

NORMANDIE IMPRESSIONISTE

DIVINE ART

While Paris was the focus of the world this summer with the Olympic celebrations, in northern France, the artist Sean Scully was attracting a different audience to see his work, displayed inside a church as part of the Normandie Impressioniste festival of exhibitions.

Part two, meanwhile, explores elsewhere in the festival – the Musée d’Orsay’s hosting of a selection of works from the renown 1874 impressionist exhibition in Paris. Stephen Hitchens reports



THE NAME OF CAEN is inextricably linked to tripe, anemones and William the Conqueror. It means 'battlefield' in Celtic – however, on this ancient battlefield, history repeated itself with a devastating vengeance only 80 years ago. Caen suffered to save the Western world. In 1944, the battle for the city lasted two months. Three-quarters of the buildings were knocked flat. At least 10,000 people died. The scars still show, but they have been turned to good effect. Today, Caen deserves time. There are hidden rewards. It would be easy to write an exhortation of some of the ersatz and egregious buildings that arose in the wake of the destructive bombing that shattered Caen's medieval heart, so gruesome is some of the architecture. With hindsight, the bombing came to be regarded as one of the most futile air attacks of the war, accomplishing nothing but the levelling of a great Norman city. However, a new district, the Presqu'île de Caen, is focused on the future and boasts one of the finest libraries in France, the large Bibliothèque Alexis de Tocqueville designed by OMA, while part of the fine heart of the city was, remarkably, preserved and contains some gems.

The Musée des Beaux-Arts and the Musée de Normandie are both tucked within the citadel that William the Conqueror held in 1060. Before the World War 2 bombardment Caen was the 'cité de cent clochers', the town of a hundred belfries. Few survive. During the bombing people slept, cooked and washed inside the churches as the shells rained down. There is the ornate St-Pierre, the austere Romanesque pair of the Abbaye aux Hommes, and the Abbaye aux Dames, plus some of the smaller churches have survived and hold real interest. Inspired by the Benedictine monastic tradition, the 11th-century Saint-Nicolas was one of the first churches to be deconsecrated after the Revolution. It was classified as a historic monument in 1913. The stained glass is particularly interesting. The façade was never finished and only one of the two planned towers ever built; the Bourg-l'Abbé ran out of money. Today, there is a bird sanctuary in its 'sleeping cemetery', and the church has been used as stables, an army depot, a venue for concerts and, very occasionally, exhibitions. This is no ordinary exhibition space.

Many artists have had a lifelong fascination with the idea of bringing architecture and art together. In particular, sculpture. Unfortunately, the two seldom hit it off. Sean Scully, however, does bring it off, and has done so on numerous occasions: at the Monastery of Santa Cecilia in Montserrat in 2015; in 2019, Picasso's Château de Boisgeloup in Upper Normandy, Villa Panza in Varese and Venice's San Giorgio Maggiore; at Houghton Hall in Norfolk in 2023; and now in Caen, another sacred space, this one brought to the artist's attention by Joachim Pissarro (the art historian, curator, great-grandson of Camille Pissarro, and president of Normandie Impressionniste), who asked Scully to make this intervention. Montserrat is the only permanent intervention, but just as there he

donated paintings on canvas, aluminium and copper, replaced windows with stained glass, designed candlesticks and painted frescoes on the wall, curating the whole project and advising on the restoration of the interior, so in Caen Scully has paid for the transportation and installation of another wide range of work, and achieved dominion over the church.

The first thing anyone has to do when looking at a painting is to decide where to stand. It can be an important decision. Here, the paintings envelop the spectators. Stand close and their sheer scale overwhelms you; move around and the combined effect makes the audience participants in the artist's

imagination. Eduardo Paolozzi once said that the artist tries to arrest flux and to perpetuate a single moment, just as Joshua prayed that God should stop the sun's course. Scully both stops you in your tracks and perpetuates a continuous running series of moments. The work itself retains much more than a memory of experienced architecture – there is something wonderfully invigorating about the measured density with which the paint brings them into the world of prayer. What confounds some is that the image must be of 'something', whereas here the images are a combination of emotion and technique, as tantalisingly elusive as ever, enigmatic to some, but rather

Right The Scully exhibition was part of Normandie Impressionniste, a festival of exhibitions and events reflecting the inventive spirit of this artistic movement

Below Inside the Église Saint-Nicolas in Caen



DETAIL FROM THE 12. © SEAN SCULLY PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

everything to do with spirituality and the beliefs of a part-time Catholic with a strong underpinning of Zen, which is how Scully sees himself. Putting these works in the context of a church is not the same as bringing them down to earth. Sacred can always spell trouble for artists. But 'walking into a painting' as you do in Caen is something spiritual. It is that immersive. All of this hits you like a blast of truth when you enter the church. It is the space, and the light, that takes the works of art to another dimension. They are not individual pieces – the work of art is the entire experience. It is one continuous narrative, a story unfolding. >



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Nowhere does it seem more appropriate that the hard-edge geometry of minimalism should be brought alive with gestural strokes, the precision saved from the formulaic by the looseness of the painting, the many-layered shifting blocks reflecting both Scully's own peripatetic background and his emotional relationship with belief. "There is a spiritual dimension to human beings that has to be nurtured, and I'm in that," he says when we met in Caen. The dark under-painting always tempers the brightness of the finished result, the solidity of his blocks conveying foundations built on shifting sands: a post-modern, post-topian style of abstraction. That morose

observation of Milton's about the topography of hell comes to mind: 'And in the lowest depth, a lower depth.' What is beneath matters just as much as what is on the surface. That sense of darkness beneath gives each block, stripe and slab of colour a brooding stability. However a colourist, like Scully, has an uncanny ability to evoke the conditions of light with a luminosity of paint in the crevices between those slabs and stripes. He thinks in layers, he works in layers, he celebrates the edge: that's where the magic exists.

A painting is so much more than its subject – you cannot pin a painting down by naming the artist's favourite motif. This is not just about

stripes. These are stripes like no one else's. Known for bringing back emotion into structural abstraction after the fall of minimalism, Scully may at times seem fixated on stripes, but look again: the variety is more than merely compelling. With Scully we have learned to expect the unexpected. A minimalist in expressive clothing, he takes the formal grid to create banked up walls of emotion, blocks of layered colour that come alive when you confront them face to face. Their formality drains away, that painterly slippage achieving a Doric calm. Their monumentality within this space achieves something unusual. They break down the

barrier between the artist and the audience; the integration of spectators into the artwork means that the visitor has to adjust to the character of each exhibit in an environment created by art. The work is as tantalisingly elusive as ever. There is a real urgency in these huge surfaces. All of which makes them even more physically compelling. It was 40 years ago when Scully was quoted as saying 'the art that interests me is *heroic art*'. Well, here, the work is nothing if not heroic. It emanates authority and autonomy.

The mathematics of the compositions are intriguing. 'I love maths. I do mental arithmetic very well. The numbers are a big part of it. I'm

incredible at mental arithmetic. Its odds and evens. It goes four, two, two, three, four", he says, an arrangement, and a discipline that the Church might find of interest. Scully once said, 'I believe in God, and I'm pretty sure God believes in me.' He has been putting religion back into his work for years. For a few months this summer, the Église Saint-Nicolas stood at a confluence of spirituality and contemporary art. Sartre defined the imagination as the ability to think of what does not exist. Here, in our more literal-minded society, Scully delivers his vision outside of this world.

For some artists, as soon as they become involved in buildings, they appear to feel

expectation to become a servant of some kind, subservient to the architect. They battle with buildings. That is not how Scully works. He calls the shots. Scully does not battle with buildings, he works with them, his art not mere addendums or embellishments to a space so much as free-standing environments in their own right. They make and remake the spaces. He is in control, and he sees very clearly what needs to be done to achieve his ideas. This project in Caen was a visual knockout, and made a punchy argument for more interventions such as this. Loquacious, exuberant, deeply immersed in literature and art history, Scully is a valiant



Left Family images from Eleuthera, an island in the Bahamas visited by Scully that gave the impetus to a series of figurative paintings first unveiled in 2017

Right Round Sleeper Stack, Opulent Ascension North, and The 12

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champion of the power of abstract art. In the context of religion and in an age of anything-goes post-modernism, Scully's paintings are absolutist, uncompromising, pure, severe, restrained, rigorous, a pictorial drama in themselves. Insert them into an environment like the Église Saint-Nicolas and not only are they a pleasure to behold, they are addictively brilliant. With Scully we have learned over the years to expect the unexpected, but the cultural unity of this project made nowhere suddenly somewhere. Jasper Johns once said: 'Take an object, do something to it, do something else to it.' Scully finds a space, does something to it, and then does

Below The district Presqu'île de Caen boasts the fine, large library, the Bibliothèque Alexis de Tocqueville, designed by OMA

something else to it. He puts the architecture on steroids.

Scully's expressions in mass and light leave it to the viewer to construct a meaning or story. Located in a church it is almost impossible to avoid interpretation and narrative explanation. Seeing is believing. They are powerful psychological paintings. Anyone who looks at them for long enough becomes involved. They can have a devotional as well as an aesthetic purpose. Thomas à Kempis urged the faithful to meditate on images in order to better understand the meaning of Christ's suffering. In our secular age, where notions of self have all but

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supplanted belief in the divinely spiritual, it is difficult to imagine a work of art being invested with anything close to the kind of significance those paintings once carried. Scully knows this, of course, and it might be argued that his work is concerned with what might be called non-specific spirituality that draws on his own experiences.

The 12, a dozen canvasses, process down the nave like holy stations on the route to a felt and wood version of a monumental 10m-high *Opulent Ascension North* that stands at the crossing. Standing inside this great celestial ladder, the shock of the view gazing up to the lantern is neither claustrophobic nor

unsettling. It is a leap of faith. These are all stunners – they grab you, the power of this art. In the centre of the nave stands a wooden column, *Round Sleeper Stack* from 2023, punctuating one's journey. Along both sides of the sanctuary there are two formidable paintings from Scully's Doric series: *Doric* (2018) and *Doric Air and Darkness* (2016), both of which are over 4m in length and almost 3m high. Finally, around the apse are family images from Eleuthera, an island in the Bahamas visited by Scully that gave the impetus to a series of figurative paintings first unveiled in 2017, a candid declaration of parental love. Outside, *A New Life* made this year awaits visitors in the sleeping cemetery, a sculpture that reuses industrial corten steel offcuts from previous sculptures by the artist.

Jean de la Varenne called Normandy 'a land of vast open spaces bathed by the sky'. *Entre terre et mer, entre vert et bleu*, that is Normandy, and that is Scully's *Landline* paintings, begun in 2000, with their endless horizons and emphasis on nature, just as it was when he began them after seeing the sea and sky in Norfolk; the beauty of work inspired by nature. The lush landscapes and the diffuse light of the impressionists that created a new art form – dramatic cliffs, rolling hills, green fields, orchards kissed with rich pink apple blossoms, the allure is as powerful as first love, and just as ineffable – have found a new expression in Scully. He may not be catching dreams but he is always capturing a sense of nature. The beauty and grace of the landscape, so distinctive, so diverse, certainly compelling, here once again renewed in these gigantic paintings – that Scully says, given the chance, he would have made even bigger. Assessed *sur place* rather than on the canvases of Boudin, Corot or Monet, those landscapes have an impressionistic quality. The perception comes from the way the light filters through the tall old trees, diffused across a horse meadow in the early morning haze that lingers until noon, or illuminates the cumulus clouds moving across a pastel sky.

Between Heaven and Earth was the title of a recent exhibition of Scully's work in Paris. His relationship with the sky has always been extremely important to his work; the colours in particular – the whites, creams, blue-greys, brown-greys – all come from the sky. Then the earth colours – the ochres, the browns, the rusts – they all overlap and they are all a memory of landscape. These atmospheric connections to Cézanne resonate in Scully's fabric of colours. The artist now has a home and studio near Aix-en-Provence and close to the Mont Saint-Victoire, which became an obsession with Cézanne, whose systematic approach to painting heralded abstraction, repeating patterns a part of his strategy. Scully is a 21st-century artist who paints in the tradition of Cézanne, finding the abstract in nature, with long furrowed lines that recall ploughed fields around his new home. Reconciling the logic of structure and the sensuality of surfaces, Scully has humanised

his grids. Add to that the weaving of threads and you can see the intertwined and overlapping lines of Scully's artwork, the repetition, the geometry, the saturation of colour and emotion.

The poetic tradition in the Charles Trenet song from 1963 *La douce France* describes geography as much as history, the ghostly outline of an old landscape beneath the superficial covering of the contemporary is to be made vividly aware of the endurance of core myths, a way of looking, of rediscovering what we have, yet another reflection of 'the things coming from underneath. That's very important,' Scully says. 'My paintings are like the blues. I love John Lee Hooker. "Boom boom boom boom".' That's Scully all right.

Talking to Scully it is not difficult to be drawn along with his punchy enthusiasm, his verbal agility, and his animated arguments. He once said, 'punches are good, counterpunches are better', and here, Scully counterpunches organised religion. The punchline is that in such a setting the work is both provocative and thoughtful. The elder statesman of abstract art is certainly not elderly. He quotes Lear: 'The sorrows of the world have landed on my face.' Next year he will be 80, yet this year and next Scully seems to be everywhere at once. There will be five retrospectives of his work in 2025: in Barcelona, Hamburg, the Herzog & de Meuron-designed Parrish Art Museum on Long Island, in Korea, and China. One of the final speakers at the Art for Tomorrow conference in Venice in June, Scully was asked to define the role of art and the artist. 'The artist is the person who offers what could be. Can art change traffic conditions in big cities? No. Can art fix cars? No. Can art cure cancer? No. But art shows what is possible. Its job is to improve the human condition. This is what it is to be an artist,' he said. 'You're a dreamer.' Boom boom indeed. **FX**

The Sean Scully exhibition finished on 22 September at the Église Saint-Nicolas in Caen as part of Normandie Impressioniste, a festival of exhibitions and events in France reflecting the inventive spirit of this artistic movement with a multidisciplinary and eclectic programme. The host of special exhibitions included David Hockney: Normandism at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen; Photographier en Normandie at MuMa (Le musée d'Art moderne André-Malraux) in Le Havre; Art and Commerce at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Caen; Daniel Buren/Toile-Toile/Voile at the Abbaye du Voeu in Cherbourg; and Edouard Vuillard, which is on show until 11 November at La Villa du Temps retrouvé in Cabourg. Paris 1874: Inventir l'impressionnisme is at the National Gallery of Art in Washington until 20 January 2025. In New York, stretching from Washington Heights to Lincoln Square, Sean Scully now has a series of seven sculptures, blocks and stacks punctuating the endless rhythm of Broadway, collectively entitled Broadway Shuffle that will be on show until March 2025.



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Art in Revolt – Inventing impressionism, Paris 1874

Below, right The Musée d'Orsay in Paris. A museum on the left bank of Seine, in the former Gare d'Orsay, it holds mainly French art dating from 1848 to 1915

Below Impression, Sunrise, by Claude Monet



MONNET IMPRESSION, SOLEIL LEVANT (IMPRESSION, SUNRISE) 1872 OIL ON CANVAS 48 X 63CM. MUSEE MARMOTTAN MONET, PARIS

150 YEARS AGO, on 15 April 1874, the first impressionist exhibition opened in Paris. Seldom in the history of European painting has a single movement caused so profound a shock as impressionism, and seldom, if ever, has one exhibition had as much impact on the history of art. Within a century its exponents became household names around the world, and the prices for their work equalled and then surpassed those of the old masters. If there could be a comparison for their achievement it is certainly only with the Renaissance, when humans first believed in a universe that could be ordered and even controlled, determining what was seen and expressed not in terms of a transcendental scale of values but by the laws of perspective. The impressionists went one further, liberating art from its dependence on dogma and attempting to paint not what they thought they saw, nor what they were told they ought to see, but what they actually did see. From that emancipation came the art of the 20th century in all its variety.

Not only that, but this revolution was achieved by around just 20 artists, working in one city, Paris, all children of their time and the product of a unique cultural environment that moulded them as much as they influenced it. Between the birth of Pissarro in 1830 and the death of Monet in 1926 France had a variety of governments and constitutions; it was involved in two major wars, several minor ones, and a brief civil war that culminated in the brutal crushing of the Commune. It also gained an empire in both Africa and Asia, and was transformed from an agricultural economy to a primarily industrial one. Waves of financial scandal had swept the country on a regular basis, and the

passions aroused by the Dreyfus affair divided it.

Out of this maelstrom came a group of bourgeois who cared little for any of this. In general they were not personally rebellious, in appearance they were not eccentric, and they were not strikingly different to their fellow citizens. Pissarro was a socialist, Renoir and Degas were out-and-out reactionaries, blatantly anti-Semitic, believing in the inferiority of women, and that 'education would be the downfall of the working class'. Cézanne had very bad manners but settled down to a provincial life in Aix-en-Provence a confirmed conservative and devout Catholic. Manet was a Republican, and the only one to



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leave a record of the horrors of the 1871 crushing of the Commune.

One of the consequences of industrialisation was the rapid expansion of the railways. When Cézanne first visited Paris in 1861 it took him three days; by 1893 it took him a day. (As one seasoned traveller observed, Paris was now only 33 cigars from Marseille.) The impressionists were able to travel on a scale unknown to their predecessors, exploring not just the Seine and the Channel coast, but Normandy and Brittany, Venice and London. Technological developments meant that from the 1840s malleable-lead paint tubes facilitated painting in the open-air, the discovery of new dyes extended the range of colours available, and research chemists worked on optical combinations of colours that became fundamental to the techniques of impressionism, pointillism, and divisionism. Then there was photography, what Degas called 'magical instantaneity', making accurate reproduction possible, and thus promoting visual literacy among an ever-larger number of people. The explosion in the number of newspapers and periodicals quadrupled in a century and the appetite for journalism about art was enormous.

The number of dealers in Paris trebled over a century from 1861, the most prominent of whom was Paul Durand-Ruel, who, after taking over the business following the death of his father in 1865, dedicated his professional career to making a success of the new art. By the end of the 19th century, Paris was universally acknowledged as the art capital of the world. Its new, grandiose public buildings and the great railway termini, the development of department stores such as

Bon Marché, and the architectural legacies of the Universal Exhibitions of 1867, 1889 and 1900 confirmed the success of the capital city and the power of France. It was only in 1900 that the impressionists were invited to exhibit within the fine arts section of the event but by then artists had staged their own one-man shows in parallel with the earlier exhibitions. Few could then have foreseen the prestige that impressionism conferred on French art.

Official patronage of art was often wasted on mediocre academic painting until well into the 20th century. The power of the official system in France rested with the Salon. Its authority was absolute. It had a monopoly on art. It attracted over half a million visitors and huge coverage in the press. In 1791, it was thrown open to all artists to submit work, and by 1848 the selection procedure that had previously been via a jury was replaced by a committee chosen by the exhibiting artists. This resulted in over 5,000 paintings being hung, which proved unviable. The jury system was reinstated, and the resentment this caused led to the *Salons des Refusés* of 1863. As Renoir explained, 'there are scarcely 15 collectors capable of liking a painting without the backing of the Salon. And there are another 80,000 who won't buy so much as a postcard unless the painter exhibits there.' The dominance of its position united the artists and provoked them to rebel against the conventions of the Parisian art world. The Salon of 1867 was the most restrictive in its history, rejecting entirely a group later identified as impressionists. Growing resentment culminated in the formation of the *Société Anonyme des Artistes*. Those excluded by the Salon met in Renoir's studio on 27 December 1873 to promote sales through group exhibitions. On 15 April of the following year at 35 boulevard des Capucines, history was made.

'Hungry for independence,' Monet, Renoir, Degas, Morisot, Pissarro, Sisley, Cézanne and 24 other artists finally decided to free themselves from the rules by holding their own exhibition outside official channels, to join forces and to show their work freely without involvement of the state. There were 165 works in the exhibition. As a commercial venture it was a failure. It attracted some good reviews but there was no shortage of hostile articles. One observer noted, 'What they seem above all to be aiming at is an impression,' a remark picked up by a facetious critic, Louis Leroy, whose article published in a satirical magazine became notorious. It was entitled *The Exhibition of the Impressionists* and the artists were saddled with the soubriquet.

Initially at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, and now in Washington DC, a selection of works that featured in the 1874 exhibition is put into perspective with paintings and sculptures displayed at the official Salon that same year. This unprecedented confrontation recreates the visual shock of the new, as well as showing some of the unexpected parallels and overlaps between the two exhibitions. The exhibition

demonstrates the contradictions and infinite variety of art in that spring of 1874, while highlighting the radical modernity of those young artists. 'Good luck!' one critic encouraged them at the time. 'Innovations always lead to something.'

The 150-year anniversary was celebrated well beyond impressionism's Parisian picture rails. To mark the occasion, some of the movement's greatest masterpieces left the former Gare d'Orsay's platforms for all four corners of France. The Musée d'Orsay lent out 78 works to 34 partner institutions across 13 regions of the country. The museum itself, a converted railway station, will be 40 years old in 2026. It is an interesting building, with an interior that was reimaged by the Italian architect Gae Aulenti into a gutsy industrial space, basically two lines of rough stone galleries that attracted considerable adverse publicity when they first opened. They were referred to as bunkers, and the whole scheme as a 'vaguely Egyptian version of postmodern architecture'. The public loved it. The project was a success, inspiring pleasure, interest and architectural debate. Nevertheless, it has to keep up with the times. Attracting over 3.5 million visitors a year it needs to expand. In order to do so it is moving its research and educational facilities into a building next door and revamping the main building. The esplanade will be refurbished; visitors will no longer have to line up for tickets outside; and the permanent collections will be rearranged and rehung. The museum will remain open while the changes are made. Work is scheduled to start in 2025 and finish by the end of 2027. Its focus will remain that particularly complex and crucial period, the 19th century, but as that century becomes more remote, no longer the last century but the century before that, it will no longer remain a train station with impressionist paintings hanging inside. So many things are rooted in the same period: economic and medical developments, scientific discoveries, photography, cinema, railways, transportation, together with colonialism and the impact of orientalist painting in France. This additional context will help visitors appreciate the revolutionary times in which the paintings were created. The complete rehang will begin with sections dedicated to the Universal Exhibitions and the revolutions of 1848 across Europe.

The impressionist exhibitions, eight of them, mounted from 1874 to 1886, constitute the most important historical model for artist-organised group shows that were central to the life of art until the 1960s. They led to an increasing number of shows created as alternatives to the stultified selection system of the Salon. Another criticism of the Salon had been the way in which the paintings had been hung, walls stacked sky-high with pictures. The hanging committee of impressionists changed all that. Paintings were hung sparsely in just two horizontal rows, something that was critical to the new private market that had

commercial objectives very different to the floor-to-ceiling display of the Salon installation. The goal of the shows was to entice people to purchase paintings for their homes, something the third impressionist exhibition of 1877 made perfectly clear: it was held in an apartment rented for the occasion by Gustave Caillebotte. In 1882, the penultimate exhibition was the most 'impressionist' of all the shows held to date, the criticism was more favourable, yet Monet was pilloried. In 1884, between the seventh and eighth exhibitions, a new *Société des Artistes Indépendants* broadcast its opposition to the Salon. Its motto? 'No Jury, No Prizes'. A serious fight broke out at their show of 402 artists that



ALEXANDRA LANDE/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Above The Giant Clock at the Musée d'Orsay

resulted in the police being summoned and several of them being arrested for assault.

The end of an era came in 1886. Some 246 works were displayed at the eighth and final impressionist exhibition, a show marked by even more acrimony than usual. It opened less than a month after the first show in New York entitled *Works in Oil and Pastel* by the Impressionists of Paris. The catalogue confused Monet with Manet, but reviews were favourable, and within two years Durand-Ruel opened a gallery in New York and, without the prejudices of the French academic tradition to contend with, American love for impressionism began and never abated. They couldn't get enough of it.

A little 'clan of rebels' that began to rethink their art and explore new directions made an impression on the world

It had been a long hard struggle from 1874, and for some of those artists it had been worth it. A little 'clan of rebels' that began to rethink their art and explore new directions painting scenes of modern life, and landscapes sketched in the open air, in pale hues and with the lightest of touches, had made an impression on the world. They became world-renowned and a few, late in life, rich. As Manet remarked: 'To exhibit is to find friends and allies for the struggle.' That struggle was on display this year at the Musée d'Orsay. **FX**

Paris 1874: Inventir l'impressionnisme is at the National Gallery of Art in Washington from 8 September until 20 January 2025