JEUX D’EAU AND ITS COLLEAGUES:
WATER AND ARTISTIC EXPRESSION
AT THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY
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Over the centuries, natural phenomena have consistently been the subjects of creative expression. While interest in nature has been historically universal, the frequency of incorporation of its elements in artistic output has been heightened or diminished by the reasoning and perspective of great thinkers in each era and generation. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, several philosophical viewpoints served as catalysts for artistic (lingual, visual, and musical) fascination with all things elemental and natural. As one of these, water was a frequent source of creative inspiration; water’s characteristics and behavior also exemplified certain creative techniques in particularly painting and music. Examination of these philosophical viewpoints brings clarity to artists’ choice of water as a subject or backdrop for creative expression. Composed for solo piano by Maurice Ravel in 1901, Jeux d’eau rests in the context of these philosophical and artistic explorations; its compositional elements and expressive language are expounded upon in the understanding of these same explorations.

Two philosophies particularly affected artistic production of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: naturalism and modernism. A third tenet emerged from these perspectives, and was apparent in the creative arts more than in other aspects of society—symbolism (or impressionism). The first philosophy, naturalism, was applied in the arts through close representation of nature or reality. The naturalist perspective for
creative artists was concerned with depicting elements in their true surroundings, portraying the everyday and the commonplace, and elevating particularly that which included the outdoors. This philosophy proposed that great meaning and value could be discovered in the most ordinary settings. Modernism, another viewpoint embraced at the turn of the century, held in high esteem anything considered to be new, adventurous, or modern. In this particular thread of thought, an idea or development could be valued if for no other reason than its innovative nature; adherents to this doctrine appreciated the new for the sake of its ‘newness.’ One of these new innovations in artistic expression was symbolism (literature and poetry) or impressionism (painting and music). Affected by and incorporating elements of both naturalism and modernism, symbolism was concerned with suggesting rather than directly stating a reality or impression. Initially found in poetry in the mid–nineteenth century, symbolism became a defining element of the artistic style of both painters and composers well into the twentieth century. Symbolism integrated the naturalist and modernist perspectives, and also reflected the existentialist tenet that meaning cannot be defined in conventional terms. The integration of these philosophies and viewpoints as embraced by creative artists could be synthesized in the following statement: meaning in the commonplace (naturalism) is best represented (symbolism) by new, unconventional methods (modernism). From these perspectives, water was a particular source of creative interest, especially to painters and musicians. As a common element of everyday life and integral part of many localities, water was an item imbued with significant meaning, according to the naturalist viewpoint. Certain components of culture represented innovation and progress to the modernist: commerce, work, and leisure. Each of these factors was often associated with water, again igniting
special interest for artists. Commercial seaports were a vital part of the modern landscape; common people often engaged in work along and in various waterways—from fishermen to dock workers to laundry maidens; seaside beaches and rivers were popular locales for leisure. For painters and musicians in particular, water integrally represented the concept of symbolism (impressionism). As these artists created impressions and representations of reality, they often imitated the relationships between water, light, and color. Water’s ability to refract, reflect, distort, and diffuse the realities that are mirrored and revealed in its surface provided a visual depiction of the artist’s attempt to represent reality from a new and less defined perspective.

The concept of symbolism as a valued method for communicating reality was initially championed by French writer Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867). Although he incorporated symbolism less prevalently in his writing, Baudelaire wrote many pieces of criticism especially encouraging painters to utilize this method of communication. Other writers who followed this pattern of depicting reality included Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898), Paul Verlaine (1844–1896), Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891), and Jules Laforgue (1869–1887). In their poetry and literature, these writers experimented with new techniques that embodied the tenets of naturalism; the structure of these literary artists’ pieces was less concerned with a linear progression of thought, and more with a reproduction of natural human thinking–patterns. Some elements of structure that sought to emulate the thinking process included interruption, juxtaposition, and combination. Baudelaire was the first to use the actual sound of language (as opposed to the actual meaning of the words) to create a particular atmosphere or to convey a certain meaning in
his poetry—elevating the sound of the language for the sound’s sake. French poet Mallarmé especially developed this technique of using sound as a symbol: equal weight was placed on the meaning conveyed by the sounds of the words as on the meaning conveyed by the vocabulary itself. This manipulation of sound as a symbol—“an object which refers to another object but which demands attention also in its own right, as a presentation”\(^1\)—was an innovative (modernist) approach to communicating new levels of meaning through written art.

The symbolist movement in literature and poetry gave rise to a similar application of communicating meaning through painting. A group of French painters most evidently influenced by each of the philosophies above were often linked together under the title the “Impressionists.” The term was coined by Louis Leroy, a writer for the French magazine *Le Charivari*. In criticism of the lack of definite lines and refined clarity of *Impression, Soleil levant* (Impression of a rising sun) by Claude Monet, Leroy labeled the work (and those similar to it) as “impressionist.” However, what the satirical writer intended as a mockery that would relegate that particular style of art to the realm of the insignificant eventually became a description for an artistic approach that conveyed meaning from a new and fresh perspective. Both modernism and naturalism played important roles in the emergence of the “impressionist” style of painting—a style distinct for both its subject selection and painting techniques. As modernists, the impressionist painters portrayed urban life, commerce, progress, and other subjects that were all part of the new modern landscape. As naturalists, these same painters sought to portray their

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subjects in their natural surroundings; in general, impressionist painters were concerned with depicting man in his ordinary settings of work and leisure. Additionally, the naturalist tendencies of the impressionists led them to be especially favorable toward outdoor settings both for their subjects and their own creative environment. Claude Monet (1840–1926), in particular, had a strong aversion to painting in a building at all. In an interview in 1880, Monet exclaimed “…I’ve never had a studio, and I don’t understand how someone could shut himself up in a room. To draw, yes; to paint, no.”

Several impressionist painting techniques were adopted by the artists as they sought to perceive and represent reality and meaning from the perspective of both modernism and naturalism. In keeping with the modernist philosophy that ‘new is better,’ impressionist painters sought to find “not new realities, but new perceptions of it” through shortened, less refined brush strokes; points or ‘daubs’ of color rather than long, smooth strokes; and incorporation of a more restricted color palette. Artist and author James Rubin describes these impressionist techniques as follows:

The brushwork for which Impressionism is so well known acts out the artist’s spontaneous response to nature: it combines both the external world and the artist’s individual vision of it—the objective and the subjective simultaneously. To be sure, all art embodies and conveys the principles, ideologies, and values that underlie it. All art authenticates these foundations by its own example. But Impressionism, unlike the normative art of its own time, was revolutionary because its principles were transformative, embodying modern values based on the change and innovation that anyone could see molding and

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shaping the world around them. It reversed the traditional relationship between art and labor, now presenting the work ethic as fulfilled not by academic studies and the smoothed surfaces of studio work but by the evidence of on-the-spot experience and the physical traces of creative productivity.4

As the French writer Baudelaire stated, “the word ‘modern’ refers to manner and not to date.”5 These techniques combined to create a new lens through which the artists and their connoisseurs could see the world. Artists employed shortened brush strokes to create a more realistic perspective of the play of light on various surfaces; additionally, these short, evident strokes created a sense of movement, as though the painting was capturing a small moment in the continuous movement of time. “The dominion of the moment over permanence and continuity, the feeling that every phenomenon is a fleeting and never-to-be-repeated constellation, a wave gliding away on the river of time, the river into which one cannot step twice, is the simplest formula to which impressionism can be reduced.”6 Points or ‘daubs’ or color also were used to promote a sense of the constant changing of reality. For the impressionist painter, the use of color was another opportunity for expanding into new territory. Following the symbolist tendency of earlier writers, these artists viewed color as equally, or perhaps more, important than line in the composition of their art and portrayal of meaning. The impressionists would often limit themselves to only the colors in the spectrum, therefore eliminating black tones (among others). Definite lines in academic painting represented reason, while color was considered to be that which brought the sensuous into the work of art. Impressionist

6 White, Impressionism in Perspective, 65.
painters, therefore, were known to base the form of their works on colors rather than on lines, as they sought to create meaning through the emotional and sensual perceptions of their art. This position was, in its own right, a display of modernism and a departure from established conventions of artistic creative practice. Elevation of color as the essence of creating meaning was promoted by the influential writer Baudelaire, who found that “a colouristic approach to rendering form was the means through which artists could address the inner human consciousness, whether it was to bare the soul or to render more effectively the specificity of an individual or an object.”

A scientific innovation of the same time period involved the breaking down of light into its prismatic elements. These colors became at times the exclusive palette of the impressionist painters; additionally, these colors were combined in the style of a mosaic rather than blended together to create a new harmony of visual perception. One point of focus for impressionist painters was the play of light with varying colors and surfaces. This particular interest led many painters to investigate water and the myriad effects of its surface on colors, light, and reflection of objects. Indeed, one of the underlying aims of the impressionists was to present the reflection or symbolic image of an object as opposed to its actual reality. The interaction of color and light with water’s surface made it a favorite subject of continuous return for the impressionist painters.

As writers sought out new lingual structures and painters created new techniques of painting to reflect reality, composers also explored new techniques of manipulating sound to portray realities. For the impressionist painter, the importance and manipulation of color superseded that of line; similarly, for many turn–of–the–century composers, the

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7 Rubin, *Impressionism*, 34.
color and manipulation of sound usurped the previously unquestioned authorities of form, structure, and tonality. In their paintings, these artists sought to capture a moment in the never-ceasing flow of time; the lack of definite lines assisted in creating this sense. Composers sought to accomplish this same naturalistic concept through use of rhythmic fluidity and structural ambiguity.

These advancements of impressionist painters most notably affected the musical explorations of several French composers—Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. As the initial pioneer into the impressionist style of composition (though the label was only later assigned and was not applied by the composer himself), Debussy incorporated such compositional techniques as whole-tone scales, cluster chords, and sequences of major seconds. Ravel’s palette of compositional colors included not only these innovations of Debussy, but several original ones of his own, including extended use of major- and minor-seventh chords and incorporation of octatonic scales.

_Jeux d’eau_ (Playing Water) by Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) is a work representative not only of these innovative techniques, but also of an early twentieth-century musical artist’s depiction of water, a popular topic for creative exploration and representation. Ravel prefaces the music with a line from a poem by Henri de Régnier, a symbolist poet of his modern time. This line (translated “The river god laughs at the water as it tickles him”) blends the touchable (water) with the intangible (the river god)—a new perspective is sought from which to behold the ordinary element of nature. Ravel himself stated that the work was “inspired by the noise of water and by musical sounds
which make one hear the sprays of water, the waterfalls and the brooks.”

While the painters of the impressionist tradition sought to portray the visual realities of water in many of their works, Ravel’s composition was crafted to embody the sound of this element of nature in the figurations and colors of its music. In congruence with the naturalist mandate for artists to represent reality (to create impressions or images of it) rather than to conceive works of self–expression, Ravel’s *Jeux d’eau* is a musical depiction of water’s sound, not a portrayal of the emotions evoked within the composer by the element itself. Since, in this perspective, the artist was seen as a servant to the presentation of the idea, personal feelings about or emotions entangled with the object were suppressed in favor of the concept or reality itself. Therefore, in listening to *Jeux d’eau*, audiences receive an objective caricature of the myriad sounds of water; the image itself may inspire differing emotions in each performer and listener. This type of compositional credo allows for a similar flexibility of interpretation as does an impressionist painting—each viewer may be affected differently by the same presentation of reality. The harmonic and coloristic language of *Jeux d’eau* (composed in 1901) provides a glimpse of the modernist philosophy evidenced in a musical composition. Ravel’s innovative approach to harmony and tonality includes the use of harmonic seconds (see Example 2, pg. 10), juxtaposition of disparate triadic harmonies, and whole–tone scales. The opening of the piece presents a G–sharp minor–seventh chord arpeggiated in the right hand, while the left hand forms the E major triad—the tonic of the key signature.

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Example 1: Ravel, Jeux d’eau, mm. 1–2

In measure 6, this rich harmonic texture evaporates through a diminuendo and an ascending whole–tone scale.

Example 2: Ravel, Jeux d’eau, mm. 5–6.

These new sounds allow the composer to create an aural image of an age–old element—water—in a totally fresh and individual manner. Further, this expanded language opens the possibilities of imitating the cadence and movement of water’s sounds beyond the constraints of traditional harmonic relations—tonal boundaries far too restrictive to emulate the bubbling, rushing, lapping sounds made by water in its natural state. Not only does the composer create an aural impression of the sounds of water, he simultaneously depicts various visual and elemental qualities of water as well. The rhythmic flow of much of the musical material in Jeux d’eau consists of sixteenth and thirty–second notes; this rhythmic motion aurally portrays the fluid nature of water. Motivic patterns imitate
the circular ripples created in or by water (mm. 9–10) or the horizontal movement of waves of water (right hand mm. 19–20, left hand mm. 24–25). The spatial depth of water, with its varying colors and temperatures, is symbolized by the simultaneous inclusion of several distinct registers of the instrument—each displaying its unique timbre and color (mm. 80–end). The ability of water to move in its distinct states through space in unique fashions is also symbolized by the rapid changing of registers, as well as the extended movement of material from high to low register, or from low to high (mm. 24–25, 48–49, 51–61, 67–72).

*Jeux d’eau* is a musical journey past various bodies of water, each presenting its own unique sound and sensation. The “sprays” (or fountains) mentioned by the composer can be heard in swelling and splashing passages such as the one found in measures 24–28. With both register and dynamics, the music moves from low to high, capturing the sound of a fountain emerging in greater volume and height from a pool. In measures 27–28, the combination of flowing rhythms in the right hand with ‘splashing’ eighth notes in the left hand re–creates the combined sounds of a fountain’s rushing upward motion as well as the splashing of the falling water into the pool from which it emerged.

**Example 3:** Ravel, *Jeux d’eau*, mm. 27–28.
Ravel experiments with a different kind of splashing sound in measures 19–20 (and again in measures 78–79) by sequencing rapid harmonic seconds as an accompaniment in the right hand while the left hand carries the eighth–note melody.

**Example 4:** Ravel, *Jeux d’eau*, mm. 19–20.

In measures 29–33 (and again in measures 73–76), an alternating chord pattern in the right hand imitates the sound of tiny waves gently lapping the shore of a quiet pond.

**Example 5:** Ravel, *Jeux d’eau*, mm. 29–32.

Ravel’s “brooks” are evident throughout the piece; the continuous streams of horizontal running notes, as well as the stepwise and chromatic figurations give musical life to the sound of a bubbling brook. In measures 38–48, Ravel follows an imaginary brook as it
expands in size, volume, and speed of current. He sculpts the music accordingly: the dynamic intensity increases from piano to fortississimo over the ten measures, the left-hand rhythmic figures intensify from eighth notes to eighth-note triplets to sixteenth notes to sixteenth-note triplets, and the overall tempo accelerates until the brook tumbles over a cascading waterfall. The black note glissando in measure 48 carries the listener’s ear over the ledge of the once quiet bubbling brook down into the murky depths of a rippling pool. Ravel’s change of register (from very high to very low) and the incorporation of a circular pentatonic left-hand figuration creates the dramatic aural experience.

The coda of \textit{Jeux d’eau} collects all the bubbling and rippling droplets of sound and gradually evaporates them into the silence of a \textit{pianissimo} conclusion—the running–note figuration dissipates eventually into an E major–seventh chord. These tones, also, soon vanish from the aural landscape. Although the audible experience of the composition occurs for a specified period of time (unlike a painting to which one may return multiple times and for as long as the viewer wishes), yet the image the composition presents remains with the listener even in the silence following the completed performance.

At the turn of the twentieth century, artists were seeking novel methods of representing the realities of the world around them. As they inevitably turned to water out of the philosophies they embraced, water in turn provided inspiration for creativity that embodied and expanded these very same philosophies that led the artists to water. Elements of creation continue to inspire and educate artists, even as those elements are perceived and represented with fresh and innovative methods of creativity and expression.
Works Cited


