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CLAUDE MONET: MASTERPIECES OF ART

Claude Monet : Evolution of a Master



Impression, sunrise, 1872, Oil on canvas, 48 x 63 cm. Mus'ee Marmottan, Paris

Arguably, the greatest of the Impressionists was Claude Monet (1840-1926), from whose painting, *Impression, Sunrise* the movement derived its name. In a career blighted for many years by rejection by the art establishment and desperate poverty, he virtually defined the Impressionist style. His stunningly beautiful paintings helped to define the way in which we see nature and the world around us, and prepared the way for a great deal of twentieth-century art. He remains one of the best-loved, as well as one of the most important, painters in the modern Western artistic tradition.

LIFE

Oscar Claude Monet was born in Paris, on 14 November 1840, the second son of Claude-Adolphe and Louise-Justine Monet. At the age of five, he moved with his family to Le Havre on the Normandy coast where his father had become a partner in the family wholesale grocery business.

Early Interest

At school in Le Havre, Monet was interested only in drawing, creating caricatures of his teachers and fantastic creatures in the margins of his schoolbooks. Most of his free time was spent wandering on the nearby beaches, filling his notebooks with sketches of sailing ships. As he admitted, 'I was born undisciplinable. No one was ever able to make me stick to the rules, not even in my youngest days. It was at home that I learned most of what I do know. I equated my college life with that of a prison and I could never resolve to spend my time there, even for four hours a day, when the sun was shining bright, the sea was so beautiful and it was so good to run along the cliff-tops in the fresh air or frolic in the sea.'

By the age of 16, Monet was well known locally for the charcoal caricatures he drew. "...I became someone of importance in the town. There, along the shop front of the only framers in business at Le Havre were my caricatures ... under glass like real works of art. Moreover When I saw strollers gathering to gape at them with admiration and cry, "It is so and so!" I was bursting with pride.' He was being paid 20 francs for each picture, money that he handed over to his aunt for safekeeping

His drawings were displayed alongside the landscapes of Eugene Boudin (1824-98), who would become an important figure in Monet's development. Monet was initially not keen on Boudin's work and was a reluctant convert. Boudin, however, recognized and encouraged Monet's obvious talent and, crucially, introduced the young artist to painting outdoors (in French, *en plein air*). Outdoor painting was a revelation to Monet and from that moment it was the only way he wanted to work.

Discovering Paris

In April 1859, aged 18, Monet set off for Paris, using the money he had saved up from the sale of his caricatures as well as a small allowance provided by his father. He arrived in time to visit the Salon: the official art exhibition of the Academie des Beaux-Arts and the most important event in the Western art world at that time. It must have been a dazzling experience for the young artist. Thousands visited every day and, as it was the main way to achieve recognition and find buyers, every artist wanted to have work exhibited there. Unfortunately, however, the judges were painters and teachers of the old school, rigid advocates of the Classical style. Nonetheless, Monet still found some paintings that he greatly admired, especially, as he excitedly wrote to Bourdin, those of a couple of landscape painters - Constant Troyon (1810-65) and Charles-Francois Daubigny (1817-78).

A month after his arrival in Paris, Monet's father stopped his son's allowance and ordered him home but Monet refused, telling his father that the money he had earned from his caricatures would tide him over for a while. He rented a cheap room on the Place Pigalle and began mixing with the artists and writers who frequented the bars and cafes of that bohemian quarter of Paris.

He elected to study at the Academie Suisse, run by former artist's model Pere Suisse, who provided an informal environment in which artists could work without any input or criticism from a teacher. They were free to use whatever medium they wished and were allowed to draw from life, something that was not permitted in the more formal schools until the student spent many years drawing plaster casts of Classical sculptures.

In the spring of 1861 this way of life ended abruptly for Monet, when he was selected in France's lottery-style military draft. His father offered to buy him out of the army, but only on condition that he give up his life as an artist and return home to work in the family business. Monet rejected the offer.