

QUICK VIEW:

Synopsis

Claude Monet was among the leaders of the French **Impressionist** movement of the 1870s and 1880s. His 1873 painting, *Impression, Sunrise*, gave the style its name, and as an inspirational talent, and as a personality, he was crucial in bringing its adherents together. Inspired, in the 1860s, by the **Realists'** interest in painting in the open air, Monet would later bring the technique to one of its most famous pinnacles with his so-called series paintings, in which his observations of the same subject, viewed at various times of the day, were captured in numerous sequences of paintings. Masterful as a colorist and as a painter of light and atmosphere, his later work often achieved a remarkable degree of abstraction, and this has recommended him to subsequent generations of abstract painters.

Key Ideas

- Monet's early work is indebted to the Realists' interests in depicting contemporary subject matter, without idealization, and in painting outdoors in order to capture the fleeting qualities of nature.
- Inspired in part by Manet, Monet gradually began to develop a distinctive style of his own in the late 1860s. He departed from the clear depiction of forms and linear perspective which were prescribed by the established art of the time, and he experimented with loose handling, bold color, and strikingly unconventional compositions. The emphasis in his pictures shifted from figures to the qualities of light and the atmosphere in the scene, and as he matured he became ever more attentive to light and color.
- In his later years Monet also became increasingly sensitive to the decorative qualities of color and form. He began to apply paint in smaller strokes, building it up in

broad fields of color, and in the 1880s he began to explore the possibilities of a decorative paint surface, and harmonies and contrasts of color. The effects that he achieved, particularly in the series paintings of the 1890s, represent a remarkable advance towards abstraction, and towards a modern painting focused purely on surface effects.

- An inspiration and a leader among the **Impressionists**, he was crucial in attracting **Renoir, Sisley, Manet and Pissarro** to work alongside each other in the Parisian suburb of Argenteuil in the 1870s. He was also important in establishing the exhibition society which would showcase the group's work between 1874 and 1886.

DETAILED VIEW:

Childhood

Born in Paris to a grocer, Claude Oscar Monet moved at the age of five to Le Havre, a seaside town in northern France. The ocean and rugged coastline of the region had a profound affect on him at an early age, and he would often run away from school to go for walks along the cliffs and beaches. As a youth, he received instruction at the College du Havre from a former pupil of the famous Neo-Classical artist **Jacques-Louis David**. Creative and enterprising from an early age, he drew caricatures in his spare time and sold them for 20 francs apiece. Demonstrating his early aptitude for the art world, he saved 2000 francs from his art sales.

Early Training

A pivotal experience occurred in 1856 when Monet became friends with Eugene Boudin, a landscape painter famous for his scenes of northern French coastal towns. Boudin encouraged him to paint outdoors, and this *plein air* technique changed Monet's concept of how art could be created: "...It was as if a veil was torn from my eyes; I had understood. I grasped what painting could be."

Despite being rejected for a scholarship, in 1859 Monet moved to Paris to study with help from his family. However, instead of choosing the more customary career path of a **salon painter**, by enrolling at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Monet attended the Academie Suisse, where he met fellow artist Camille Pissarro.



Mature Period

Obligated to serve in the military, in 1861 Monet was sent to Algiers. Like **Eugene Delacroix** before him, the north African environment stimulated Monet and affected his artistic and personal outlook. Coming home to Le Harve after his service, his "final education of the eye" was provided by the Dutch landscape and marine artist Johann Jongkind. Following this, Monet again left for Paris, attending the studio of Swiss artist Charles Gleyre, which included such students - and future Impressionists - as Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Frederic Bazille and Alfred Sisley.

In 1865 the Paris Salon accepted two of Monet's seascapes for exhibition. However, the artist was feeling confined by working in a studio, preferring his earlier experience of painting in nature, so he moved just outside Paris to the edge of the Fontainebleau forest. Using his future wife, Camille Doncieux, as his sole model, his ambitiously large *Women in the Garden* (1866-67) was a culmination of the ideas and themes in his earlier work. Monet was hopeful that the work would be included in the Paris Salon, but his style kept him at odds with the jurors and the picture was refused, leaving the artists devastated. The official Salon at this time still valued Romanicism. (In 1921, to assuage the 50-year-old insult, Monet made the French government purchase the painting for the enormous sum of 200,000 francs.)

To escape the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, Monet took refuge in London, producing many scenes such as *Westminster Bridge* (1871). His wife and their new baby boy joined him. He visited London museums and saw the works of **John Constable** and **J.M.W. Turner**, whose romantic naturalism clearly influenced his use of light. Most importantly, he met Paul Durand-Ruel, who ran a new modern art gallery on Bond Street. Durand-Ruel became a major supporter of Monet and Pissarro, and later Renoir, Degas and other French Impressionists.



Returning to France after the war, Monet settled his family in Argenteuil, a suburb of Paris along the Seine River. Over the next six years he developed his style and documented the changes in the growing town in over 150 canvases. His presence also attracted Parisian friends including Renoir and Edouard Manet. While each influenced

the other in significant ways, Monet had won Manet over to *plein air* painting by 1874.

In a continued effort to protest the Salon system, Monet and his friends organized their own exhibition 1873, held in the vacated studio of photographer and caricaturist **Felix Nadar**. This became known as the 1st Impressionist exhibition. These artists, including Renoir, Degas and Pissarro, were the first artists to collectively respond to the changes in their city. The modernizing of Paris was evident in the wider boulevards needed to accommodate the expanding fashions of public life and growing traffic of consumerism. Not only was their subject matter new, but the way they portrayed this reality was unique as well. Intuitive feeling and the essence of spontaneity, of the moment, was impressed upon the canvas. It was through the 1873 work *Impression, Sunrise* that Monet inadvertently gave the movement its name, although that name was actually initially used by writers to criticize these types of works.

While Monet's upbringing was rather middle class, his extravagant tastes led him to live much of his life in varying degrees of poverty and debt. His paintings were not a decent source of income and he often had to borrow money from his friends. After receiving several commissions through the 1870s, Monet enjoyed some financial success, but was in dire straits by the end of the decade. When his wife Camille died, in 1879, there was a change in Monet's work, focusing more on the flux of experiential time and the mediating effects of atmosphere and personality on subject matter.

The next two decades of Monet's life and work were characterized by constant travel. He visited Norway, Venice, made several journeys to London and around France. Monet was less concerned with modernity in his works and more with atmosphere and environment. It was at this stage that he hit upon the type of paintings for which he is perhaps best known. His series of grainstacks, painted at different times throughout the day, received critical acclaim from opinion-makers, buyers and the public when exhibited at Durand-Ruel's gallery in May 1891. He then turned his sights to Rouen Cathedral, making similar studies of the effects of changing mood, light and atmosphere on its facade at different times of the day. The results were over 40 canvases of brilliant, slightly exaggerated colors that formed a visual record of accumulated perceptions.



Late Years and Death

Ultimately, Monet preferred to be alone with nature, creating his paintings rather than participating in theoretical or critical battles within the artistic and cultural scene of Paris.

After his 1908 Venetian excursion, he settled for the remainder of his life at his estate in Giverny. 1911 saw the death of his second wife, Alice, followed by his son, Jean. Shattered by these deaths, the ragings of the First World War, and even a cataract forming over one of his eyes, Monet essentially ceased to paint. Finally, his friend Georges Clemenceau lifted him out of his mourning by encouraging him to create his water garden series, of which the *Water Lilies* (1918) is a part.

The property at Giverny was Monet's primary inspiration for the last three decades of his life. He created a Japanese garden for contemplation and relaxation, making a pond filled with water lilies with an arched bridge. He conceived a continuous sequence of waterscapes situated in an oval salon as a world within the world. A new studio with a glass wall facing the garden was built for the purpose, and despite having cataracts now in both eyes, Monet was able to move a portable easel around to different places within the studio to capture the ever-changing changing light and perspective of his water lilies. Concentrating on the pond itself, his all-over compositions allowed the viewer to feel as if they were within the water surrounded by the foliage. He continued to work on his water paintings right up until the end of his life.


Legacy

Monet's extraordinarily long life and large artistic output befit the enormity of his contemporary popularity. Impressionism, for which he is a pillar, continues to be one of the most reproduced styles of art for popular consumption in the form of calendars, postcards, posters, etc. Additionally, his paintings command top prices at auction. Monet's work is in every major museum worldwide and continues to be sought after. While there have been major internationally touring retrospectives of his work, even the presence one Monet painting can anchor an entire exhibition for the audience. The impact of his experiments with changing mood and light on static surfaces can be seen in most major artistic movements of the early 20th century. As a testament to his value, one of his water lilies paintings sold for almost US\$80 million at Christie's London auction house in June 2008.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES:

Below are Claude Monet's main influencers, and the people and ideas that he influenced in turn.

ARTISTS	CRITICS/FRIENDS	MOVEMENTS
 <p>Eugène Boudin</p>  <p>Gustave</p>	 <p>Pierre-Auguste Renoir</p>	 <p>Realism</p>  <p>Neo-Classicism</p>

<p>Courbet</p>  <p>Jean-Francois Millet</p>	 <p>Jean Frédéric Bazille</p>  <p>Charles Baudelaire</p>  <p>Alfred Sisley</p>  <p>Emile Zola</p>	 <p>Japonisme</p>
 <p>Edouard Manet</p>  <p>J.M.W. Turner</p>		

**INFLUENCES
ON ARTIST**



Claude Monet

Years Worked: 1852 - 1926



**INFLUENCED
BY ARTIST**

ARTISTS

CRITICS/FRIENDS

MOVEMENTS

 Vincent Van Gogh	 Paul Durand-Ruel	 Impressionism
 Paul Cézanne	 Stéphane Mallarmé	 Post-Impressionism
 Edgar Degas	 J.A.M. Whistler	 Symbolism
 Georges Seurat	 Georges Clemenceau	 Pointillism
 Camille Pissarro		 Fauvism

Quotes

"I am driven more and more frantic by the need to render what I experience. Working so slowly I become desperate, but the further I go the more I see that one must work very hard to succeed in rendering what I am looking for: 'Instantaneity', especially the envelope, the same light that diffuses everywhere and, more than ever, things come easily and at once disgust me."

"The motif is insignificant for me; what I want to represent is what lies between the motif and me."

"Once more I have undertaken things which are impossible to do; water with grasses waving in depths..It's wonderful to see but it drives you mad to want to do it. But I am always trying things like that."

Major Works:



Women in the Garden, Claude Monet, 1866-7, Louvre, Paris
Oil on canvas

Women in the Garden was painted at Ville d'Avray using his wife Camille as the only model. The goal of this large-scale work, while meticulously composed, was to render the effects of true outdoor light, rather than regard conventions of modeling or drapery. From the flickers of sunlight that pierce the foliage of the trees to delicate shadows and the warm flesh tones that can be seen through her sleeve, Monet details the behavior of natural light of the scene. In January 1867, his friend Bazille purchased the work for the sum of 2,500 francs in order to help Monet out of the extreme debt that forced him to slash over 200 canvases to avoid them being taken by his creditors.



Westminster Bridge (aka The Thames below Westminster), Claude Monet, 1871, The National Gallery, London
Oil on canvas

Painted on the Embankment in London, Monet's *Westminster Bridge* is one of the finest examples of his work during the time he and his family were in wartime refuge. This simple, asymmetrical composition is balanced by the horizontal bridge, the boats floating upon the waves with the vertical wharf, and ladder in the foreground. The entire scene is dominated by a layer of mist containing violet, gold, pink and green, creating a dense atmosphere that renders the architecture in distant, blurred shapes.



Boulevard des Capucines, Claude Monet, 1873, Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City
oil on canvas

Boulevard des Capucines captures a scene of the hustle and bustle of Parisian life from the studio of Monet's friend, the photographer Nadar. Applying very little detail, Monet uses short, quick brushstrokes to create the 'impression' of people in the city alive with movement. Critic Leroy was not pleased with these abstracted crowds, describing them as "black tongue-lickings." Monet painted two views from this location, with this one looking towards the Place de l'Opera. The first Impressionist exhibition was held in Nadar's studio, and perhaps in a show of respect to his supporter, Monet included this piece.



Lady with a Parasol, Claude Monet, 1886, Louvre, Paris
Oil on canvas

One of Monet's most popular figure paintings, *Lady with a Parasol* showcases the parasol, one of his longstanding themes. The parasol itself makes many appearances in his work, primarily because when painting from real life outdoors, most women would use one to protect their skin and eyes. But it also creates a contrast of light and shadows on the figure's face and clothing, indicating from which direction the actual light is coming from. Having already explored this scene in an earlier, more detailed version, *On the Cliff* (1875), in this work from Giverny, Monet pays little attention to the model's features, letting them fade into the shadow beneath the parasol.



Rouen Cathedral: The Facade at Sunset, Claude Monet, 1894, Museums of Fine Arts, Boston
Oil on canvas

Monet's *Rouen Cathedral* series is one of his most renowned. He painted the cathedral's facade at different times of day to explore the effects of different light during winter. The burnt orange and blue appearance of the cathedral dominates the canvas, with only scattered views of sky at the top. Layered over the top of the Gothic structure, the brushstrokes play with the light and atmosphere on the stones, and the details on their carved surfaces. In 1895, he exhibited twenty *Cathedrals* at the Durand-Ruel Gallery that were both criticized and praised by viewers that either struggled or championed his artistic, scientific, and poetic innovations.



Water Lilies, Claude Monet, 1916, The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo
Oil on canvas

Water Lilies is a part of Monet's water landscape group that was likely conceived in 1909, but which he did not begin until after several personal traumas that occurred in the early 1910s. He worked in secret on dozens of canvases creating a panorama of water, lilies and sky in his studio within and inspired by his Giverny garden. While he painted from the constructed nature around him, due to his failing eyesight and the flower's strictly summer bloom, much was painted from his rich memory. The brushstrokes and palettes utilized were varied from earlier works, almost appearing expressionistic.