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CLAUDE MONET: MASTERPIECES OF ART

Claude Monet : Evolution of a Master

Personal Tragedy

The year 1877 was terrible. At one point Monet was forced to sell 10 paintings to a dealer for only 1,000 francs. He begged his friends and associates for financial help, but eventually was left with little option but to give up the house in Argenteuil. Yet again, the Monet family was on the move, this time to Paris.

He was not the only one in desperate financial straits, for, in 1878 Ernest Hoschede was declared bankrupt. Hoschede fled to Belgium, leaving his pregnant wife Alice and their five children behind in France to fend for themselves.

Meanwhile, Camille gave birth to a second son, Michel, in March 1878 and Edouard Manet helped a despairing Monet by providing him with a loan and helping him to find a cheaper place to live in Vetheuil, by the Seine, near Paris. The Hoschedes, all eight of them now, including Ernest who had returned from Belgium, also moved in. But Monet was earning little and Hoschede contributed nothing to the household.

A cold winter did little for Camille's health and Alice Hoschede nursed her, while the artist Gustave Caillebotte (1848-94) proved himself a loyal friend by providing Monet with funds. The fourth Impressionist exhibition passed with the customary vitriol from the critics.

On 5 September 1879, Camille, emaciated and in terrible pain, succumbed to cancer, aged just 32. Monet later recalled how, following her death, he was appalled to find himself studying her lifeless face with the dispassionate eye of the artist. 'I found myself staring at those tragic features and automatically trying to identify the sequence, the gradation of colour that death had imposed on the motionless face... even before the thought occurred to me to

memorize the face that had meant so much to me, my first involuntary response was to tremble at the shock of the colours.'

The following winter was again bitterly cold and the extended Monet family survived on hand-outs from the generous Caillebotte and Monet's brother Leon. Reflecting the bleakness of his life at the time, he painted the frozen waters of the Seine - works that seemed to be even more unfinished than anything to date, stark and semi-abstract.

Financial Success

After a gap of 10 years, Monet horrified his friends by submitting to the 1880 Salon and of the two pictures he sent, one was accepted. It would be his last submission. Soon after, however, he was the subject of a one-man exhibition staged at the offices of the weekly arts review *La Vie Moderne*. The critics were slowly warming to his approach to landscape painting. 'Claude Monet is the one artist since Corot [Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796-1875)] who has brought inventiveness and originality into landscape painting,' wrote the critic Theodore Duret (1838-1927). It seemed to mark a turning point in his career, as from that time on his paintings began to sell.



The Customs Officers' House, 1882, Oil on canvas, 60x73cm. Private Collection

As can be seen in much of Monet's work of the 1880s, such as *The Customs Officers' House* or *Boats on the Beach at Etretat*, he made numerous journeys to Normandy's coastal resorts - Fecamp, Etretat and the area around Dieppe - to render in paint the dramatic coastline. Some of this travel was funded by a resurgent Durand-Ruel, who recognized that Monet's seascapes were amongst his most popular, and therefore most commercial, works.

In 1881, in search of a good school for his son Jean, Monet decided to move to Poissy, closer to Paris. Scandalously, Alice Hoschede elected to go with him, leaving her husband Ernest from whom she had become estranged. Poissy, however, was not a happy place for the artist and Monet resolved to move yet again. This time, however, he was determined to find a place where he could settle down, where his and Alice's large family could be happy and, above all, where he could work.



Boats on the Beach at Etretat, 1883, Oil on canvas, 66 x 81 cm ,Private Collection