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book review of

Monet by Ségolène Le Men

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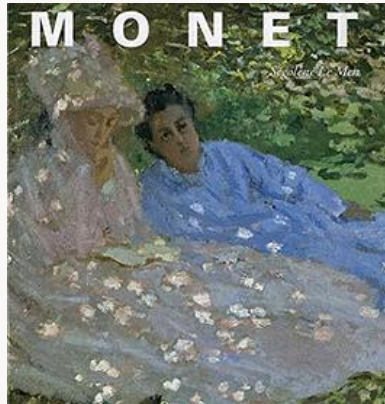
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Ségolène Le Men,
Monet.

Paris: Éditions Citadelles & Mazenod, 2010.
416 pp, 320 color illus.; bibliography; index.
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The publication of Ségolène Le Men's *Monet* coincided with the veritable Monet mania that swept France in the summer and fall of 2010. With the landmark *Monet* retrospective at the Grand Palais and *Monet: Son Musée* at the Musée Marmottan Monet, the multi-museum Impressionist exhibition in the summer of 2010, and the numerous publications that accompanied each of these exhibitions, we would be well inclined to ask just why the world needs yet another monograph on Claude Monet (1840–1926). Le Men herself asks just this in the opening pages of her book “Inevitably the question arises: what good can come from a new book on Monet? [...] How does one say [something] without repeating too much?” (16).^[1]

Le Men offers her *Monet* book as a more humanistic portrait of the artist that nonetheless takes into account Monet's active self-promotion and the important role of galleries on both sides of the Atlantic in contributing to his international success. Dutifully leading us from Paris to Normandy, London, Holland, Bordighera, Venice, and, finally to Giverny, Le Men weaves together an interdisciplinary account of Monet's work that gives pride of place to his exhibition history while highlighting what she calls the “foisonnement poétique” or “poetic abundance” of his work. What emerges is a portrait of an artist who at once possessed deeply literary sensibilities and a sharp business acumen. This Monet, however, is nothing new.

According to Le Men, among the original contributions of her book “. . . was to tackle the ensemble of Monet's career in which the complete oeuvre is constructed around certain leitmotifs by a system of echoes, variations, repetitions, but also ruptures” (22). ^[2] Yet, such is a task assumed by many previous scholars on Monet, not least among them Daniel Wildenstein, John House, Joel Isaacson, and Virginia Spate, all scholars on whose work Le Men relies heavily. Le Men's book also owes a great debt to excellent Monet exhibition catalogs, notably

The Unknown Monet: Pastels and Drawings (Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown MA; Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2007), and *Turner, Whistler, Monet* (Grand Palais, Paris, 2004). While it is true that there has been a dearth of academic publication on Monet within the past five years (particularly in France), Le Men's *Monet* falls into the very trap she set out to avoid: it says too little of something different and too much of what has already been said.

Divided into seven parts, the book begins at the beginning and ends at the end of Monet's life, reprising a standard chronological structure that attenuates the more interesting and innovative arguments Le Men attempts to make. Parts 1–3 trace the development of Monet's early years as an artist: his brief stint as a caricaturist, his move from Le Havre to Paris, from the confines of the studio to the freedom of painting en plein air, and later, from Paris to London and Holland. Particular emphasis is given to the genesis of Monet's interest in things Japanese and to early critical readings of his work.

Parts 4–6 take us from the early impressionist years up through Monet's painting campaigns in Normandy. Le Men's focus in this middle section of the book is twofold. On the one hand, she aims to situate Impressionism within a broader international context by emphasizing Monet's admiration for Whistler and Turner and by pointing to the importance of Monet's time in Holland. On the other hand, she underscores the implications of a burgeoning tourist industry on Monet's landscape painting. According to Le Men, Monet's choice of painting locations was bound to the logic of *voyages pittoresques* and to a desire on the part of Monet to follow and respond to the traces of artistic precedents in each place he visited. Le Men writes: "I wanted to show that his choices [of site] were linked to one another by a diagrammatic logic comparable to the reading of a map, and above all by a poetics. This distribution of voyages successively adhered to two principles, that of the tour [...], and that of the confrontation with other artistic schools, as we see beginning in Norway, followed by England and Italy" (298).^[3] Broadly speaking, Le Men's analysis of Monet's painting in relation to popular tourism is convincing. This is particularly true of her discussion of Monet's Rouen cathedral series, where Le Men points to similarities between Monet's work and illustrations for popular travel guides as well as to previous representations of the cathedral by such artists as J. M. W. Turner. More problematic are Le Men's frequent and largely unsubstantiated references to Monet's "poetics."

Throughout the book, but particularly in the later chapters, Le Men makes a point of placing Monet's work in a poetic register. She refers repeatedly to the artist's "poetics" yet never fully develops a reading of the poetry in his work. Readers inclined to see the literary qualities of Monet's landscapes will be left disappointed by the lack of substantive evidence to back up Le Men's more provocative claims. In Part 4, for example, Le Men asserts that the period during which Monet travelled extensively to paint, "... permitted contemporaries of Helmholtz to rethink the categories of the sublime and the picturesque through redefined concepts of spatiotemporal perception that would transform the notion of site, unique to voyages pittoresques or tours of France, by a poetic of geographic space and climate diversity" (213).^[4] Here, as elsewhere, Le Men inserts poetic sounding phrases and concepts developed by writers like Gaston Bachelard, to whose *Poetics of Space* (1958) Le Men is presumably referring, without expanding such concepts in relation to Monet's work. As a result, Le Men's effort to draw out the "foisonnement poétique" of Monet's painting often rings empty.

The final part of *Monet* is devoted to a discussion of the *Nymphéas* painted at Giverny, and to the so-called *Grandes Décorations* for the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris. As she makes a point of emphasizing in her introduction, Le Men interprets these last of Monet's paintings as "an impulsive oeuvre, marked by tensions of war, followed by the return of peace" (23).^[5] This connection between Monet's Grand Décorations and the trauma of World War I was argued perceptively and persuasively by Romy Golan in her essay "Oceanic Sensations: Monet's Grandes Décorations and Mural Painting in France from 1927–1952" for the *Monet in the 20th Century* catalog (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Royal Academy of Arts, London 1998–99), which Le Men does not acknowledge. Of course the volume of research on Monet makes at least partial repetition of previous work nearly unavoidable. Furthermore, Le Men's book is not without original insight.

Among the strengths of Le Men's work is her introduction of new sources ranging from passages from nineteenth-century literature to hitherto unpublished letters received by Monet at Giverny. More than most previous Monet scholars, Le Men draws special attention to Monet's relationship to prominent French literary figures, ranging from Victor Hugo to Guy de Maupassant and Octave Mirbeau. While Le Men's references are often original and intriguing, she does not fully develop the insightful connections she draws between painting and prose. In Part 2 we are told that Monet's *Méditation, Madame Monet au canapé* (1870–71, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), a portrait of the artist's first wife, Camille Doncieux, on a chaise longue, evokes "... simultaneously the sobriety characteristic of Whistler's interiors and the theory of the arabesque in interior decor analyzed by Edgar Poe" (142).^[6] There is no further mention of the subject following this statement. That Monet was an avid reader of Poe, as he was of Mirbeau and Maupassant is a well-known fact. Yet, to date, Monet scholars have not attempted to mine what may be the more profound connections among these figures. Was Poe on Monet's mind when he was in London? What is there to Mirbeau's observation that, "Involuntarily, one thinks of some Ligeia figure," (the title character from Poe's eponymous story) when looking at Monet's *Jeune fille à l'ombrelle* (1886, Musée d'Orsay, Paris)?^[7] As she does throughout the book, here Le Men provides rich material for a new understanding of Monet, but she herself does not make good use of it.

The same is true of many of Le Men's most insightful visual analyses. In Part 1, Le Men avers that the sinuous compositional lines of Monet's copy of Nadar's *Pantheon Nadar* (1854) for *Le Charivari* presage the curving slope of Monet's poplar paintings from the 1890s (44). Not only are these images not juxtaposed side by side, but also the comparison is not mentioned again until some three hundred pages later. Le Men's connection is astute, but it loses weight and coherence when spread out over the more than four hundred pages of her book.

For such a beautifully illustrated work, rarely does Le Men's *Monet* employ images in a way that would fortify the author's comparisons. A particularly conspicuous example comes in the form of Le Men's discussion of Robert Bingham's photograph after Paul Delaroche's *La Jeune Martyre* (1855, Musée du Louvre, Paris). As Le Men rightly points out, Delaroche's painting of a young girl floating in the water is a variation of popular images of Ophelia. Bingham's albumen print (1860) converts the aqueous hues of Delaroche's painting into gradations of gray so that the heroine appears to be drowning in shadow. According to Le Men, this image would "durably haunt the imagination of Claude Monet" (72).^[8] There is neither a citation for nor explanation of this assertion.

For those who know Monet's work, the assumption is that Le Men is alluding to the similarity between Bingham's image and Monet's later painting of his first wife, Camille, on her deathbed. In *Camille sur son lit de mort* (1879, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) Camille, like *La Jeune Martyre*, is submerged in shadow, her face barely visible beneath a barrage of grey marks. Although the composition and technique of Monet's painting are wildly different from Bingham's image, there is nonetheless a strong case to be made that Bingham's print indeed "haunted" Monet's imagination when he sat down to paint his dying wife. Nonetheless, Le Men never mentions these two images in relation to one another. In fact, *Camille sur son lit de mort* is not discussed until one hundred pages after Le Men's mention of Bingham. Readers unfamiliar with Monet's painting are thus left to wonder just what Le Men meant in her initial claims for the importance of this image to Monet. Le Men's introduction of new and provocative material in relation to Monet's work is thus undermined by lack of substantiation.

Le Men's analyses of even the most well traveled aspects of Monet's career deserve more attention than she gives them. Discussing his renowned (though incomplete) painting *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1865–66, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), Le Men raises the specter of the rococo and images of *fêtes galantes* by painters like Jean-Antoine Watteau. Le Men frankly acknowledges that she was not the first to make this connection, yet she might well have been the first to take seriously the implications of the rococo style on Monet's art, a subject that extends beyond *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. Not only does Le Men cite a comment made by Mirbeau in which he stated that Monet's late figures of women were "adorned with a supreme grace, like those of Watteau," but also she highlights the decorative paintings that Monet completed for the interior of Paul Durand-Ruel's rococo salon (164).^[9] That Monet, who built his reputation on breaking with the past, should look back toward the rococo is a phenomenon that warrants further attention.

For those who believe that there is more than meets the eye to Monet's art, or more than "simply an eye" as Cézanne once said, Le Men's text provides welcome fodder for further research. Yet Le Men does not allow herself the latitude to pursue the most exciting material she introduces. The sheer breadth of the project makes sustained analysis of individual paintings and texts necessarily limited. Nonetheless, Le Men should be commended for attempting to rethink Monet's oeuvre. It takes courage to take on such an iconic figure, but it takes greater courage still to say something truly different. In this respect, Le Men did not fully meet her challenge.

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Notes

[1] "Immanquablement, s'est posée la question: à quoi bon un nouveau livre sur Monet [...] Comment dire sans trop redire?"

[2] "... l'une des originalités de ce livre a donc été d'aborder l'ensemble de la carrière de Monet, dans laquelle l'oeuvre complet se construit autour de quelques leitmotive par un système d'échos, de variations, de reprises, mais aussi de ruptures."

[3] “J’ai voulu montrer que ces choix étaient reliés les uns aux autres par la logique diagrammatique qui s’offre à la lecture d’une carte, et surtout par une poétique. Cette distribution des lieux du voyage a obéi successivement à deux principes, celui du Tour [...], puis celui de la confrontation à d’autres écoles artistiques, comme cela s’amorce en Norvège et se poursuit en Angleterre et en Italie.”

[4] “Cette période viatique de Monet permet alors aux contemporains de Helmholtz de repenser les catégories du sublime et du pittoresques à partir de cadres perceptifs spatio-temporels redéfinis qui transforment la notion de site, propre aux voyages pittoresques ou au tour de la France, par une poétique de l’espace géographique et de la diversité climatique.”

[5] “. . . Grandes Décorations, que j’ai choisi d’interpréter comme une oeuvre impulsive marquée par les tensions de la guerre, puis tu retour à la paix.”

[6] “. . . ce tableau parvient à évoquer simultanément la sobriété revendiquée par Whistler dans ses intérieurs et la théorie de l’arabesque dans le décor intérieur analysée par Edgar Poe.”

[7] Octave Mirbeau, “Claude Monet” in *L’Art dans les Deux Mondes*, no. 16 (March 1891), 184.

[8] “...une variation sur le thème d’Ophélie [...]qui va hanter durablement l’imaginaire de Claude Monet.”

[9] “. . . parées de grâce souveraine comme celle de Watteau.” Octave Mirbeau, “Claude Monet,” *Galerie Georges Petit*, 8 rue de Sèze, Claude Monet/ A. Rodin, Paris, 1889, p.11.