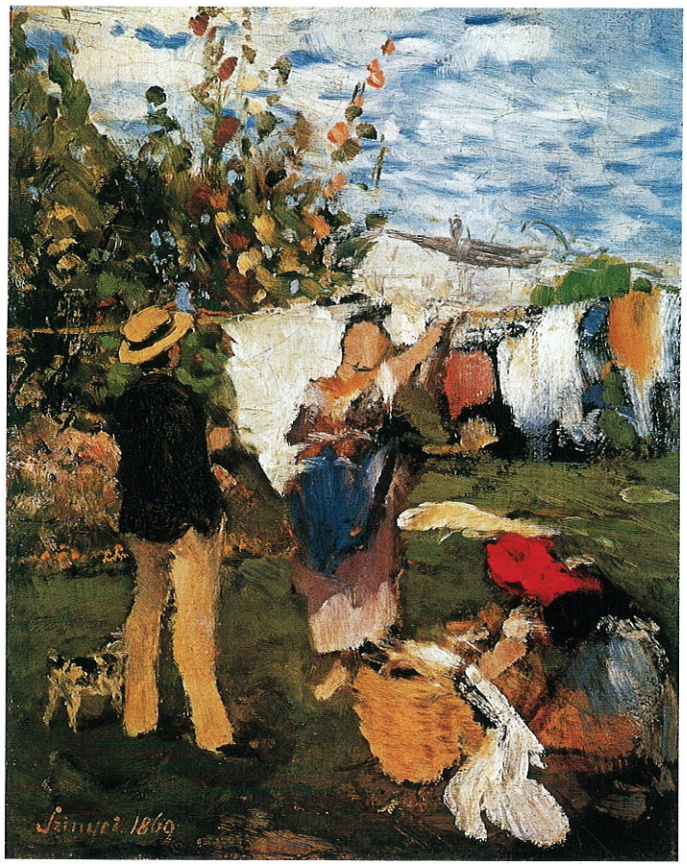

Fig. 303 **Pál Szinyei-Merse**, *Drying Laundry*, 1869. Oil on canvas, 15 3/16 × 13 3/8". Magyar Nemzeti Galéria, Budapest.

Boulogne"), where he drew and painted for *Harper's* the windswept costumes and parasols of the ladies who, like those in Boudin's or Monet's resort scenes, enjoy a decorous confrontation with sand and sea breezes.

Homer, like the Macchiaioli, apparently developed a technique to record the intense glare of outdoor light independently of Monet and his circle, and so, too, did a Hungarian painter, Pál Szinyei-Merse (1845–1920), who was trained not in Paris, but in Munich, finishing his studies under Piloty in 1868. The following year, that of Munich's International Art Exhibition, which brought Courbet himself and his paintings to the capital of Bavaria, Szinyei-Merse began to make sketchy, outdoor paintings that moved far past Courbet's Realism or even that of the early Manet (some of whose work was also seen in Munich). Like Monet and other French contemporaries, he often chose subjects that, as scenes of carefree, springtime leisure—figures enjoying garden swings or picnics—recall Rococo traditions revisited in the contemporary world. His *Drying Laundry* of 1869 (**fig. 303**), signed and dated boldly for so small an oil study, is one of these, transporting to the modern countryside a familiar Fragonard theme of cheerful laundresses hanging the wash on a line, while a dapper gentleman and his dog look on. The painting, in fact, was originally titled *Monsieur*, but this verbal effort to emphasize the narrative potential of the situation seems secondary to what is, in effect, a visual fusion of figures, landscape, and white laundry, in which the whole dissolves the sum of the parts. Such rapidly painted sketches hover between works of art sufficient in themselves (but still generally incomprehensible to contemporary audiences) and preparatory studies for larger paintings on the same theme, an ambiguity which posed no special problem in earlier decades and centuries, when highly improvisatory drawings, for example, could be prized as well as the finished painted product. But this began to raise perplexing issues in the 1860s, when so many artists found that the sheer intensity and immediacy of a small oil sketch executed on the spot might in fact be even more honest as art and experience than a similar work in which all the t's were crossed and the i's dotted.

This shift of value from the calculated to the spontaneous can be seen most memorably in painted sketches that Monet executed alongside his fellow student at the Gleyre studio Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919). In the summer of 1869, the two artists sketched together at one of the flourishing new recreation centers of the Paris suburbs near Bougival, La Grenouillère (The Frog Pond). There, countless Parisians arriving by rail or carriage on a sunny weekend could enjoy boating, swimming, picnicking, and conversing in an outdoor environment that brought Watteau's Isle of Cythera or Fragonard's pleasure gardens up to Second-Empire date. It even figured in a short story about romantic intrigue by Guy de Maupassant, *Paul's Wife*. The results of Monet's and Renoir's visual explorations (**figs. 304** and **305**) are of a dazzling newness even by such advanced standards as Manet's *Departure of the Folkestone Boat* (see fig. 293), also of 1869. Here, all seems at first an almost illegible confusion of the most varied brushstrokes—broad horizontal slashes for the water, rapid speckles for the leaves of the foreground trees, soft dapples for those on the far shore—and the most intense unmodulated pigments of yellows, blues, greens, whites that seem to come right out of the tube. It is impossible to get one's bearings here, for the spectator seems half-suspended over a watery ground plane as choppy and unstable as the cropped rowboats that bob up and down in the foreground. Near and far now merge into a shimmering surface of often almost palpable pigment, carrying to a new extreme the disintegration of perspective illusion that had begun with Courbet and Manet. Yet this at first bewildering, unanchored world of varied, pulsating sensations is clearly predicated on objective fact, for both Monet and Renoir have documented on the spot precisely the same data, from the heads and chests of the bathers in the Seine at the far left to the footpaths over the water that lead to the central island (referred to as the "Camembert," because of its cheese shape) to the words of the sign on the pavilion cut off on the right: LOCATI[ON] CANOTS (Boats for Hire). What

may at first seem amazing here is that two different artists of two different personal and aesthetic temperaments achieved so similar and so objective a result, the equivalent of two photographers recording the same site from the same place at the same time. Yet what seems no less remarkable is that these presumably objective facts of fleeting, fragmentary impressions of the movement of light, nature, and people reveal, on subtler examination, the work of two very different artistic temperaments. Renoir's colors have a more pastel, Rococo flavor than Monet's, and his touch similarly seems softer and gentler. Monet's vacationers have a crude, stick-figure quality that yields, in Renoir's case, to a more convivial warmth of paired couples who seem almost to be conversing rather than disappearing, as do Monet's, into the more jagged patterns of the ambient brushstrokes. Renoir, typically, includes some family dogs, invariably excluded from Monet's depictions of Parisian society. Even the atmosphere varies, with Renoir's casting a more balmy, hazy spell and Monet's creating a more silvery, limpid tone. But however much we view these works as products of separate temperaments, we may also marvel at the common impulse which, by the 1860s, could result in such a convergence of result that at least two artists in Paris could make us feel that Western painting has been rejuvenated and that we have suddenly been forced to rediscover what children perhaps always know, that the most immediate spectacle of light, color, and movement, perceived before the brain can sort out other kinds of order, is a tonic, joyous experience.

Again, the question of whether paintings like *La Grenouillère* should be regarded as self-sufficient works of art is a slippery one. Later spectators, accustomed to much greater kinds of spontaneity in painting, have learned to accept them easily as such. Yet we also know that Monet himself thought of this study as a means to a more complex end, a larger painting of this popular resort that could be submitted to the Salon as a more modern vision of earlier depictions of the same popular locale by lesser artists. But from what we know and will see of his later development, such a preparatory oil sketch, even if broadly rooted in the academic traditions of making small, cursorily painted studies for larger works, began to seem not only totally adequate as a work of art, but the most authentic pictorial

Fig. 304 **Claude Monet**, *La Grenouillère*, 1869. Oil on canvas, 29⅜ × 39¼". The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Fig. 305 **Pierre-Auguste Renoir**, *La Grenouillère*, 1869. Oil on canvas, 26½ × 32½". Nationalmuseum, Stockholm.

equivalent of what for many artists of Monet's generation was to become the only thing that mattered: the individual search for that most wonderful and most primitive of aesthetic phenomena, the seen world as primary, unedited sensation. Even though these artists carried with them an intricate complex of artistic traditions and of varying emotional responses, they tried to act as if all this might be discarded by using their eyes as innocent but refined reflectors of a moment of perception. They ignored, among countless other things that had to do with the world they lived in, the welling national rivalries that at the Munich International Art Exhibition of 1869 provoked a French critic, Eugène Müntz, to comment that "the artistic battle of the Munich Glass Palace [built in emulation of the London Crystal Palace of 1851] is essentially nothing but a duel between the Germans and the French." And they ignored in their art, if not in their life, the political storm clouds that could prophesy how, within a year, this artistic duel would take on another kind of reality when the imperialist ambitions of Bismarck and a growingly patriotic and unified Germany would provoke France into declaring war against Prussia on July 19, 1870.