

Monet and painting *en plein air*



The Church at Varengeville, Claude Monet, 1882, oil on canvas, 65 x 81.3 cm, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.



The Church at Varengeville Grey Weather, Claude Monet, 1882, oil on canvas, 65 x 81.3 cm, The Speed Art Museum, University of Louisville, Kentucky.

Transcript

Hello and welcome to our series of online Tuesday Talks presented by staff at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, at the University of Birmingham. I'm Beth Brankowski. Between September 2019 and February 2020, I was the Collections Intern at the Barber. Since then, I have been working in the Barber's Learning and Engagement team.

In this talk, I will be discussing Claude Monet's 1882 work *The Church at Varangeville* and the practice of *en plein air* painting. Translated into English, this literally means "in the open air".

The painting was purchased by the Barber Institute in 1938 and is among the most popular in the collection. It depicts a church situated in the small Normandy fishing village of Varangeville. The church is seen in the left distance on the crest of a hill, which slopes steeply down towards the lower right corner. In the right foreground, and on a slight incline, grow two windblown trees, which stand out strongly against the sky. This picture is one of a series painted by Monet, in which he represents the same scene at different times of day. It is Monet's extraordinarily vivid rendering of the effects of evening light on the scene that make this painting so memorable – and ground breaking.

After discussing the formal elements of the work in more detail, I will outline the reasons why *en plein air* painting became so popular in the second half of the nineteenth century. Although artists had long painted outside to create preparatory landscape sketches or studies, before the nineteenth century, finished works would not have been made in this way. The practice of *en plein air* painting was popularised by the Impressionists who chose to confront nature directly by producing completed paintings outdoors. This practice was fundamental to their art as they sought to capture the transitory effects of light. At the time this work was painted, Monet was visiting a number of areas away from Paris, both in France and the Mediterranean. He was particularly attracted to Normandy, travelling extensively along the northern coastline of France, often finding inspiration at the village of Varengeville and the seaside towns of Pourville and Trouville.

In his treatment of the hillside in this work, Monet contrasts complementary colours – sections of oranges and reds sit against blues and greens – while the boldly asymmetrical and flat composition echoes Japanese landscape prints. Interestingly, Monet, along with other Impressionist artists, was an avid collector of these types of work. These colours placed next to each other has the result of making them look brighter and more vibrant. The palette sets the foreground foliage ablaze in a rush of fiery oranges, reds and yellows. We can also see the looser strokes of cool greens, lilacs and blues which Monet used to describe the shady vista in the background, which sweeps upwards to the misty hilltop, swathed in gilded pinks and warm yellows. The choice of colours used in the work is not coincidental; Monet used complementary colours enthusiastically in his paintings. The palette of the painting is complemented by the pale blue sea to the right, balancing the composition with the sinking sunlight behind the church.

While the influence of Japanese prints did not lead Monet to rearrange nature, they did help him to visualise his motifs in fresh ways, showing him how to set off the silhouetted trees and the irregular contours of the background against a high horizon line: in this way he could create an effect truer to the way in which such scenes appear in nature. It becomes apparent when examining the work that Monet is not seeking to depict the church in a faithful manner, but instead explore the visual phenomena of the scene – the light, the colour and the atmosphere of this dramatic setting on the Normandy coast. When the Impressionist school first achieved public notice (and notoriety) in the 1870s, few people could see, or were willing to believe, that it was a naturalistic movement, dedicated to the faithful rendering of actual visual experience. Instead, Monet, as exemplified in this painting, sought to convey the momentary elusiveness of the impression.

This is reflected in the circumstances of the work's production – it was painted directly from nature, with Monet editing and altering what he saw to imbue the scene with harmonious effect.

The *plein air* approach is widely believed to have been pioneered by John Constable in England in the 1810s. Constable used a technique of producing an *en plein air* oil sketch which he then developed in the

studio to create finished works. His 1816 painting *Flatford Mill* is believed to be the first painting he made almost entirely on location at the River Stour in Suffolk, and depicts a rural working scene as a barge and its crew progress up the river.

From about 1860, the practice became fundamental to Impressionism. Before the Impressionists, most landscape painters had worked in the studio, building their pictures from sketches and drawings which had been made on the spot. Sometimes unrelated studies were combined to create a single work.

Monet and his colleagues, in their zeal for maximum fidelity to nature and to the optical impressions through which they are perceived, preferred to work on their landscape paintings on the spot and in the open, without the intermediate stage of preparatory sketches. This practice involved more physical problems than the old method, since it meant carrying a portable studio around the countryside – a sizeable canvas, an easel to support it, paints and so on – but it was justified by the freshness and vitality of the paintings it produced.

However, to be really faithful to visual truth, one could only work for an hour or two before the changing direction and quality of sunlight began to alter the effect. Thus Monet sometimes went out with several canvases (sometimes up to 8, in fact), on which he would record the transformations of a single motif throughout the day, putting them aside in turn as the light altered and continuing them in sequence on succeeding days.

The popularity of painting *en plein air* increased into the 1870s and coincided with the introduction and availability of paints in tubes. Previously, painters were required to make their own paints using the laborious and messy process of grinding and mixing dry pigment powders with linseed oil. Paint was then stored in pig's bladders, sealed with string; the bladder was perforated with a pin to access the paint inside. However, there was no way to plug the hole afterwards, and the bladders would frequently burst open in transit.

In 1840s, the American portraitist, John G. Rand, invented a method of packaging oil paint in flexible zinc tubes. Companies such as Winsor and Newton quickly developed and produced tubes with a cap, making them commercially available to painters. The cap could be screwed back on and the paints preserved for future use, providing the flexibility to paint away from the studio. The convenience of using pre-mixed paints and the invention of the new French box easel, or field easel, increased the portability required for painting *en plein air*. These innovations were integral to the Impressionist practice, as it ensured that artists could capture the immediacy of life and nature in their paintings.

By the mid-1880s, Monet had largely moved away from the Impressionist practice of finishing a painting from nature, instead preferring to complete his paintings in the studio. In the instance of this painting, it is thought that Monet began painting *en plein air*, before adding the final touches of detail in his studio. His return to the studio can perhaps be attributed to his move to Giverny in 1883, where Monet purchased a farmhouse surrounded by an orchard. The house, complete with extensive gardens, a pond and artist studio, was to be his home until his death at the age of 86 in 1926. After his travels in the early 1880s, Monet spent the majority of his time at Giverny, producing new groups of works, including the *Water Lilies* series.

It is thought that, in total, Monet painted the church at Varengeville seven times: like the Barber's version, three other paintings represent the same scene, at differing times of the day. A separate series of three works represent an alternate view of the church, this time seen from the shingle beach below.

Another version depicting the same view of the church at Varengeville is located at The Speed Art Museum at the University of Louisville, Kentucky. This time presenting the scene at late afternoon, the distinctive palette of this work is mainly composed of strong blues and greens. The foliage of yellow gorse dominates the painting's foreground. In the far distance of the work, the church stands out against the subdued light. The change in tone in this version is in sharp contrast to the yellow and pink details of the horizon and the fiery foliage of the of the Barber's painting.

The differing palettes of the versions of this scene have an emotional impact upon the viewer. It could even be argued that we are seeing the origins of Expressionism here, as Monet experiments with capturing the visual phenomena of the coastal scene.

Thank you for joining me on this Tuesday Talk. Come back next week for another journey into our collection.

If you have any questions or would like to continue the conversation, please get in touch with the Barber (info@barber.org.uk) or use our social media platforms.

Speaker info

Beth Brankowski joined the Barber Institute of Fine Arts as the Collections Intern in September 2019 and since January 2020 has worked in the Barber's Learning and Engagement team. Prior to the completion of the internship, Beth was a student on the MA History of Art and Curating course at the University of Birmingham and was a co-curator of the 2019 summer exhibition at the Barber Institute, *The Paper Museum: The Curious Eye of Cassiano*.

Music

Music composed and performed by Jack Davies.

Select reading list

Bermingham, Ann. *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.

Callen, Anthea. *The Work of Art: Plein Air Painting and Artistic Identity in Nineteenth-Century France*. London: Reaktion Books, 2015.

Isaacson, Joel. 'Claude (Oscar) Monet' in *Grove Art Online*. Published online: 2004.

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Townsend, Joyce H.. 'The Materials Used by British Oil Painters in the Nineteenth Century' in *Tate Papers*, Vol. 2, Autumn (2004), online resource.

<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/02/the-materials-used-by-british-oil-painters-in-the-nineteenth-century>

'Art Term – Plein Air'

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/plein-air>

Auricchio, Laura, 'Claude Monet', *The Met Museum*, October 2004.

https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cmon/hd_cmon.htm

'John Constable – Flatford Mill ('Scene on a Navigable River')

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-flatford-mill-scene-on-a-navigable-river-n01273>

'The Church at Varengeville'

<http://barber.org.uk/claude-monet-1840-1926/>

'The Church at Varengeville. Grey Weather'

<https://www.speedmuseum.org/collections/the-church-at-varengeville/>