



Pierre Auguste Renoir (1841 – 1919), *Two Girls at the Piano*, 44 x 34”, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum, New York

It was in late 1891/ early 1892 that Renoir was approached by the French government to execute a painting for a new museum in Paris, the Musée de Luxembourg, which was to be dedicated to the work of living artists. Prior to this there had been no works by the Impressionists in the national collections. Aware of the importance of such a commission, Renoir chose his subject with care, painting a canvas that looked back to the popular 18th century works of artists such as Fragonard whilst, at the same time, identifying himself as a modern painter showing us an ideal world, peopled with young graceful girls. This is not a portrait; we do not know the names of the sitters. The scene simply evokes a comfortable bourgeois setting in which the girls play their music in an atmosphere of ideal domestic harmony.

As if to emphasise this harmony, Renoir uses a muted palette and softly modulated forms that give to the work a sense of grace and charm. There is no stress or tension between the two girls. The young pianist plays with her right hand whilst her left arm reaches upwards to touch the music. At the same time, her companion leans over to rest her arm on the piano as if to close the circle. The soft pink of her dress is echoed in the bow in her hair and the trimming of the curtain behind her, whilst the blue ribbon of the pianist's dress is equally repeated in the curtain behind the piano, the porcelain vase of flowers delightfully linking the two hues into one space.

It is interesting that the aura of calm evoked by this image stands in contrast to Renoir's own life and career. Renoir was born in Limoges in 1841. One of seven children, his father was a tailor who moved the family to Paris in 1845. Recognising the young boy's talent, at the age 13, his parents apprenticed him to work in a porcelain factory in Paris, where he learned to decorate plates with bouquets of flowers. (The presence of the porcelain vase on the piano is no accident!) From there, he went on to paint fans and cloth panels before, in 1861/2, he finally entered the studio of Charles Gleyre, enrolled in the Ecole des Beaux Arts and gained permission to study and copy works in the Louvre. This combination of classical training ensured that Renoir learnt the skills he needed to become a painter of works on canvas. More importantly, however, it was in Gleyre's studio that he met and formed a close friendship with Sisley, Monet and Bazille, through whom he would subsequently meet both Pissarro and Cezanne. These were all young men who shared an urgent desire to paint works of art that were free from past traditions and closer to the life they were leading. Over the next few years each became increasingly frustrated with the vagaries of the Salon exhibitions – the key place to sell your paintings and yet one where they had very mixed success. And so it was that the Impressionist movement was born, initially through a society of like-minded artists in 1869, before finally coming to fruition with their first independent exhibition in 1874.

Having found little acceptance of his paintings among the critics during the period of the seven Impressionist exhibitions that followed from 1874 to 1886, it is perhaps not surprising that he approached the state commission with some trepidation. Perpetually dissatisfied with his work, he was determined to provide the museum with a perfectly accomplished canvas and thus, to that end, worked at least three oil versions, a sketch in oil and a pastel (right) of the same composition. Eventually in 1892, weary of struggling for the perfection he sought, he presented his painting to the Musée de Luxembourg. He soon admitted, however, that this version was not the best as it was overworked.

The person to whom Renoir made the admission was the art dealer, Durand-Ruel, the man who had helped and supported the Impressionists so much during their early dark days when were unable to sell their works. He had bought what is now considered to be one of the most accomplished versions of the painting, the one illustrated above that is now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The other equally accomplished version was bought by Renoir's fellow Impressionist and great supporter, Gustave Caillebotte. A fine painter himself and a man of considerable wealth, Caillebotte assembled a wonderful collection of his Impressionist friends' paintings which he left to the nation in 1894. These now form the core of the Musée d'Orsay's rich holding of their works.

