



MONET
AND CHICAGO

Gloria Groom
with an essay by Adam Gopnik

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AN EYE STILL SEEING

Adam Gopnik

“Monet is only an eye,” a famous bit of disparaging praise from Paul Cezanne insisted. “But what an eye!” *Only an eye!*—the words were meant to imply a virtuosic engagement with the shimmering optical surface of the world, implicitly contrasted with Cezanne’s virtuous, stumbling search for a visual language that would add ordered geometry to high-keyed color.

Yet Monet’s eye—in his ability to turn, catch, stylize, and still the play of light on surfaces, against Gothic stones and British bridges, on transient lilies and Seine-lit dawns, as well as on the iron and steam of the engines resting in the Gare Saint-Lazare—still sees. The eye’s story goes on, continues to sweep. If no one disputes Manet’s quick wit or Degas’s intelligence, Monet’s fine eye has turned out to be more pregnant with possibility for future art than perhaps any other of that Impressionist generation. Monet’s influence is, indeed, in retrospect perhaps larger than any other painter of the last two centuries, compellingly, if at times “illicitly,” broad. He is famous as the one French painter who mattered most to the American abstract painters of the 1940s and 1950s—the one

who showed that it was possible to paint big to be intimate, and that a picture could envelop as potently as it might narrate. The painting of Philip Guston and Morris Louis and Joan Mitchell is unimaginable without him. His art, with its honesty of means, made merely to be looked at, was in a way the most radical kind of art anyone could make. Monet’s subterranean influence, if less reported, also extends to the generations of bathroom and bedroom impressionists who are dismissed by art history, but who, painting away in low-status but lucrative corners, continue to pour out countless sub-Monets to placate a still-hungry market. You cannot turn a corner in a show of Sunday painters without seeing an effort at Monet.

The eyes have it. They always do. The optical painters, the ones who inquire into light more than literature, with minimal obvious moralizing or dramatic editorial point, have always been the most enduring for other artists: Johannes Vermeer and Giovanni Bellini are in this set, and no one more than Monet. The best way to enter another’s hands and mind is to begin only as an eye.

With this exhibition, the adventures of the



MONET AND CHICAGO: A NEW CHAPTER

Gloria Groom

"Why go to Paris since Paris has come to Chicago?"¹

Although Claude Monet's dealer Paul Durand-Ruel never ventured west of New York and Monet himself would never visit America, a critic's gushing 1888 review of paintings by Monet along with those of his confreres Alfred Sisley and Camille Pissarro presented at a local gallery attests to how Impressionist art in general was fast becoming part of Chicago's cultural landscape. Three years before, on the eve of an important exhibition of Impressionism in New York—the first ever in the United States, to which Durand-Ruel lent forty-one paintings by Monet—the artist lamented to his dealer, "Do you really need so many paintings for America? People are forgetting about us here [in Paris] because as soon as you have a new painting you make it disappear."²

Chicago's embrace of the vanguard painting of Impressionism accelerated in 1890 when Monet and other Impressionist artists were included at the Inter-State Industrial Exposition of Chicago. The exposition space was razed two years later to make way for a building constructed for

the World's Columbian Exposition, which would later become the site of the Art Institute of Chicago.³ This unprecedented world's fair galvanized the city's leaders and was indirectly responsible for Monet's success there. Collectors like the Palmers and Ryersons—the major tributaries through which Monet paintings flowed into the Art Institute—began acquiring his works in 1891 as preparations for the fair were gaining momentum. As president of the Board of Lady Managers, Bertha Honoré Palmer ensured that Monet, whose art she had "discovered" only a few years before, was represented in a loan exhibition at the Woman's Building, as well as in the ninety-foot combination ballroom and picture gallery of her Lake Shore Drive home, known as "the Castle" (see p. XX, fig. XX). She had built the room to display her collection of Monet and other "Moderns" to local and foreign notables.⁴ By the end of her most active buying period, 1891-92, the Palmers owned some ninety paintings by the artist, many of which entered the museum with their bequest in 1922. Many others were returned or exchanged within years of their acquisition—the Palmers' collecting principles guided by the same

1873

The city of Chicago hosts the annual Inter-State Industrial Exposition beginning in 1873 (which continues until 1890), both to demonstrate its recovery from the devastating fire of 1871 and to reclaim its role as a major commercial center. The exhibition hall includes an art gallery intended to promote cultural sophistication among Chicagoans. Potter Palmer, one of several businessmen investors, meets Sara Tyson Hallowell, secretary of the exposition's Fine Art Department, who later serves as the Palmers' art advisor.²

1874

From April 15 to May 15, the group of artists who would become known as the Impressionists hold their first independent group exhibi-

tion (of eight) at the former studio of photographer Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, called Nadar, at 35 boulevard des Capucines, Paris.

1876

Monet's *Apple Trees in Blossom* (cat. XX [W201]) and *The Beach at Sainte-Adresse* (cat. XX [W92]) are among the eighteen paintings he shows at the second Impressionist exhibition.³

1877

Monet paints the Paris Saint-Lazare train station twelve times, an early instance of his variations on a single subject, and exhibits *Arrival of the Normandy Train* (cat. XX) alongside six others at the third Impressionist exhibition that spring.

1878

After financial difficulties force Monet to leave Paris in summer, he settles in Vétheuil, where he lives in a modest house with his wife, Camille, and their two sons, as well as Ernest Hoschedé, one of the artist's most important early patrons, and Hoschedé's family. The artist would return to Vétheuil again and again (see cats. XX-XX), painting the rural landscape in a place imbued with personal significance.

1879

Camille Monet dies and is buried in Vétheuil; soon after the artist becomes involved with Ernest Hoschedé's wife, Alice, whom he eventually marries in 1892 after Ernest's death in 1891.

Monet shows twenty-nine paintings, including *The Parc Monceau* (cat. XX [W468]) and *Apple Trees Vétheuil* (cat. XX [W490]), at the fourth Impressionist exhibition, which showcases works by the artist from as early as 1867.

1880

Annie Swan (see fig. 4) marries Lewis Larned Coburn, a prominent patent attorney and one of the founders (and first president) of the Union League Club of Chicago. Upon his death in 1910, Annie Coburn begins to collect art, initially purchasing American works and gradually expanding her collection to include French Impressionist paintings.

1881

Martin A. Ryerson marries Carrie Hutchinson on October 26. Hutchinson's father, Charles Hutchinson, had been a founding trustee of the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts in 1878. Three years later, after the organization is



Fig. 4. Annie Swan Coburn.

renamed as the Art Institute of Chicago, Charles Hutchinson is named its first president, a role he holds from 1882 to his death in 1924. Martin Ryerson serves as a trustee of the Art Institute from 1890 to 1924 and as its vice-president for many years. Martin and Carrie Ryerson are among the most generous donors in the Art Institute's history.

1882

Monet shows thirty-five paintings, including *Boats Lying at Low Tide at Fécamp* (cat. XX [W645]), at the seventh Impressionist Exhibition (March 1-April 2).⁴

In May Monet receives an ambitious commission to decorate the six double doors of the large eighteenth-century-style drawing-room in Paul Durand-Ruel's apartment at 35 rue de Rome in Paris, for which he produced at least forty canvases, including *Vase of Dahlias* (cat.

XX [W 931]), between 1882 and 1885.

1883

Durand-Ruel organizes Monet's second solo exhibition at his gallery, from February 28 to March 27. It includes about sixty landscapes, including *The Artist's House at Argenteuil* (cat. XX [W284]), *Apple Trees* (cat. XX [W489]), and possibly *Falaise à Varengeville* (cat. XX [W806]). Critic Philippe Burty appraises these three canvases as "completely modern," both in their "agitated aesthetic" and execution: "He paints from afar,' one of his colleagues told me, describing in a striking way his technique, which in fact does not consist in hunching over the easel tracing the contours of objects with a paintbrush, but rather in laying down the touch that must evoke the idea of the hue rather than the memory of the details. . . . It is from afar that these paintings must be judged."⁵ Durand-Ruel buys a number of these canvases in April and more the following October.

With considerable financial support from Durand-Ruel, Monet moves to what will be his final home in Giverny, a village of 279 inhabitants fifty miles northwest of Paris and across the Seine from the town of Vernon. Many artists, collectors, dealers, and friends will visit the artist there, touring his studio and gardens.

1884

In a letter to Monet dated November 18, Durand-Ruel inquires whether he would consider a trip to the United States, where artist Mary Cassatt promises a ready market. Monet never makes the voyage.⁶

1885

Durand-Ruel begins arrangements for a large

group exhibition in New York for April 1886. Monet confides that he is upset by the prospect of his works leaving for the "land of the Yankees" and hopes that some can be kept in Paris, which is, he believes, "the only place where there is still a little taste."⁷

The Palmers move into their new home (see fig. 5), nicknamed "the Castle," after two years of construction, at 1350 North Lake Shore Drive (then called North Shore Drive), where they host society events.

1886

The first exhibition of French Impressionist art in the United States opens at the American Art Galleries, New York, in April. Durand-Ruel lends forty-one paintings by Monet, including *Near Monte Carlo* (cat. XX [W851]) and *The Seine at Port-Villez, Snow Effect* (cat. XX [W962]).⁸ In a letter to the dealer, the artist lamented, "What's left in France? Because I want to believe in your hopes, in America, but even more and especially I would like to have my works known and sold here [in France]."⁹



Fig. 5. The Palmers' home, "The Castle," at 1350 North Lake Shore Drive, 1890/1910. Institutional Archives, Art Institute of Chicago.



Fig. 3. The Palmer House, Chicago, 1873. Lithograph by the American Olligraph Company. Chicago History Museum, ichi-39476.



67. *Houses of Parliament, London, 1900/1*
The Art Institute of Chicago, Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection, 1933.1164