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THE UNKNOWN Monet
PASTELS AND DRAWINGS

Royal Academy of Arts

THE UNKNOWN Monet PASTELS AND DRAWINGS

Sackler Wing of Galleries
17 March – 10 June 2007

An Introduction to the Exhibition
for Teachers and Students

Written by Lindsay Rothwell

Education Department
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The exhibition has been organised by the
Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute,
Williamstown, Massachusetts,
in association with
the Royal Academy of Arts, London.

COVER
Detail of Cat. 265
Water Lilies, *c.* 1918
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York. Gift of Louise Reinhardt
Smith, 1983 (1983-532)
Photo © 1998 The Metropolitan
Museum of Art

Designed by Isambard Thomas, London
Printed by Tradewinds Ltd

Introduction

'You must begin by drawing … Draw simply and directly, with charcoal, crayon or whatever, above all observing the contours, because you can never be too sure of holding on to them, once you start to paint.'
CLAUDE MONET, 1920

Despite his statement, Claude Monet (1840–1926) spent most of his life staunchly denying the role drawing played in his creative process. Critics, biographers and journalists did not write about it, and his paintings were often praised for their lack of it. The reality, however, is that Monet carried pocket-sized sketchbooks with him throughout his life, setting out into nature to make notations and jot down scenes and people that caught his eye. Monet left eight folios of sketches, containing 400 individual drawings, to his son Michel, who in turn donated them to the Musée Marmottan in 1966. They are reproduced digitally in this exhibition, allowing visitors to explore different periods in Monet's artistic career.

It is interesting to note that while his mentors Eugène Boudin (1824–1898) and Johan Barthold Jongkind (1819–1891) left many more drawings as their legacies, not many sketchbooks belonging to Monet's Impressionist peers have survived. Auguste Renoir (1841–1919) and Frédéric Bazille (1841–1871) left two sketchbooks each, Edouard Manet (1832–1883) and Alfred Sisley (1839–1899) one each and Gustave Caillebotte (1848–1894) left none. None of Monet's sketches was ever shown or sold during his lifetime; in his eyes their value and purpose was as an early preparatory stage in the process of making a painting. He generally drew in pencil, and as Richard Kendall states in the catalogue, had 'an accomplished hand, fluent not only in multiple languages of line, but in tone, texture, and chiaroscuro.' This level of skill and interest in drawing, although at odds with Monet's publicised creative process, holds very true with the quote above and his desire to 'hold on to' the contours within his paintings.

Monet and the Impressionists

'I am pursuing success through work. I distrust all living painters save Monet and Renoir.'
PAUL CÉZANNE, 1902

Although Impressionist art is now largely seen as a pleasing, benign and almost universally beloved school of art, in the nineteenth century it completely contradicted popular concepts about art's purpose and ideals. The Impressionists' method of painting was very different to the academic

traditions of previous generations. The Impressionists favoured smaller canvases and natural, informal and quotidian subjects. Most controversially, they strove to elevate the perception of landscape painting to that of history painting, then considered the highest form of art by the official academies and two bastions of the art establishment, the Paris Salon and the Royal Academy of Arts in London.

Monet was a founding and dominant member of the Impressionists, and he excelled at both painting and self-promotion. His now stratospheric fame began its ascendancy in the 1880s, but he first achieved a certain artistic success as a teenager in Normandy, not with his popular painted interpretations of light and nature, but with carefully drafted drawings and caricatures.

Childhood in Normandy

Oscar-Claude Monet was born in the ninth *arrondissement* of Paris in November of 1840. He was a third-generation Parisian but spent the majority of his childhood in Le Havre, after moving to Normandy at the age of five with his parents. His father Adolphe expected his son to join the family shipping supply business one day. In later life, Monet would describe his childhood home as a place 'where all professed a contemptuous disdain for the arts', but in reality, Oscar's mother Louise-Justine was an elegant woman and trained soprano who loved to paint and write poetry. Mme Monet was a consummate hostess who filled their ornately decorated home with music and cultured guests.

Oscar allegedly did not like school, although he was described in a school report as 'a very good-natured boy, who gets on well with his fellow pupils'. He adored nature and the sea and took every available opportunity to escape outdoors. He had a passion for drawing and covered his books with doodles and caricatures of his teachers. Draftsmanship was a core curriculum subject taught at both the primary and secondary levels of nineteenth-century French education as a means of fostering future French artists. Oscar studied with the local artist Jacques-François Ochard (1800–1870), a former student of Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825). Ochard would have taught figure drawing in the traditional method, by having his students copy from plaster models. Monet's dual love of the open air and of drawing fuelled his ambition to become an artist; as well as caricatures, he devoted his time to sketching the boats and cliffs of his local surroundings.

Louise Monet died in 1857, when Oscar was sixteen. He left school and went to live with his aunt, Marie-Jeanne Lecadre. She was an amateur painter in her own right and was a staunch advocate of Oscar-Claude's artistic development, ensuring that his drawing lessons continued.

Monet first earned a living as a professional artist doing caricatures of Le Havre locals (see cats. 29, 31 and 36–48 in the exhibition.) He was accomplished at drawing people and managed to turn over brisk sales of his work. Caricature relies on an ability to exaggerate and abbreviate simultaneously, while at the same time capturing a good likeness. Monet's caricatures were drawn with an economy of line that vividly suggested his subjects' personalities. These processes of exaggeration and abbreviation later resurfaced in his Impressionist paintings as a sort of shorthand, witnessed, for example, in his treatment of the figure and eventually in his rendering of almost abstracted water lilies.

Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), the Romantic poet and essayist, thought caricature an important modern art form. Gustave Courbet (1819–1877), Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas (1834–1917) and Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) all drew caricatures as young artists, but none to the extent that Monet did. Drawing and selling his cartoon portraits – which he signed O. Monet – first enabled Monet to become a professional artist, rather than just a talented young amateur.

Sketchbook of 1857

Although few documents remain to give information about Monet's youth, his sketchbook from the months of February to October of 1857 survives. Michel Monet, Claude Monet's younger son, eventually inherited it and first showed the early drawings to academics in the mid-1960s. The sketchbook is an important record of Monet's artistic development.

Cat. 15 Monet's sketchbook consisted of 55 pages, each approximately 20 by 30 centimetres. It was probably too big to carry with him daily, but his mother used to carry a pocket-sized book for drawing, and at this stage in his life it is likely that did the same. Unfortunately none of these smaller sketchbooks from his teenage years have survived. The pages of this larger album were of different colours, which was not uncommon in the commercially sold sketchbooks of the time. The paper colours were primarily ivory, grey, warm grey and buff. At this age, Monet seems to have preferred different colours for different types of drawings, generally

using the coloured paper for landscapes, which comprised about half of the book, and using the ivory paper for boats and caricatures. This strong drawing of two tree trunks, however, was drawn boldly in pencil on ivory paper.

How has Monet created a sense of depth and space in this drawing?

The treatment of the leaves seems to have been handled quite differently to the trunks of the trees. How has Monet suggested the different textures of these surfaces, particularly in light of the fact that he has not used colour?

Cat. 15
Tree Trunks at La Mare au Clerc, 1857
Pencil
310 × 210 mm
Musée Eugène Boudin, Honfleur, 56.7.1

Lessons in landscape painting

Eugène Boudin was a landscape painter fifteen years older than Monet. He was a native of Le Havre and had once owned a stationer's shop where both he and Monet had sold their work. Boudin first introduced Monet to painting landscapes *en plein air*, inviting him to Rouelles, north-east of Le Havre, to work on their canvases. Monet later described the experience to a friend:

> … at Boudin's suggestion I agreed to go out and work with him in the open air: I bought a box of paints and we went off to Rouelles … Boudin put up his easel and set to work … for me it was like the rending of a veil; I understood, I grasped what painting could be … my destiny as a painter opened up before me … Gradually my eyes were opened, and I understood nature; at the same time I learned to love her.'

'If I have indeed become a painter, I owe it to Eugène Boudin … with infinite kindness, he set about my education.'
CLAUDE MONET, 1922

In 1859, Adolphe Monet applied unsuccessfully for a grant to allow Oscar-Claude to study painting in Le Havre. The teenage artist instead moved to Paris to receive guidance from established artists. He visited the studios of Amand Gautier (1825–1894) and Constant Troyon (1810–1865), who urged him to practise drawing. At the 1859 Salon, Monet saw the work of Jean Baptiste Camille Corot (1796–1875) and the Barbizon painters, including Charles-François Daubigny (1817–1878), Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863) and Théodore Rousseau (1812–1867).

The Barbizon School was a group of French landscape painters who from the 1830s to the 1870s set out to paint nature. Every summer they visited the village of Barbizon, in the forest of Fontainebleau, and by the late 1850s had achieved success and recognition in the Salon. Their work

'With interest I have followed you in your bold endeavours, even in your foolhardy ones, and watched them bring you fame and reputation. The times are long gone when we sallied forth to try our skills at landscapes in the Rouelles valley, or along the coast of Sainte-Adresse, or at Trouville and Honfleur – with Jongkind, our good, great, and much-mourned friend.'
EUGÈNE BOUDIN TO CLAUDE MONET, 1892

'It's lovely here, my dear friend; every day I discover more and more beautiful things. It's enough to drive me mad. I want to paint everything so badly… I have some wonderful projects.'

LETTER TO FRÉDÉRIC BAZILLE, JULY 1864

heralded a distinct shift from the much-revered Classicism of earlier landscape artists such as Claude Lorrain (1600–1682) and Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), who had been concerned with the insertion of mythological and historical subject matter into formal and idealised representations of nature. The Barbizon School, with its dedication to drawing initial inspiration from sketching *en plein air*, is now widely seen as forming a transition between Classicism and Impressionism.

After a period working at the independent art school in Paris, the Académie Suisse, where he first met Camille Pissarro and Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), Monet enlisted in the French army and was sent to fight in Algeria. He returned to Le Havre in 1862 on sick leave, and his family bought him out of his remaining service on the condition that he study in an artist's studio. He met Johan Barthold Jongkind, a Dutch landscape painter who, along with Boudin, was the most formative influence on his painting and career. He returned to Paris in the autumn of 1862 and joined the studio of the Swiss painter Charles Gleyre (1806–1874). At Gleyre's studio, Monet met and worked alongside Auguste Renoir and Alfred Sisley, who were to become two of his most famous Impressionist counterparts, and Frédéric Bazille, who became his loyal friend, peer and supporter. In the spring of 1863, the two men visited Fontainebleau, the forest with almost hallowed art-historical traditions, to which they would regularly return. A recently discovered journal suggests that Monet had visited Fontainebleau with his wealthy relatives while a teenager, but he was certainly taken with the place and repeatedly drew and painted it.

Fig. 1
EDOUARD MANET
(1832–83)
Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe, 1863
RF1668
Paris, Musée d'Orsay
© Photo RMN / © Hervé Lewandowski

Dejeuner sur l'herbe

In Paris, Edouard Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (fig. 1) was causing a stir at the 1863 Salon des Refusés. The painting was a huge success, despite its historic and pastoral overtones and allusions to works by Titian (*c.*1487–1576) and Giorgione (*c.*1476–1510). Controversy was caused by the juxtaposition of a nude woman with a pair of clothed men seated in a landscape. Manet was hugely inspirational to younger artists, bucking the Salon's traditions of exhibiting paintings of highly idealised mythological and historical subjects in a minutely detailed, smooth and realistic style. Monet, who had a competitive streak, embarked on his own *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* in the spring of 1865. He returned to Chailly-en-Bière, near Fontainebleau, and began sketches for his new large-scale painting, planned for a canvas of nearly four by six metres.

In a 1989 article, art historian R. R. Bernier described Monet's work as a battle of 'the preliminary sketch versus the finished picture'. In these three examples we can see the path a particular work has taken from its inception to a more finished and worked state, and the role played by drawing in this journey. Monet began sketches for *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* in Chailly but did not start painting his canvas until returning to his Paris studio in the autumn. Ultimately the painting was not a success. Despite its being inspired by Courbet's large-scale paintings, Courbet himself criticised the work when he visited Monet's studio. Monet was unable to finish it in time for the 1866 Salon and eventually abandoned the work, leaving it unfinished. It exists now only in fragments. The experience did, however, contribute to Monet's realisation that to capture the fleeting moment in time, he would have to work on a smaller scale.

'My dear Manet, I often think of you and of how much I owe you, and it is really most kind not to have asked for that money back, which you must badly need … I am very glad to hear that your paintings are so successful. Apparently you have done some marvellous things.'

MONET'S LETTER TO EDOUARD MANET, 1879

Cat. 88, *The Luncheon on the Grass*, is a sketchily drawn composition of the planned painting. Monet's hand is very evident in the roughness and quickness of the drawing. His aim for the work seems to have been to combine the natural, pastoral setting – favoured by the Barbizon painters in their own paintings of Fontainebleau – with a study of everyday, life-size people interacting with one another. In other words, he is fusing the genres of landscape and portraiture and placing the subject of modern life on a heroic scale, as well as embarking on what was to become the Impressionists' key aim: to catch a transitory moment in time.

Does this sketch of a French landscape remind you of any other locations or landscapes?

Can you find a sketch for Cat. 90 within this composition?

Cat. 88
The Luncheon on the Grass, c. 1865
Black chalk on blue-grey laid paper
305 × 468 mm
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon
Photo © Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington

Cat. 90
Figure of a Woman (Camille), c.1865
Black chalk on off-white laid paper
472 × 315 mm
Family of Richard S. Davis, courtesy Stiebel, Ltd.
Photo courtesy Stiebel, Ltd.

Cat. 90, *Figure of a Woman (Camille)*, is another study in black chalk but is much more finished and polished than the previous sketch. Camille, the future Madame Monet, and Bazille both posed for this painting and in fact, were probably models for several of the painting's figures. In this drawing, Camille is quite fully rendered, though much more finely detailed attention is paid to her clothing and hair than to her face. Monet often used a sort of shorthand for the faces he drew and painted, but despite that, Camille seems to emanate a sort of resignation in her downturned gaze and slightly rounded shoulders.

For a painter so interested in suggesting and depicting natural elements, why do you think Monet has drawn Camille's clothing so completely?

Cat. 89, *Bazille and Camille (study for* Déjeuner sur l'herbe*)*, is a painted study for the final painting. Camille has been very nearly transposed from the chalk drawing into this oil but there does seem to be an interaction between the two figures. Notice how the dappled, light-green leaves in the upper right-hand corner interact with the dark, lacy branches in the bottom left. The overall effect of the painting is one of freshness and light, despite the large areas of very dark shading.

What area of the painting is the brightest, and what effect does this have on the painting as a whole?

How do the natural elements interact with the constructed ones, such as the fabric of Camille's dress or Bazille's walking stick?

Why do you think Monet changed Camille's pose from that of the drawing to this one, with her back turned more towards the viewer?

Cat. 89
Bazille and Camille (Study for "Luncheon on the Grass"), c.1865
Oil on canvas
93.5 × 69.5 cm
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection
Photo © Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington

Fig. 2a
Le déjeuner sur l'herbe, fragment, 1865–66
RF1957-7
Paris, Musée d'Orsay
© Photo RMN / © Philippe Bernard

Fig. 2b
Le déjeuner sur l'herbe, à Chailly, 1865–66
Paris, Musée d'Orsay
© Photo RMN / © Droits réservés

Monet's work in the mid-1860s was not limited to oil paintings executed on this almost monumental scale. Two of his large landscapes, *The Seine Estuary at Honfleur* and *The Pointe de la Hève at Low Tide*, had gained admission to the 1865 Salon, and this taste of academic success was probably a key element in his desire to create something as ambitious as *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. At this early stage in his career, Monet may have felt he needed to create something striking enough to cement his reputation and daring enough to become a talking point. However, it is interesting to note that while his Normandy seascapes did gain him recognition with the Salon, *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* was not a success – it was left rolled up, unfinished and was eventually partly damaged by moisture. It now exists only in fragments (fig. 2).

Cat. 180 Although the vast majority of Monet's drawings as a mature artist were meant to be private and for preparatory purposes only, this pen and ink drawing seems to be a finished work in its own right. Paint, chalk and pencil allow an artist to create more subtle nuances than ink. In this graphic drawing, Monet has created texture and volume with line. The most solid marks in this drawing seem to be reserved for the outline of forms, such as around the waves, sailboats and horizon. Broad expanses of what would be blended colour in another medium, such as the sky, are hatched with quick, sharp, parallel lines. The lower third of the work, comprising the sea, cliffs and boats, is more intensely marked, with larger areas of solid ink. The scribbles and marks in this drawing can be seen as Monet's handwriting; even his signature seems to mirror the tilt and swirl of the waves.

How has Monet varied the pen marks to differentiate between the sky and the sea?

How has Monet suggested motion and wind in this image?

Do you see any similarities between the different kinds of line used in this drawing and the Impressionists' handling of light and colour? (See cat. 265.)

Commercial success and domestic upheaval

In 1870 Monet married Camille Doncieux, and they moved to London to avoid involvement in the Franco-Prussian War. This visit was the first of several sojourns in London. They stayed in London for nine months, during which time he painted both Green Park and Hyde Park and the

Cat. 180
The Mouth of the Seine at Honfleur, 1865
Pen and ink on paper
245 × 360 mm
Private collection, courtesy Brame and Lorenceau, Paris

'Everything you have heard said of Daubigny and me is true, and I have reason to be very grateful to him. When he met me in London during the Commune, I was in serious straits; he was enthusiastic about some of my Thames studies and he put me in touch with Monsieur Durand-Ruel … But most to his credit is the fact that he resigned as a member of the jury of the official Salon of the time, because it had so unjustly refused work by me and my friends.'
CLAUDE MONET, 1925

Thames from several different sites. Camille Pissarro was also in London at the time, and the two artists exhibited their work at *The International Fine Arts Exhibition* in Kensington. Pissarro and Monet visited the London museums and galleries together, and Monet developed a keen interest in the work of the great English landscapists, namely John Constable (1776–1837) and J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), who had painted the Thames and the Houses of Parliament from similar viewpoints as Monet was to do. It was also probably in London that Monet consolidated his love of Japanese prints, in which he remained keenly interested throughout his life.

Monet had been introduced by Daubigny to Paul Durand-Ruel, who became his first dealer. The first London Durand-Ruel exhibition in December 1870 featured a Monet canvas. Durand-Ruel was to have an important influence on Monet's career, artistic development and life. By 1871 Durand-Ruel was buying large numbers of Monet works, and he supported Monet and Camille for two years after they returned to France. The family settled in Argenteuil, which became a hotbed of Impressionist activity for that decade. Renoir, Sisley, Pissarro, Manet and Caillebotte all followed Monet to Argenteuil once he started producing his images of the Seine and the town.

In 1873 Durand-Ruel found himself in financial trouble and was forced to rein in his support of the artists. The Impressionist group formed the *Société des Artistes Peintres, Sculpteurs, Graveurs, etc*, and Monet was one of its most forceful and dominating figures. The following year, they held an independent exhibition of their work at the studios of the photographer Nadar (1820–1910) on the Boulevard des Capucines. Among the works Monet exhibited was *Impression, Sunrise*, a painting which gave the group its name, despite its derogatory origins at the hand of an unimpressed art critic.

A textile merchant named Ernest Hoschedé bought *Impression, Sunrise* and several pastels for 800 francs, which at the time was a huge sum of money. In the spring of 1876 he commissioned Monet to decorate his wife Alice's country estate in Montgeron. Monet moved to their home and painted four panels for the salon. In 1877 Alice gave birth to a boy named Jean-Pierre, who in all likelihood was Monet's son. Both the Monet and Hoschedé families found themselves facing severe financial difficulties. Monet sold some paintings in an auction of Impressionist work in 1877, but the pieces fetched dismal prices. The two families moved into a house in Vétheuil – further away from Paris and the Seine – in 1878, and Camille gave birth to Michel, the Monets' second son. The following year Camille died, and Ernest left for Paris to raise money. In 1883 Monet and Alice and the eight children they had between them moved to a rented home in Giverny. Although his living arrangement was certainly unorthodox, it was probably the first time Monet had experienced such domestic stability.

Etretat

During the 1880s, Monet rediscovered the Normandy coast and made repeated trips to the Normandy coast, drawn by the open sea, the craggy cliffs and the arresting rock formations. Etretat had already been painted by both Delacroix and Courbet; Monet in fact owned a Delacroix watercolour of the area. The Courbet retrospective at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1882 featured a group of Etretat seascapes (fig. 3). Monet visited Etretat in 1883 with plans to create his own Normandy seascapes: 'I reckon on doing a big canvas on the cliff of Etretat, although it's terribly audacious of me to do that after Courbet who did it so well, but I'll try to do it differently.' The region had become a fashionable holiday destination for Parisians, which may have encouraged Monet to create paintings for a growing market.

'Monet excels also in suggesting the drawing of light, if I may venture to use this expression. He makes us understand the movement of the vibrations of heat, the movement of the luminous waves …'
CAMILLE MAUCLAIR, 1903

In the 1890s, Monet began producing his series paintings: multiple images of the same subject done at different times of day and captured in different kinds of light. In the 1880s, Monet painted and drew the coast north of Le Havre at Etretat repeatedly, and the body of work he produced shows that he was already thinking in terms of repeated representations of the same subject. Two of the three pieces shown here are in pastel, a medium that enabled Monet to note down ideas for composition and colour with speed.

Fig. 3
GUSTAVE COURBET (1819–77)
Falaises d'Etretat, 1869
NG76/44
Allemagne, Berlin, Nationalgalerie (SMPK)
© BPK, Berlin, Dist RMN / © Jörg P. Anders

Etretat, le cap d'Antifer (cat. 139) is a pastel done from an almost aerial view, looking down on the cliffs with the sea below. Monet has dissected the plane of the paper with the sharp vertical face of the cliffs. The centre of an image is an unusual place for it to be divided; this drawing has two distinct halves, one green (land) and one blue (sea). Note the way the edge of the cliffs seems almost carved into the drawing with a darker green line. This line is mirrored by a path along the cliff edge, which is picked out in lighter tones of sand and white. The farthest outcropping of cliff is balanced by a darker area of sea in the bottom third of the drawing.

How has Monet juxtaposed horizontal and vertical in this image?

In the rather moody yet serene *Etretat, the Needle Rock and Porte d'Aval* (cat. 138), Monet has again dissected the paper, both horizontally with the foreground and horizon line, and vertically with the nearest cliff and the needle rock. Despite the drawing's smoothness, the effect of light and colour in the sky reflects the Impressionists' painted treatment of light, achieved with visible brushstrokes of different colours. A pure dash of lilac above the horizon – possibly a remnant of the already set sun – is echoed in the clouds and on the surface of the water. The formations of rock in the foreground are outlined quite clearly.

How does the quality of this pastel differ from that of *The Mouth of the Seine at Honfleur* (cat. 180), seen above? Would you guess they were drawn by the same artist?

The oil painting *Etretat, The Cliff and The Porte d'Aval* (cat. 225) depicts the same stretch of coastline as the previous two drawings but at a different time of day. The light source is in the upper left corner of the painting, and it diffuses a rosy-yellow glow onto the sunny areas of the image. The cliff face and shadow on the water have cool violet

Cat. 139
Étretat, the Cap d'Antifer, c. 1885
Pastel
270 × 346 mm
Private collection

tones that accentuate the carved-out edge of the cliff, seen in the drawings. The waves are painted in short, horizontal brushstrokes, like those in the rock strata of the cliffs and the surface of the ground at the top of the cliffs. Monet has again juxtaposed horizontal with vertical, in this case using the brushstrokes to create a sense of wide horizontality and the composition to emphasise the cliffs' solid, immoveable verticality.

Compare the sea in this painting to the sky in the previous pastel. What relationship do they have with one another?

Series paintings

Monet's series paintings were groups of works with the same subject matter rendered under the effects of different times of day and types of weather. He would work on up to eight canvases at a time, moving from one to another as the hours passed and the ambience changed. He began exhibiting his series at Durand-Ruel's gallery in Paris and in 1892

Cat. 225
The Cliff and the Porte d'Aval, Étretat, 1885
Oil on canvas
65 × 92 cm
Bequest of Marie Dabek, Paris, to the State of Israel in Memory of Jack and Mimi Dabek. On permanent loan to The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, from the Administrator General of the State of Israel, L-B83.006

Cat. 138
Étretat, the Needle Rock and Porte d'Aval, c. 1885
Pastel on tan paper
400 × 235 mm
Private collection
Photo courtesy LeFevre Gallery, London

showed the *Poplars on the Epte* series in the first of his shows to exhibit only paintings from one series and nothing else.

Monet returned to London in 1899 and worked on his favourite subjects: the Houses of Parliament and Charing Cross and Waterloo Bridges (see cats. 251–259 in the exhibition). He was fascinated by the effects of the city's infamous fog and painted more than a hundred canvases of London. However the myth that his paintings were quickly executed in order to capture a moment is belied by the fact that when he returned to his home in Giverny, he continued to work and re-work the London paintings before showing them in 1904.

Giverny

From the 1890s until 1910, Monet carried out painstaking work on his Giverny gardens. He bought a neighbouring plot of land and developed the pond and the stream flowing into it, adding a Japanese bridge as a testament to his love of Japanese art. Monet obtained permission from the local government to control the flow of water into his stream and was thus able to cultivate his water lilies. The Impressionist ideal of capturing nature in all its wildness on canvas or paper is overturned; in his landscape design, Monet manipulated nature and created the settings he wanted to paint.

In 1911 Alice, Monet's companion of over thirty years, died. Jean, Monet's eldest son, died unexpectedly in 1914. Despite suffering from depression and fatigue, Monet built a new studio space at Giverny and began work on a concept derived from his series paintings of the 1890s, to create a decorative cycle of water lily paintings. He imagined the finished works entirely surrounding the viewer in an oval room. He built moveable easels and worked on hundreds of these paintings from the years 1916 through 1926, painting in his garden during the summer and then reworking the painted surfaces in the studio throughout the winters.

Cat. 265 Monet spent the rest of his life painting his garden, titling the water lily paintings with their scientific name, *Les Nymphéas*. Although this painting is oil on canvas, it strongly resembles a drawing: the marks on the surface seem to be applied with an almost dry brush, giving the effect of drawing with a pen or piece of chalk. Just as with the pen drawing *The Seine at Honfleur*, we see Monet's handwriting here in his brushstrokes. As in the Etretat works, with their strong juxtaposition between horizontal and vertical planes, Monet has again played with surface and plane in this late work which borders on the abstract. The murky, dark green bottom layer of the painting depicts the depths of the pond and the unknown and unseen space underwater. The top level of this painting consists of strongly applied lines of pure colour laid on top of the colour field, creating a dichotomy between surface and depth.

What do you think Monet is saying about the planes or surface of a painting?

What do you think is the subject matter of this painting?

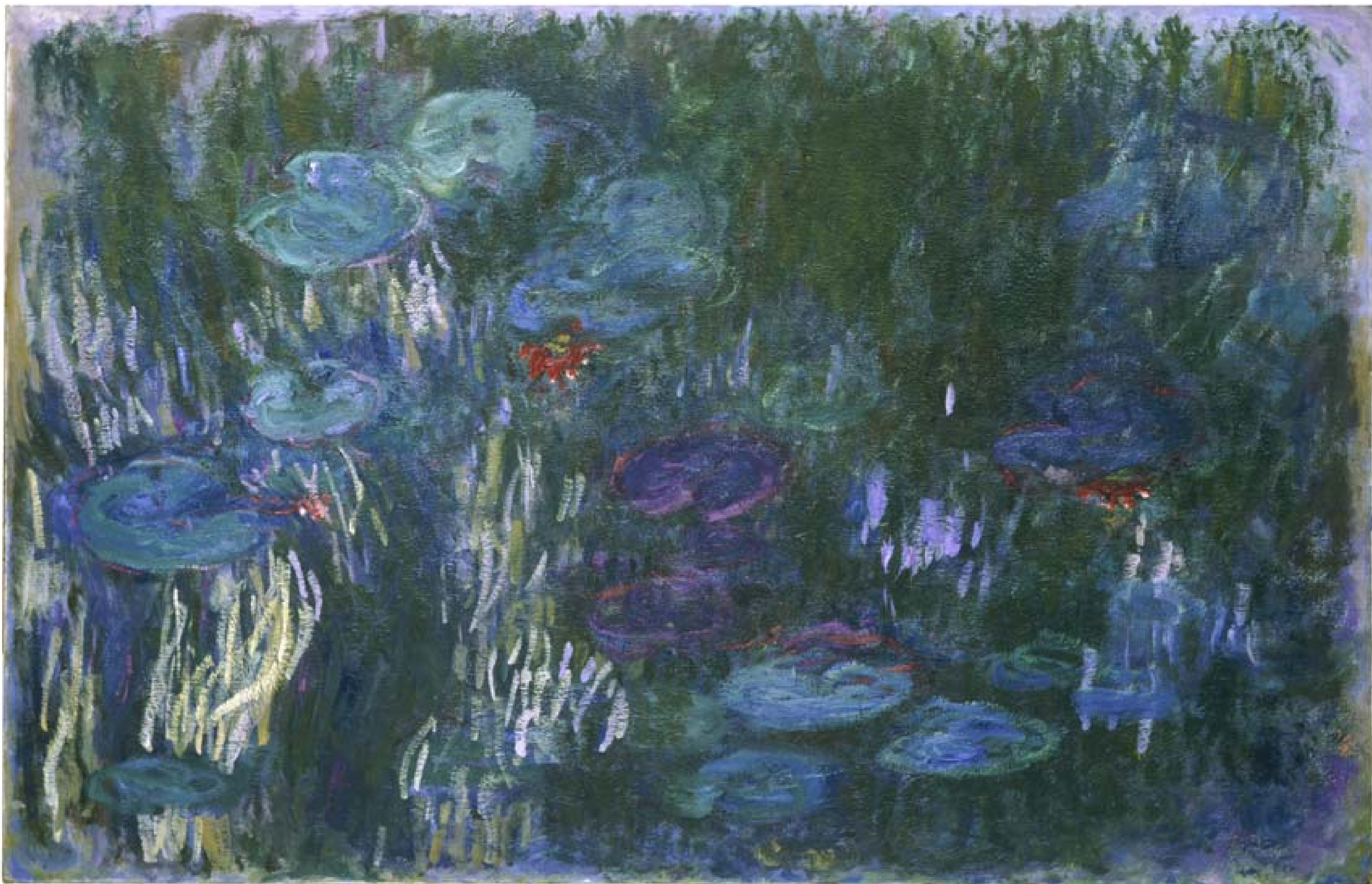
Water lilies and abstraction

In 1918, Monet donated his water lily cycle to the French state and in 1921 the French government decided to build a dedicated space for the *Grandes Décorations*, finally choosing what is now the Musée de l'Orangerie, at the bottom of the Tuileries gardens. After Monet's death in 1926 and as stipulated in his will, the *Water Lilies* were installed in the Orangerie. The paintings were executed as this great artist feared the loss of his most cherished gift, his sight. Cataracts in his eyes had obscured his vision and plagued him with fear at the thought of the potential consequences. However the subsequent paintings are not only his most famous, but also those that most closely border on abstraction. Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), the first artist to produce an abstract painting, said of another of Monet's works:

> *… suddenly for the first time, I saw a painting … I dimly understood that the painting lacked an objective … one thing was quite clear: the undreamt-of power of the palette, which had hitherto been hidden from me. From it the painting received a force and a vividness that were fabulous. But also, unconsciously, the idea that an object is an indispensable element of any painting had been discredited.*
> *Rückblicke*, 1913

Thus Claude Monet's legacy bridges the seemingly insurmountable gap between nineteenth-century French landscape painting and the twentieth-century conception of abstract art.

Cat. 265 [overleaf]
Water Lilies, *c.* 1918
Oil on canvas
130.2 × 200.7 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Louise Reinhardt Smith, 1983 (1983-532)
Photo © 1998 The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Conclusion

Although our perception of Monet is one of an artist preoccupied with the mastery of painted colour and texture, he also had a lifelong fascination with drawing. Henri Matisse (1869–1954) claimed that 'drawing is like making an expressive gesture with the advantage of permanence.' Certainly for Monet, the act of drawing, whether as a preparatory tool for a composition in oil or as a finished work in its own right, was an intrinsic element of his creative process, albeit one at odds with the supposed spontaneity of Impressionist painting and, until this exhibition, largely unexplored.

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