

IN A NEW LIGHT

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THE UNKNOWN MONET: PASTELS AND DRAWINGS

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BY NOW YOU'VE PROBABLY SEEN A huge billboard or two proclaiming how proud the Clark is of its Monet exhibition and how much they want you to come see it. With such a big-name draw, it's easy to wonder if the curators have just dug some obscure scratchings out from the vaults. But no—as unfair as it may be, Monet didn't seem capable of creating anything less than works of genius, even as a teenager. This is the real thing, a world-class show of almost 100 fine and infrequently shown caricatures, drawings, pastels, and paintings. It is a show meant to change the way we see the artist and his life's work.

Nature boy, plein air magician, spontaneous master—that is the stereotype of Monet, that makes him seem “one of the most known” artists, as curator Richard Kendall (the exhibit was also curated by James A. Ganz) said in a recent lecture he gave at the Albany Institute of History and Art.

So it is something of a relief to see how much drafting and careful study went into creating his illusions of quickly changing light. We also learn how much Monet used newly accessible print media to promote his paintings. Far from disturbing the impact of his great works, this information makes them all the more remarkable. This is the first time so much material has been made available from the, shall we say, “unplugged” Monet—the man whose painting gave “impressionism” its name. The first two rooms alone, which contain Monet's earliest works, could easily stand on their own as an exhibit.

His numerous early caricatures come as a delightful surprise, since later his interests ran in the opposite direction—away from the human form and from precise lines. Yet his unmistakable joie de vivre is in *Carica-*

ture of Jules Didier, Butterfly Man (1858), which makes fun of a nature artist by transforming him into a giant bug. Also loud and clear is the young Monet's energetic competition with early role models such as the famous caricaturist Nadar.

Maybe it was all that truancy and fresh seaside air of Le Havre that promoted so much talent. Whatever it was, *Alley of Trees, Gournay* (1857), shows the artist's daring already at age 16 as well as his fine, well-trained hand. The pencil drawing juxtaposes nature's chaos in a canopy of trees, suggested by empty space at the top of the page bordered by loose sketching, with the human desire for order in the tighter, shaded tree trunks lined up in the alley.

With so much to linger over, make sure

make boldly simple statements.

What this exhibit teaches us, though, is to look beyond Monet's supposed simplicity. As Kendall explained, works such as the pastel landscapes *Twilight, After the Rain*, and *Nightfall* (1865-70), are essentially about that evanescent quality—time. These pastels, of the same landscape dominated by a swirling sky in different moods, are precursors for Monet's later fascination with works in series (such as *Water Lilies* and *Grain Stacks*). Of course, time is difficult to capture: “And then there's this river which falls, then rises again; one day it's green, then it's yellow; just recently it was dried up, but it will be a torrent again tomorrow after the dreadful amount of rain falling at the moment,” wrote Monet in a letter of 1889 about painting en plein air. The themes of time and change obsessed Monet's entire generation, poised as they were on the brink of the high-speed modern era.

Adept at the emerging arts of mass media, Monet didn't rest on his laurels. The penultimate room is dedicated to Monet's drawings for journals like *Gazette des beaux-arts*, made after he finished paintings such as *View of Rouen* (1872) and *The Two Anglers* (1882) (also on display).

Yet for all the information that attempts to unmask Monet, there is something mysterious that remains. Look at his *Portrait of a Woman* (circa 1890-95), a haunting red-chalk portrait of an unknown subject (possibly his first wife, Camille Doncieux, or his stepdaughter, Suzanne Hoschedé). Why and even exactly when he made this, we don't know, nor can we know what was behind the peculiar combination of confidence and interrogation in the woman's gaze.

And then, in the final room, we get the dazzlers, those paintings and pastels that knock you out with blues, greens, pinks, all at once: *Waterloo Bridge*

almost completely washed out by the fog, *Rouen Cathedral, Façade* (1894) looming (a preparatory drawing is nearby on display), and a dizzying loss of perspective in two *Water Lilies* (1918 and 1916-19). What is up, what is down? Ultimately, something besides technical mastery takes over, and all we can do is feel gratitude in the presence of so many beautiful reflections. ■



Spontaneous genius: Monet's *Portrait of a Woman* (1895).

you browse at a computer station the more than 300 drawings digitized from Monet's sketchbooks (owned by the Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris). In one of these notebooks, *The Gare Saint-Lazare* (1877) shows the complex vitality in Monet's sketch work, while other drawings in these private books, like *Fleur d'Iris* (1914) or sketches in preparation for *Water Lilies*,