Monet: Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man

We usually think of Monet as a painter who produced a consistent body of work, but to mush together the separate elements of his oeuvre is to miss both the work and the man.

The Backstory
As a young man, Claude Monet was a firebrand. He abandoned his formal studies at 15 and by age 26 took up with a woman considered unsuitable by his relatives, who then cut him off. Unlike Edouard Manet, Monet saw no need to participate in the defense of Paris during the Franco-Prussian war started by the absurd Napoleon III, and he was happy to escape to England and Holland. There, at age 32, he painted *Impression Sunrise*, so radically loose—even vague, even cartoonish—that it brought him ridicule in the press.

Six years later, in 1878, Monet found himself financially responsible for two wives, eight children, and assorted household staff. This happened because his patron and dealer, Ernst Hoschedé, abandoned his wife, Alice (with whom Monet had already started an affair), and left her and his six children with Monet, who was married to Camille, with whom he had two young children. Camille died in 1879 when Monet was 39, leaving him with guilt, grief and bills. Alice had a small income (although her fortune had been greatly reduced by Ernst), and she also taught piano, but Monet's dire financial circumstances continued for another 16 years or so.

Monet responded to the financial burden by adopting a more saleable, more conservative style in his work in the later part of the 1870s and1880s. As a student, he had had the experience of making caricatures, which were popular with the public and easy to sell, and during this conservative period, Monet painted what are essentially postcards of famous French landscape sites, with the intention of taking them to Paris and selling them cheap, sometimes for as little as 100 francs. These paintings were tighter, more photographic, and more accessible than his earlier work. Nevertheless, the peripatetic family changed locations frequently, sometimes leaving behind a rash of unpaid bills. Claude and Alice finally married in 1892.

Although seductive, these pastoral paintings increasingly seem to me to be a fictitious report on France. The country had been at war with its neighbors, and then with itself. Paris was in ruins, but none of this is evident in Monet's paintings.

Or, compare his innocent work of this period to the opulence of the Second Empire, as evidenced by Napoleon III's apartment in the Louvre, and the corruption and squalor below that supported it, as evidenced in *Nana,* the novel by Monet's friend Émile Zola.

Eventually, as Monet got higher prices for his work, there came a desire for a more permanent home, and at the age of 50, he bought a house in Giverny. There, in 1890, Monet began less frivolous work. The Haystacks paintings, which he exhibited in 1891, were very nearly scientific studies of light. Without people, without gaiety—gone are the pretty women with parasols—mundane and repetitious, the paintings seem a risky relapse into art for art's sake, indifferent to the taste of the time. And they set the pattern for almost all Monet's subsequent work.

In 1896, the Dreyfus affair began and continued for 12 bitter years. Neighbor against neighbor, friend against friend—France seemed to erupt in a frenzy of recrimination and anti-Semitism. Monet, Zola, and George Clemenceau were among the Dreyfusards, supporters of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, who thought he had been wrongly convicted as a Prussian spy to cover up mismanagement of the military by higher-ups. Monet never again painted a recognizable French subject; he painted London and Venice, but never again France.

By the time of Dreyfus's second trial in 1899 (the anti-Drefusards refused to give up after he was exonerated in 1896), Monet was independently wealthy from sales and investments (there was no income tax in France at that time). By 1906, when Dreyfus was given the Légion d'honneur and the matter was finally put to rest, Clemenceau was in the government, and Monet, at 66, had friends in high places. His legacy was assured.

It is this last period—when Monet changes his work yet again—that interests me now: what choice Monet makes with his freedom and independence. It is rare, and always impressive, when an older artist turns a winter's passion into a new body of work. If we knew Michelangelo Buonarroti only from his work after 74 years of age, he still would be considered a great artist, or rather a great architect: the final plan and the dome of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome are his design. Henri Matisse began his paper cutout series at age 78 when he was too ill to get out of bed. Again, if we knew only this more graphic style, and the books, interior design, stained-glass windows, and textiles that the cutouts engendered, we would still consider Matisse a great artist with a major influence on the art and design that followed. But, in a way, the last works of both Michelangelo and Matisse can be seen as a

continuation of the aesthetic philosophy developed throughout their lives. Monet does something more daring. Monet's choice is to turn Impressionism on its head; the paintings change from the specific to the general; he takes on the avant garde and becomes an abstract artist.

A Change in Aesthetic Goals

This evolution of Monet's last style can be told as a story about edges. As the series of Rouen cathedral paintings progresses, the edges of the architecture dissolve. It just happens that there is a recognizable building: it is not drawn and filled in. By, 1892 (the orange-lit Rouen façade in the Marmottan) the painting is cropped so that the edges of the building are outside of the canvas. This is clearly willful, as the artist, seated in the same spot, previously pictured the edge of the facade to be in the painting. As the light plays across the architecture, different features, such as the tympanum, advance and recede; the stone dematerializes into light. Architectural ornament becomes gestures of brush and paint.

After 1906, another type of edge is discarded. In painting the water lilies, Monet moves the bank of the pond, which is effectively the horizon line, up the canvas until finally it is off the painting. The view tips up. This is not flatness; rather, there is a volume on top of and also behind the canvas, as in *Glycines* (1919–20). Now the edge of the canvas itself disappears, as the paintings become more horizontal, encompassing our peripheral vision, even to the extent of being continuous ovals.

Finally in *Roses* (1925–26), the surface of the canvas as the plane through which we see is discarded. The blue that is both sky and ground is slapped on top of the reds and oranges of the roses. What is figurative is almost completely lost in what is paint.

Painters draw edges and fill in; Monet escaped from that. The paintings flicker between subject and object, between figure and gesture. No longer an observation of the hour of the day, they become a meditation on the passing of time. And in so doing, as an old man, Monet made the break, the terrifying break, with reality, cut painting off the world, made it pure sensation, made it abstract.

Art Historicity

In the 1950s, art history was psychoanalytical: artist so-and-so did what he did because he was a repressed homosexual, the Agony and the Ecstasy, and so on. The 1960s rejected so romantic an approach for the formalist: an artist inherited a tradition of making a work of art and structuring the response of the viewer, and then played with that tradition. The artist's life experiences and personality were

largely irrelevant. In the 1970s, Linda Henderson, myself, and others argued for a more contextual approach: artists exist in a culture whose members all have the same opportunities and limitations of consciousness. It is our human destiny to expand our awareness. In a way, everybody (artists, mathematicians, scientists, jurists) is working on the same problem. Unfortunately, "context" has often been seen as another way to focus on identity politics, and there is less understanding of the broader movement of consciousness. Now perhaps it is time to return to the life experiences of the artist.

Bodies, minds, brains change and age. I know this myself. 2006 was a momentous year of loss for me. I used to try to argue that there was a continuation in my work—and some do see that continuation and find the "after" to be a progression of the 40 years of "before." But I have come to accept the break. People make art and people are changed by circumstance. If art history cannot know that, then what can it know?

A Face in the Clouds

I have described Monet last paintings in formal terms, as the story of edges. I have also mentioned the aesthetic context and Monet's desire to compete with younger artists and their new painting of the abstract. But what of Monet himself? Such an absorption in self, to be the center of a vortex of sensation that includes no companions, speaks of a degree of misanthropy, or at least feelings of isolation. There were more deaths: Alice in 1911 and his eldest, closest son in 1914. And Monet has more and more trouble with cataracts; he surely knew about Degas's blindness. Monet's delight was in seeing the world; he must have felt that world closing in on him. I may be seeing things, but is there a face in the painting called *Les Nuages* at the Orangerie? If so, then the forehead, closed eyes, nose, mouth, ear, and beard are all in their right places. And if so, it is a portrait of the artist as an old man.

Tony Robbin, Paris and New York, 2013