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HSBC Presents: Beyond the Frame, Episode 6 – *Dance at Bougival*, Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1883)

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FEMALE DANCER: What happens in a Renoir, stays in a Renoir.

HOST:

HSBC proudly presents *Beyond the Frame*, a look behind the bigger picture of some of the world's most important impressionist art. In this season, we're looking at the rebellion of the impressionists. It wasn't all dreamy brushwork, but rife with bravery, breaking stereotypes and smashing perceptions. Across this series, we go back nearly 150 years to discover some of the surprising stories behind six impressionist masterpieces, one classic impressionist painting in every episode. Don't take my word for it. You'll hear from the paintings themselves. If you like what you hear, extend the *Beyond the Frame* experience by seeing them for yourself at the National Gallery of Victoria's French impressionism exhibition brought to you by HSBC, a proud partner of the NGV. It's open now until October 3rd. For tickets visit ngv.melbourne.

If you've ever seen a famous artwork and been disappointed by how small it is, when you see Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Dance at Bougival*, you'll have no such feeling. As one of the biggest canvases on display at the NGV, Renoir's seminal work will have you dancing your way through the NGV impressionist exhibition in Melbourne. *Dance at Bougival* is an artistic icon. The NGV are bringing the works to our shores for the very first time.

Pierre-Auguste Renoir's story was one that could only be describe as rags to riches. The child of a seamstress and a tailor who left school to work in a porcelain factor, then sent to a prestigious Parisian art school in his late teens Renoir's works were a celebration of snappy threads and funky frocks. Unlike his compatriots, his paint brush was not overflowing. He couldn't always afford paint. Now a Renoir would set you back tens of millions of dollars, but it's not so much how expensive the art is, but rather how the sale of art impacted Renoir and the other impressionists that they can thank for how artistically successful they became.

More on that later. But let's get to our interview. Often on a podcast about art, you'd speak to the artists, but today we've got the lucky chance to chat with the dancers, the feature of this classic impressionistic example. Dancers from Pierre-Auguste Renoir *Dance at Bougival*, welcome to *Beyond the Frame*.

FEMALE DANCER: Nice to still be dancing.

MALE DANCER: Thank you for having us.

HOST: My first question is, who are you?

MALE DANCER:

That you care about who we are totally misses the point of the significance of the painting. Oh, my friend. What kind of art critic are you?

HOST: Oh, I'm not really an art critic.

FEMALE DANCER: Yes. What we are is the finest example of Renoir's skill at the life painting.

MALE DANCER: And plot.

HOST: Plot?

FEMALE DANCER:

Dance at Bougival is the third in a series of dance paintings. He did Dance in the Country, Dance in the City, and this one. Three dancers in three environments, the three parts of French society. Looks like they're dancing the same dance. But to answer your question, painter Suzanne Valadon probably modeled for the Dance in the City, with the Dance in the Country being modeled by the painter's wife. Whereas, I am most likely a mix of both models.

HOST: And you sir?

MALE DANCER: I'm most certainly not van Gogh. More like Hippolyte-Alphone Fournaise, who was the subject in an earlier painting.

FEMALE DANCER: Either way, you certainly are luminous.

MALE DANCER: You certainly might be having fun.

FEMALE DANCER:

Perhaps. If you notice my hat though, it's the same one as the Dance in the Country, as well as the dance being a very similar pose, which shows how all three paintings are connected and part of the same narrative.

HOST:

Oh, actually the thing I noticed the most was the cigarette butt. What has that got to do with the painting? Why is it there?

FEMALE DANCER:

It must've been in his memory. Impressionism captures the moment and what the artists eyes soaked in. Even if they were ugly, like the half drunk cider or yes, the cigarette butt. But if that's what you're noticing, then you're not looking properly. You should notice the dancer's motion. The blending of the brushstrokes. The incredible detail is impressive. But if it was a most important thing, you'd be interviewing the cigarette butts or the matches wouldn't you?

MALE DANCER:

Given that Bougival was not far out of Paris and was a celebrated impressionist location. Maybe it's why it was set there, as a sendoff to the place, the form. Always nice to go out with a party, no?

FEMALE DANCER:

And obviously what happens in a Renoir, stays in a Renoir. Bougival was the place to be. We were free. Society wasn't watching, but they were all there. We danced, drank, laughed, and loved. No wonder this rebelliousness made an impression on him.

HOST: So tell us about Paul Durand-Ruel, who was the art dealer who commissioned this?

FEMALE DANCER:

Well, Paul Durand- Ruel commissioned this and the other two in the series. Paul was a very big supporter of the impressionists, and as one of the world's biggest art dealers, in fact he broke down the international barriers to French art. Perhaps Renoir gave him a subtle nod.

MALE DANCER:

Well, also, given how huge this work is, it's clear Paul knew what he was doing when it was commissioned. It would have been an easy sale.

HOST: Yeah, it was sold back in 1937 to the MFA Boston for a fraction of what it would cost today.

FEMALE DANCER: Art dealers discuss art sales. We're a priceless piece of art.

HOST: Sorry, force of habit.

MALE DANCER:

Oh, that's fine. Renoir was showing much promise as a singer, but had to stop his music lessons to get a job in a porcelain factory to help support the family.

FEMALE DANCER: At 13.

HOST: Oh wow. Times were different then. How did he get his start?

FEMALE DANCER:

He spent much time hanging about at the Louvre, admiring the old masters. And he did show skill with a brush, going into art school in '62, his first alone showing was in '64.

MALE DANCER: And the Salon showing in 1868. That was the one that made him famous.

HOST: And by famous, do you mean he could afford more paint?

MALE DANCER: Well, he did not come from money.

FEMALE DANCER:

Have you seen how big this canvas is? You would need a wheelbarrow of Francs to pay for it. A wheelbarrow.

HOST: So what happened after '68?

FEMALE DANCER:

That's when he became the impressionist that we know. He started painting with Monet in public and really impressed the impressionist style.

MALE DANCER: He painted in the streets.

FEMALE DANCER: Crazy.

MALE DANCER:

Accepted by the Salon in the sixties for showing potential, rejected by the Salon in the seventies for being talented but not sticking to the norms.

FEMALE DANCER:

Renoir and the other impressionists actually stopped submitting their works to the Salon, focusing on the independent impressionist society that he was a very early member of.

MALE DANCER:

And so, after much travel and success, by the end of the '80s, he went back to a more traditional style, and spent more time in the studio.

FEMALE DANCER:

And in 1919, just before Renoir passed away, he was able to see his work on display in the Louvre, in the same gallery as the old masters that he loved so dearly.

HOST:

Oh, how lovely. It really is a fitting tribute to a true impressionist master. So dancers from Bougival, thank you so much for joining us today.

FEMALE DANCER:

Oh, Lovely to be hanging in the National Gallery of Victoria.

MALE DANCER: Thank you so much for having us.

HOST:

Beyond the Frame is proudly brought to you by HSBC in partnership with the National Gallery of Victoria's French Impressionism exhibition. Open now until October 3rd, for tickets visit ngv.melbourne. This is our final episode of this first series. So if you're new to us, please check out the other episodes in this series. Make sure to follow like and rate this podcast. There's plenty more Beyond the Frame to come in future series.