

# CLAUDE MONET



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FELICITAS TOBIEN



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江苏工业学院图书馆  
藏书章

PADRE PUBLISHERS

Translated by Stephen Gorman

**PADRE PUBLISHERS**

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English Language Rights. Padre Publishers  
8195 Ronson Road, San Diego, CA 92111 U.S.A.  
Fax (619) 277-5790

**Printed in U.S.A.**

ISBN 1-57133-037-2

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Monet is an eye, the most wonderful eye since painters have existed. I take off my hat to him. He is the best Impressionist . . . He is the only eye, the only hand that can follow a sunset with all its transparent hues; he can capture its colour gradations instantaneously without having to take the painting in hand later.

Paul Cézanne to Ambroise Vollard





Monet once said, "I paint like a bird sings". Everyone who knows his work understands what he meant by this. Claude Monet was a master of the instant, of ease, freshness and gaiety.

He was born on November 14th, 1840 in Paris but his family moved in 1845 to Le Havre where his father, a grocer, began working in his brother-in-law's wholesale business. Here, in this seaport in northern France, Monet discovered a love for the sea which never left him from then onwards and eventually gave him the nickname "Raphael of the water" as in his pictures water often played a central role.

The fact that he was fascinated by the sea, cliffs and the breakwater did not exactly have a favourable effect on his scholastic development, as Oscar, as he was still called in those days, much preferred to roam around out of doors than to dedicate himself to learning. In fact he hated to go to college "for even four hours a day". When he did condescend to attend the lessons he spent most of his time filling his school books with disrespectful caricatures of his teachers and soon developed a skill in this area which played a great part in strengthening his self-confidence. Soon the demand for his work was so great that he saw a lucrative source of income in this pastime. He was a sharp witted youth, and when he was just sixteen years old, he already asked twenty francs for a portrait. In those days he already felt himself to be a "famous person in the town". He often went to the picture frame dealer Gravier who had several of his caricatures displayed in his shop window, because he wanted to experience how the people stopped to stare admiringly at his work.

However, something which did not please him was the fact that in the same shop window pictures by the landscape painter Eugène Boudin were also exhibited. He later admitted, "His painting aroused a vehement dislike in me and I hated the man without knowing him."

Because of this he was horrified when the frame dealer suggested that he should get to know Boudin. But as chance would have it, the self-assured young man entered the shop one day and came face to face with the painter whose work he found so "awful". There was no escape.

"Boudin immediately came up to me", he reported, "congratulated me in his benevolent voice and said, 'I always enjoy seeing your sketches, as they are amusing, talented and lively. You are gifted, I can see that. But surely you are not content? For a beginner it is very good, but soon you will have had enough of caricature. You should study, learn to observe and paint. Draw and paint landscapes. The sea, the sky, animals, people and trees are so beautiful as nature has created them with their individual features, their sincerity in light and air' ..."

At first these exhortations had as little effect on Monet as Boudin's offer to take him under his artistic wings. "... when he invited me to draw out of doors with him I always found a reason not to go. When summer came — I



had a lot of time and could find no valid excuse — I eventually relented and went with him. Boudin now took over my education with endless patience. Slowly my eyes started to open and I began to really understand nature, at the same time I also learned to love it.”

The course was set. Boudin — himself only in his early thirties — proved to be a sympathetic tutor who convinced the seventeen year old Monet by his words and his work, which Monet was only now beginning to understand. The one time disdain and scepticism of plein air painting was forgotten. Monet very quickly understood how right Boudin was when he time and time again emphasized, “Things you paint out of doors always have a power, freshness and liveliness of brushstroke which you cannot achieve in the studio.” The more experienced Boudin also recommended strongly that he should “resolutely retain the first impression” because this “is always the best”, and pointed out that “not just a part of the painting has to please, but the whole thing”.

Monet was deeply impressed by the things Boudin explained and showed to him. He eagerly committed Boudin’s teachings to memory. Before this his headstrongness had blurred his view of the essentials, but now he realized that talent alone was not sufficient to become a true artist. “Suddenly a veil was ripped away, I understood — it had become clear to me what painting could be. By the single example of this painter, devoted to his art with such independence, my destiny as a painter opened out to me.”

Boudin also recognized this “destiny” of the young Monet, but at the same time he also recognized his own limits. He said self-critically, “My stroke is confined, my colour palish. I lack pep in the execution of my work.” After six months of working together, Boudin decided it was time to send his protégé to Paris where completely different perspectives would be open to him. Speaking to Monet’s conscience, he said, “Left to himself no one can become an artist in a provincial town without criticism or the opportunity of comparison.”

Apart from the financial aspect, Monet’s family had nothing against Boudin’s suggestion. But hopes of a scholarship were not fulfilled. It was feared that Monet’s abilities as a caricaturist could “hinder him from carrying out more serious but less lucrative studies . . .” And so the Le Havre municipal council rejected Monet’s father’s application for a grant on May 18th, 1859. Oscar Claude was therefore forced to keep his head above water in the capital without any public financial support. He received very little money from home, but luckily he had saved a part of his earnings from the sale of his caricatures and was able to use this in the beginning to live on.

Full of expectations he arrived in Paris in spring 1859 and shortly afterwards informed Boudin, “I have only been able to visit the Salon once so far. The pictures by Troyon are wonderful and those from Daubigny seem to me to be



really very beautiful; there are very good Corots . . . I visited several painters. I started with Amand Gautier who expects you in Paris soon. Everyone here is of the same opinion. Don't stay in a town in which you lose your courage. I visited Troyon and showed him two still-lives. He said to me: 'Yes, my dear friend, you do very well with colour, it has the right effect. But you have to study earnestly; this is very pretty but it is too simple for you; it will always be the same. If you follow my advice and want to dedicate yourself to serious art, enter a studio in which figures are drawn; learn to draw, that is what is lacking in most people today. Listen to me and you will see that I am right. Draw as much as you can, you can never learn enough. But do not neglect your painting; go out of doors from time to time to make sketches; do this. Make several copies in the Louvre. Come to me often and bring me your work. If you have courage you will achieve something' . . ."

Monet did not lack courage. However, when it concerned taking advice he only did this when it suited him. The fact that his family and Troyon, who he admired so much, thought that the Studio Couture would be suitable for him did not bother him too much. He did not like Couture's painting, therefore why should he take lessons from him? He also in no way wanted to give up his independence by attending the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Therefore he elected to go to the Académie Suisse, a private business, founded by a former model called Suisse, in which more artistic freedom was granted. In doing this he risked losing the monthly payments he received from his father.

He did not gain any new knowledge worth mentioning in the Académie Suisse, however, he formed a friendship with Camille Pissaro. Together with another friend they stayed in Champigny-sur-Marne in April 1860 and painted together out of doors.

In the autumn of the same year Monet began military service in Algiers, at his own request, with the Chasseurs d'Afrique. There he was presented with a completely different landscape. He was so overwhelmed by it that he "tried to capture it in my spare time. You just cannot imagine", he commented later in 1900 in a discussion with François Thiébault-Sisson, "how much I learned during this time and how much my perceptions deepened. At first I didn't notice this, it was only in the future that I was able to arrange the impressions of light and colour which I picked up there; but these impressions contained the seeds of my later ambitions."

In 1862, Monet became seriously ill with typhoid fever and after he had more or less recovered he was given six months convalescent leave which he spent in Le Havre where he immediately began to work using his newly gained artistic perceptions. Because of Monet's state of health the family doctor strongly advised his patient against returning to Algiers and carrying on his military service which would have lasted seven years. Considering this, his family paid for him to be freed from the army.



He was now completely obsessed by his painting and enjoyed being able to work with Boudin again. He was very pleased to make the acquaintance of the painter Johan Barthold Jongkind who was spending some time in Le Havre in those days. The Dutch artist knew how to capture the play of light and other atmospheric changes very effectively — especially in his water-colours — and this fascinated Monet. “Jongkind asked to see my sketches”, he remembered in November 1900, “invited me to work with him and explained the secrets of his technique to me and in this way completed the lessons which I had had from Boudin to that date. From then on he was my real teacher. I thank him above all for the definitive education of my eye.”

While Boudin and Jongkind immediately recognized Monet's talent, his family were very sceptical towards his painting. His mother had died young and Madame Lecadre, his father's half-sister had taken over his education together with his father. Although she was a hobby painter and even allowed Monet to use her studio, when it came to judging his work, a knowledge of art was obviously denied her. She wrote to the painter Amand Gautier in 1862, “His studies are still just cursory sketches ... as soon as he wants to elaborate, to make a picture out of themes, he ends up with the most awful daubs which he prides himself upon. He also finds idiots who congratulate him. He pays absolutely no attention to my comments. I am not able to cope with him and so from now on I will remain silent.”

As his father also had his own thoughts on his son's abilities, but saw no possibility of dissuading him from becoming a painter, he had Oscar Claude move to Paris again after having made a show of his authority once more. “If you take up your free, independent lifestyle again, I refuse point-blank to support you in any way whatsoever”, he threatened and insisted that Monet agree to work “in a studio, under the supervision of a well-known master.”

This time his otherwise so self-willed son did not dare to disagree. There would have been no point in disagreeing anyway as his father had safeguarded his interests by directing the Parisian painter Auguste Toulmouche, who was married to one of Claude Monet's cousins, to keep a good eye on his son. Toulmouche recommended that Monet should study in the studio Charles Gleyre, where he himself had received his training. As Gleyre had the reputation of allowing his pupils a certain amount of freedom, Monet actually did enter the studio at the end of 1862. His fellow pupils included Renoir, Bazille and Sisley and soon they all became good friends.

While the other three earnestly tried to follow the wishes of their teacher of whom Renoir said, “he was a numbskull, but a good man”, Monet, after a short time, felt no inclination to go along with Gleyre's conservative ideas. He carried out his first nude studies from a living model “with diligence and conviction”, but his tutor's preference for classical art which bordered on fanaticism had a sobering effect on him.



One day Gleyre looked at one of Monet's works and said, "Not bad, this is not bad at all, but it is too close to the model. You have a thickset man in front of you and you paint him thickset; his feet are enormous and you paint them just as large. That is all horrible. Think about it, young man, when you draw a body you always have to remember classical art. Nature is very good to study, my young friend, but apart from that it is uninteresting. Style, you see, that is most important!"

That was too much. Monet angrily talked to Renoir, Bazille and Sisley, "Here it is not serious. The atmosphere is uncomfortable. Let's get out of here."

From then on the group of friends carried out their own studies direct from nature. The varying atmospheric conditions played a major role for them. They attempted to capture instant effects, to paint fleeting moods onto the canvas, where the optical impression of light and shadow reflections stood in the forefront.

Chailly-en-Bière in Fontainebleau forest was one of their favourite destinations, but also Le Havre and Honfleur offered multifarious motifs, especially for Monet who wrote to Bazille on July 15th, 1864, "... I discover even more beautiful things every day; it is enough to drive you crazy. My desire to paint everything is so great that my head is throbbing ... I am very satisfied with my stay here, although my studies are still far removed from what I would like; it is really incredibly difficult to complete something which is perfect in every way ... Yes, my friend, I will fight and scratch, start from the beginning again, you can create something you see and something you understand ... with a lot of observation and contemplation you find it ..."

Boudin and Jongkind also came to Honfleur occasionally. This pleased Monet as he was still able to learn a lot from them. In 1865, he had the good fortune that two of his paintings — "Cape La Hève" and "Mouth of the Seine at Honfleur" — were accepted by the Salon.

The exhibition was a great success for him. The art reviewer of the "Gazette des Beaux-Arts" was full of praise. He wrote, "... The preference for harmonic colour effects and the interplay of related tones, the feeling for colour values, the surprising general impression, a daring way of seeing things and capturing the observer's attention — these are all characteristics which Monet already possesses to a great extent. His 'Mouth of the Seine' forced us suddenly to stop in front of it, we will never forget it again. From now on we will follow the further performance of this serious marine artist with interest ..."

Because Monet had again had his way and left the Gleyre studio this led to renewed tension between him and his family. However, when the first public recognition of his work came about, his relatives were prepared to forgive and they were so proud of him that they completely forgot that this was the son and nephew who had been shown the door shortly before.



But domestic peace only held until Monet began an affair with his model Camille-Léonie Doncieux. Here, too, his family attempted to interfere in his life and in August 1867, when his illegitimate son Jean was born, they tried to force him to leave Camille. As usual the lever was money. For Monet this meant a constant struggle for his existence, being torn back and forward between obedience and love. It was certainly not easy to realize his artistic plans under such awful accompanying circumstances. However, he spared not effort in furthering his career.

His second participation in the Salon in 1866 — he had handed in a landscape and a portrait of Camille — was also successful. A critic wrote, “I have to admit the picture which caught my attention the most was the ‘Camille’ from Monet. An energetic and lively painting. I had quickly passed through the cold, empty halls, tired because I had not discovered any new talent, when I saw this young woman trailing her long dress behind her deep into the wall as if there was a hole there . . . I don’t know Monet, I don’t think any of his earlier pictures have attracted my attention. But somehow it seems as if he is an old friend. This is because his picture tells me a story of strength and truth, — truly — there is a temperament, there is a man in this horde of eunuchs . . . Here is more than a realist, here is a sensitive, powerful expounder who knows how to represent every detail without becoming stranded . . .”

Monet became ambitious to create a work for the Salon in the following year which would really catch the public’s attention. The title was “Women in the Garden”. Camille posed as the model for all four women. As the painting was 251 x 205 cm, the artist had to let it down into a trench with the help of a block and tackle when he wanted to work on the top half. He dug the ditch in the garden of a house in Ville d’Avray which he had rented for this express purpose. This was of course well beyond his financial means. He had to pay dearly for this recklessness. When Monet saw no other way out, he fled from his creditors with Camille and the still unfinished painting to Honfleur, where he completed it.

Distress is said to have been levied on two hundred of his paintings then and he was so desperate that he even attempted suicide. In March 1867, the Salon jury refused to accept his “Women in the Garden” although the painter’s progress could not be overlooked. One of the jury members substantiated the negative decision with the reason that his progress had actually led to the rejection, “Too many young people could join this awful movement”, he said. “It is high time that they be protected and that art be saved.”

Still the work found its way to the public in the shop window of the dealer Latouche in spring 1867. Bazille, Monet’s faithful, wealthy friend bought it from him for 2,500 francs, a sum which was paid in monthly instalments of 50 francs so that he could help his colleague in this way. In 1876, Edouard Manet bought the painting, and one day it landed back in the creator’s hands who then sold it to the French government in 1921 for 200,000 francs — a



belated satisfaction for the one-time rejection. Today it is regarded as one of Monet's most famous works.

As Monet could no longer afford to run a studio of his own, he mainly lived and worked with Bazille from 1865, when he was not staying with his family for economical reasons.

On Boudin's recommendation Monet was invited to participate in the "Exposition maritime internationale" in Le Havre in 1868 where in June of that year he was represented with four pictures. He was awarded a silver medal. The exhibition also produced two portrait commissions. This did not alter his precarious financial situation a lot as now he also had to support Camille and his son.

A letter which he wrote to Bazille in those days expresses his mental condition. "... All that is not enough to give me back my earlier passion for work. The painting is not coming along as it should and I have finally given up all thoughts of fame. I am at the end of my tether. Actually I have done nothing since I left you. I have become lazy, and everything bores me as soon as I begin to work. I am very pessimistic. On top of all this I never have any money. Disappointment, insults, hope and new disappointment, that is all my friend. I sold nothing in the exhibition in Le Havre. I received a silver medal (which is worth fifteen francs), wonderful articles in the local press but that does not fill your stomach. At least I made a small transaction which did not yield very much but which is perhaps useful for the future, although I don't believe in that any more either. *I sold the Woman in Green Dress* [Camille] to Arsène Houssaye, [inspector of fine arts and publisher of the *Artiste*] who came to Le Havre and promised to publicize me."

Monet could no longer count on support from his family, however, he found a patron in Monsieur Gaudibert who had given him the commission for the above mentioned portraits. He saved Monet from the worst by safeguarding his future — if only temporarily — so that he was at least able to work free of all worry in autumn and winter 1868. From Fécamp Monet happily informed Bazille, "Here I am surrounded by everything I love. I spend my time in the open, on the beach by stormy weather or when the fishing boats sail out, or in the countryside which is so beautiful here, perhaps even more beautiful in winter than in summer. Of course I work all the time and I believe that I will manage to create something serious this year. In the evening, my dear friend, I find a warm fire and a cosy little family in my house. You should see how cute your godchild is now. It is so exciting to see this small creature grow and I really am glad that I have him. I will paint him for the Salon, beside other figures of course. I am planning two figure paintings this year, an interior with the baby and two women and several sailors out of doors. I want to produce something really special. I have no worries thanks to the gentleman in Le Havre who is helping me. I would like to remain for ever in a quiet corner of



nature. I do not envy you in Paris. To be honest, I do not believe that fruitful work is possible in such a milieu. Don't you also think that you can work better alone and in the middle of nature? I am convinced and was always sure of it; the things I painted under these circumstances were always better. In Paris you are affected too much by the things you see and hear, no matter how resolute you are. The things I paint here will not be comparable to anything else; at least I believe that, as they will be quite simply the expression of my personal feelings. The further I come, the more I regret how little I can do; that is my main problem."

Truly, Monet was very critical of his work. He often destroyed works which did not meet his standard. His colossal composition "Breakfast in the Open Air" (1865/66) also suffered a sad fate. The artist left it incompleated as security for unpaid rent in a pension in Chailly after Courbet had strongly criticized it during a visit. Monet, who shortly before had said to Bazille, "I only think of my picture, if it was to be unsuccessful I would surely become mad", parted with his creation completely disheartened. It was badly stored and because of this it rotted away so that, when Monet went to pick it up one day, there were only fragments left. Fortunately there was an excellent preliminary study which is today exhibited in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow.

In summer 1870, shortly before the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, Monet married Camille and moved with her and the three-year-old Jean to Trouville where he again worked together with Boudin who lived nearby.

In order to avoid military service he fled to London in autumn, without his family, where he met Pissarro. Both used the opportunity of capturing the interesting English countryside in pictures. "The London motifs excited us . . . We painted from nature . . . We also visited the museums. The watercolours and paintings from Turner and Constable and the works by Old Crome undoubtedly influenced us . . ." Pissarro reported, but modified, "Although we learned a lot from them, the works from Turner and Constable proved to us that they did not understand the analysis of shadow. In Turner's painting, shadows are dealt with only as an effect, as a non-existence of light. Regarding the splitting of tones, Turner proved the value of this method as one among many although he did not use it correctly or naturally."

Monet even in those days proved himself to be a master of atmospheric reproduction. His "Westminster Bridge in London" (1871) veiled in thick fog, is an outstanding example of his acute sense of observation and of his ability to bring colour to life under the influence of light. "Every tiny part of the surface is imbued with a shimmering mist — golden, pink, green and violet, all at the same time — which reforms the stones of the distant buildings into a fragile pattern of warm or cool blue tones and the bridge into a soft rhythmic extension of the horizontal quays. Apart from one single scarlet accent, the barges remain silhouettes: they float in a field which could be a continuation of the sky if it was not enlivened by strokes and rippled waves . . ." (William C. Seitz).



Through Charles Daubigny, Monet and Pissarro got to know the Parisian art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel who also lived in London in exile. Daubigny had already supported Monet in France and had even resigned from the Salon jury in 1870 because he could not succeed in having Monet's pictures accepted. "As I love this painter, I cannot suffer the disregard of my opinion", he complained, "You could just as well say to me I do not know my trade."

He found a like-minded person in Durand-Ruel. The art-dealer was immediately impressed by Monet's painting. He bought several of his paintings and, in his first London exhibition, the "Society of French Artists", he presented Monet's "View of Trouville Harbour". Pissarro and the other "intransigents" as the unconventional young painters called themselves, soon also appreciated his good will. Durand-Ruel was not afraid of the risk in committing himself to the artists. He was of the opinion — as is indicated in an article in the "Revue internationale de l'art et de la curiosité" from December 1869 — that a "true art dealer has to also be an open-minded art lover who under certain circumstances must be prepared to sacrifice his immediate business interests for his artistic conviction and who would be better fighting against speculators than joining their intrigues."

His tough struggle to spread the Impressionist paintings, lasted more than ten years, almost destroying his livelihood and endangering his good reputation. On the occasion of an Intransigent Exhibition in his gallery, an article in the "Figaro" said, "... An exhibition has just opened at Durand-Ruel's gallery which ostensibly deals with painting. Attracted by the flags which decorate the facade the unsuspecting passer-by enters the gallery where his shocked eyes are offered an awful spectacle. Five or six people, including a woman, all touched by the madness of ambition, have arranged a meeting place in which they can exhibit their work. Many people laugh their heads off at these things. I am more worried. These so-called artists call themselves the 'intransigents'. They take canvas, paint and brush, throw a few random blotches on the canvas and sign it; ... It is a terrible spectacle when human vanity loses itself in madness ..."

In autumn 1871, Monet returned to Paris via Holland — where his first wind-mill pictures were created — and in December he moved to Argenteuil, a village on the Seine near Paris. There, in the course of the following years, he created numerous riverside paintings. His friend Renoir often visited him. Both of them painted the same motifs so that forty years later neither of them were able to say, in at least one case, who had painted the picture in question.

The intransigents came together — apart from Bazille, who had fallen at Beaune-la-Rolande on November 18th, 1870 — after the war had ended to further pursue their common artistic interests. Their main aim was to carefully observe the interaction of light and shadow and their influences on the respective colours and then to capture these effects on canvas.



Monet had a special place within the group. He was not just the initiator but also — in spite of his youth — a sort of father figure and ideal. His course of action was more consistent than that of the others and his endeavours to spontaneously capture nature in all its changing forms according to the time of day or the season, its continually changing lighting effects and innumerable vibrations of light just to be able to paint one single instant, a fleeting moment, were greater than those of his colleagues. As Renoir put it, “Without him, without my dear Monet, who gave us all courage, we would have capitulated.”

Monet observed every motif in respect of colour. That was his great love so that the object being portrayed played a subordinate role for him. He admitted, “I am obsessed by colour, it is my anguish from morning to night. It goes so far that, one day as I stood at the deathbed of a woman who meant a lot to me, I found myself staring at her temples, automatically analysing the series of changing colours which had taken over her motionless expression in death. There were blue, yellow, grey hues — hues which I cannot describe. I had come to that stage.” From April 15th to May 15th, 1874, in the studio of the photographer Nadar, a memorable exhibition took place which went down in history as the “First Impressionist Exhibition”. All in all 30 artists took part in the exhibition, presenting 165 works. Apart from Monet there were such artists as Renoir, Sisley, Degas, Cézanne, Pissarro and Berthe Morisot.

The artists could not complain about the number of visitors to the exhibition, but the reaction left a lot to be desired. It was soon obvious that the people were in no way interested in the art, instead they had come because of a craving for sensation. Everyone wanted to see the “absurd daubs” and to amuse themselves at the artists’ expense. The press also printed some very cutting remarks. For example, the critic Louis Leroy commented on Monet’s painting entitled “Impression — Sunrise”, which gave rise for him to describe the whole group as “Impressionists”, “A roll of wallpaper in its original state is more finished than this painting...” and another reviewer maintained that Monet, Pissarro and Berthe Morisot had “declared war on beauty”.

However, the painters did not allow themselves to become disheartened and by 1886 they had organized a further seven “Impressionist” exhibitions. Monet took part in the first four and in the seventh. He found the critics lack of understanding quite normal and consoled his friends with comments such as “Since Diderot invented critique, they have always erred. They grumbled at Delacroix, Corot and Goya. If they had showered us with praise it would have been a bad sign.”

When he met with injustice against his art, he saw this as a challenge to carry on as before. When one critic complained about his “Impression” that it was too “foggy” he considered creating something even more foggy. “I’ve got it — the train station at Saint Lazare”, he said to Renoir one morning. “When the train steams out the clouds of smoke are so thick that you can hardly recognize anything at all. That is charming, a real fairy story. We have to delay the