

EXHIBITION REVIEW

CLAUDE MONET: 1840–1926 AT THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

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Without a doubt, *Claude Monet: 1840–1926* was an extremely popular exhibition. Between July 22 and November 26, 1995, approximately 900,000 people queued up and filed through The Art Institute of Chicago to witness 156 paintings by the artist most closely associated with the French Impressionist style. *Claude Monet* drew most of its audience from outside Chicago and was the most heavily-attended exhibition in the history of The Art Institute. Though most of the paintings displayed were from public collections and more than one has been widely reproduced, so many works by Monet had never before been assembled in one place. Consequently the institute pulled out as many stops as it could.

Ten separate galleries (subdivided into 18 rooms)—one floor of an entire wing—were set aside to house the exhibition and related activities (two galleries were used as gift shops). The exhibition catalogue reproduced in color every painting on display and provided a chronology of the artist's life and work prepared by curator Charles F. Stuckey. An 18-minute film about the artist, recapitulating the chronology in the catalogue, ran continuously in one of the museum's auditoriums, and the audio guide provided a room-by-room explanation of the artist's personal life and the development of his painterly technique.

Combined with the exhibition of paintings was an entire series of free public programs and lectures that examined (seemingly) all things Monet,

including his painting technique, iconography, acquaintances, and lifestyle. Further paid programming events enabled the devotee to take a stab at landscape painting or sample recipes of French cuisine as part of a lecture on "Gastronomy in France."

The overall sense of the 18 contiguous rooms of paintings, the myriad supplementary guides and activities, the long lines queued up at the entrance, and the continuing promotion of the exhibition in the mass media was that here one could, quite comprehensively, "do Monet."

As justification for the scale of this signal event, the exhibition catalogue boldly proclaimed Claude Monet as "one of the greatest artists of all time." In this effort, Charles Stuckey's catalogue was written to counter "scholars [who] have too often dismissed Monet's widely reproduced works as luxury goods by a great artist who prostituted his integrity to the marketplace," and "art historians [who] have relegated the majority of Monet's mature paintings to a limbo for masterpieces made too late to matter much" (Stuckey, 1995). *Claude Monet* demonstrated quite well that Monet worked the painterly style of "impressionism," with noticeable commercial success, for sixty-some years. On the other hand, the presentation avoided any comparative discussion or display of contemporary nineteenth-century painting, except for a series of Japanese woodblock prints. Monet is presented as the archetype of late-nineteenth-century painting.

As part of this effort, the exhibition argued—in the catalogue and especially in the introductory film—for the recognition of Monet's paternity of twentieth-century painting and sculpture, including the work of such disparate

individuals as Georgia O'Keeffe, Jackson Pollock, and Andy Warhol. From the water-lily studies alone, Stuckey finds that "Monet made one of the most profound pictorial discoveries of the new century: the possibility that a single monochrome plane could evoke an inexhaustible field of all-encompassing space" and cites as the "direct heirs" of this discovery no less than 13 well-known artists, ranging from Constantin Brancusi through Robert Smithson (Stuckey, 1995).

This kind of fanfare, which has been played before but with fewer trumpets, centers on instances of technique or subject matter—his serial studies of Rouen Cathedral or the gestural brushwork of *Wisteria*—as examples of Monet's "first use" in modern art. Ironically, no explicit analysis is made of Monet's role in the profound transformation—which began at the end of the previous century and has continued up to the present—of artist from ideologist to mercantilist.

This transition, which parallels the evolution of the Republic in France (but which has played out internationally), began with the intention to bring to painting and sculpture "the means of existing for itself, of supporting itself by its own resources, thus to enjoy the noble independence suited to genius" (David, 1881). The historic quest to liberate art from the feudal confines of patronage sought out the Rights of Man in a marketplace tent.

Monet, much more than any of his contemporaries, exemplifies the triumph of this shift not just by his long and profitable tenure with Durand-Ruel (his dealer) or by his relationship with the ruling circles of the French establishment or by the ready acceptance of his work by collectors and museums (The Art Institute of Chicago was the first museum to acquire his work). The signal result of Monet's career was the

arrogation of modern art by the nouveau régime for the status it might confer and, later, for its investment potential. Monet debuted his painting talent in the marketplace of the Salon quite purposefully. After the economic shakeout in the early 1870s, he assiduously marketed his painting (through Durand-Ruel) to the new industrial bourgeoisie in France and America, who bought it to decorate their homes and to mark their own good taste.

This role is unmentioned in the exhibition. Similarities are noted, for example, between Monet's serial studies of Rouen Cathedral or Saint-Lazare Station and the silk-screened multiples produced in Andy Warhol's Factory but not to the Factory itself or to Warhol's role as pop imprimatur and marketer.

Arguably, Western culture experienced its most exhaustive metamorphosis to date between 1870 and 1920. During Monet's career as a painter, French society underwent significant changes, including one insurrection, two continental wars, and the consolidation of its colonial power in Africa and Asia. In this exhibition, The Art Institute has presented a sweeping survey of work produced by the most commercially successful painter of the period but largely avoids asking the (too sticky?) questions that might help us understand Monet and his painting beyond the boundaries of his garden at Giverny or beyond his circle of friends and acquaintances. Instead, we are left with the sense that modern art is the product of formal opportunism among individuals and that Monet was adroit at that type of activity.

The resident expertise and the extent of its collections of late-nineteenth-century European painting give The Art Institute special credentials in this area of study. So it is both fitting and laudable that the institution organized this exhibition and accompanied



TOP. *The Water Lily Garden*, 1899, (Art Museum, Princeton University William Church Osborn collection, gift of his family).

ABOVE. Visitors study *Water Lilies*, 1914–1917, (Musée Marmottan).

it with so many auxiliary programming routes for nonspecialists to approach and interpret Monet's work. The attendance figures clearly substantiate the acceptance of Monet as "great art" by a large audience (or can 900,000 Monet fans be wrong?). And the 50,000 concurrently enrolled new members speaks well for the institution overall.

Unfortunately, the usual result of clever marketing is a transient fad and the germ of nostalgia. The lasting value of *Claude Monet* will certainly be memories of long lines and vague notions of

having seen "great art," but underlying the grandiloquent claim of the exhibition lurks hyperbole and the implicit opinion that we—"the public"—are cultural consumers either waiting for the cotton swab of expert enlightenment or hunting through the gift shop for the "*Claude Monet—Been There, Done That*" T-shirt.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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LEFT, BELOW. *Luncheon on the Grass*, 1865–1866, from the Musée d'Orsay. It is the larger of two fragments that Monet salvaged from a monumental (13-by-20 foot) painting that had suffered severe damage from improper storage.

BELOW. The three works displayed here are (from left to right) *The Port of Honfleur at Night*, 1866, from the National Galleries of Scotland; *Sea Study*, 1866, from Ordrupgaardsamlingen, Copenhagen; and *Headland of Hève River at Low Tide*, 1865, from the Kimball Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.

