
Potsdam, February 20, 2020

Monet: Places

February 22 to June 1, 2020

From February 22 to June 1, 2020 the Museum Barberini will stage the exhibition *Monet. Places*. The show, organised in partnership with the Denver Art Museum, is one of the biggest retrospectives ever devoted to the artist by a German museum. More than 100 works chart the places where Monet drew inspiration for his Impressionist *plein air* painting—from Paris and the villages of Argenteuil, Vétheuil and Giverny along the River Seine to travel destinations like London and Venice. Generously spread across three floors, the show brings together numerous key works from every period of Monet's oeuvre, and it is the first exhibition to illustrate his artistic development by examining his choice and awareness of places.

Place was essential to Claude Monet (1840–1926). Here light, which depends on the weather, the seasons and the time of day, plays out over a landscape. Here he explored the fleeting effects of atmospheric phenomena—the layer between him and his motif. He did not make it easy for himself and was always on the look-out for topographies that presented a challenge to implementing his theme, from the dazzling light of the Riviera to the wind-swept Atlantic coast of northern France. The exhibition *Monet. Places* reveals the strategies pursued by the artist in deciding where to live and what cities to visit. This broad panorama of his oeuvre is illustrated by over 100 exhibits, from his first recorded composition to the famous water lilies painted in his garden in Giverny in the final years of his career.

There are two pervasive threads at the heart of this venture: one is Monet's fascination with the centuries-old notion of the *genius loci*, the aura breathed by a particular place, and the other is his contextual investigation of the motif, which Monet always rendered with topographical precision. Both played an integral part in his decision to work outdoors, not only to make preparatory sketches in oil, which was a widespread practice at the time, but to produce full-fledged paintings in their own right.

In his correspondence Monet spoke repeatedly of his need to begin by immersing himself in a landscape, because he had to forge a sense of an unknown territory before he could capture it properly on canvas. This made him extremely deliberate and methodical about transposing the motif. There was a fundamentally conceptual element to the way he formulated his compositions in advance, not at all like the widespread cliché of Impressionist art as a 'spontaneous' interaction with nature. Monet's struggle to depict a landscape authentically, to catch hold of that subjective impression, was the *sine qua non* of his painterly practice. Monet confirmed as much in a letter he wrote in 1912: "I only know that I do what I can to render what I feel when facing nature and that more often

than not, when I try to do so, I completely forget the most basic rules of painting, if indeed there are any.”

Unlike many of his contemporaries, whose work was inextricably associated with a particular area, Monet sought out a wide spectrum of landscapes and moods of light, not only all over France, but also beyond the borders. His ability to work in so many different places was facilitated by technical innovations such as the portable easel and industrially manufactured oil paints in handily sized metal tubes. Even more important was the rail network, which grew rapidly from 1850, dramatically expanding the radius of French landscape painters. The 19th century was an age of travel, and Monet’s art vividly reflects this new mobility brought by the railways. Many of the places that he featured in his paintings were favourite tourist spots, widely circulated on picture postcards and in amateur photographs. Monet used this strategy to appeal to the up-and-coming urban middle classes, clients with purchasing power who defined themselves through tourism, leisure and recreation—all major themes in his Impressionist testimonies to the modern lifestyle. “Faithful as he was to the motif, he aimed in his works to share his experience of nature with the viewer,” observes Ortrud Westheider, the director of the Museum Barberini. “Although his desire to capture subtle atmospheric effects betrays the positivist spirit of the 19th century, his paintings always convey a subjective feeling—for which Monet used the term *sensation*.”

Curator Daniel Zamani adds: “The significance of place as a category is already evident in the titles that Monet chose, which often refer to a specific place—like *View of Bordighera* or *Rock Points at Port-Goulphar*. Monet was well aware that a place could serve as a token of identification or a trademark and he accordingly took pains to make the topography in his paintings distinctive, rather than using generic titles like *Seaside Town* or *The Black Cliffs*, as was the custom for Salon paintings at the time.”

The exhibition draws primarily on the collection of Hasso Plattner, the founder and patron of the Museum Barberini, and the Impressionist holdings of the Denver Art Museum. This substantial core of significant works is complemented by loans from museums and private collections in many different countries, including key works from the Musée d’Orsay and the Musée Marmottan Monet in Paris, the National Gallery in London, the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C., the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, the National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo and the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra. Over 100 exhibits will be on display across all three floors of the museum, arranged thematically according to place. As visitors progress through the rooms they will be able to trace Monet’s entire artistic development, culminating in his late serial works, and will gain a sense of the various places which inspired his Impressionist *plein air* painting—not least the elaborate landscape of his water garden in Giverny, the exclusive focus of his final years.

“The endpoint and in many respects the highpoint of our retrospective is a room devoted entirely to Monet’s garden in Giverny,” says Ortrud Westheider. “This backdrop, created specifically for his plein air painting, transcends the category of natural places that Monet discovered through his art. In his iconic paintings of water lilies, but also his depictions of the Japanese Bridge, a free play of colour and form is carving out its way, making him one of the most important precursors of abstract painting in the early 20th century.” Daniel Zamani expands on the aims of the retrospective: “Scholars have rigorously explored Monet’s art, but our focus is on the places which inspired him, and it offers new insights into his artistic interests and methods. We wanted to show how important certain landscapes and topographies were at decisive turning-points in his career, and to examine more closely how and why these places influenced the course of his painting.”

The exhibition is accompanied by a 280-page catalogue (Prestel, 2020) with essays by some of the leading researchers in the field of Impressionism, among them Marianne Mathieu, James H. Rubin, George T. M. Shackelford, Richard Thomson and Paul Hayes Tucker.

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