

DENVER
ART MUSEUM



Claude **Monet**
The Truth of Nature



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The Truth of Nature

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Claude Monet: The Truth of Nature

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**“These palm trees are
driving me crazy”:
Monet, the South, and the
Intentional Motif**

Angelica Daneo



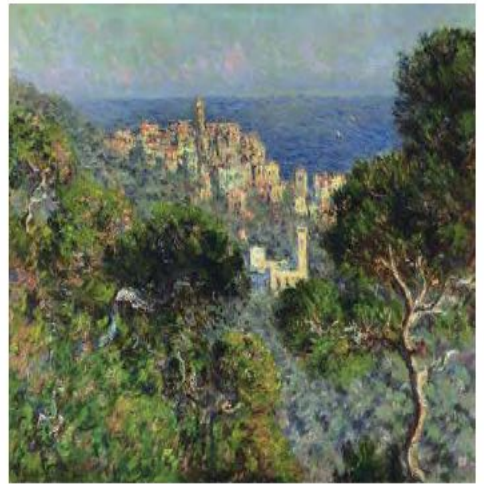
More than any other impressionist artist, Monet traveled extensively to search for motifs, alternating places that were dramatically different from one another (consistent with his own admission that “we must do everything”) instead of settling for a signature landscape.¹ It is not surprising, then, that after a trip to the sunny, warm Italian and French Riviera in 1884 he would sojourn in the dark and “sinister” island of Belle-Île off the coast of Brittany in 1886, only to return to the South of France in 1888.² He clearly did not want to be “bored by the sun,”³ as he admitted to his wife, Alice, and his intentional journey to Brittany in between the two visits to the South is meaningful. Actually, Monet’s first experience with the “exotic” South of France dates to the end of 1883, when he took an exploratory tour with Renoir. Only two paintings can be ascribed to this sojourn with some certainty, showing Monet’s remarkable self-control in not giving in to his brush and canvas and, most likely, his reluctance to paint such a new and unfamiliar place with the distraction of company. His self-control was short-lived, however, as almost immediately upon his return to Giverny he wrote to his dealer Paul Durand-Ruel of his desire to return to Bordighera for a longer stay and, this time, alone—hence his request to his dealer not to mention it to anyone, especially Renoir.⁴

The Picture in His Head

His first painting trip to the South, and to the Italian town of Bordighera, is particularly revealing, as Monet was confronted for the first time with nature quite unlike anything he had experienced until then. Even abroad, during his visit to London and the Netherlands in 1870–71, he could still relate to the cool light of Northern landscapes or the calm, reflective qualities of rivers and canals, not dissimilar to the familiar Seine and its tributaries. Bordighera and its environs, however, were “féerique,” magical, and, to some extent overwhelming for Monet, who at first admitted his struggle to capture the tone of the place.⁵

By this date, his art centered on nature and his views often incorporated water, an element that is dominant throughout his career. It is worth mentioning that, despite his visit to Italy, he remained immune to the lure of the old masters and uninterested in the country’s centuries-old artistic culture. It is true that the impressionists generally rejected the lofty subjects of Academic art, which revered the classical past of Italy, but study of the old masters and copying in the Louvre was still practiced by numerous artists of the avant-garde. But while Berthe Morisot and Pierre-Auguste Renoir, for example, followed the traditional path of copying old master works in the Louvre, Monet literally turned his back on the prestigious institution in 1867, painting the views from its balcony: *Garden of the Princess*, *Quai du Louvre*, and *Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois* (p. 50–52, fig. 1–3).⁶

1 *Under the Lemon Trees*, 1884, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen



2 *View of Bordighera*, 1884, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (cat. 105)

3 *The Church at Varengeville, against the Sunlight*, 1882, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham

Monet, Bergson, and Proust: Observations on Place, Displacement, and Poetry

James H. Rubin



It is often said that impressionism is an art that addresses the eye, and only the eye.¹ I shall argue that it does much more, addressing the body and the bodily senses as a whole. Just as often, it is said that impressionist paintings capture instants in time, as exemplified by Monet's works in series, with their multiple viewpoints and varied effects. Valid at first glance, on deeper reflection this view contradicts the nature of time itself. The experience of time, whether of duration or of an instant, is only made possible by the faculty of memory. It comes as no surprise, then, that time and memory were important considerations in the philosophy of the late nineteenth century, best evidenced by the writings of Henri Bergson. Two central aspects of Monet's work—the concept and importance of place and the idea of truth in nature—can be used to question these conventional interpretations of impressionist painting. This essay will explore two important themes. I will propose that Monet's displacements, even within a single general location, demonstrate how the body as a whole is involved. And I will argue that, as a consequence of his travels and increasing self-consciousness, Monet gradually moved towards forms of representation that responded to the body's experience not through the instant but through what Bergson called "duration," using means often referred to as subjective and poetic. In my conclusion, I will draw on the writing style of Marcel Proust to suggest a parallel to this aspect of Monet's later work in literature.

Displacement: Physical and Imaginary

From the start of his career, Monet's impressionism was an art of the body. One might begin with the concept of *plein-air*. The term describes a condition—one in which the body is surrounded by air-filled space. The contrast with indoors is that there is no constraint to the air, the light, or the body circulating freely. *Plein-air* describes the body's immersion in an environment. Within such an environment, it can feel its mobility. This mobility, both the potential for movement and one's actual displacement, is essential to the experience of place. In letters of the 1860s to his friend and fellow-painter Frédéric Bazille, Monet wrote of the pleasures of being away from Paris and being surrounded by all the things he loved in nature.² I place my emphasis on Monet's use of the word "surrounded." In addition, one may point to Monet's passion for gardening as an activity of the body operating both upon and within nature more directly than from the physical and psychological distance of the artist's studio. Nature frustrated and sometimes battered him with bad weather, as he noted in many of his letters from the 1880s. His art embodies all these experiences. Even when Monet finished paintings in the studio or when he executed large formats away from the motif, the notion of his corporeal presence in the natural realm remained essential to the fashioning of his self-image (see also the contribution by Daniel Zamani, 22–33).

Monet's view of nature is thus circumambient rather than seen as through the "theoretical window" of the traditional one-point perspective. His representation of space is not mathematical but intuitive. As the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty

¹ *The Portal (Morning Fog)*, 1894, Museum Folkwang, Essen



² *The Portal (Harmony in Blue)*, 1894, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

between or among them exists. This could be a lesson he learned from Monet's series. The individual states supposedly "captured" by Monet's early work, or the several states of a motif's existence ostensibly documented in Monet's series, can be compared to what Bergson calls "immobile points" along the continuum of their being. They constitute not a whole but a multiplicity. Bergson points out on the one hand "the absurd proposition that movement is made of immobilities." On the other hand, he understands that each image is like a "snapshot of the mobility of the inner life."¹⁹ Bergson showed that intuition is what provided the continuity painting had trouble expressing. He explains that we experience our own selves as continuous through time. That is what he called duration. We project this continuity on to people or objects through our memories of them, which only our consciousness has the power to interrelate. Knowledge cannot be derived from disconnected fragments.

I focus here on Bergson's equation between mobility or duration and inner life. That inner life is what Monet seems to have begun seeking, beginning with movement. Bergson's reasoning helps shed light on what Monet was discovering in practice, namely that the more closely related a group of pictures, the closer he could come to recreating his own experience of place. Still, his individual scenes could only approximate the experience of his mind and body; multiple views of the same place are the best an artist can do. It was certainly this realization that caused Monet's frustration and concern. Eventually he would exhibit in multiples we call series, he would expand his imagery vertically, he would fuse canvases to make them wider and eventually create a total work at the Orangerie. Like Monet, Bergson discovered that something beyond the

image is what gives it the power to move its viewer. By supplementing mere topographical representation with marks that bear witness to a perceiving self, Monet attempted to endow his works with that something. His paintings address the body via means that extend one's engagement with it, thus producing a certain kind of continuity. For lack of a better word, his means and effects are "poetic."

As the Seine, the Thames, and ultimately Monet's lily ponds acquired increasing prominence among his themes, the pictures yield their formerly specific identities as places, such as Paris or Argenteuil, to become more generalized "spaces." That is, Monet's later works become less bounded and defined as topographical realms. The painter transforms topography to poetry; to use a term coined by philosopher Edward Casey, they become "topo-etic."²⁰ By poetry, I mean the use of language—in this case the material language of painting—in a distinctive manner and with an intensity that elicit novel ways of seeing, thinking, or feeling that one would not experience if language were deployed conventionally. There is always a supplement: something added beyond the real, even if it is at the same time evidence of a painter's craft.

7 *Saint-Lazare Station*,
1877, Musée d'Orsay, Paris
8 *Saint-Lazare Station*, 1877,
National Gallery, London
(cat. 19)



Bergson exemplifies how philosophy had come around 180 degrees from a positivist faith in empirical observation to consider the individual self as being the primary source of truth and knowledge. As Monet's painting became successful, those aspects we attribute to techniques expressive of subjective feeling, intuition, or spontaneity were increasingly referred to as poetry and valued. Although the word poetry is expressive of this increased valuation, the problem with the word for art is that it seems to overlook the role of the body that produces those effects. I am suggesting that only through supplements to the real, implying displacement of the body, whether physical or imaginary, could Monet produce the sensation of immersion found increasingly in his later works. Anticipating Bergson, he wanted to convey life within the world rather than its outlines measured simply by the eye. He indicated this by dismissing the comparison with photography, by constantly moving through his environment, and by painting from what he called his inner sensibility. In 1909, he is said to have made the following confessions to the critic Roger Marx. The exact wording may or may not be his, but the quotation does seem to contain some essential truths: "It is because I rediscovered and allowed intuitive and secret forces to predominate that I was able to identify with Creation and become absorbed in it. My art is an act of faith, an act of love and humility. [...] I set up my easel in front of this body of water that adds a pleasant freshness to my garden. Its circumference is less than 200 meters. Looking at it, you thought of infinity; you were able to discern in it, as in a microcosm, the presence of the elements and the instability of a universe that changes constantly under our very eyes. [...] The indeterminate and the vague are modes of expression that have a reason for existing and have their own characteristics; through them sensations become lasting; they are the key to symbolism and continuity. [...] I have no other wish than to mingle more closely with nature, and I aspire to no other destiny than to work and live in harmony with her laws."²¹

Marcel Proust: Memory and Immersion

The title of Marcel Proust's seven-volume *À la recherche du temps perdu*, published between 1913 and 1927 and translated into English as *Remembrance of Things Past* (and more recently as *In Search of Lost Time*), makes its theme of the experience of time explicit. Not only do seven hefty volumes take a long time to read, but Proust's prose is known for its long passages and descriptions, interweaving memories and the present, in paragraphs and even sentences that can seem endlessly meandering.²² There is no evidence that Proust and Monet ever met. Proust never mentioned Monet, but he was deeply familiar with art and often used comparisons with it to enhance or specify his descriptions.²³ Moreover, there is at least one passage in Proust that seems directly to recall Monet's painting, namely a promenade along a river in which water lilies are floating: "But further on the current slackened [...] so that the little ponds into which the Vivonne was here diverted were aflower with water-lilies. As the banks hereabouts were thickly



9 *Arrival at Saint-Lazare Station*, 1877, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge



Artistic Beginnings: Normandy and the Forest of Fontainebleau

Alexander Penn & Daniel Zamani

Monet's first forays into plein-air painting were made in Normandy, France's northernmost region, which in the mid-1800s was a center of the country's burgeoning seaside tourism. Under the influence of his mentor and fellow artist, Eugène Boudin, he executed numerous harbor and coastal scenes, showing particular interest in the evocation of atmospheric effects. Another site that offered motifs for Monet's early work was the Forest of Fontainebleau, a popular tourist destination south of Paris, which had previously been explored by the painters of the Barbizon School. Both places were easy to reach by train from Paris and provided Monet with inspiration for a new, anti-academic type of landscape painting, based on a direct and unmediated observation of nature.





6 Forest of Fontainebleau, 1865



17 *The Tuilleries*, 1876

18 *The Boulevard des Capucines*, 1873–74





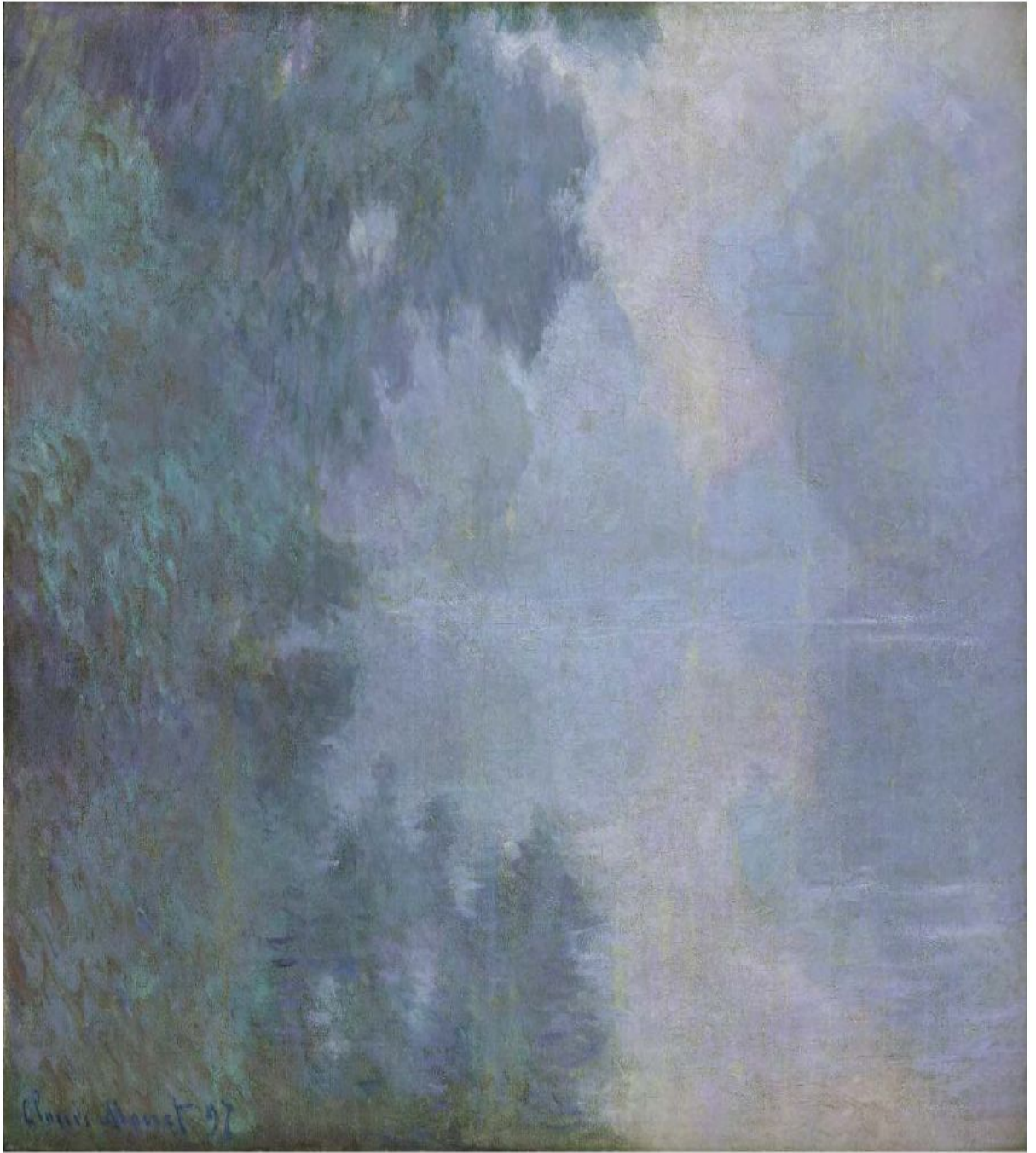
The Colors of Fog: London

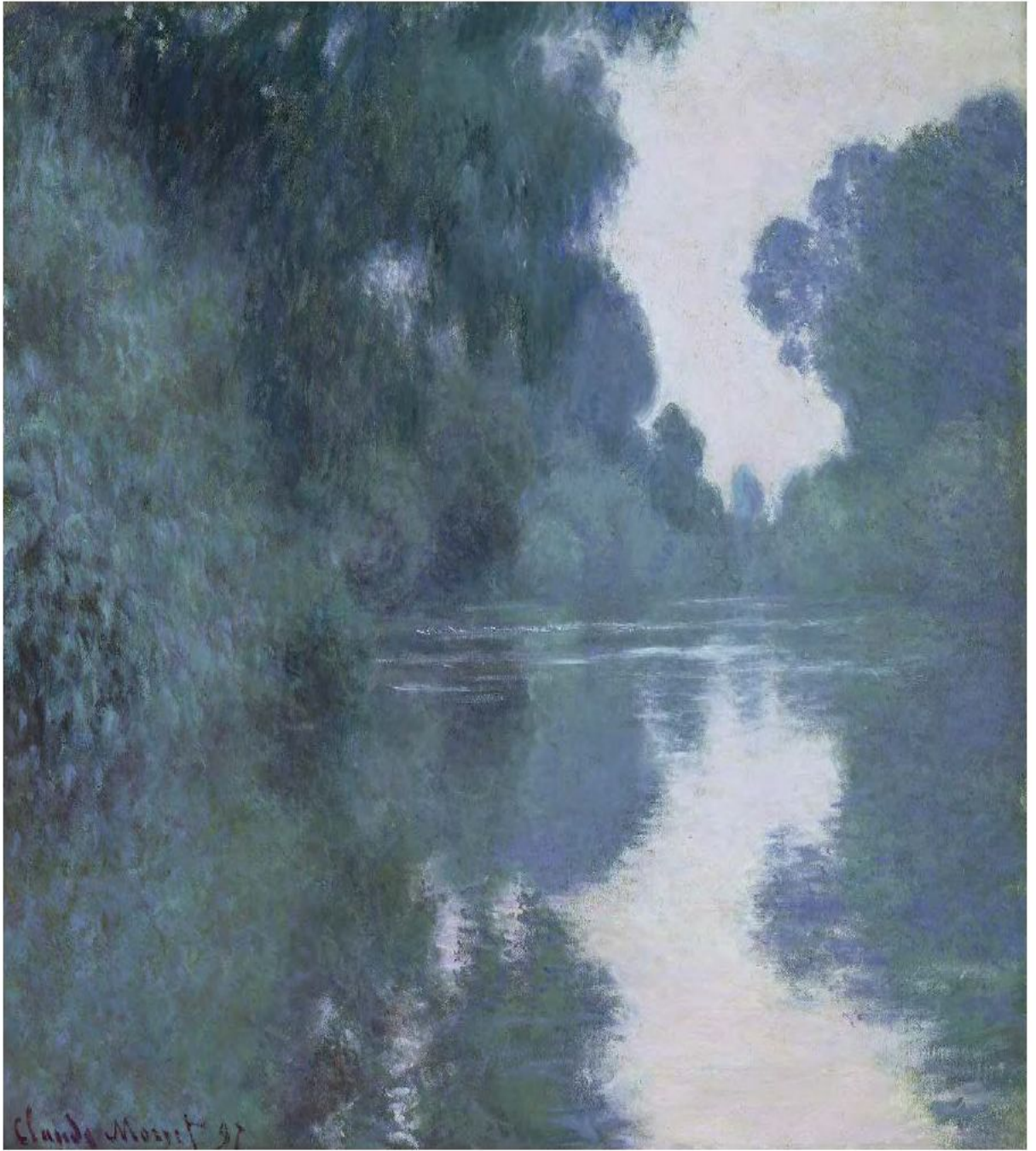
Christoph Heinrich

During the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, Monet spent several months in London. He returned to the British capital on a string of painting trips around the turn of the century. In the National Gallery, he would have had the opportunity to study the works of William Turner, who had already depicted the heavily industrialized metropolis as a city shaped by the waters of the Thames. Bridges, reflections of light, and shimmering veils of haze and mist over the river characterize the majority of Monet's views of London. His serial depictions of Waterloo and Charing Cross bridges correspond to his obsessive exploration of a single motif *in situ*, in line with his incessant search for inspirational outdoor environments.





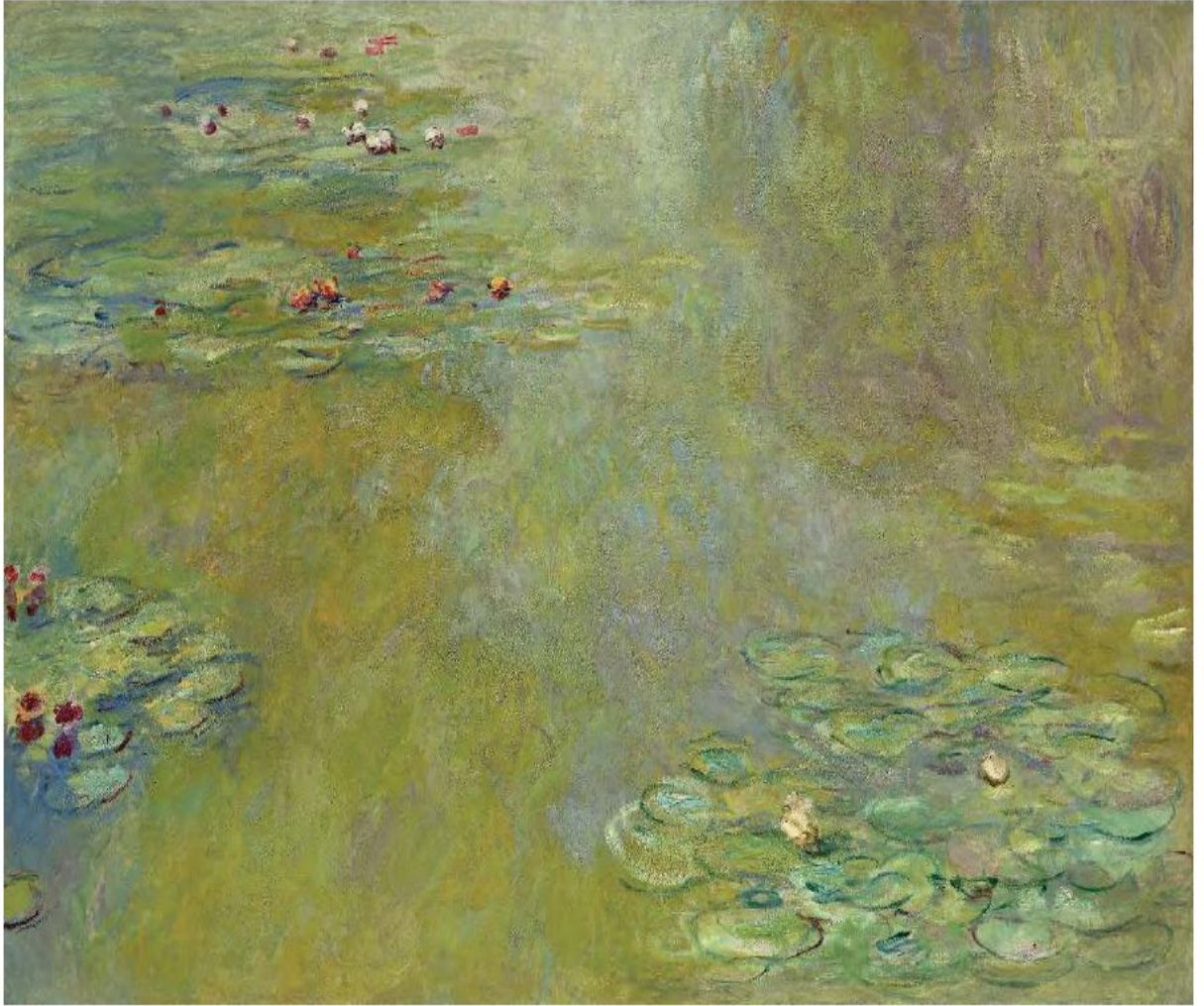


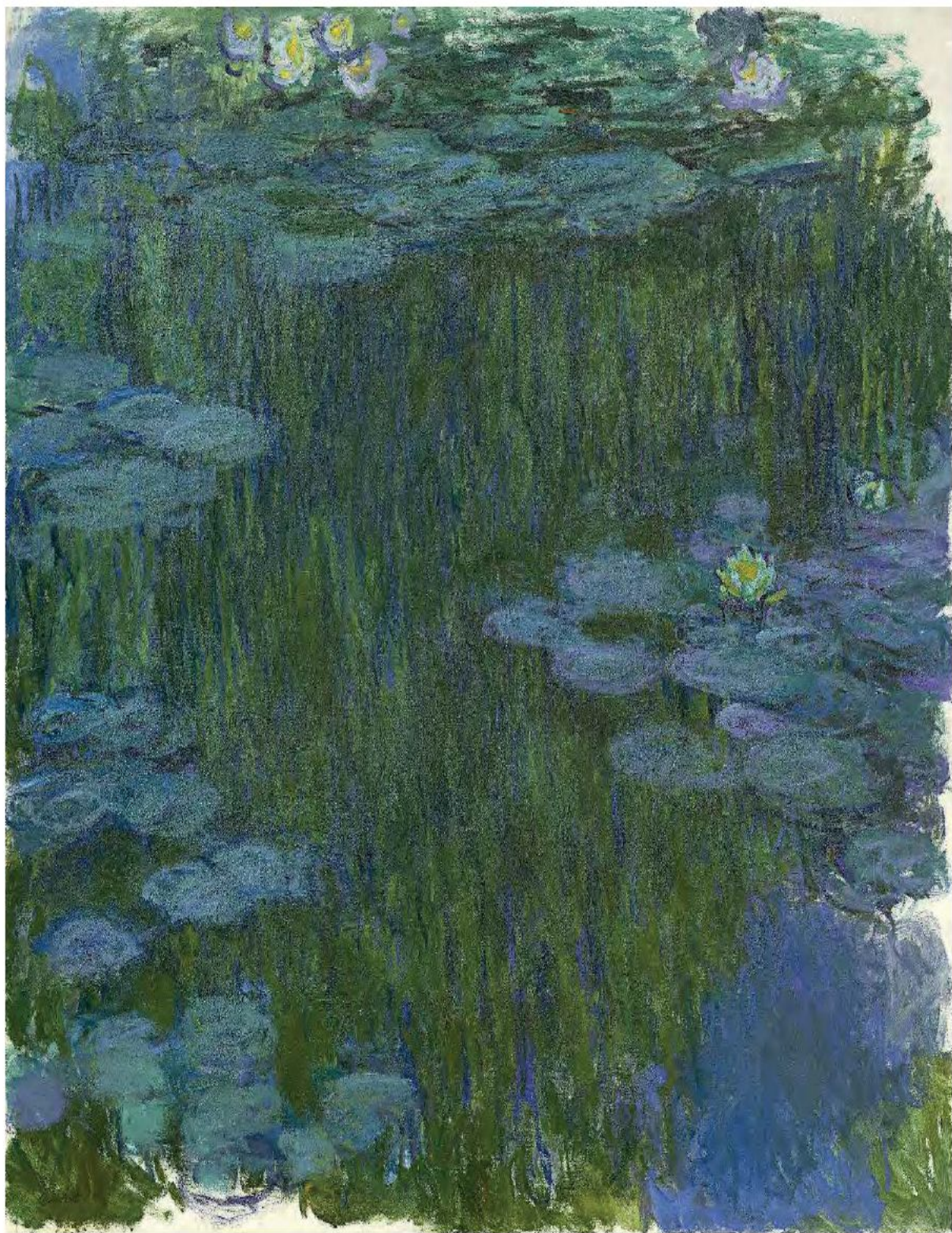




87 Étretat, the Cliff and the Porte d'Aval, 1885







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