

Is *Randomised Controlled Trials* a useful addition to the literature? Unequivocally, yes. It provides a good survey of important issues in evidence-based health care, is easy to read, and is organized in a manner that helps the reader target specific areas of interest. Does it fill the gap the author alludes to in the introduction by providing “a single

source that could help [the reader] really understand what RCTs [are] about, their strengths and limitations, and how to use them while making health care decisions”? Not really. If one wanted to pursue that goal, a second edition with an expanded treatment of some of the basic topics would be a step in the right direction.

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Reference

1. Marwick C. NIH “Research Risks Office” reprimands hospital institutional review board. *JAMA* 1990;263:2420.

Lifeworks

Modern optics

Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.

— Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” 1925

The National Gallery of Canada’s summer crowd-pleaser this year is *Monet, Renoir and the Impressionist Landscape*, a selection of 70 canvases from the extensive Impressionist collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. This survey of French landscape painting from the 1850s to the end of the 19th century attests to the depth of the Boston collection, even if the definition of “landscape” is somewhat strained by the inclusion of Renoirs that in another context would be called portraits. But there is no need to quibble here.

Those in the mood for a bolus dose of Impressionist dazzle might find this show rather studious. The exhibition is framed by a roomful of paintings representing the precursors to Impressionism, and by another roomful of works by contemporaries of the Impressionists who found acceptance through the official Salons rather than via the harder (or higher) road of the Salon des Refusés. But this contextualization illustrates how Impressionism was not a unitary movement. It was the product of an infusion of ideas from a number of sources, and those ideas took a different shape in each practitioner. The flecked application of paint by the Dutch marine artist Jongkind, whom the young Claude Monet met in 1861, showed the way for the rendering of



Camille Pissarro, *Morning Sunlight on the Snow, Éragny-sur-Epte*, 1894–5. Oil on canvas, 82.3 cm × 61.5 cm



Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Woman with a Parasol and Small Child on a Sunlit Hillside*, 1874–6. Oil on canvas, 47.0 cm × 56.2 cm

light in a raw form, as if to replicate the moment of sensation that precedes the moment of perception. What Virginia Woolf proposed some years later for writing, the Impressionists accomplished in the representation of light.

The Impressionists' famed dedication to painting *en plein air*, where nuances of light and colour could be viewed with a new immediacy, was in part a legacy of the Barbizon painters who preceded them by roughly a generation. And their interest in landscape as a subject was both a revival of and a departure from earlier, classical traditions. But not all the Impressionists were equally committed to landscape, and not all were equally happy in the open air. Pissarro, the Impressionist who more than any other stayed the course, exhibiting at all eight Impressionist group exhibitions from 1874 to 1886, said that "the unity that the human mind gives to vision can only be found in the studio. It is there that our impressions, scattered as they are at first, become coordinated."¹ Perhaps he was making a virtue of necessity, for by the time he made this remark Pissarro's chronic dacryocystitis was forcing him

indoors, away from wind and dust.² Degas' preference for working in the studio may have been related to his sensitivity to light, perhaps as a result of macular

degeneration.³ But it is the arch-impressionist Monet whose failing eyesight is the most well-known, and whose love of painting outdoors never faltered. We picture him in his last years, in his garden at Giverny, tormented by his distorted perception of colour as he struggled to produce his *Waterlilies*, the tribute to the glory of France exacted from him by the statesman George Clemenceau.⁴ In the end, Monet's art transcended the affliction of his eyes. His paintings are a tribute to the glory of subjectivity.

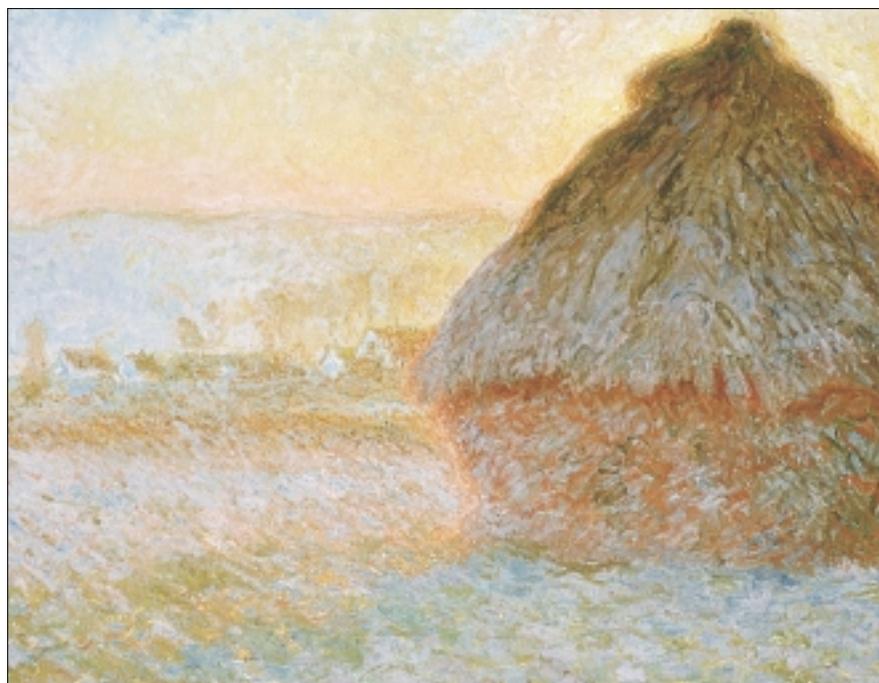
Monet, Renoir and the Impressionist Landscape continues at the National Gallery in Ottawa until August 27.

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References

1. Pissarro C. Interview with Paul Gsell, 1891. Cited in notes to Pissarro J. Pissarro's art and life: from dystopia to utopia [lecture]. National Gallery of Canada, 7 June 2000.
2. Ravin JG. Pissarro, dacryocystitis, and the development of modern lacrimal surgery. *Doc Ophthalmol* 1994;86(2):191-202.
3. Ravin JG, Kenyon CA. Degas' loss of vision: evidence for a diagnosis of retinal disease. *Surv Ophthalmol* 1994;39(1):57-64.
4. Ravin JG. Monet's cataracts. *JAMA* 1985; 254(3):394-9.



Claude Monet, *Grainstack (Sunset)*, 1891. Oil on canvas, 73.3 cm × 92.6 cm