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CLAUDE MONET: 1840-1926

EXHIBITION SIGNIFICANCE AND HIGHLIGHTS

Claude Monet ranks among the greatest painters in the entire history of art. His career spanned a revolution that was predicated on the intensification of realism and eventually led the way to abstraction. The Art Institute of Chicago, which was the first American museum to purchase a painting by Monet, boasts the richest collection of the artist's work (33 paintings and 11 works on paper) outside of Paris and Boston. Given this treasury, and a long-standing support for Monet, the Art Institute is a particularly appropriate venue for ***Claude Monet: 1840-1926***, the largest, most comprehensive retrospective of his works ever held—made possible by a grant from Ameritech. Although some of the 159 paintings and works on paper incorporated will be familiar, others will be fresh surprises, including works never before exhibited in the U.S. or seen outside of private collections.

Throughout his long career, Monet identified and confronted the fundamental issues of modern art. As a pioneer of classic Impressionism, Monet explored ephemeral light effects in his landscapes and coastscapes, reaching a new understanding of perception through a reconciliation of the glance of the eye and the gesture of the brush. He went on to experiment with painting in series—with his variations on the subjects of trains, wheatstacks, cathedrals, poplars, and the British Houses of Parliament rendered under different atmospheric conditions and at different times of day. Finally, in the twentieth century, he moved toward abstraction in the innovative paintings of his water lily garden at Giverny by eliminating the horizon line and blurring the distinctions between objects and their reflections. Constantly challenging himself to confront the problem of

representing the natural world through the filters of time and space, Monet developed a modern visual vocabulary that was at once highly original and profoundly influential.

The paintings in *Claude Monet: 1840-1926* represent his career from its outset in 1859—when he still signed his work "O. [Oscar-Claude was his given name] Monet,"—until his death in 1926. They reveal the broad scope of the artist's lifetime of work (more than 2,000 oil paintings survive, as well as some 600 pencil notebook sketches, caricatures, and pastels), and demonstrate how his audacity played an enormous role in the development of twentieth-century painting. The challenge met by this retrospective is to get beyond the flood of millions of words that have been written about Monet and to present his art in a fresh way, concentrating on basics and insisting on the fact that he was unquestionably a leading art pioneer in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as one of the most truly virtuosic painters in the history of western art. Although specific periods of Monet's output, such as his late works and series paintings, have been gathered together for recent museum shows, *Claude Monet: 1840-1926* provides the first opportunity since the 1960 Museum of Modern Art exhibition for U.S. audiences to open their eyes to Monet's tremendous achievement. This exhibition far outstrips—with a much greater depth and scope—not only that show (119 pieces), but the Art Institute's own 1975 exhibition, and also the definitive memorial exhibition organized with the help of the artist's family in Paris in 1931.

Highlights of the Exhibition

Monet's evolution as a landscape painter is well charted in the exhibition. Coming of age when innovative art supplies facilitated outdoor painting, Monet, in tandem with colleagues like Renoir, Bazille, and Sisley, made a commitment to working outside the studio to render observations first-hand without the use of preparatory studies. In order to capture the rapidly changing spectacle of light in nature, Monet more than any of his contemporaries developed a new mode of transcription with paint,

inventing an array of "stenographic" strokes that for the first time in history put painting at the service of the most basic visual experience—the unedited glance.

A number of works from Monet's "pre-Impressionist" phase, of about 1865-1870, stand out. *Haystacks at Chailly at Sunrise* (1865, cat. 2, San Diego Museum of Art) is a masterful treatment of a subject that would greatly occupy the artist almost 30 years later, and *The Bodmer Oak, Fontainebleau Forest* (1865, cat. 3. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) essentially culminates the Barbizon school of landscape painting. A great treasure of the exhibition is the central panel of the Musée d'Orsay's unfinished painting *Luncheon on the Grass* (1865–66, cat. 5). This monumental 8-by-7 foot work, which has never before been seen outside of Europe, combines classical figure painting with *plein-air* natural light effects. Also, for the first time, the Metropolitan Museum's famous *Garden at Sainte-Adresse* (1867, cat. 11) will be shown to its greatest advantage—with the Art Institute's own *Beach at Sainte-Adresse* and the Metropolitan's *Regatta at Sainte-Adresse* (both 1867, cat. 12 and 13).

The 1870s were the era of classic or "pure" Impressionism, and Monet's pioneering work from this period is well represented in the exhibition. Two open air impressions done around the same time in Trouville, on the Normandy coast, stand out: *The Beach at Trouville* (1870, cat. 21, National Gallery, London) and the seldom-seen *Breakwater at Trouville, Low Tide* (1870, cat. 22), from the Szépmüvészeti Museum in Budapest. Painted in a single sitting in the open air, the former is one of the most vivid examples of early Impressionism, with its startling composition and the unintentional addition of beach sand blown onto the wet canvas by the sea breeze. Monet's initial serial explorations of space and time are repsented in the reuniting of the Art Institute's beloved *Arrival of the Normandy Train, Saint-Lazare Station* (1877, cat. 50) and the *Saint-Lazare Station* (1877, cat. 49) from the National Gallery, London, with the pencil sketch that plotted them both (1874-77, cat. 51), augmented by two other Saint-Lazare paintings (cat. 52 and 53, from, respectively, a private collection in Japan and the

Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum, Hannover). Monet's decorative work from the 1870s can be seen in the startling large-scale *The Turkeys (Decorative Panel)* (1876-77, cat. 46, Musée d'Orsay). Another surprise is a tender portrait of the artist's son, *Jean Monet on His Horse-Tricycle* (1872, cat. 27, Sara Lee Corporation) showing the growth of the boy and the artist from the time of *Jean Monet in His Cradle* (1867, cat. 14, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.).

The 1880s saw the disintegration of the original Impressionist group and the advent of Neo-Impressionism, with only Monet maintaining the same fervor to carry on the scrutiny of nature. Living and working mainly in the northwest corner of France, Monet conducted many "painting campaigns" from Vétheuil, and later Giverny, along the Seine River Valley to the Normandy coast. As the exhibition documents, his steady determination to match the speed of nature made time a constant subject, and starting in the 1880s, his works became at once technical tours-de-force and astounding poetic insights about time in the abstract. For example, the coastscapes of cliffs weathered over centuries by pounding tides—as shown in the two 1886 treatments of *Pyramids of Port Coton, Belle-Ile*, one from Copenhagen and one from Zurich (cat. 83 and 84)—present geological macro-time as the backdrop for split-second micro-time effects. One can also see one of his initial essays into near-abstraction in the brilliantly simple clouds/surf composition of *Rough Sea, Normandy* (1881, cat. 66, National Gallery of Canada). Monet's travels to the Italian seaside town of Bordighera are represented in three 1884 canvases (cat. 75, 76, and 77). He was dazzled by the Mediterranean light, saying "One needs a palette of diamonds and jewels here because of the blues and pinks. . . . Everything I do [here] is flaming punch or pigeon's throat." *Young Women in a Boat* (1889-90, cat. 93), from the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo, shows the evolution of Monet's approach to figure painting as a form of landscape already evident in *Luncheon on the Grass*. Three still lifes from 1883 (cat. 72, 73, and 74)—panels that once decorated a door in the Paris apartment of the artist's dealer—will be reunited for

the exhibition. One can see in these not only the influence of Japanese prints, which Monet collected, but an often overlooked emphasis on compositional structure and geometric rigor that rivals his celebrated friend Cézanne.

Working in series was perhaps the most influential innovation of late nineteenth-century French art. No artist extended the series concept further than Monet, who often worked on several canvases simultaneously, turning to different works-in-progress as the light changed in order to capture brief atmospheric effects in detail. This exhibition gives prominence to two series from the early 1890s and early 1900s. The Art Institute's six *Wheatstack* variations (1890-91, cat. nos. 96-101) will be joined by the Minneapolis Museum of Art's 1891 variation (cat. 102), which is arguably the starkest and most modern of the 15 originally painted. Monet considered the sunset views of the Houses of Parliament he began in London in 1901—and completed in the studio over the next three years—to be among the best he had ever made. The seven assembled here (cat. 117-119, cat. 121-124) provide a remarkable account of the "fairytale-like" visual poetry in his art beginning in the 1880s.

Monet's Gardens

Much has been written about Monet's garden at Giverny. Wherever he settled, Monet created gardens and painted them, but it was at Giverny, where he lived from 1883 until his death, that he created his true masterpieces of environmental art—his flower garden, and moreover, his water lily garden (Manet once referred to Monet as "the Raphael of Water"). More than one-fourth of Monet's paintings were devoted to his gardens, and *The Garden (Irises)* of 1900 (cat. 112) stands out as a supreme example, with its riotous near abstraction and tapestry-like rendering of the artist's dictum "What I need most are flowers, always, always." The exhibition reaches an exquisite climax in the two final galleries with a staggering 31 examples of Monet's water lily paintings. His water garden has been described as "an exotic lotus land within which he was to

meditate and paint for more than 20 years," and it is in these paintings that his life's work is seen to culminate. Included here are 16 of the 48 works from the 1909 exhibition that was the most critically acclaimed and commercially successful of his entire career. The 1903-08 *Water Lilies* paintings are a milestone in the evolution of modern art; Cubist and Futurist painters followed Monet's lead, grappling with the problem of depicting the three-dimensional world on an unapologetically two-dimensional picture plane.

Special features of the exhibition installation are a gallery illustrating the influence of Japanese art on Monet, and as a supplement, a room of large-scale color photo-murals of the two garden/waterlily painting cycles permanently installed at the Orangerie in Paris. Monet was an avid collector of Japanese art, considered one of the top connoisseurs in France during his life. A familiarity with woodblock prints by such artists as Ando Hiroshige (1797-1858) is visible beginning in his 1870s works, specifically in his preference for silhouetting and compositions based on broad spans of one predominant color. The Art Institute possesses one of the world's preeminent collections of Japanese prints and all of those on view in the above-mentioned gallery duplicate ones in Monet's collection.

Completed in the year of his death and donated to the French state, the Orangerie "decorations" *Clouds* and *Morning, with Weeping Willows* are the crowning achievement of Monet's long, probing study of nature—his striving to render his impressions "in the face of the most fugitive effects." According with the artist's wishes, the works were glued to the walls of the Orangerie, insuring that his gift would never be taken off view, and as a result, no Monet retrospective can include his world-renowned final achievement.

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