

Monet

ROOM GUIDE
FONDATION **BEYELER**



MONET

January 22—May 28, 2017

CAUTION: *Please do not touch the works of art!*

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Whenever this symbol appears on the exhibit labels, it means you will find the work of art discussed in detail under the corresponding number in this guide.

INTRODUCTION

CLAUDE MONET

To mark its 20th anniversary, the Fondation Beyeler is devoting an exhibition to one of the most important artists in its collection: Claude Monet (1840–1926). A concerted overview will shed light on selected aspects of his oeuvre. As such, our project focuses on the years after 1880 to the onset of the twentieth century, and is accompanied by a glance at his later work.

After the death of his wife Camille in 1879, a phase of reorientation began for Monet. His time as a pioneer of Impressionism was over. Though he was not a well-recognized artist at the time, Monet's dealers secured his growing financial independence, as is reflected by his many journeys to the Mediterranean, the Atlantic coast, and London. During this time his art became more personal. He abandoned strict impressionist objectivity and dedicated himself to representing subjective sensations like the "strange and tragic" quality of landscape—as he wrote in a letter to his second wife, Alice Hoschedé.

Above all, however, the painted picture itself seemed to increasingly form the true object of his craft. Therefore, Monet's thoughts on the image itself can be understood in a dual sense. The repetition of his motifs by means of reflection, which culminated in the lily-pond paintings, can be viewed as a recurring personal contemplation about the potential of images. Additionally, the shadows to which Monet repeatedly devoted his efforts are all depictions of a singular motif. The abstracted form of these images calls pure representation of objects into question.

The exhibition, comprising 62 works from major European, American and Japanese museums, along with many rare paintings from private collections, is arranged in key themes of the artist's work. Above all else, it illustrates the endless possibilities of painting, and the diversity of Monet's art.

Exhibition curator is Ulf Küster.

ROOM 1

1 • *La Meule au soleil*, 1891
≡ *Grainstack in the Sunlight*

The exhibition begins with a series of works that show objects backlit by strong sunlight. One of these paintings features a haystack that is depicted from such close quarters that its top is cut off. The long shadow cast by the stack occupies the entire lower half of the picture and seems to virtually continue into the viewer's space. The stacks of hay and grain—which Monet reproduced from various angles and lighting conditions—were used to store harvests, and were a familiar sight at that time.

The painter and pioneer of abstraction Wassily Kandinsky saw this picture in Moscow in 1896 or 1897. He later reported having experienced an artistic revelation while viewing the painting, which was triggered by the fact he was initially unable to identify the subject. This, he said, was his first experience of an (apparent) non-representation, an abstraction: "... for the first time, I saw a picture. That it was a haystack, the catalogue informed me. I didn't recognize it.... Painting took on a fairy-tale power and splendor". (W. Kandinsky, *Reminiscences*, 1913)

ROOM 2

2 • *Coucher de soleil sur la Seine, l'hiver*, 1880
≡ *Sunset on the Seine in Winter*

The winter of 1879–80 was unusually cold, causing many waterways, including the River Seine, to freeze over. On the morning of January 5th, 1880, the Monet and Hoschedé families were wakened in their home in Vétheuil by the sharp cracking sound of slowly thawing blocks of ice. The painter immediately went out to capture the spectacle, and over the following days produced two dozen pictures of the icy river.

In *Sunset on the Seine in Winter*, Monet employs warm red hues as a contrast to the largely cool tones of the scene. The setting sun on the horizon is a red fireball whose reflection tints the water pink and orange. The reflection is punctuated by ice floes rendered in strokes of white and blue. The clear image on the water is underscored by the contrast between the opaque floes and the mirroring surface. Monet would return to this device in his later work, where the ice floes were replaced by water lilies.

3 • *Jean-Pierre Hoschedé et Michel Monet au bord de l'Epte*, ca. 1887–90

Jean-Pierre Hoschedé and Michel Monet on the Banks of the Epte

Here Monet shows the vista of a riverbank suffused by pastel tones and lined with slender, bare poplar trees. The poplars rise beyond the upper edge of the picture while their reflections simultaneously run downwards, lending a marked rhythm to the scene. The juncture between water and land becomes a mirror axis. Imagine the picture rotated by 180 degrees—wouldn't the reflected tree trunks almost appear even more realistic?

A pair of small figures distracts us from the landscape view. The boys noted in the title are Jean-Pierre Hoschedé and Michel Monet, the youngest in the artist's family. In addition to his two biological children with Camille, who died in 1879, his large family grew to include the six children of his companion, Alice Hoschedé. They all lived in a house on a spacious lot in Giverny, which Monet rented in 1883 and bought seven years later.

This picture is one of the few from the period when Monet still depicted human figures. Soon he would begin to fill his canvases with landscapes alone, many of which featured motifs found on his very own doorstep.

4 • *Les Peupliers au bord de l'Epte*, 1891

Poplars on the Banks of the Epte

In this work, we are confronted by a dynamic scene of poplar trees viewed against the light of a blue sky. We see several slender trees whose dark green foliage grows denser as it reaches the crown. The thin verticals of the bare trunks give the composition an upward thrust, which is counteracted by the S-curve formed by the trees' crowns—effectively drawing the eye into the background. Along the lower edge flows the River Epte, whose bank seems barely tangible. White clouds are rendered in rapid brushstrokes that seem to virtually vibrate on the image surface.

From his purchase of the Giverny house in 1890 onwards, Monet increasingly devoted himself to the landscape motifs of his surroundings. A year later, while walking along the Epte, he discovered this row of poplars. He painted the trees from his studio boat in different weather and lighting conditions. When the trees went up for sale, Monet managed to prevent their being felled by paying a fee. The poplars were eventually cut down after he had finished a series of 23 related paintings.

ROOM 3

5 • *Église de Varengeville, soleil couchant*, 1882
≡ *The Church at Varengeville, Sunset*

During his stay in Normandy in 1882, Monet produced a series of landscapes that were successfully sold through his dealer, Paul Durand-Ruel. One of Monet's favorite motifs was the church of Varengeville perched high on the cliffs, which he painted several times from a hill across from it. He captured the mild light of the setting sun in the Impressionist manner, using bright complementary colors that blend in the viewer's eye to form a harmonious overall picture. The golden yellow bushes are punctuated by purple accents; red shrubs grow in front of the green slope; and over the light blue sea, the horizon shimmers in a warm orange. In the foreground, two slender pines stand against the light and lend the picture a compelling sense of depth. These striking trees serve as what is known as a *repoussoir*, meaning that their large size causes the background to recede to a dramatic distance. There, in the distance, the roof of the little church glows in the sun as its contours cast long, bluish shadows on the slope.

ROOM 4

6 • *Route de Monte-Carlo*, 1883
≡ *The Road to Monte Carlo*

With an eye to explore the Mediterranean landscape, Monet went to the Côte d'Azur with his painter-friend Pierre-Auguste Renoir in December 1883. The small town in the center of the picture is noted as Roquebrune-Cap-Martin in the artist's sketchbook, and is located between Monte Carlo and Menton.

In this scene, Monet's visual impressions are transferred into a fine weave of light and color, in which contours, materials and details are dissolved. We can just make out three figures at the end of the path, and the houses embedded in the rocks of Mont Agel likewise seem to merge with the heavily applied brushstrokes. The shadow zones, which Monet always depicted using blue or violet gradations instead of black, are particularly interesting.

7 • *Antibes vue de la Salis*, 1888

≡ *Antibes Seen from the Salis Garden*

Monet visited Antibes in January 1888, where he took lodgings in the artists pension Château de la Pinède until early May. Accustomed to the subdued light of the north, the artist was considerably challenged by the brilliant sunlight of the Côte d'Azur. Despite this effort, however, he enthused over the intense colors of the sky and sea.

In this painting, Monet looks from the south towards the small town shining in the warm morning sun at the far end of the bay. The gleaming light, just visible behind the mighty olive tree, casts a yellowish tinge over the leaves. The sun's rays have not yet reached the crown of the tree or the coastline. As a result, the right half of the picture is dominated by cool blue and green tones—embodying the gradual transition from the dark shadow of night to the bright light of day.

8 • *Marée basse devant Varengeville*, 1882

≡ *Low Tide at Varengeville*

In February 1882, Monet went to Normandy for several months. He initially stayed in the harbor town of Dieppe before going to the fishing village of Pourville, where the spectacular landscape with its rugged cliffs offered ideal working conditions.

In *Low Tide at Varengeville*, Monet took up a vantage point in the middle of the beach, from where he had a good view of both the narrow coastline on the horizon and the cliffs rising to his right. These, along with the clouds, are reflected in the pools of water left behind by the receding tide. As in *Sunset on the Seine in Winter* (Room 2), painted two years earlier, the reflections are interrupted in places. A few dark green brushstrokes set among the reflections represent algae. Here Monet addresses the relationship between the real object and its image. *Representation* per se becomes the true subject, in that both the surface of the pools and painting itself capture, fix, and reveal their object to the eye of the observer.

9 • *Vagues à la Manneporte*, ca. 1885

≡ *Waves at the Manneporte*

Monet was fascinated by the soaring natural arch, La Manneporte, near the beach at Étretat, Normandy, and depicted it several times from various viewpoints. In this version, he captured it with rapid, heavy brushstrokes—giving the picture a sketch-like look.

To reach an optimal viewpoint of the isolated arch, the artist had to invest considerable effort. He had to crawl through a narrow tunnel with his painting supplies, as there was no other access on land. A mistake in calculating the tide almost ended in disaster for Monet. In a letter to Alice Hoschedé dated November 27th, 1885, he reported being surprised and thrown against a cliff by a wave from the rising tide. Though he wasn't hurt, he was angered that the wave had carried away his finished canvases.

10 • *La Cabane du douanier*, 1882

≡ *The Customhouse*

The sea and its coastline, especially the steep coasts of Normandy, had a great hold on Monet—prompting him to paint view after view. From 1882 onwards he devoted himself to capturing a small house on the cliffs near Pourville, which was built as a guard outpost during the Continental Blockade inflicted on England by Napoleon I.

The Customhouse shows the house, like the cliff on which it stands, outshone by the bright light reflected off the sea. It appears shaded—going against every visual expectation—as if we were looking at the negative of a photograph. Yet this shady side is rendered in a myriad of different colors, which our eye only gradually perceives after adjusting to the unusual lighting conditions.

11 • *Cabane du douanier*, 1882

≡ *The Customhouse*

In this representation, *The Customhouse* is depicted from a different point of view. Now it lies in sunlight at the edge of the cliff, from where the previous painting (10 •) was completed. This cliff intrigued Monet; it was an artistic challenge to render its striking configuration in the light that lent its surface a constantly changing appearance.

He addressed the same subject again in the 1890s. One such painting is *On the Cliff at Petit Ailly*, which presents a similar view of the seaside cliff. It is an unfinished work from the artist's estate that presumably dates to the year 1896.

12 • *Matinée sur la Seine*, 1897

≡ *Morning on the Seine*

While working from his studio boat anchored at the confluence of the Epte and the Seine in 1897, Monet produced the major series collectively known as *Morning on the Seine*. These works are devoted to the changing light and atmosphere on the river.

The motif is repeated as a reflection in such a way that the boundaries between painted trees, branches, clouds, and their mirror images are well-nigh obscured by rising fog. Up and down are barely distinguishable; the painting might just as well be viewed upside down. In other words, clarity of composition is sacrificed to a subjective perception of space. It would appear that Monet had intended to evoke a fundamental principle of nature known to the Greeks as *panta rhei*, or “everything is in flux.” For he not only depicted the changing light as night gave way to day, but addressed the constant movement of two currents flowing into each other.

13 • *En Norvégienne*, ca. 1887

≡ *In the “Norvégienne”*

In the midst of dense green foliage, the viewer’s gaze is attracted by three women clad in light dresses and bright hats. These figures are Monet’s stepdaughters Germaine, Suzanne and Blanche Hoschedé, shown fishing from a boat on the Epte. This type of rowboat, known as a Norwegian on account of the wood it was made from, was popular in France at the end of the nineteenth century.

We view the scene as if seated in another boat alongside. Nothing moves; time seems to stand still. The boat appears fixed in the water, even its reflection is entirely clear. A few meandering algae are visible under the surface—the motif that was most difficult to capture, as Monet wrote in letters to friends. The scene appears entirely cut off from the world; the borders between up and down, foreground and background, reality and reflection blend and vanish seamlessly into one another.

14 • *Charing Cross Bridge, brouillard sur la Tamise*, 1903
≡ *Charing Cross Bridge, Fog on the Thames*

After his first visit to London in 1870–71, Monet was fascinated by the city’s foggy atmosphere; the ever-changing light over the Thames offered an inexhaustible source of inspiration. From his suite in the Savoy Hotel, he had an ideal view of Charing Cross Bridge, whose piers are visible here. The reddish sun just breaks through the blue fog, reflecting its rays on the water surface. Their luminosity is amplified by the dark green brushstrokes applied as a complementary contrast.

Monet traveled to London a total of three times between 1899 and 1901. It was here he painted the Charing Cross and Waterloo Bridges, as well as the Houses of Parliament at various seasons and times of day. Due to the frequently changing lighting conditions, he usually worked on several canvases at a time, finishing them only after returning to his Giverny studio in France.

15 • *Le Parlement, coucher de soleil*, 1904
≡ *Houses of Parliament, Sunset*

Setting up his easel on the terrace of St. Thomas’ Hospital in London, Monet depicted the Houses of Parliament at sunset—an ambitious project that would not be completed until 1904, after several years of reworking. For him, the challenge consisted in faithfully conveying the visual impression experienced at the moment of seeing. Rather than idealizing the subject, he merely transferred fog, light and atmosphere into their equivalents in color.

The imposing structure becomes the scene of a spectacle in color and light, whose spectrum ranges from dark blue to a purplish red. The contours of the building’s neo-Gothic towers and battlements on the opposite bank of the Thames are just discernable. The mist hovering over the river consists of a veil of fine brushstrokes spread across the scene—giving it a mysterious aura.

16 • *Nymphéas*, 1916–19≡ *Water Lilies*

The water-lily pond that graced his garden in Giverny became Monet's favorite motif from 1899 on. The garden's layout was inspired by Japanese woodblock prints, which the artist collected at the time. In keeping with this theme, the water lilies were arranged by a gardener every day.

One such arrangement is shown in this painting. Yet the view is unsettling—are only the plants depicted, or their reflections as well? Rapid brushstrokes are used to evoke water lilies, algae, reeds and leaves. The excerpt, which also includes a few dangling branches, is so indeterminate that we are encouraged to fill in the scenery in our imagination. Restoration studies have shown that both the painting on the edges of the canvas and the transparent top layer, a sprayed-on acrylic varnish, are later additions. Since this varnish has altered the original matte character of the surface and the effect of depth caused by the paint application, the museum has undertaken an attempt to return the picture to its original state. We suggest you compare it to the triptych *The Water-lily Pond* from the Beyeler Collection—one of the few water-lily paintings that still maintains its original force of color and relief-like effect.

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Texts: Diana Blome, Julianna Filep, Ulf Küster,
Jana Leiker, Hannah Rocchi

Translation: John William Gabriel

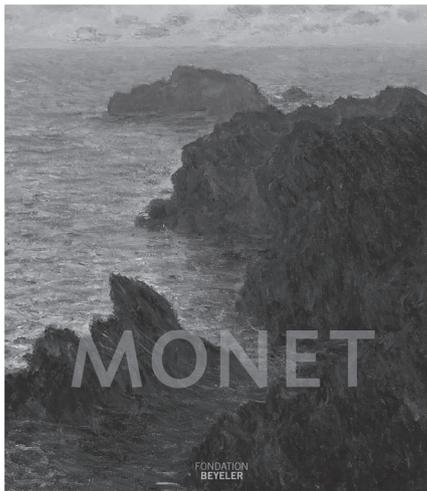
Editing: Leah Lefort

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fondation@fondationbeyeler.ch

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The Monet exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue published by Hatje Cantz Verlag. English edition, 180 pages, 130 illustrations, CHF 62.50 Further publications on Claude Monet are available from our Art Shop: <http://shop.fondationbeyeler.ch>

Upcoming exhibition:
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FONDATION BEYELER
Baselstrasse 101, CH-4125 Riehen/Basel
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