



Musée d'Orsay, Paris

The surviving central panel of Monet's "Luncheon on the Grass" (1865-66), his response to Manet's notorious work.

Monet: impressive from the very start



Metropolitan Museum of Art

Claude Monet, "La Grenouillère" (1869).

'Early Years' show is like seeing his work for 1st time

By Charles Desmarais

If ever we had to be convinced of the need to see works of art in the original, the Legion of Honor's exhibition "Monet: The Early Years" does the trick. Forget everything you think you know about the work of this most famous of all French Impressionists. Come to it with fresh eyes, just as he entered a world that thought it knew itself — and taught it to see anew.

The show is a solid one, with 53 works he painted between 1858 and 1872 — between the ages, that is, of 17 and 31. That time period begins with the first work he showed publicly, made under the tutelage of the great French landscapist Eugène Boudin. It stops with the last paintings he produced before

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Monet — impressive from the start

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inventing the name for the movement he exemplifies. The exhibition opens to the public Saturday, Feb. 25, and runs through May 29.

Most of the artist’s most famous paintings — the hay-stacks, poplars and waterlilies; the extraordinary studies of light effects on Rouen Cathedral and the houses of Parliament — were ahead of him, and so are not included. Instead, and thrillingly, we see the ideas of Monet in the process of formation into the concrete objects that will signal his maturity.

It’s easy to get smug about Impressionism in general, and Claude Monet in particular. A Monet show is a reliable blockbuster, and we tell ourselves we’ve seen it all. But even if we have encountered the occasional original in a museum — maybe an entire, fleeting exhibition at some point — what we know about the paintings, we got from photographs. Reproduced in books, projected on the screens of classrooms, our knowledge of these matchless paintings comes from pictures of pictures.

Slick and slippery, drained of affect, the reproduction can never approach the nuances of texture, color, detail and scale of an original painting. Add to that the history of all the pictures that have followed — paintings, yes, but photographs and movies, commercial and artistic, professional and amateur. Together they create a thick, hard shell, separating our moment from Monet’s first inspired splotchings of paint on canvas.

Leave all that behind. As you enter the exhibition, you are confronted (there is no better word) with two monumental framed canvases. These, in fact, are fragments of an even larger work, originally meant to be something like 13 by 20 feet. This is Monet’s famous “Luncheon on the Grass” (1865-66), the artist’s audacious, ultimately failed attempt to both honor and compete with Édouard Manet’s notorious work of the same title, painted three years earlier.

An entire chapter of art history is referenced in Monet’s “Luncheon,” and the exhibition’s excellent catalog contains an essay by Monet expert Mary Dailey Desmarais (no relation to me) that explores the uses and social meanings of related works through time.

Even without such background, however, the attentive viewer will sense the significance of this grand experiment in technique, with its shattered fragments of ephemeral light represented by contours of color and brushstrokes of paint that have an almost physical weight.

That first room of the exhibition has a smaller work that, quietly but even more insistently, demanded my attention. Unlike “Luncheon,” “Le Pave de Chailly in the Forest of Fontainebleau” (1865) is unpeopled. We aren’t blocked at the picture’s entry by flirting and fashion. We’re meant to wander down a road, cut deep into the forest.

But something else keeps us from engaging in that illusionistic stroll. The paint itself — scumbled



Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Monet’s “Regatta at Argenteuil” (1872): the dazzling, flickering evocation of a brilliant summer day.



National Gallery of Art

Claude Monet’s “The Cradle — Camille With the Artist’s Son, Jean” (1867) features Monet’s wife and eldest son.

into clouds, or drawn in a thick, long line along the trunk of a tree — becomes a topic of the work of art, just as significant as the scene described.

These works, so of their place and time in subject, are the first indication of the artist’s great formal awakening. They hint, even at this early point in his career, at Monet’s eventual mastery of that great tension between the real, the artist’s perception and the illusion we as viewers are presented.

As the exhibition progresses, we see other clues to the artist’s development. “Grainstacks at Chailly at Sunrise” (1865) and “La Porte d’Amont, Etretat” (1868-69) lay claim to subjects that will occupy him as time goes on. More significantly, his painting style continues to

develop. Pictures like “Seascape, Storm” (c. 1866-67) could almost be modernist works from the 1930s; “Fishing Boats” (1866) — bold diagonals of masts against a stark white sky — knowingly anticipate abstract art that others would make many decades later.

The magical “La Grenouillère” (1869), a dense weave of color and light, unleashes Monet’s uncanny ability to tell complex stories with seemingly casual swipes, flips and curls of his brush. It was painted by Monet virtually alongside his friend Pierre-Auguste Renoir, as Renoir produced the most significant works of his own career during the same period, at the same summer boating spot on the Seine.

A work in the final gallery of the exhibition, “The Wooden



Harvard Art Museums

Claude Monet, “The Porte d’Amont, Étretat” (c. 1868-1869).

Monet: The Early Years: 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays. Through May 29. \$20-\$55. Legion of Honor, Lincoln Park, 100 34th Ave., S.F. (415) 750-3600. <http://legionofhonor.famsf.org>

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Bridge” (1872), startles from across the room. The bridge, under repair, is depicted head-on from the river, creating a strictly geometric frame of intersecting lines around a central rectangle. This abstract form contrasts with a deep-perspective view of a harbor within the rectangle, under the bridge. It is a virtuoso demonstration of the 31-year-old’s understanding of, and pleasure in, the balance of form and content.

A smallish work in high-key tones, also in the last gallery, might almost be missed among paintings in deeper colors that look more finished, at least in the traditional sense. But it was the work most obvious to me as the link to all that would come after, as Monet grew into the incomparable figure he would become. I was not surprised when I looked again at the catalog to see that George Shackelford, deputy director of Fort Worth’s Kimbell Art Museum and the curator of the

exhibition (who will follow up in two years with “Monet: The Late Years”), came to the same conclusion.

The painting is “Regatta at Argenteuil” (1872), and it is reproduced twice across the book’s final two pages of illustrations. On the right, an extreme close-up re-creates the experience of looking closely at the picture’s surface. Simple striations of color have been stacked, like the logs that appear to have been used to build a house on the shore, one atop the other. So efficient, so workmanlike.

On the left page the work is pictured in full. Even in reproduction, we can get a sense of the dazzling, flickering evocation of a brilliant summer day that will lead to what we now know as Impressionism.

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