanced than what we normally understand by the rivalry between impressionism and classicism, the mere confrontation between the "new" and the "old" which ends in 1874 with the Impressionists Exhibition. The author reveals that Manet, for example, used very classical models (Titian, Tintoretto) for his first paintings. Also, Manet valued the Salon and kept presenting his paintings to be juried year after year, even after becoming the hero of many an impressionist. Meissonier on the other hand struggled to create a modern vision as well despite the fact that his enormous success stemmed from his anachronistic and greatly detailed canvases of a somewhat dutch inspiration. The cast of characters that surrounds these two masters is the subject of much literature: Courbet, Baudelaire, Whistler, Monet, Zola, Fantin-laTour, Ingres, Degas, Bougereau and the "pompier" painters, an endless row of royals, politicians, gallerists and collectors. "The Judgment of Paris" does a phenomenal job of integrating all these pieces in a coherent narrative. I particularly enjoyed the glimpses into the lives of the painters, how young some of them were when they created some of their work, how poor or rich or inbetween some were, how they debated with their own place in time and art. I thought it was fascinating and far from the "finished" product and portrait of self-determination most biographers produce. For anybody interested in art and history, the book is well documented and seamless. Not just a collection of facts in search of a story but a good narration. If you are a painter, this is a must read and the only thing you will regret is the time you won't be painting waiting to put it down.

I enjoyed it a lot for the stories, and the clever idea of counterposing Manet with Meissonier -- the first a radical who was scorned in life and rose in reputation in death, the other the opposite. But the book is marred by rather weak explanation of what Manet was trying to do with his art, and why it was seen as so radical; for the most part we hear only the critics' condemnations of his sloppy brushwork and strange compositions, without grasping the deeper issues involved. So it becomes a series of interesting anecdotes rather than providing real insight into the emergence of Impressionism.

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