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Claude Monet Pioneered Art For The Modern Citizen

MARY O'NEILL 1/14/2016 1:50 PM EST

Begonias au jus. Flowers in gravy, along with cat stew and grilled zoo animals, were Parisian menu items in 1871, when the starving city tried to survive a Prussian blockade.

Against that backdrop of war, unstable government and riots, Claude Monet led his own revolution, using begonias and other greenery as his artillery.

Benign weapons, it would seem, but they worked.

Monet succeeded in introducing a new era in the visual arts, climbing from obscurity to become France's best-known painter.

Claude Monet's "Impression, Sunrise" of 1874 drew a critic's naming of Impressionists, who painted with brushwork of pleasant dabs and dashes.

"I owe it all to the flowers," he said.

Claude Monet (1840-1926) is nearly synonymous with impressionism, the 19th-century French movement that takes its name from one of his paintings. Easily recognized by brushwork of pleasant dabs and dashes, the style in fact has radical underpinnings.

Art had been central to French national identity since 1661, when King Louis XIV

enforced a royal aesthetic. Grandiose subjects, stable compositions, restrained colors — these were expressive of Louis' absolute monarchy, and the national art academy trained young artists to adhere to the classical program.

But what happens when the monarchy tumbles?

By the time Marie Antoinette and King Louis XVI were guillotined in the French Revolution, an auspicious close to the 18th century, any government-sponsored taste-making was suspect.

An avenue of challenge, of liberation, of audacity thus opened up.

Picking Sides

Artistic styles — academic or avant-garde — became emblematic of the power struggle. Artists chose their camps, and the winner would claim the 20th century.

When 19-year-old Monet entered the Parisian art scene, he had already ventured outside the traditional artist track. He hadn't the connections — his father was a grocer — or the personality for the elite academy system.

Back home at Le Havre and neighboring seaside villages, he had learned to paint outdoors.

En plein air, the French call it, and the practice aligned nicely with the new fad of tourism taken up by the middle class.

Railroads could now transport Parisians to the countryside or beach, and wouldn't they like a souvenir of such a visit? And even to watch it being painted?

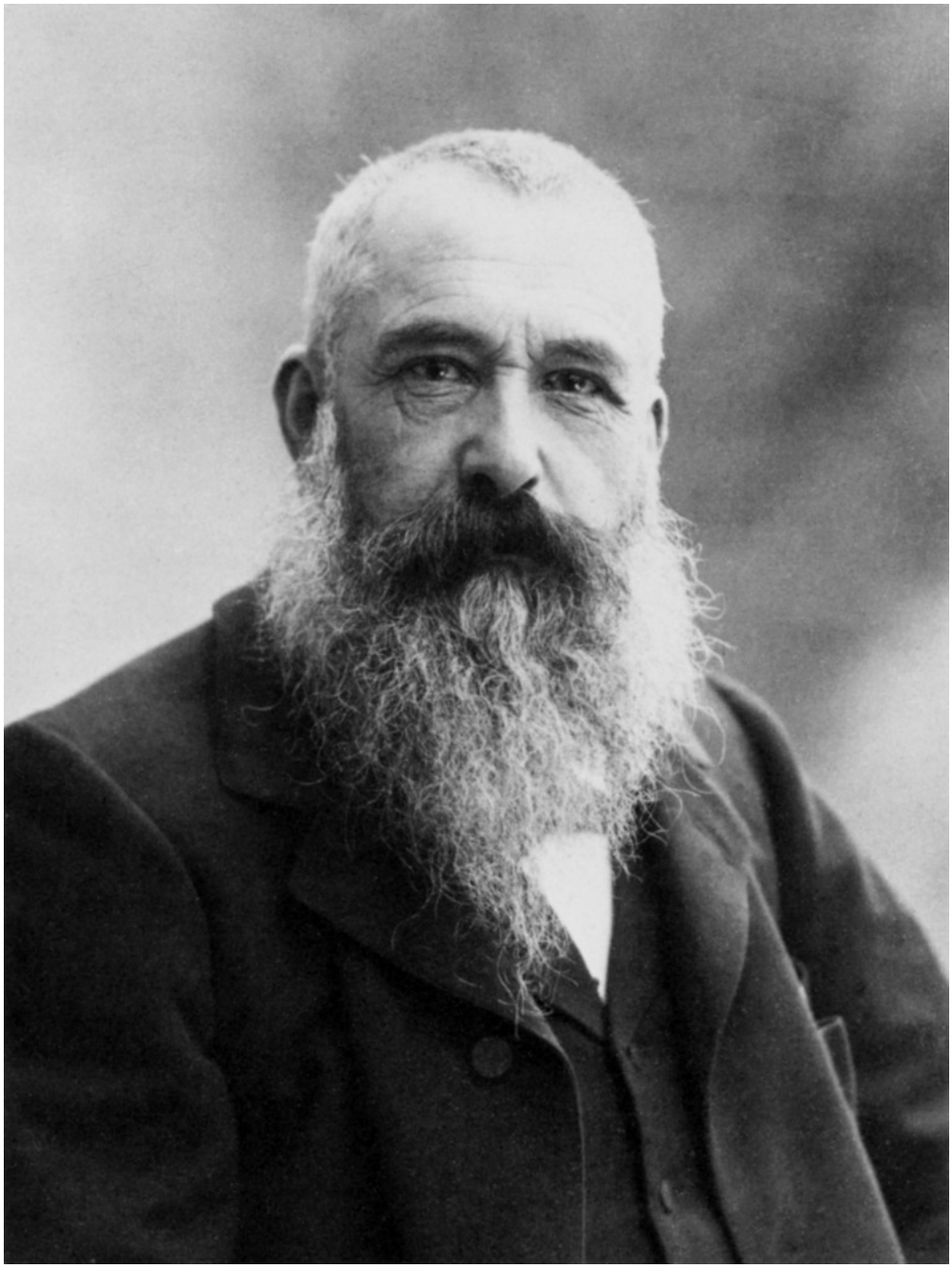
By the time the enterprising and rebellious Monet arrived in Paris in 1859, he had proved to himself that there were alternatives to the Salon, the official art exhibition of the academy since 1667 and the unassailable bastion of French taste.

A monthlong juried expo, the Salon held the keys to an international art market. It hosted an astounding average of 24,000 visitors per day — far beyond the capacity of

Madison Square Garden.

It was, by the mid-19th century, the most prestigious art event in the world and very much the province of the old guard.

Medals were awarded, buyers were secured, and reputations were cemented — for those the jury deemed promising.



Monet entered Paris' art scene in 1859 and produced an impressive way to make colors catch the light.

Monet and a group of like-minded painters in Paris took their chances at the Salon, with hit-or-miss results. It became clear that they would have to cut out this heavy-handed intermediary and market directly to buyers.

"That meant putting their works in front of the general public, whoever that might be, on their own, without hierarchy, without recompense, without awards," Paul Tucker, professor emeritus of art at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, told IBD.

Direct marketing was necessary, as their art was radically different from the pictures that the Salon jury typically accepted.

"Their subjects were contemporary life — people walking down the sidewalk, vacationers on the coastline of the country," said Tucker. "These subjects are not conceived as truly being the makings of art. Art with a capital A, a quivering R and a defiant T.

"France was rigid in this regard, feeling that art defined the nation. These painters are heralding the insignificant and moving the top subjects of mythology, history and religion to the bottom. This is really tipping the table."

Not knowing who the final buyer might be gave Monet and his friends freedom from the demands of a patron. They could choose their own subjects.

But it was risky. Even before Parisian life collapsed under the 1870-71 Prussian invasion, Monet had been dodging creditors and trying to find coal to keep his wife, Camille, and new child warm.

"The notion of painting what you decide is important, and what may at the time be seen as insignificant, is not only a political act, it's a dangerous one economically," Tucker said. "You're automatically limiting your potential to find buyers."

Not Alone

Monet and other ambitious artists spurred each other on, working collectively. The result was the first impressionist exhibition in 1874, a group show produced and promoted by the artists and held in a photographer's showroom on a busy shopping promenade.

The show predates the impressionism label. At first, the 30 artists called themselves the Cooperative & Anonymous Association of Painters, Sculptors & Engravers, its charter based on a bakers' organization. When critic Louis Leroy pejoratively christened them the impressionists, after one of Monet's works, "Impression, Sunrise," the name stuck.

Despite popular legend, the reviews of impressionist art exhibits were not uniformly negative.

"More people admired it than those who didn't," said Tucker. "People embraced these works for many reasons, most importantly because (they) represented the vitality of French art after the Franco-Prussian War — and the kind of economic initiative that was so needed for France at the time."

Monet painted that vitality in pictures of boating trips and rebuilt railroads — of French will and hope — using a novel style of broken brushwork to irradiate his canvases.

Paint in tubes was new technology, the better to carry in a satchel into the countryside. Monet used paints from his tubes to lay unmixed colors side by side directly on the canvas in dabs and dashes.

The effect is colors that interact with and strengthen each other, the way you're funnier when you're next to your funny friend.

Monet produced "Poppies" in 1873.

Spotlight On Color

The paint itself catches the light, shimmers and telegraphs a sensation, rather than a precise optical description, of modern life.

"Sketchiness was considered forward-looking, independent and 'democratic' because it was opposed to the highly finished surfaces of officially sanctioned art," wrote historian Robert Herbert in "Impressionism: Art, Leisure and Parisian Society."

By calling the painters impressionists — an impression was a sketch, not a completed work — Louis Leroy was unwittingly underscoring that intrepid aspect of Monet's art.

Sensation, via light and color, is the modern currency, not details.

So devoted was Monet to capturing outdoor light and color, he set up a ministudio on a boat so he could paint on the water. To get the proper vantage point for a garden scene, he once dug a trench deep enough to hold a canvas eight feet high and lowered it in.

Most artists visit the Louvre to copy the old masters. Monet went to its balcony to look outward so he could paint Parisians in the street.

"He's literally turning his back on the history of art and embracing the new in front of him," said Tucker.

Monet scraped together enough funds to rent a home in Giverny, northwest of Paris, in 1883. There he started to create a veritable theater of flowers.

Soon after, he gained international renown. "His glory really started when a gallerist friend organized an exhibition of impressionism in New York in 1886," said Hugues Gall, director of the Claude Monet Foundation in Giverny. "He was very clever at publicity and knowing how to price his paintings. He became celebrated, even in Japan."

The success enabled Monet to buy the house and turn it into a horticultural paradise, a stage set for his art. Lacking a pond, he diverted a channel of a nearby estuary to bring water to a dry parcel across the road. The resulting Asian-inspired garden became the locus of 250 paintings of water lilies — Monet's primary infatuation in the last 30 years of his life and one of the most celebrated series in art.

Monet lived long enough to see his artistic instincts validated.

Through all the upheaval, Monet laid legitimate claim to the 20th century.