

Claude Monet was arguably the most influential painter of the Impressionist movement; even the word “impressionism” comes from one of Monet’s paintings. Monet’s paintings radically transformed the accepted styles of the time. His work influenced countless painters and established the basis of modern painting. However, Monet’s technique was as much the culmination of influences by great artists as it was his own creation.

Monet was born Oscar-Claude Monet on November 14, 1840 in Paris. He would later drop Oscar from his name, although until 1862, he signed his artwork with this name, while signing his letters “Claude.”¹ Monet only lived in Paris for five years until his father, Claude-Adolphe moved the family to Le Havre, a port city in France.

At age ten, Monet enrolled at the Le Havre secondary school, although he professed much disdain for it: “School was like a prison for me. I could never resign myself to staying there even for four hours a day.”² However, Monet was fortunate enough to have Jacques-Francois Ochoa as an art teacher, as he was a former student of Jacques-Louis David. At this age, Monet enjoyed drawing landscapes and simple aspects of nature, such as trees, which mostly mimicked the work of previous artists.³

What is most interesting about Monet’s early years is his denial and contradictory recounting of them. We know from surviving notebooks that Monet’s early sketches were mechanical and imitating of older artists, but he would later claim that at this age he drew “spontaneously” and “(covered) his schoolbooks with fantastic designs.”⁴ Similarly, he would later allege to have held disdain for his next mentor, Eugene Boudin: “His painting inspired in me great aversion...without knowing the man, I hated him.”

Despite these feelings, Boudin would be the man who set Monet forth on his style of painting.

Boudin also lived in Le Havre, and his artwork was often on display in shops alongside Monet's. How they met exactly in 1856 is unknown, but in a town whose population was 116,000 in 1900⁵, the meeting of two artists whose work was sold in the same shops is inevitable. Boudin introduced Monet to painting outdoors, which would later become essential to his style.

In the spring of 1859, Monet sent a request to the city council of Le Havre to be granted a stipend to study art in Paris. This request was denied, but Monet went anyway and studied at the Academie Suisse, where he would meet and befriend fellow artist Camille Pissarro. During his time in Paris Monet was exposed to the works of contemporary artists such as Delacroix and Rousseau, which he often criticized.⁶ This would further influence him to stray from the then popular styles.

An unlucky pick in the draft lottery sent Claude Monet into military service in Algeria in 1861. He would not stay long, as he came down with typhoid fever in 1862, but the impression of the strong effects of light in Algiers would forever stay with him and his work.⁷

After resting in Le Havre for several months and painting several seaside landscapes, Monet returned to Paris in 1862. There he entered the studio of Charles Gleyre, a classical painter who criticized the artist's realistic portrayals and instead encouraged him to paint in the "antique" style.⁸ Again, Monet would later claim that due to this criticism, he only stayed at the studio for a couple weeks, when in reality he was there until the studio's closing in 1863.⁹ Nevertheless, it was at this studio that Monet

met three artists of similar influence: Renoir, Sisley, and Bazille. Monet became good friends with all of these artists, especially Bazille with whom he would periodically live and paint.

For a while, Monet avoided the Salon, which was the official art exhibition of France. This may have been a bold movement against the established method of showing art, or it could have simply been due to insecurity about his work. Eventually though, financial pressure from his parents¹⁰ prompted him to submit two canvases to the Salon in 1865. Both were accepted and received enormous praise.

Following this success, Monet embarked on a grand painting titled, *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*. This was to be based on Edouard Manet's painting *Le Bain* (he later changed the title to *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*; which, exhibited 1863 at the Salon des Refuses (the exhibition for all the Salon rejects) great controversy because of its "immoral" content¹¹. The painting was also departure from previous styles, because of its unhidden brushstrokes, an element of impressionism. Monet did not finish his more straightforward, simple version by the deadline of the 1866 Salon and instead rushed a portrait of his future wife, Camille-Leonie Doncieux, which was accepted, and again highly praised. For reasons known only to him, Monet never would finish *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*.

For financial reasons, Monet was forced to return home to Le Havre in 1867. He would soon return to Paris, though, and settle in 1869 at Bougival, where he often painted with Renoir. The two had great influence on each other's paintings during this period and Renoir himself admitted that if they were not signed, he would have difficulty telling which artist had done them.¹²

Eighteen-Seventy marked the beginning of the Franco-Prussian war, and as a result, the beginning of Monet's time in London with Pissarro. This stay introduced Monet to the works of English painters such as Turner and Whistler, whose art would influence him to employ the subtle use of color his later paintings are known for.¹³

Upon his return to France in 1871, he settled at Argenteuil, a city on the Seine River. Here, he began planning a new exhibition for independent artists, which would be the first of its kind. It was at this exhibition in 1874 that Monet displayed his *Impression: Soleil Levant*. This is one of his most well-known works, and portrays his growing method of painting fast to capture the essence of light on a subject. Impression implies that it is not meant to be a purely realistic copy of the subject, but a viewpoint of it. A critic of the exhibition, Louis Leroy, used the name to derogatorily dub Monet and his fellow painters "impressionists."¹⁴

In the following years, impressionism moved from an experimental art to an established style. Monet continued with his impressions of landscapes, and produced some of his most famous paintings such as such as *La Femme a l'Ombrelle* and *Gare Saint-Lazare*. Monet's influence became evident as other artists, such as Degas, departed from their previous styles, and adopted one more similar to his.¹⁵

Monet moved to his final home at Giverny in 1883. Like his many of his past homes, it was on the Seine and in an area of vast beauty to Monet's eye. Throughout the 1880's, Monet became more independent in his painting. He drew inspiration as always from landscapes and simple scenes of life, while others drew their inspiration from him. Impressionism was now serving as a basis for newer forms and techniques such as "pointillism" and "divisionism"¹⁶

Light had been growing in significance to Monet's work all his life. Now, he began to truly understand the importance of it. His focus shifted even more from the subject of the painting, to the conditions of it. His series of haystacks best exemplifies this, because of the seeming dullness of the subject and the beauty of the paintings. After this and a series of poplars, Monet embarked on his most impressive series yet, the Rouen Cathedral. Beginning in 1892, he painted the Rouen Cathedral 26 different times, all from generally the same angle, but each at a slightly different time of day or weather.

This would be the last of Monet's experiments, although his artwork would continue to change throughout his life. It became increasingly surreal, and the defining lines of things increasingly blurred; the focus continued to be on light. Before his death in 1926, he completed several more paintings which are now world famous, such as his water-lilies, or the paintings of the Parliament in London.

It is impossible to deny the impact of Claude Monet on the world of art. His inspiration of new artists and even entire movements is remarkable, but understandable when one views his work. Without the influence and support of past artists and his contemporaries though, Monet's style might have ended up quite different.

1399 Words

¹ Paul Hayes Tucker, *Claude Monet: Life and Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 5

² Raymond Cogniat, *Monet and his world* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1966) 8

³ Tucker, *Claude Monet: Life and Art* 7-8

⁴ Ibid. 6

⁵ “Havre, Le,” *The Nuttall Encyclopedia* 1907

⁶ Tucker, *Claude Monet: Life and Art* 13

⁷ Ibid. 18

⁸ William C. Seitz, *Claude Monet* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1960) 14

⁹ Robert Gordon and Andrew Forge, *Monet* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc. 1983) 14-15

¹⁰ Cogniat, *Monet and his world* 22

¹¹ Lisa MacDonald, “Edouard Manet,” 1999, <<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/M/manet.html>> (16 November 2006)

¹² Cogniat, *Monet and his world* 45

¹³ Ibid. 47

¹⁴ Gordon and Forge, *Monet* 52

¹⁵ Meyer Schapiro, “Claude Monet,” 1997, <<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/M/monet.html>> (18 November 2006)

¹⁶ Cogniat, *Monet and his world* 102