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Theresa A. Cunningham

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Monet and Boston: Lasting Impression

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Monet and Boston: Lasting Impression

Reviewed by Theresa A. Cunningham

Monet and Boston: Lasting Impression

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

November 15, 2020–March 28, 2021

(dates subject to change due to the COVID-19 pandemic)

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Katie Hanson,

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The fascination in the United States with Impressionism dates to the very emergence of the style itself, with major collectors—including Louisine Havemeyer, Bertha and Potter Palmer, and Alexander Cassatt—establishing significant collections of works by Claude Monet and his contemporaries in the nineteenth century.^[1] Many of these works were subsequently donated to museums, and today Monet's work is readily accessible to visitors at public collections in major cities throughout the United States. Although Boston's best-known Gilded Age collector, Isabella Stewart Gardner, primarily focused her collecting on works by Old Masters and chose to construct her own museum in which to house them, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston nonetheless amassed a significant collection of works by Monet, acquired through the generosity of a number of donors, as well as strategic purchases made by the museum over the years. These thirty-five oil paintings, along with several works on loan from local private collections, are the subject of *Monet and Boston: Lasting Impression*, an exhibition which considers the appeal of the Impressionist master to Boston area collectors on the occasion of the museum's 150th anniversary (fig. 1). The MFA held its first solo show devoted to Monet in 1911, but this installation unites all of the museum's works by Monet and displays them together for the first time in a generation (10).

Fig. 1, Visitor photographing *The Water Lily Pond*, 1900, by Claude Monet.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Installed in the museum's Linde Family Wing for Contemporary Art, the exhibition opens with a 1915 film clip depicting the artist at work in the gardens surrounding his home in Giverny, France. From here, the exhibition proceeds in roughly chronological order, dividing the MFA's Monet works into four thematic galleries, "Becoming Monet," "Monet and Japonisme," "Monet's Normandy," and "Monet's Magic." Works by the artist from the museum and local private collections are interspersed with select objects from the MFA's permanent collection that provide instances of stylistic comparison. A detailed audio guide, available to visitors through the museum's mobile app, provides additional commentary from the curator of the exhibition, Katie Hanson.

Each object in the installation is given its own didactic text, with many labels including additional information that relates the work of art to Boston or elaborates on how the object was acquired by the museum in addition to the standard interpretive material. When possible, the labels include quotations from artists and local critics or excerpts from Boston area papers, chronicling the response to these paintings when they were displayed in the city for the first time. Although Monet never visited Boston, or any United States city for that matter, these quotes help to anchor the exhibition within the artist's own lifetime, emphasizing both the critical reaction and general fascination with Impressionist painting, and Monet in particular, that captured the attention of Bostonians during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The first gallery, "Becoming Monet" begins with an 1858 caricature, *Dandy with a Small Cigar*, executed while Monet was still a teenager (figs. 2, 3). Although the oldest work included in the installation, it is the most recent acquisition and is on view at the MFA for the first time in this exhibition. The drawing comes from the earliest moments of the artist's career when he was still signing works as Oscar Monet, his given name. It was not until the 1860s that he would begin to be called by his second name, Claude. From this early drawing, the exhibition shifts to Monet's early landscape paintings created in the 1860s and early 1870s, before the display of *Impression, Sunrise* (1872, Musée Marmottan Monet) at the First Impressionist Exhibition would make the artist's name synonymous with that movement.

Fig. 2, Installation view of “Becoming Monet” gallery. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 3, On left: Claude Monet, *Dandy with a Small Cigar*, ca. 1858.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Monet’s early paintings were well received in Boston in part because he was deeply influenced by Barbizon artists including Théodore Rousseau and Jean-François Millet, whose work was already in favor with local collectors and well represented in the MFA’s collection. Works by Rousseau and Millet are displayed alongside Monet’s early landscapes, including *Woodgatherers at the Edge of the Forest* (ca. 1863, fig. 4). Likewise, Monet is similarly indebted to marine scenes of the beaches and harbors of Normandy painted by his early teachers Eugène Louis Boudin and Johan Barthold Jongkind. These nautical influences are also explored in the first gallery. Through exploring Monet’s early interest in the Barbizon School and other French landscape painters, the gallery lays the foundation for the artist’s enduring engagement with the genre, which would continue throughout his career (fig. 5). The vast majority of the MFA’s Monet collection is comprised of landscapes, with all periods of the artist’s career represented. Paintings from the second half of the 1870s round out the gallery and highlight the characteristic Impressionist style for which Monet is best known. Many of these works, including *Meadow with Poplars* (about 1875), depict the villages of Argenteuil, Lavacourt, and Vétheuil, communities along the Seine where Monet lived and worked at the time—just a short train journey from Paris (fig. 6).

Fig. 4, From left to right: Théodore Rousseau, *Edge of the Woods (Plain of Barbizon near Fontainebleau)*, ca. 1850–60.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 5, Installation view of “Becoming Monet” gallery. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 6, Claude Monet, *Meadow with Poplars*, ca. 1875. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The second gallery, entitled “Monet and Japonisme,” highlights a true masterpiece in the MFA’s collection, *La Japonaise* (1876), a portrait of the artist’s wife Camille in a kimono (fig. 7). As one of only three works by Monet purchased by the museum, the acquisition of *La Japonaise* was intended to solidify the connections between the MFA’s collection of nineteenth-century French painting and its Japanese holdings. Like many Frenchmen in the nineteenth century, Monet became enamored with Japanese culture, especially woodblock prints and *ukiyo-e*. After Japan reopened trade negotiations with western nations in 1853, woodblock prints were readily available in France and were prominently displayed at the 1867 Universal Exposition in Paris. Japonisme, or the western fascination with Japan, was almost as pervasive in Boston as it was in Paris. In this gallery, Monet’s Japanese influenced paintings are hung alongside prints collected by William Sturgis Bigelow, a Boston born doctor who donated over 75,000 Japanese art objects to the MFA that he had acquired during his travels in Japan.^[2] Woodblock prints by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, Utagawa Hiroshige I, and others help draw out the radical cropping and high horizon lines employed by Monet and situate these compositional techniques in relation to their Japanese antecedents.

Fig. 7, Installation view of “Monet and Japonisme” gallery. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

“Monet’s Normandy,” the third thematic gallery, considers the works Monet created in the 1880s, include those painted after he moved in 1883 to Giverny, where he would live for the rest of his life. Among these Normandy works are iconic scenes including *Poppy Field in a Hollow near Giverny* (1885, fig. 8). These landscapes embody the exploration of light, color, and atmosphere that became synonymous with Impressionism in the last decades of the nineteenth century (fig. 9). Their vibrant palette and charming subject matter appealed to both a younger generation of United States born artists as well as Boston collectors, who journeyed abroad to visit the area where the works had been painted. Monet frequently welcomed guests, such as the ex-patriot artist John Singer Sargent, to his home and gardens in Giverny. These relationships with fellow artists and visiting collectors are explored through archival material presented in this gallery, including a letter to the Boston artist Lilla Cabot Perry, who helped to acquire one of Monet’s paintings on behalf of her brother, Arthur Tracy Cabot. Installation photographs show works by Monet on view at the MFA in 1902. An entire wall in this gallery is devoted to a pair of intersecting timelines, chronicling Monet’s life and career in comparison to some of the major cultural events occurring in Boston at the same time. We learn, for example, that in 1883, the same year that Monet moved to Giverny full time, his work was first exhibited in Boston at Mechanic’s Hall in the South End.

Fig. 8, Claude Monet, *Poppy Field in a Hollow near Giverny*, 1885.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 9, Installation view of “Monet’s Normandy” gallery.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

At the end of his career, Monet turned to the same motifs repeatedly, considering subjects including the Rouen Cathedral and the water lily pond in his garden at Giverny in different seasons or times of day to capture the way light affected these views in distinct atmospheres (figs. 10, 11). These series paintings are displayed in the final gallery of the exhibition, “Monet’s Magic.” The series works brought Monet acclaim and commercial success in his own lifetime, and they were well received by Bostonians. The MFA is home to works from nearly all of Monet’s major series and the exhibition provides a rare opportunity to see pairings of works from a range of Monet’s late series on view together. Many of the subjects were ones he found near his home, including grain stacks in a nearby field and a view of the Seine near Giverny, yet others represent travels he took at the end of his career, such as a view of the Grand Canal in Venice and depictions of the coastline along the Mediterranean Sea in the South of France (fig. 12). As the section title suggests, the effect is ethereal. The bold choice of deep blue paint on the walls and dramatic lighting draws out the pastel hues of Monet’s paintings and enhances the luminosity of the gallery, reflecting the subtle shifts in environment that Monet is able to articulate through repeated consideration of a subject (figs. 13, 14). Series works would occupy the artist for the rest of his career (fig. 15).

Fig. 10, Claude Monet, *Rouen Cathedral Façade and Tour d'Albane (Morning Effect)*, 1894. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 11, Claude Monet, *Water Lilies*, 1907. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 12, Claude Monet, *Antibes, Afternoon Effect*, 1888. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 13, Installation view of “Monet’s Magic” gallery. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 14, Installation view of “Monet’s Magic” gallery. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Fig. 15, Visitors in front of *Grainstack (Sunset)*, 1891, by Claude Monet. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The exhibition coincided with the release of a related publication, *Monet: Paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, authored by the exhibition's curator. Although not intended as a catalogue of the exhibition, this brief book touches on similar themes, including an introductory essay that elaborates on Monet's reputation in Boston and the first installation of his work at the museum. Steeped in archival research, including quotations from Boston newspapers, MFA annual reports, and correspondence with artists, the essay elucidates the longstanding appreciation of Monet in Boston. Hanson argues that Monet's work was particularly appealing to both Boston collectors and the MFA because it resonated with viewers who were already familiar with French landscape paintings through the museum's robust collection of Barbizon School works (9). Monet's reputation in the city was sustained through the work of Boston-based artists who visited him in France and encouraged their acquaintances back home to collect his work. Although the MFA did not purchase their first Monet painting until 1924, the artist was well represented in local private collections by that time. The book goes on to examine each of the thirty-five oil paintings in the MFA's collection through brief entries that address historical and stylistic concerns. Although many of these short essays shed light on the paintings' connection to Boston and refer to their initial collector in the city, detailed provenance information is not included.

The MFA is not the only institution to reflect on its legacy during its sesquicentennial year or to consider the enduring popularity of Monet in their city. The concurrent exhibitions, *Making the Met, 1870–2020* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and *Monet and Chicago* at the Art Institute of Chicago reflect on similar themes of collecting and institutional growth. The MFA presents an interesting case study. Although the museum has amassed a major collection of Monet paintings, which anchor an impressive selection of nineteenth-century French art, no one donor is responsible for a majority of the MFA's selection of Monet works. The museum's deep holdings stem from a citywide interest in the artist that reached a height in the early decades of the twentieth century. In the case of major encyclopedic museums, the interests of early benefactors helped to shape the ways in which their collections developed. The MFA's acquisition of earlier French landscape painting helped to generate appeal for Monet's work in Boston and the museum's significant Monet collection has become a defining feature of the institution. As the museum reflects back on 150 years, it is clear that Monet has played a significant role in the development of MFA's rich collection of Impressionism.

Yet these works are rarely on view simultaneously and *Monet and Boston: Lasting Impression* offers the opportunity to see the true depth of the collection. At the same time, the MFA's Monet holdings are broad enough that the exhibition is able to provide a thorough overview of the artist's growth and development. Not quite a retrospective, the exhibition illuminates the broad strokes of Monet's career as seen through the paintings acquired by one city and provides an occasion for the institution to highlight a great strength of its collection.

Theresa A. Cunningham, PhD
Margaret R. Mainwaring Curatorial Fellow
Philadelphia Museum of Art

theresa.cunningham[at]philamuseum.org
theresa.a.cunningham[at]gmail.com

Notes

- [1] Anne Distel, *Impressionism: The First Collectors*, trans. Barbara Perroud-Benson (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1990), 242–43.
- [2] Christopher Reed, *Bachelor Japanists: Japanese Aesthetics and Western Masculinities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 125.

Illustrations

Fig. 1, Visitor photographing *The Water Lily Pond*, 1900, by Claude Monet. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. [\[return to text\]](#)

Fig. 2, Installation view of “Becoming Monet” gallery. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
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Fig. 3, On left: Claude Monet, *Dandy with a Small Cigar*, ca. 1858. Charcoal and white chalk. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. On right: Claude Monet, *Rue de la Bavoie, Honfleur*, ca. 1864. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. [\[return to text\]](#)

Fig. 4, From left to right: Théodore Rousseau, *Edge of the Woods (Plain of Barbizon near Fontainebleau)*, ca. 1850–60. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Jean-François-Millet, *Shepherdess Leaning on her Staff*, ca. 1852–53. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Claude Monet, *Woodgatherers at the Edge of the Forest*, ca. 1863. Oil on panel. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. [\[return to text\]](#)

Fig. 5, Installation view of “Becoming Monet” gallery. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
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Fig. 6, Claude Monet, *Meadow with Poplars*, ca. 1875. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
Bequest of David P. Kimball in memory of his wife Clara Bertram Kimball. Photograph © Museum of
Fine Arts, Boston. [\[return to text\]](#)

Fig. 7, Installation view of “Monet and Japonisme” gallery. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. [\[return to text\]](#)

Fig. 8, Claude Monet, *Poppy Field in a Hollow near Giverny*, 1885. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Julia Cheney Edwards Collection. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. [\[return to text\]](#)

Fig. 9, Installation view of "Monet's Normandy" gallery. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
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Fig. 10, Claude Monet, *Rouen Cathedral Façade and Tour d'Albane (Morning Effect)*, 1894. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Tompkins Collection—Arthur Gordon Tompkins Fund. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. [\[return to text\]](#)

Fig. 11, Claude Monet, *Water Lilies*, 1907. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Bequest of Alexander Cochrane. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. [\[return to text\]](#)

Fig. 12, Claude Monet, *Antibes, Afternoon Effect*, 1888. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Samuel Dacre Bush. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. [\[return to text\]](#)

Fig. 13, Installation view of “Monet’s Magic” gallery. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
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Fig. 14, Installation view of “Monet’s Magic” gallery. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
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Fig. 15, Visitors in front of *Grainstack (Sunset)*, 1891, by Claude Monet. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. [\[return to text\]](#)