Subject

Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* sparkles with life. At a riverside restaurant outside of Paris, Renoir's friends drink, smoke, and flirt in the dappled sunlight. The atmosphere is one of timeless pleasure. Gathered around a table replete with wine, fruit, and shimmering tableware, the diners have just finished a satisfying meal. The whites of the tablecloth glow with reflected color. Renoir has created an intimate scene in which a young woman cuddles her dog amid a lively group of friends. Just beyond the party on the balcony, the Seine river is active with sailboats and skiffs gliding on the water. In the far distance, the gray line of the railroad bridge and the new houses of the bourgeoisie allude to the emerging suburbs.

The Maison Fournaise

The small, riverside town of Chatou was one of Renoir's favorite places in the suburbs (Primary Sources 32, 33). On an island nearby, at a restaurant called the Maison Fournaise on the banks of the Seine river, he painted *Luncheon of the Boating Party.*

Parisians flocked to Chatou's Maison Fournaise to rent rowing skiffs, enjoy a good meal, or stay the night. In 1857, the entrepreneur Alphonse Fournaise bought land in Chatou and opened a small hotel with a restaurant and boat rental facility in response to the new tourist trade. By the time Renoir began to frequent the Maison Fournaise in the 1870s, it was a favorite weekend destination for Parisians and was celebrated for its *fêtes nautiques* (nautical events). Renoir greatly enjoyed Chatou's convivial atmosphere and rural beauty. He created several paintings of the restaurant, surrounding landscape, and the Fournaise family.

Renoir's Circle

Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* conveys the lighthearted leisurely mood of the Maison Fournaise and reflects the dynamic character of mid- to late-nineteenth-century French social structure. The restaurant welcomed customers from a variety of social classes and professions: bourgeois businessmen, society women, artists, actors, writers, and critics. With the newly shortened work week (a result of the Industrial Revolution), everyone from seamstresses to shop workers could enjoy the pleasures of the suburbs. This diverse group embodied a modern Parisian society fulfilling the French Revolution's promise

Primary Source 32

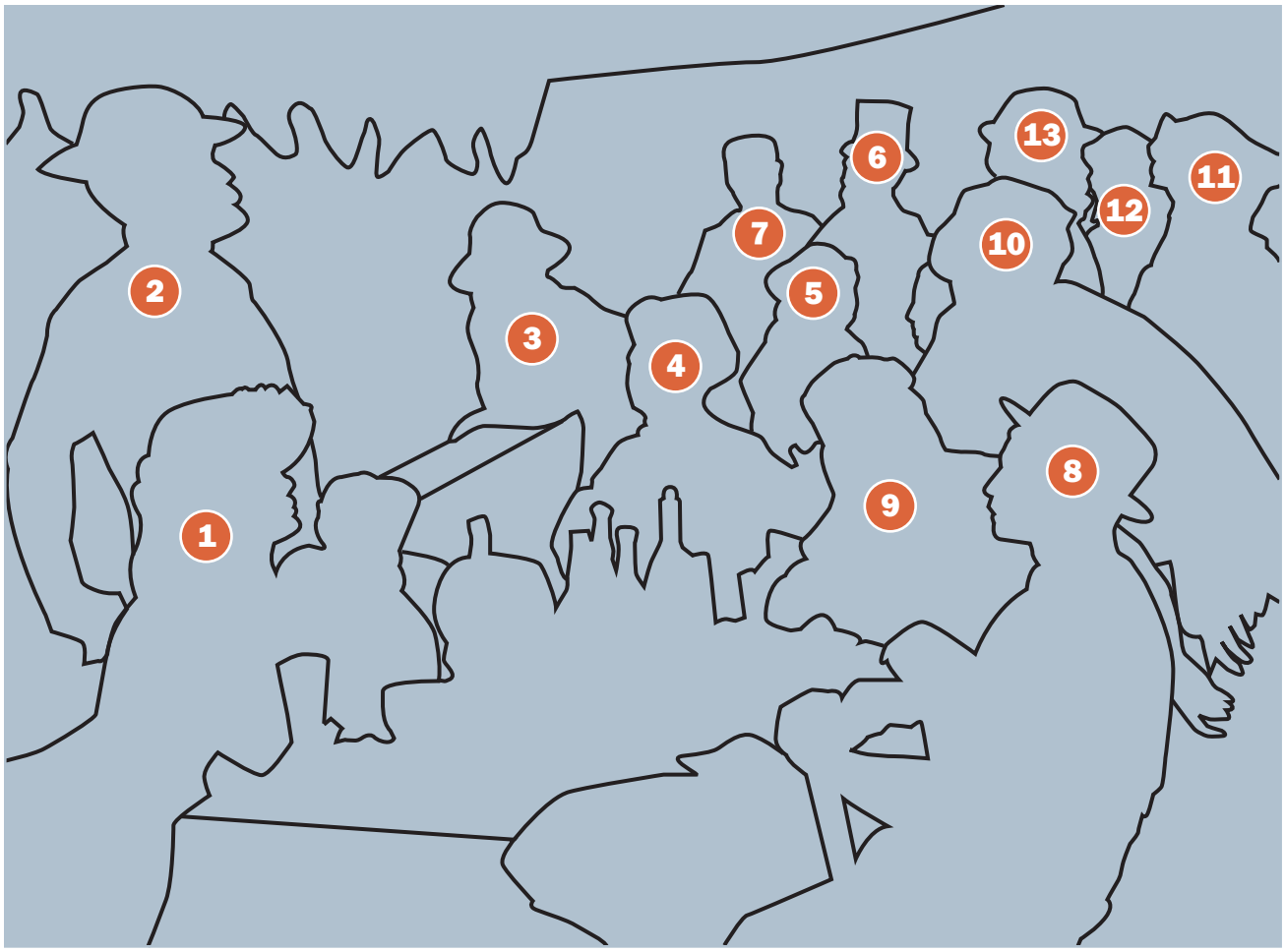
The Maison Fournaise and the Seine river, 1870s, postcard. Copyright Musée Fournaise, Chatou-France.

Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Luncheon of the Boating Party,* 1880–81. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* (liberty, equality, fraternity). It also reflected the eclectic character of the Parisian cultural scene and the city's unique intersection of art, journalism, literature, theater, and sport.

With a masterful use of gesture and expression, Renoir painted idealized portraits of friends and colleagues who frequented the Maison Fournaise. Renoir's goal was not to create accurate depictions of his friends (many of whom he had painted before), but to transform an everyday scene into a modern day *fête galante* (festive party), heightening the leisure, youth, and beauty of his models and the enchanted moment. Many interpretations have been presented regarding the identity of the figures in *Luncheon of the Boating Party.* Those described below reflect the most recent scholarship of The Phillips Collection.

In the background, wearing a top hat, is Charles Ephrussi, the wealthy collector, amateur art historian, and editor of the fine arts magazine *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (6). He speaks with a younger man in a casual brown coat and cap who may be Jules Laforgue (7), a poet, critic, and Ephrussi's personal secretary. In the center, the actress Ellen Andrée (5) drinks from a glass. Seated across from her and dressed in a brown bowler hat is Baron Raoul Barbier (4), a bon vivant and former mayor of colonial Saigon (in present-day Vietnam). Baron Barbier faces a smiling woman who leans against the railing. She is believed to be Louise-Alphonsine



Fournaise (3), the daughter of the proprietor. Her brother, Jules-Alphonse Fournaise (2), surveys the scene from the far left of the composition. Alphonse, as he was known, was responsible for the establishment's boat rentals. He wears a traditional straw boater's hat and brawny sportsman's T-shirt. In the upper right-hand corner, Renoir included some close friends who often modeled for his paintings: the writer Paul Lhote (12) and the bureaucrat Eugène-Pierre Lestringuez (13), who seem to be flirting with the famous, fashionably dressed actress Jeanne Samary (11). Renoir gave prominence to Gustave Caillebotte (8), his fellow artist, friend, and wealthy patron. Youthfully portrayed, Caillebotte sits backwards in his chair in the right foreground conversing with the actress Angèle Legault (9) and the Italian journalist Adrien Maggiolo (10). Caillebotte, an avid boatman and sailor who painted many images of river sports, is portrayed in a white boater's shirt and straw boater's hat. Caillebotte gazes across the table at a young woman who affectionately plays with her dog. She is Aline Charigot (1), a young seamstress who Renoir had recently met and would later marry. The only figure in the painting not identified by scholarship is the young man in profile to the right of Ellen Andrée. (Tab 3—Who's in the Painting has more information about the people in *Luncheon of the Boating Party.*)

Style and Technique

In 1880, Renoir was forty years old and facing many important professional choices. While he maintained friendships with his impressionist colleagues, he had artistic ambitions that differed from their anti-establishment inclinations. He had become a prominent portraitist of many wealthy and illustrious members of society. These new connections provided a much-needed livelihood and renewed Renoir's desire to exhibit in the Salon, the official, state-run art exhibition of France. From the outset of his work on *Luncheon of the Boating Party,* Renoir consciously constructed an epic painting about modern life that would surpass his earlier artistic achievement, *Ball at the Moulin de la Galette* (1876). Renoir hoped that *Luncheon of the Boating Party* would be the masterpiece to impress the Salon jury. The nearly life-size proportions of the painting testify to this aspiration, and Renoir himself voiced his ambition in a letter written while working on it:

> *I am at Chatou . . . doing a painting of oarsmen which I've been itching to do for a while. I'm not getting any younger, and I didn't want to defer this little festivity which later on I won't any longer be able to afford, already it's very difficult. . . . Even if the enormous expenses I'm incurring prevent me from finishing my picture, it's still a step forward; one must from time to time attempt things that are beyond one's capacity* (House 1985, 222) (Primary Source 17).

Zola's Challenge and the Making of a Masterpiece

Many art historians believe that *Luncheon of the Boating Party,* begun in the summer of 1880, may have been Renoir's response to a published challenge from the famous writer and critic Émile Zola. In a June review of the official Salon exhibition of 1880, Zola criticized the impressionists: "they show their works while incomplete, illogical, exaggerated. . . ." He challenged the artists to create more finished and complex paintings of modern life that would establish "a new formula" (Rewald 1973, 445) (Primary Source 16). With its ambitious scale, lengthy execution, complex composition, and subject, Renoir's masterpiece can be seen as his response to Zola's challenge (Moffett 1986, 413).

Linking Impressionism and Tradition

Consistent with the impressionists' emphasis on direct observation, *Luncheon of the Boating Party* captures the fleeting effects of changing light and color. The impressionists also championed scenes of modern life, such as *Luncheon of the Boating Party.* However, the fresh, spontaneous feeling of the work belies an arduous, six-month effort that would prove to be the pinnacle of Renoir's career.

Painting Techniques and Color

Luncheon of the Boating Party is a technical tour de force, revealing Renoir's skillful handling of paint on canvas. His clever brushwork varies depending on the subject matter in the overall composition. For example, bold and bright impressionist dabs of thickly applied paint form the tableware in the foreground, while delicate, feathered brushstrokes create an atmospheric landscape in the background. Dazzling areas of white, such as the tablecloth and T-shirts, are infused with reflected color. While the dog's fur appears brown, it is actually a combination of violets, greens, and yellows that blend in the viewer's eye. Painterly flourishes of red and white dapple the canvas and give the impression of changing light.

Detail from Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Luncheon of the Boating Party,* 1880–81. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

Detail from Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Luncheon of the Boating Party,* 1880–81. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

When portraying people, however, Renoir altered his technique. He employed traditional firm outlines and subtle gradations from light to dark to clearly define the three-dimensionality of the human body and the specific details of facial features. The artist used blending and layering techniques of the Old Masters to depict warm, glowing, pink skin with subtle tints of green and blue. Thus, in *Luncheon of the Boating Party,* Renoir united traditional and impressionist styles and techniques.

Composition

Renoir masterfully combined the traditional categories of painting—portraiture, landscape, still life, and genre painting—into a unified whole in *Luncheon of the Boating Party.* He successfully arranged a large group of figures into a single, coherent scene that depicts a charmed moment. Careful visual examination of the painting's composition reveals Renoir's full artistic achievement.

Compositional Games

Renoir delighted in visual games. For example, the composition can be seen as a series of flirtatious glances: each figure looks at another, guiding the viewer's eye on a dazzling tour around the painting. Only Charigot, the artist's girlfriend, does not participate in the dance of the glance, and instead gazes fondly at her dog.

Renoir employed several other compositional devices in *Luncheon of the Boating Party.* One can follow the yellow straw hats around the painting to form triangles or figure-eights. The viewer can trace the line of heads from Caillebotte in the right foreground to Louise-Alphonsine Fournaise leaning against the railing, back down to Charigot with her dog, or up to Alphonse who surveys the scene from the far left. Brilliant flecks of red and white, added during the last stages of the painting's execution, also guide the viewer around the canvas, from the glint of white in the dog's eye to shirt cuffs, and cigarettes.

Space and Balance

Renoir's treatment of space is equally complex. In a feat of compositional genius, the artist balances two figures on the left with twelve on the right. To

achieve this, Renoir seems to tilt the floorboards so that the viewer can clearly see the partygoers in the upper-right background. Without this visual trick, the viewer would see only their hats. All of Renoir's spatial devices evoke a feeling of comfortable intimacy. The table extends to the edge of the picture, inviting the viewer to pull up a chair and participate. The two most prominent boaters, wearing similar white, sleeveless T-shirts, flank the composition at left and right. Their curved arms seem to form parentheses, enclosing the space. Renoir added the greenery and the billowing awning later in the process to further enhance this cozy atmosphere.

Artistic Process

In order to create a complex work such as *Luncheon of the Boating Party,* an artist often begins with sketches on paper or small painted studies; yet no drawings, oil studies, or other preparatory exercises specific to *Luncheon of the Boating Party* are known to exist. In addition, technical analysis has revealed that Renoir did not make preliminary sketches on the canvas. Instead he developed his composition as he painted, making changes as the work evolved, which was in keeping with innovative impressionist practices.

There are, however, many precedents in Renoir's work that suggest a move toward *Luncheon of the Boating Party.* In 1866, soon after he had finished art school, Renoir painted *Mother Anthony's Tavern* (Primary Source 18). With a compositional structure similar to the later painting, Renoir organized several friends around a dinner table that extends toward the viewer. In 1875, he returned to a mealtime subject with *Lunch at the Restaurant Fournaise (The Rowers' Lunch)* (Primary Source 19), which is among his first paintings of Chatou. Like *Mother Anthony's Tavern,* Renoir used a compositional arrangement with friends

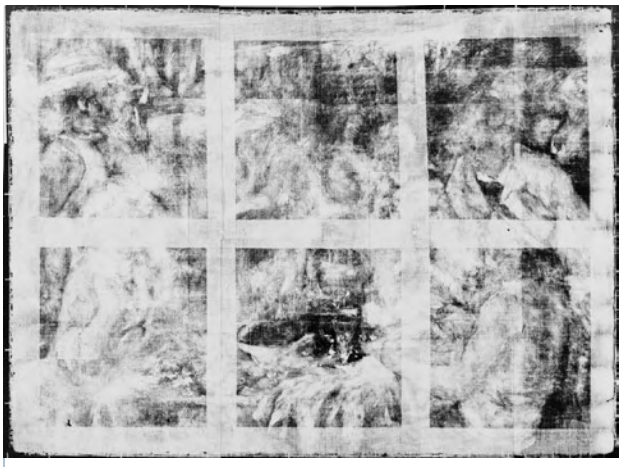
Primary Source 18

Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Mother Anthony's Tavern,* 1866. © Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, Sweden/ The Bridgeman Art Library.

grouped around a table. *Lunch at the Restaurant Fournaise* also demonstrates the artist's stylistic evolution toward *Luncheon of the Boating Party* with brilliant effects of reflected color and light. Over the next few years, Renoir painted many of the friends depicted in *Luncheon of the Boating Party* repeatedly and he became familiar with their physiognomy and their gestures.

It is believed that Renoir executed at least some of the work for the painting on the balcony of the Maison Fournaise. However, *Luncheon of the Boating Party* was not painted entirely en plein air (the technique of painting outdoors used by the impressionists to capture the effects of changing light). Renoir also had a studio near the Maison Fournaise where friends sat for portraits and where he reworked and refined the composition. Renoir returned to Paris in the fall of 1880, where he finished his masterpiece in early 1881.

As he worked on his grand painting, Renoir wrote from Chatou that he was "surrounded by people" (Rathbone 1996, 38). Presumably, Renoir gathered most of the cast of *Luncheon of the Boating Party* at the Maison Fournaise early on to organize his composition. A letter written by the artist during the autumn of 1880 indicates that he worked on individual figures as they were available to model for him, but that he was struggling to resolve the final grouping of figures, the table setting, and the landscape. In recounting his progress, he complained of being behind schedule, of having to remove a "high class cocotte" (he wrote "today I've wiped her out"), and of his frustration with the ambitious project: "I no longer know where I am with it, except that it is annoying me more and more" (House 1985, 222) (Primary Source 17).



Primary Source/Technical Study 15a

X-Radiograph of *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, 1995. Conservation Studio, The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

Despite his frustration, Renoir persevered, making changes that ranged from minor adjustments to major additions. Recent technical studies, including x-radiography and infrared reflectography, have revealed many of these changes, while others are visible to the naked eye (Primary Sources 15a, 15b). The red and white awning, which was added late in the painting's execution, is among the major compositional changes Renoir made to the work. The importance of this change can be understood by attempting to envision the painting without the awning. If an open sky and distant landscape had been retained, the three-dimensional illusion would have been difficult to achieve. By enclosing the top edge, the balcony's recession into space becomes more convincing, and the sitters are better defined as an intimate, cohesive group. Renoir made several adjustments to his figures to accommodate this addition. One can still see a slight halo around the hat of the bearded Alphonse Fournaise where Renoir adjusted the hat's placement to accommodate the awning above. Technical analysis also revealed a figure underneath Charigot who might be the "high

Primary Source 21

Paolo Veronese, *The Marriage Feast at Cana,* 1562–63. Louvre, Paris, France/Peter Willi/The Bridgeman Art Library.

class cocotte" removed by the artist. Interestingly, this erased figure looked out at the viewer—a compositional device that would have changed the painting dramatically (Primary Source 15a).

Renoir also made many minor adjustments. He carefully refined the gestures of his luncheon guests to craft an aura of ease and informality. He also meticulously modified the expressions and poses of his figures to heighten the interaction among them and to add cohesion to the scene. For example, one can see the adjustment made to Maggiolo's sleeve as he leans over the artist Caillebotte and actress Angèle Legault in the foreground. Technical analysis has revealed that Legault, seated in the right foreground and wearing a white striped cap, originally looked out toward the viewer. However, Renoir fine-tuned the interaction between the actress and her companions, shifting her glance toward Caillebotte.

Looking to the Louvre and the Influence of Great Painting

Renoir's reverence for the history of art, particularly the paintings in the Louvre in Paris, was a source of inspiration throughout his career. In the case of *Luncheon of the Boating Party,* he may well have looked at such works as Paolo Veronese's lavish, mural-sized banquet scene, *The Marriage Feast at Cana* (1562–63) (Primary Source 21). *Luncheon of the Boating Party* seems to echo the lively party atmosphere of Veronese's masterpiece. Renoir also may have picked up a few tips about composition. Similar to *Luncheon*

of the Boating Party, a rectangular table surrounded by guests that extends toward the viewer is also present in the left foreground of the Italian Renaissance work. Another influential work in the Louvre was Jean-Antoine Watteau's *Embarkation for Cythera* (1717) (Primary Source 20). Eighteenth-century Rococo style was very popular during the 1860s and 1870s, permeating French culture from fashion to popular song. Renoir was captivated by Watteau's depiction of elegant, light-hearted outdoor amusements, such as picnics and flirtatious games, of the Rococo *fêtes galantes* (festive parties). He also carefully studied Watteau's masterful use of nuanced gesture to portray the revelers in a casual and intimate manner. Through his emulation and admiration of these important French painters, Renoir indicated his belief in the importance of France's artistic tradition and his place within it.

Renoir created *Luncheon of the Boating Party*'s mood of enchantment by capturing both the immediacy and specificity of a contemporary moment in nineteenth-century leisure and the universal appeal of human celebration. Moreover, in this composition he synthesized several of the traditional categories of painting: still life, landscape, portraiture, and genre. The result is a timeless painting that captures the idyllic atmosphere of the Maison Fournaise, where friends share the pleasures of food, wine, and conversation.