

Claude Monet

Claude Monet (cl-ohd mun-ay) is the best-known painter of the impressionist movement. Today, his work hardly seems radical. However, to art viewers of the 1870s, his paintings seemed unfinished and sketchy — nothing like they had ever seen before. Monet and the other impressionists turned away from the past, rejecting traditional subjects such as history or religion, and painting the modern world around them in new ways.

Many of the impressionists, Monet included, painted outdoors, a practice made easier by the recent invention of paint in tubes. Their primary goal was to capture on canvas the atmosphere of a particular moment in time through the use of colour and light. In this painting, Monet has successfully conveyed the feeling of a late winter day in Argenteuil, a suburb of Paris. There is a sense of dampness and chill in the air; however, the snow seems to be melting, as the multiple greens of the grass and many browns of the path emerge from underneath. The sky is not simply grey, but also includes pale pinks and yellows, perhaps indicating the approach of the clearer skies of spring.

The short, choppy brushstrokes you see in this painting were characteristic of impressionism. Through them, the artists intended to recreate the vibrating quality of light and lend their paintings a certain spontaneity. Each dab of paint is an unmixed colour. Monet and others believed that placing two colours next to each other on the canvas and allowing the viewer's eye to mix them optically would result in a more intense hue than if the colours were first blended on a palette. The brushstrokes make the painting blurry when up close; by standing back, viewers get a different effect. Monet almost never used black — only for clothing and other man-made objects. If you look carefully at the shadows, you will notice that they are not black, but various shades of brown, blue, purple, green, and so on.

The scene represented in this painting is a tow-path along the Seine River in Argenteuil. In the past, horses pulled barges along the river from the tow-path. Monet lived in Argenteuil for six years in the 1870s, during which time the town changed quite dramatically. Since it was only a short distance from Paris by train, many new factories were built, which attracted workers from the city. If you look carefully into the distance in this painting, you can see some of the smokestacks of the industry at Argenteuil. Also, it became a favourite spot for Parisians to go on weekends to enjoy the countryside, participate in boat races (regattas), and enjoy walks along the river, as we see the figures in this painting doing. In *Tow-Path at Argenteuil, Winter*, Monet shows both aspects of Argenteuil: the peace and quiet, which is what attracted him to the village; and the smokestacks of modern industry, which eventually drove him to leave in 1878. By that time, an iron works had opened up across the street from his house, permits had been granted for a distillery and chemical company to be built, and increasing quantities of waste from Paris were polluting the river.

While many impressionists became dissatisfied with the style, Monet alone continued to develop it. As his work continued into the twentieth century, forms became less and less distinct, until they sometimes disappeared altogether in a dazzle of color and light.