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Claude Monet: Le Roi de la France

Nothing misleads like success; just look at Claude Monet. The quintessential Impressionist is ubiquitous; a staple of the note card industry, his lily pads and views of Venice also adorn any number of calendars, tote bags, key chains, paper weights and membership umbrellas. Affection for his work is so widespread you can find framed reproductions of it hanging in the homes of people who have never set foot inside an art museum in their lives. The source of this esteem is obvious — too obvious: Monet was one of the greatest virtuoso painters in history. Unfortunately, facility this assertive can leave drabber virtues unacknowledged. Cezanne inaugurated this prejudice when he famously sneered that Monet was “only an eye,” the assumption being that no brain lurked behind the eye. Because Monet enralls us, we feel tricked, as if something dishonest has taken place. We find ourselves on his side without argument, and so chicanery must have been involved, a drugged handkerchief or something slipped into our orange juice.

Popularity, however, is no disqualification, to think so is to misperceive the nature of communication. All communication is a form of seduction. When green algae invented sex over a billion years ago, they also created the need to communicate. The relationship between predator and prey is decidedly one-sided; sex, on the other hand, requires cooperation, and that only occurs when there is mutual understanding. The seducer speaks to the seduced's inclinations, projecting a form of empathy that anticipates the direction of the other's expectations.

Monet is a seductive artist, but his intentions are strictly honorable; the goal of this courtship is a lifelong passion rather than a one-night stand. The journey seems deceptively short only because the road is so smooth; and no French artist covered more ground than Claude Monet. A judicious review of his achievement can only lead one to the inescapable conclusion that this was the greatest painter that France has produced.

Much of Monet's life can be viewed as a struggle between opposites, a pattern that was established from the start: this man who viewed himself as a Norman outsider was actually born in Paris on November 14, 1840.

In fact, it wasn't until the boy was five that his father, a grocer, moved the family to the port city of Le Havre on the Norman coast. The greatest landscape painter in Western art, one who often eschewed human figures of any sort, began his career in art as, of all things, a caricaturist, selling sarcastic likenesses for ten or twenty francs each. Claude Oscar Monet signed his work "Oscar" then; it was the name he was known by at home.

The sketches were strong enough to impress Eugene Boudin, a local landscape painter with a reputation in Paris, who took the fledgling artist under his wing. Success is never a matter of talent alone; a few moments of strategic luck are required as well, and this was Monet's first piece of luck. Boudin held the eccentric belief that a painter of landscapes must work with his subject before him, *en plein-air* as it came to be called, and this belief was facilitated by the recent English innovation of tubed paint, which made painting a far more mobile activity. Boudin and Monet went on frequent painting excursions together in the surrounding countryside, and the young artist learned lessons he would develop for the rest of his life.

In art, originality consists of acquiring your own bad habits rather than copying the bad habits of others. At a time when the artistic establishment believed that technique came solely from studying what hung on the walls of the Louvre, Monet was learning how to paint by studying nature. It was an approach that was more intuitive, less preconceived; in it, you owned whatever you discovered. In the years ahead, it sent the artist traveling as far afield as Norway and the Mediterranean to see and to learn.

The deference to verifiable visual reality can be discerned in the early scenes Monet painted at Rouelles and Honfleur: the precise placement of shadows, perspective that truncates in ways someone using an intersected vanishing point would never anticipate, a deft sense of the way color pales in the sun and dulls in the shade. The young man's insistence on ignoring the generalized reality of the past and seeing for himself bespeaks a stubborn independence that set "Claude" at odds with the more accommodating, bourgeois "Oscar." Even before he took his first formal lesson, Monet had committed himself to an approach that was almost Cartesian in its austerity: "I observe, therefore I paint." As he once said much later in life, "I have never seen an angel so I shall never paint one." This became his creed, although, like all creeds in time it

developed its own sincere contradictions.

Monet went to Paris and joined the Academie Suisse and then Charles Gleyre's atelier to acquire the polish that was favored by the prestigious Salon exhibitions. The young artist's experience made him less malleable than most of the other apprentices, but the enduring value of this step lay in the friendships he formed rather than the education he received. And such friendships! Cezanne, Renoir, Pissarro, Sisley and Bazille all became Monet's lifelong comrades because of their time together in these studios. Never underestimate the usefulness of like-minded malcontents; while opposition can sharpen a distinction, nothing inspires one to develop that distinction more than kindred spirits. All were dissatisfied with the entrenched approach to art they encountered, yet the dissatisfaction of each helped focus the dissatisfaction of the rest. Impressionism was born as much at a table at Café Guerbois as in any artist's studio.

But what was this revolution they wrought? Few of Impressionism's enthusiasts today can clearly say; love as always contains a large amount of misapprehension. At a distance of almost a hundred-and-fifty years, it's difficult to find anything controversial in these celebrations of bourgeois values: dressing well, eating out, a day at the beach, a night on the town. Was there ever a more amiable rebellion? If anything, the movement occasionally seems too ingratiating; as Zola once observed about Manet, "He would have pleased if he could have."

But the Impressionists' intended audience, the middle class, were having none of this. They not only refused to buy these paintings, they vilified the painters that produced them. Their indictment consisted of two charges, the first of which, that the Impressionists were incompetent, was baseless. In art, craft can be a self-vindicating kudo; the obvious labor that has gone into a piece creates its own aura of achievement, particularly for a class that is defined by its labors. Can there be anything more alienating to a successful apothecary or bank clerk than the perception that a painter is unprofessional?

The second charge, however, proved unusually prescient. The finish that the academic painting of the day advocated was a tribute to what the viewer already knew. Everyone intellectually grasps that a tree consists of a thousand branches, even though they only perceive a trunk with a beige halo from a distance. By painting the thousand branches, the academic painters produced a realism that was reassuringly unrealistic.

Pushed to an extreme, this resembles the art of children in which all hands emit five fingers, eyes sport outlandish lashes and every window is uniformly square. The Impressionists stepped back from what we know to replicate the optical illusions we perceive, but in doing so they undermined the permanence of the visible world. A man, a horse, a cloud, a stream no longer appeared unnaturally fixed and solid; the ambivalence of motion infested everything. A conflict developed between the way things appear and the way they ought to appear. For a class as preoccupied with appearance as the bourgeoisie, this could only be interpreted as subversive.

The conflict manifested itself in Monet's life during this period as well. Where he came from was at war with where he wanted to go as Claude and Oscar pulled in opposite directions. The artist wore his hair at a scandalously Bohemian length, yet he also sported lace cuffs to affect an air of middle class prosperity despite his poverty. Camille Doncieux, his future wife, became pregnant, but, because his family viewed her as socially inferior, Monet pretended to break off the relationship, and even summered on the coast with his parents, leaving Camille to have the baby alone in Paris. Even while he was painting the first truly impressionistic canvases, he continued to produce formulaic work he hoped would curry favor with the Salon.

He should have saved his effort. While the painting aimed at the Salon is competent, it remains too deferential and deliberate in its rhythms. Like a first-year trumpeter, he produces the notes in the score without animation. Cynicism never quite works in the arts; a master forger is incapable of producing authentic trash because his performance will contain no surprises. Monet's monumental *Dejeunen sur l'Herbe* is an example of this. The artist relegates his true interest, the natural setting, to the demure role of backdrop for a conventional picnic scene. Everything is judiciously in its place; all that is lacking is a sense of delight. Like Monet's *La Japonaise* which shows a blond Frenchwoman in a Japanese robe brandishing a Japanese fan, one can inhabit conventions and still not convey them.

What is missing becomes obvious when you turn to the Impressionist landscapes Monet was painting at the same time. One has to go back to Caravaggio to find another artist who has made reality such a startling experience. Monet's work abounds with the intimate observations of a lover's scrutiny: the spangled path of sunlight that writhes over a choppy

sea, the way a smudged blanket of cirrus clouds thins in spots to expose the blue sky it conceals, the mottled shapeliness of poplars, the subtle chiaroscuro that plays on the surface of a meadow to indicate the rise and dip of the terrain beneath it. Monet alludes to aspects of the physical world we didn't know we knew until we recall them at his prodding. He gives us a view of nature that is so palpable it almost seems sufficient in itself, the shimmering boxes and spires of distant cities that occasionally appear on the horizon are beside the point in the larger scheme of life.

The power of these scenes is laced with paradox: how can anything this precise be so loose and improvisational at the same time? The tension that exists between these two contradictory aspects throws both into dramatic relief. A true virtuoso is never invisible; you always catch a glimpse of the hand with the brush pulling away from the canvas. Monet does not transcribe a landscape; he finds equivalents, and by simplifying his effects in this way, they become more lucid for the viewer. The artist's studies of La Grenouillere, a popular place for swimming and boating, offer an excellent example of this. The grooved surface of the water is too agitated to reflect objects; it can only reproduce the colors of objects. So Monet alternates dashes of the dark shade of the foreground with the blue of the water and the buttermilk of the sky, which he gradually transforms into a band of buttermilk interrupted by glints of the reflected trees lining the opposite bank (those trees demonstrate Monet's preternatural ability to gauge color: saturated with late-afternoon sunlight, they can only be described as appearing mustard green).

Bodies of water occupy such a prominent place in Monet's Impressionism one is tempted to claim that, like Venus, the movement was born on the sea. Such an equivocating subject demands a looser and (forgive the pun) more liquid approach to painting. Before Monet, pictorial waves were as sharply delineated as Alps, which only robbed them of their Protean elusiveness. By banishing line, eddies and currents of paint define their subject, and a greater resemblance to the original emerges. While all the Impressionists were drawn to aquatic scenes, the subject offered Monet an additional feature that attracted him: I can think of no other artist in history who has made more use of water's capacity as an imperfect reflecting surface. In canvas after canvas, a body of water will create a parody of the scene that has been depicted, a visual echo. It is as if Monet wants to portray Nature as a wayward painter and the creation of

art as a natural process.

Surveying the work that Monet produced during the 1870s when Impressionism was at its peak, one is struck by the way shadow mutes so much of his color. This is reasonable given the varied climate that exists around the north of France and the Impressionist's allegiance to appearance. In *The Seine at Argenteuil, Autumn*, the season expresses itself in the foliage on the left with nothing more vivid than a burnt orange, and even then only as highlights in a largely tawny mass. The brilliance of *Woman with a Parasol* has more to do with the nervous brushstrokes than the colors those brushstrokes employ: the smattering of clouds the shaded figure of Madame Monet interrupts is the strongest element in the picture, but one that is largely made up of white. Even in *Wild Poppies near Argenteuil*, the scattered red flowers are dulled as they reflect the overcast sky. It's important to remember that painting was still emerging from the shadow (literally) of Rembrandt and Velazquez. The aggressive use of color, which we associate with Impressionism, appeared more during the 1880s when the movement was slightly past its prime. The circumspect use of pigment seems less an inhibition with Monet because he was such a master of subdued color. One only has to consider *A Corner of the Apartment* to appreciate this: the central third of the painting is set in a dark room dimly illuminated by a curtained window. The artist's son is standing in the middle of the room wearing a navy blue uniform. Despite the absence of light there doesn't seem to be an absence of color; all is merely tempered by shadow.

Another surprise this segment of Monet's oeuvre contains is the artist's sense of composition. One doesn't think of this as being one of Monet's strengths. Color, painterly effects: yes. But composition? Wasn't that Cezanne's forte? The skill with which Monet arranged his pictures tends to be overlooked because it is so functional. He establishes a large, clear framework to counterbalance the busy surface it must support. There's *Train in the Country* in which a barely perceived train at the horizon vanishes into a copse, only its billowing smoke signals its location on the right; but the smoke is almost indistinguishable from the billowing clouds that also crowd the sky. Or there is the way Monet balances the green grass at the bottom third of *Woman with a Parasol* with the matching green of Madame Monet's umbrella held at the top of the picture. Or the way Monet divides the chaotic vegetation of *The Artist's Garden at Vetheuil*

with the dirt path that leads directly into the line of the house's chimney. This strong vertical is softened with shade, and the presence of three standing figures and a sled.

In November 1885 while Monet was painting the Manneporte, a favorite rock formation at Etretat, a huge wave knocked the artist against a cliff and almost pulled him out to sea. If his career had ended there, Monet would be remembered today as Impressionism's most brilliant practitioner. But he lived on for another 41 years, and continued developing the whole time. While never entirely abandoning the techniques of Impressionism, Monet pushed them beyond anything his contemporaries envisioned, demonstrating among other things that Impressionism is as analytic as Cubism, more so since it avoids the latter's reductive rigidity. By systematically exploring a variety of motifs in his series paintings, Monet introduces something that was new and even unique to the endless argument that is art history.

The series paintings were inevitable because, in a less developed form, they were always there. Throughout his life, Monet had a tendency to return to a subject or scene over and over again. This was prompted in part from his habitual dissatisfaction with his work; he seemed to believe that if he painted something often enough he would eventually get it right, following the dictates of exorcism rather than logic. In the 1880s he began visiting a number of different locales and his attempts to record what he saw established the rigor that would later lead to the various series. The most impressive aspect about these pre-series series is how often the man chose uncongenial subjects, terrains that lacked any of the effects that came easiest to him. What could a country buried in white snow like Norway during the winter possibly offer a master colorist? An impossible challenge. Only an artist who approaches a subject without preconceived ideas would attempt such a feat. And Monet's attempt was vindicated by the results. Only a master colorist could find anything to paint in a seemingly colorless land where everything is differentiated by the subtlest tints.

The canvases Monet produced at the ironically named Belle-Ile off the blasted coast of Brittany offered him an even greater challenge, a subject seemingly too terse for the pastels and dappled handling of traditional Impressionism. All sunlight and vegetation were absent; only battered rock and battering sea existed in an eternal state of agon. This was the earth's final moments before the proverbial Flood enveloped the

planet. That Monet was able to produce compelling art from such an unpromising landscape is a testament to his own tenacity. The rocks are rendered with the same choppy brushstrokes used to paint the sea, which gives the work an unusual formal unity. Monet marshals his limited palette in contrasting patterns which imply texture without explicitly delineating it; the artist's use of pigment is as stark and elemental as his subject.

In billiards, there is a rule that states one can straddle the table any way they want for a shot as long as they keep one foot on the floor. Veracity was Monet's legitimizing foothold; it kept the wildest fantasies of color and detail grounded. The viewer is never lost; they perceive his point of departure and so authorize what follows. But, rebellious soul that he was, Monet reduced that planted foot to a few toes as he began moving away from visual reality. *Sunset on the Sea at Pourville*, which was painted in 1882, may be the world's first abstract painting: the dashes of paint darken to a line just below the middle of the canvas that serves as a horizon. Above this, one finds longer strokes of color. Monet doesn't even oblige the viewer by adding a recognizable whitecap or two or a few wispy clouds to facilitate the interpretation; only the title clarifies the reality. Like one of that intrepid group of 19th century explorers, Monet was out to chart the limits of painting, the outer edge of visibility itself. In works like this, it becomes obvious that the Frenchman is no longer interested in painting the easy; he wishes to paint the impossible. As an artist, the verb was beginning to take precedence over any noun for Monet.

Elsewhere I've written about how all visual art falls into either one of two distinct categories: narrative or decorative, but even a binary system like this can be misleading. Form is often at odds with function. One of Ingres' exotic harems may seem to teem with the specificity of time and place one associates with narrative, but what exactly is the point? All that undulating female flesh unites for no other purpose than to create a pleasing pattern, a pattern that isn't challenged by a single individual face. On the other hand, the three greatest painters of the late 19th century (Cezanne, Van Gogh and Monet) may at first appear to be decorative artists, but a closer examination of their work reveals how each conforms to the pursuit of a larger issue, to wit: order (Cezanne), vitality (Van Gogh), and time (Monet).

No other artist was as obsessed with the passage of time than Claude Monet, and this obsession is nowhere more obvious than in his series

paintings. The artist took a fixed object, and often a fixed perspective, and demonstrated how unfixed it was. In these paintings, three o'clock is more than a designation on a clock; dawn and dusk are more than positions of the sun; each helps us measure life's eternal retreat. Like a sundial, Monet was forever translating light into time, and nothing is so trivial or permanent as to avoid its altering touch.

If the passage of time was Monet's great theme, the main device he used to explore that theme was juxtaposing the fixed with the fleeting. The role of rooted reality could be filled by something as mundane as a haystack or as grand as the House of Parliament. The object usually sat in the foreground, often in silhouette which made it seem more monolithic, while in the background the gossamer atmospherics of the moment envelop everything. Redundancy of form was essential in conveying these changes. Since a work of visual art is static, ephemeral effects are compromised by the illusion of permanence; only the comparisons that repetition create enable an artist to demonstrate subtle change. Reality is not indeterminate, Monet seems to be saying, merely transient, provisional, something briefly held by an ecstatic moment of art.

While the subjects of these series are prosaic enough to seem arbitrary, each contributes to the oppositional approach Monet was pursuing. With the haystacks, we see that which is cut standing apart from that which continues to thrive. The poplars reflect the man-made ordering of a natural form, not just from the farmer who planted them, but also the artist who paints them: Monet interlocks the two lines of trees at varying intervals with the elegance of a Bach fugue. The Frenchman had a thing for bridges his whole life, and one can see the thematic attraction: constructs that enable people to traverse nature, human elements that become part of the environment, a device like art that places mankind at a different vantage point with the world.

The most daunting series Monet ever tackled involved the Rouen Cathedral. Once again, he chose a subject that forced him to work against his strengths: no greenery, almost no sky, the whole canvas filled with the grey facade of a Gothic cathedral, one of the most decorated structures on earth. How does one avoid merely replicating the relentless tyranny of its design? Monet approached this huge structure as if it was just another mountain, ignoring the detail in order to capture how the whole functions as a receptacle of light. And somehow it works. One realizes with a start

that a carved surface requires the contrast of chiaroscuro in order to avoid resembling an inkless etching plate. Too much light bleaches out the detail; too little muddles everything in shadow. Monet takes the compulsively linear facade of a Gothic cathedral and renders it without using a single line. These studies in light go beyond obscuring detail: the integrity of the object itself begins to dissolve. In some of the canvases the Rouen house of worship is barely legible, like an engraved image on a thumb-worn coin. In these paintings, Monet acknowledges the justice of Impressionism's earliest critics who claimed it was a technique that undermined the reality it sought to replicate. If something as solid as a cathedral could dissolve into thin air, what was permanent?

Monet's most famous series was certainly his water lilies. When the artist finally settled at Giverny in the early 1880s he seems to have abandoned his struggle with bourgeois respectability, a sign perhaps that he had finally achieved financial success and didn't need to bother with the appearance of success. He refused the Cross of the Legion of Honor; he avoided group exhibitions; he openly lived with an ex-patron's wife for ten years. "Oscar" was dead and buried; now Claude had only himself to fight with. People almost completely vanished from his work; houses are as close as he came to admitting the planet is inhabited. Taking *Candide's* advice, he began cultivating his garden and thereby created his own subject, arranging it like an oversized still life.

The lily pad paintings start with his favorite compositional strategy: rooted reality (the lilies) on a drifting surface of illusion (clouds reflected on the water). But water always pushed Monet in novel directions; it took nothing more than a puddle to get him started. As a young man, the artist had complained that Canaletto had neglected to include the reflections of the gondolas in his Venetian paintings; when Monet attempted to paint Venice as an old man, he concentrated on the reflections almost to the exclusion of the gondolas. As he continued to work at the lily pad paintings the Frenchman enhanced the water's reflective surface while minimizing the visual solidity of the flowers on it; the extremes of his dichotomy were beginning to blur together at the center. Stalwart reality was no longer something that time tinkered with; Monet seemed to be saying now that nothing was permanent. Reality as such is just the momentary manifestation of time, and time is nothing more than a name we give the decay and rejuvenation of matter.

The paintings Monet produced during the last ten years of his life are among the least known of his oeuvre, some having appeared in public for the first time as late as 1999. During much of this decade, the artist was plagued by the effects of cataracts. Since Monet had been challenging visible reality for years, encroaching blindness actually facilitated his quest. Painting became an act of memory rather than observation as the objects of the artist's garden took on the generalized shape and heightened color of nostalgia. His paint projected an organic character, establishing a resemblance through pantomime more than appearance, as tendrils and tangles of pigment moved in currents that corresponded to an object's broadest outline. The Japanese bridge is seen as nothing more than a double arch, the weeping willow as a patch of vertically limp lines. Visual reality has been reduced to its gestural essence.

All this leads to the final, wall-wrapping decorations that Monet completed shortly before he died in 1926 and gave to the French government. They summarize everything he ever did while resembling nothing he had ever done. Monet finally lifts the one legitimizing foot planted on the floor; the "eye" closes and proceeds to dream. Reality's final moorings are done away with: there is no horizon or perspective, no day or night or mimetic realism. Even the separation of viewer and vista is obscured as the scene surrounds and engulfs any audience. Objects appear so large one feels like nothing more than a dragonfly perched on one of the floating blossoms. At its furthest frontier, observation becomes contemplation, and the I and It distinction is lost. Experience and identity are fused.

In a letter once, Willa Gather commented how in the late works of certain artists (she cites Beethoven, Michelangelo, and Shakespeare) one gets the sense "that the man is getting too big for the game." To this exclusive list, one confidently adds the name Claude Monet. He was an artist who was always great, but great in different ways throughout his life. He was more than the creator or most systematic practitioner of Impressionism. No other painter has delved so deeply into the nature of visibility. No other painter has carried the struggle so far, challenging the very nature of visual cognition.

Monet stopped painting people during the final 25 years of his life. He violated this ban only once, however, with a rare self-portrait. The old caricaturist caught a good likeness: the ruddy red skin, the yellow-tinged

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white beard, the large nose and bulking forehead. A shallow halo of dark ambience surrounds the head, but beyond that one finds no paint. How typical of this half-blind old man, after a lifetime of striving, to portray himself with so much of the canvas invitingly empty.