

Claude Monet (1840-1926)

- Monet was the leading figure of the impressionist group.
- As a teenager in Normandy he was brought to paint outdoors by the talented painter Eugène Boudin. Boudin taught him how to use oil paints.
- Monet was constantly in financial difficulty. His paintings were rejected by the Salon and critics attacked his work.
- Monet went to Paris in 1859. He befriended the artists Cézanne and Pissarro at the Academie Suisse. (an open studio where models were supplied to draw from and artists paid a small fee). He also met Courbet and Manet who both encouraged him.
- He studied briefly in the teaching studio of the academic history painter Charles Gleyre. Here he met Renoir and Sisley and painted with them near Barbizon.
- Every evening after leaving their studies, the students went to the Cafe Guerbois, where they met other young artists like Cezanne and Degas and engaged in lively discussions on art.
- Monet liked Japanese woodblock prints and was influenced by their strong colours. He built a Japanese bridge at his home in Giverny.

Monet and Impressionism

- In the late 1860s Monet and Renoir painted together along the Seine at Argenteuil and established what became known as the Impressionist style.
- Monet valued spontaneity in painting and rejected the academic Salon painters' strict formulae for shading, geometrically balanced compositions and linear perspective.
- Monet remained true to the impressionist style but went beyond its focus on plein air painting and in the 1890s began to finish most of his work in the studio.

Personal Style and Technique

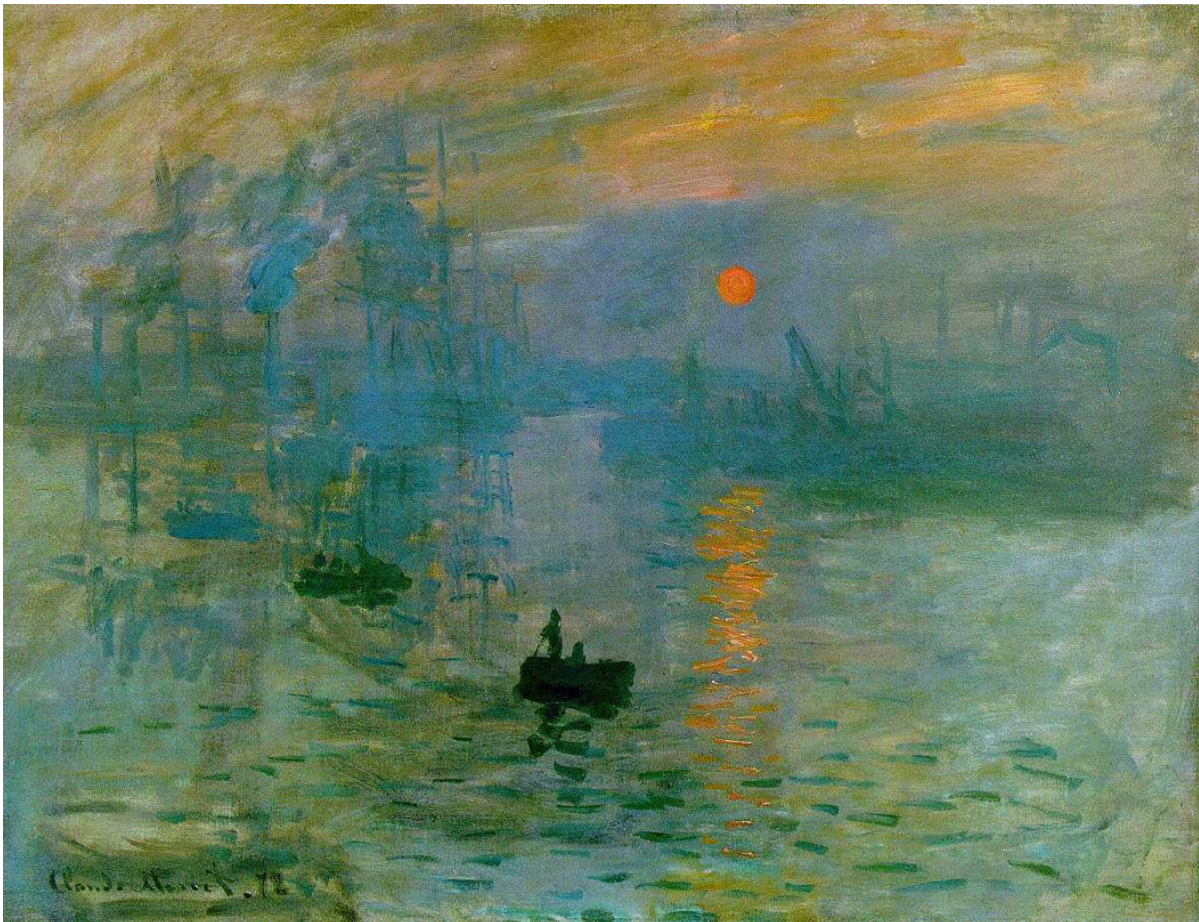
- Use of pure primary colours (straight from the tube) where possible
- Avoidance of black
- Addition of unexpected touches of primary colours to shadows
- Capturing the effect of sunlight
- Loose brushstrokes

Subject Matter

- Monet painted simple outdoor scenes in the city, along the coast, on the banks of the Seine and in the countryside.

- The growth of landscape painting during the nineteenth century was a direct reaction to the industrial revolution.
- Artists wished to escape the hectic pressures of urban life and portray instead simple, tranquil scenes of the countryside.
- He painted many pictures in his specially-built water lily gardens at his home in Giverny. He felt that artists should try to forget what the objects were in the landscape and look merely at the blocks and streaks of colours that made up the shapes.
- Monet chose to depict the same subject matter repeatedly under varying weather conditions, time of days and months of the year. His three notable series of paintings were of Haystacks, Rouen Cathedral and his Water Lily pond.

'Impression Sunrise'



'Impression Sunrise', 1872, oil on canvas, 48 × 63 cm

- This painting by Monet showed sunrise over the sea at Le Havre.
- His aim was to create an impression of the rapidly changing, shimmering orange light of the morning sun on the water.

- He wanted to capture the intense brightness with contrasting complementary colours, thereby making the primary colours brighter.

'Argenteuil Basin with a Single Sailboat'



Argenteuil Basin with a Single Sailboat, 1874, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Ireland

- Monet responded to the seasons by studying open air effects year round, illustrated here in this Autumn scene of Argenteuil.
- Places like Argenteuil were painted because they were accessible by train from Paris.
- In this painting he shows his studies of reflections of light on water. He painted with speed and directness, capturing their fleeting effects in the sun-light and adding extra intensity to the red, orange and yellow foliage.
- He used a variety of brushstrokes to capture these reflections.
- This painting is composed of sky, trees and river, with the town on the horizon and a sailing boat adding to the movement.

- The peacefulness of this river scene is enhanced by the brushwork, employing clear bright colours to depict the shimmering effects of light and colour on water.

Rouen Cathedral Series



Rouen Cathedral, Blue Morning Harmony, Morning Sunlight

Rouen Cathedral, Portal in Front View, Harmony in Brown

“Every day I discover something I have not seen before”, Monet

- In 1892 Monet painted more than 30 views of the Rouen Cathedral's decorative facade.
- Monet rented a room opposite that gave him the best view of the sun moving over the Cathedral's facade.
- He picked the west facade with its three portals, rose window and twin towers.
- He paid little attention to the detail or uneven surface.
- He emphasised instead the transformation of the facade by sunlight.
- Sometimes he saw yellow, orange, pink, green, blue and white playing off the facade as the sun moved across the sky or was suddenly lost behind clouds.

In one painting, with mist swirling at street level, the building seems to be floating away.

- In the early morning, the sun lit up the sky behind the cathedral giving a dark silhouette. In the early afternoon it rose gradually until the facade glistened in full sunshine. As shadows crept up the facade only the upper reaches picked up the last rays of the setting sun.
- He worked on these paintings in his studio afterwards so that the paintings might work together as a group.
- In 'Rouen Cathedral, Blue Harmony, Morning Sunlight', Monet exploits the visibly rough texture of his loose brushstrokes. Thick, impasto layers build up to suggest the rough stonework of the cathedral.
- There is a sense of movement in the fluid, hasty paintwork which gives us the impression of the volatility of the weather and light conditions under which the artist worked. He was often working on several paintings simultaneously, one for each time of the day.
- His blurred edges and rough surface texture are at an extreme variance to the smooth finished work in the Academie Salon and he was criticised for this lack of understanding of form.
- The brushstrokes form an intricate mesh of colour. His use of contrasting complementary colours (e.g blue and orange beside each other), even in shadows, is striking.
- Viewed from a distance, the colours seem to blend and the cathedral facade comes alive. It shows his extraordinary ability to convey the optical illusions created by light.
- Many of his Rouen Cathedral paintings were painted from the exact same viewpoint, making the composition of the pictures practically identical to each other. The only differences were the light conditions under which they were created.
- Through the repetition of the same subject matter, Monet's almost scientific investigations into the effects of light on colour and form are instantly apparent. Previously, artists had created shadow by adding black and grey to their palettes. Monet and other impressionist painters realised that shadows are largely made up of reflected colours, often including the complementary colour of the object depicted. This can be seen in 'Rouen Cathedral, Harmony in Blue and Gold', 1894, which is mostly created through the use of radiant white, yellows and golden orange hues, contrasting with the blue of the sky and the violet tones in the shadows.
- 'Rouen Cathedral, Blue Morning Harmony, Morning Sunlight', 1984, has almost exactly the same composition as the previous painting but here Monet has used a paler palette of hazy blues and purples with golden hues to create the impression of a sunny morning.

- The painting 'Rouen Cathedral, Main door and Saint Romain Tower, Full Sun, Harmony of Blue and Gold', 1983, also uses the same viewpoint but suggests mid-afternoon sunshine through the golden glow which saturates the front of the cathedral and deeper, darker windows.
- If you compare these with 'Rouen Cathedral, The Portal, Morning Effect', 1984, we see a cathedral moulded in purplish shades, semi-silhouetted against the blinding morning sun flooding over the roof.
- 'Rouen Cathedral, Portal in Front View, Harmony in Brown', 1982, looks very different from the other paintings even though it is portraying the same subject. We see the cathedral from a more frontal position in much more sober colours of browns and blues against a stark white background, giving the sense of a bleak cold day. There is greater clarity of form, as there is more contrast in tone, but there is still a sense of the changeability of the weather and the fleeting moments which make up the day.

'Waterlily Pond: Green Harmony'



Waterlily Pond: Green Harmony, 1899. Oil on canvas, 89cm x 93.5cm

- After moving to Giverny with his second wife Monet bought a piece of land diverted a section of a small river to create a magnificent water garden. A large water lily pond was crossed over by a Japanese style bridge. The inspiration from this came from his many Japanese prints.
- During his last 30 years of life he spent a lot of time here and produced some of his most famous water lily paintings.
- Monet painted the pond in different light conditions and vantage points. Sometimes he painted the bridge from a small boat.
- Waterlily Pond Green Harmony features the Japanese footbridge and the surrounding plants. Water lilies are in flower and weeping willows can be seen in the background, but the main subject of the painting is the reflections in the water.
- Monet compressed the composition into a square shape. The edges of the bridge are covered by plants, but its graceful curves form a natural division across the centre.
- The surface is a rich carpet of colour, with brushstrokes of yellow, pink and lavender woven in with the shimmering green of the plants.
- The flowers are just blobs of white tinged with yellow and pink, but the colours reflect brilliant sunshine.
- The painting shows Monet's characteristic short brushstrokes and patches of pure paint or taches, applied with the square brush.
- He used a palette knife to create the textures of the water and plant reflections.
- He also used a dry brushing technique on the bridge, where he dragged a loaded brush across the dry surface, building up layers of paint. This created very rich textures that pick up light.
- Monet used his brushstrokes to emphasise the directional lines in the scenery he observed. The foliage in the trees in the upper left of the painting and their reflection in the water are created by strong vertical strokes of the paintbrush.
- These are in striking contrast to the horizontal lines representing the water lilies on the surface of the pond. The horizontal strokes are applied heavily over the vertical reflections, creating an aesthetic contradiction.
- It creates the illusion of a three dimensional reality with the water lilies overlying the calm water while at the same time the rough texture of the paint draws our notice to the surface of the canvas, making us unaware of the two-dimensional reality of the painting.
- The dominant colours on the canvas are luminous greens, lush yellows, shady purples, and blues and delicate pinks.
- The light infused scene is hazy, the edges of objects and vegetation blurred and indistinct.

- Complementary colours are placed side by side to heighten the vibrancy of the colours. Even the artist's signature is painted in reds to contrast the green of the water lily pads and to unite it with the pinks and reds of the flowers.
- The brilliant light suggests morning, but there is only the slightest suggestion of sky. He has closed off the background and all sides of the scene enveloping the viewer in the beauty of the sunlit garden.

Later Life

- Monet had little contact with the impressionist group in later life. He had no interest in working with other artists and felt he was the only one to hold true to the modern ideals. He was extremely conscious of maintaining his status as the leader of modern French art.
- Monet's last work were huge wall paintings of waterlilies. Special built oval rooms in the Orangerie museum in Paris hold these.

Influence

Durand-Ruel bought paintings from Monet on a regular basis from the 1880s. This helped Monet to support his family. Monet achieved international recognition for his art in 1889 when he had a major exhibition in Paris.

Exam Questions

2012

Claude Monet (1840-1926) and Auguste Renoir (1841-1919) embraced the general principles of Impressionism while developing their own individual style.

Discuss this statement referring to the characteristics of Impressionism and to one named painting by each artist.

and

Name another Impressionist artist and briefly describe one named work by him/her. Illustrate your answer.