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Monet in Le Havre

Monographies citadines



Despite the unkind and often repeated words which Monet had to say about his region of adoption, the towns of Le Havre and Sainte-Adresse were of great importance to him because they were where he learned his art. They were places to which he returned often up until 1874, although usually more out of financial interest than for the love of their inhabitants, but places where he produced some of his great masterpieces, such as *La Terrasse à Sainte-Adresse*. The format of this book sadly only allows us to touch upon this subject, with the aim here being to present a brief overview of the various aspects of his work and a summary of how they were realised.

With Monet having become such a legend, it is worthwhile starting this essay about his young years by recalling that he was not born a genius, as was Bonington, or, slightly later, Picasso, but that he was simply talented, and, as his first laborious paintings show, he owes his glory to his work and the intelligence of his thinking.

In actual fact, not much is known about Monet's early years. We do know a little about his reputation as a young caricaturist in around 1856-1858, but, with many of these drawings having been lost in the ruins of the town following the bombing of September 1944, only a small number of the caricatures signed with his first Christian name, Oscar, are known. Apart from a notepad of landscape drawings (of



little interest because truly childlike), it has been believed up until now that he only did caricature. However, the Christie's sale on 26 March 2014 (lot n° 60) of a drawing of a seated young boy, which used to belong to Michel Monet, logically offers a glimpse of forms of representation other than caricature. For example, this portrait of a young man singing (private collection) painted on the same brown paper as that used for the seated young boy, probably a singer whom his mother must have taken him to hear or whom she received at her home in about 1857.

When Boudin encouraged the young Monet, at the time aged seventeen and a half years, to come to Rouelles near Le Havre, the young man showed a clear talent as a caricaturist but was not in any way planning to become a painter. "If I became a painter, it was thanks to Eugène Boudin", he explained to Jean-Aubry, an inhabitant of Le Havre. Nevertheless, the first six years spent learning this new profession revealed a young artist technically at ease when it came to painting still-life pictures or bouquets of flowers in the Dutch style, but who was much less comfortable when he found himself faced with nature. *Les Porteuses de bois en forêt de Fontainebleau* from 1864, in the same way as his first two paintings of Etretat, reveals an artist struggling to find solutions. Greatly influenced by landscape painters of the 1830s, in particular Daubigny, whose

small painting of the grape harvest he owned in 1860, he was clearly sensitive to the lightening of the colour range extolled by Boudin, his first master, but struggles to confirm a new approach. It all remains terribly stiff and his Aunt Lecadre, who acted as a benefactor for him, was not wrong when she wrote in 1861: "His studies are always sketches as you have seen, but when he wants to finish them, create a painting, he sees himself mirrored in the picture and although he is congratulated for it by fools, it becomes worthless." It was not until *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* in 1865, his first large format canvas, that nature, figures and light found harmony in his painting and that Monet's great talent became apparent.

Oscar-Claude Monet was born in Paris on 14 November 1840, but his family moved to Le Havre in about 1845 after the half-sister of Alphonse, Oscar-Claude's father, married Jacques Lecadre, a wholesale grocer and ships' supplier, who was able to offer his brother-in-law a good position. Therefore, the young Monet grew up in the Ingouville neighbourhood in a family which enjoyed and took advantage of life. His mother, a musician, was said to have a remarkable voice and took her children on countless cultural visits. But, this did not prevent Monet from finding it hard to support the atmosphere at the high school in Le Havre, where Jacques-François

«WE NOTICE A FIRE, THEN
AN EASEL, THEN A MAN
WRAPPED IN THREE SHORT
JACKETS, WITH GLOVED
HANDS, A HALF-FROZEN
FIGURE: IT WAS MONET
STUDYING THE EFFECT OF
SNOW. ART HAS SOME BRAVE
SOLDIERS.»

LOUIS BILLOT,
LE HAVRE CHRONICLER.

ON THE RIGHT
Portrait d'homme
chantant, vers 1858
drawing
17,5 x 13 cm
©Private collection



ON THE RIGHT
La Pointe de la Hève (W 39), 1864
painting on canvas
41 x 73 cm
© Bridgeman, Paris.





ON THE LEFT
Jardin en fleurs (W 69), 1866
 Villa Le Coteau à Sainte-Adresse, propriété des Lecadre
painting on canvas
 65 x 54 cm
 © AKG-Images

Ochard worked as an art teacher. Monet never made any mention of this kind man and excellent teacher.

His mother's death in 1857 brought the teenage Monet very close to his Aunt Lecadre, who herself was widowed the following year. An amateur painter, she greatly helped her nephew to further his taste for drawing.

Later, came his decisive meeting with Boudin and the exhibition of his first painting in Rouelles at the Municipal Exhibition of Le Havre in 1858. In the same way as his mentor, Monet attempted to obtain the same grant that was allocated to Boudin in 1851. The application was turned down under the pretext that the Monet family had enough money to finance his training. The argument was largely justified because the Lecadre family belonged to the upper middle classes of Le Havre society. However, the question was not if they could do so or not but whether they actually wanted to do so.

Whatever the case, Monet set out for Paris in order to visit the Paris Salon and meet several artists for whom he had prepared recommendations. Troyon, an honest man, did not hide from him the fact that he had a great deal of progress to make and he advised him to join Couture's art school. Monet rejected this idea but, nevertheless, was able to settle in the capital thanks to the money

provided by his father and his Aunt Lecadre, and he enrolled in the Académie Suisse, which was more open and free than the strict academic art schools where the leading figures of official painting taught.

During this time, his father, now retired, fell in love with a house servant with whom he had a child. Because of these new expenses, the money from his father was reduced to such an extent that the student, who was used to the high life and who appeared to barely do any work, found himself in difficulty.

When his name was chosen for conscription he was faced with a great dilemma, with his father and aunt agreeing to finance the 2,500 Francs needed to pay for a replacement provided that he return to Le Havre and give up painting in order to enter the world of business. Monet refused and, therefore, opted to join the “Chass’ d’Af”, dreaming of adventure in the African deserts. He was sent to Algeria, where, firstly, he had to learn to ride a horse. He only spent one year there, thanks to a fortuitous bout of typhoid, and he returned to Le Havre in summer 1862 for a 6-month leave, during which he met Jongkind. It was a highly amusing encounter if it really did happen as it is said. While he was working alone near the Cap de la Hève trying to complete a study of a cow which would not stop moving, a large Englishman, amused by the situation,

«I ADMIT THAT THE
CANVAS THAT MADE ME
STOP THE LONGEST IS THE
CAMILLE BY MR MONET...
INDEED, HERE IS A TEMPE-
RAMENT; HERE IS A MAN
IN THIS CROWD OF
EUNUCHS.»

Zola, in *L'Événement*, 1865.

ON THE RIGHT
La Jetée du Havre par mauvais temps (W 88), 1867
painting on canvas
50 x 61 cm
© Bridgeman, Paris

