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Monet in Etretat

Monographies citadines



As a poor fishermen village, at the beginning of the 19th century, Etretat saw very few visitors. In 1826, 1,500 people lived in the village in very modest thatched houses with very little connection to the rest of the world. The houses were gathered around a shared yard, and each group of houses was usually inhabited by one family. 80% of the population made a meagre living from fishing. This was a world of its own, with precise community living rules dictated by the sea, because the sea forced people to unite, especially when large caïque boats had to be pushed into the swell every day, and then taken out of the water with a capstan before they filled up with water. There was no comfort in the village, everything was muddy, and the rain created rivers flowing through the village. Women were essential to life in Etretat, they mended the nets, sold the fish in the surrounding villages, and regardless of their age, every day they had to push the heavy timber bars of the capstans.

The sea was a source of food, but it wasn't always kind. Its wrath could be terrible and each family had lost many members to the sea. At this time, we didn't know anything about the sea, not how it operates and nothing of the monsters lurking in the deep. We had to wait until 1861 for Michelet to publish *La Mer* (The Sea), the first book on oceanography.

The first people that came to drag the village out of its torpor were artists, romantics in breach with institutions who were passionate about landscapes; this new passion was long to be disputed by academia. They were the first contemplators, a new breed of artists who were touched by



ABOVE
Eugène Le Poittevin
Life of a caïque (the fish sale)
Engraved lithograph by Jazet
53 x 71 cm
© private collection, Etretat



ABOVE
Hôtel Blanquet
postcard
© author's collection



OPPOSITE
Henry Bacon
Sailor's woman at
the capstan, 1881
drawing
23 x 17 cm
© author's collection

LEFT PAGE, ON THE TOP
Alexandre Noël
Etretat, seen from the Trou à l'Homme, circa 1821
aquatint engraved by Th. Fielding
© private collection, Etretat

nature to the point of seeing their feelings exalted. They were Eugène Isabey, Eugène Le Poittevin, Paul Huet, but also the other great Eugène, Delacroix who was going to turn the grand elements of this landscape into natural monuments. The first artists arrived around 1820, and some settled here, like Le Poitevin who built a workshop on the shore. He lent this workshop to Courbet in 1870, from where he painted his famous series of paintings *Vagues* (Waves).

Many of the painters were attracted by this picturesque trend, thanks to all these paintings, which were mostly charming and presented at the annual Paris Show, Etretat started to step out of the shadows.

The new trend for sea bathing quickly steered the village towards a new economic model. Some writers, starting with Alphonse Karr, then Guy de Maupassant, boasted about the charms of Etretat so much that they were the best heralds of this evolution. Now the health virtues of the sea, which were until then only touted by seaside resorts such as Dieppe or Granville which specialised in this medical experience, spread to the wider public who rushed to the shores of the Channel and the Atlantic. From medical, this new craze soon turned hedonistic with seaside villages seeing their foreshore transformed. Casinos, beach huts, hot baths, and other facilities were built for rich city dwellers coming to the shore in droves.

In Etretat, the locals saw half of the intertidal area of the foreshore where they beached their boats and dried their cotton nets allocated to this new touristic activity. At this time, one had to be registered with the "Bath



OPPOSITE
Stormy sea in Etretat
(W 127), 1868
oil on canvas
66 x 131 cm
Musée d'Orsay, Paris
© Awesome art

PAGE 7
The Magpie (W 133), 1868
oil on canvas
89 x 130 cm
Musée d'Orsay, Paris
© Awesome art

PAGE 8
**The upstream arch,
Etretat (W 258), 1873**
oil on canvas
81 x 100 cm
Fogg Art Museum, The Harvard Uni-
versity, Cambridge, Massachusetts
© Awesome art

PAGE 9
Etretat, the upstream arch
pastel
© Awesome art

Society” to have access to this part of the beach that was dedicated to the pleasures of the seaside. Locals were only left with the “perrey des manants”. Of course, the village will largely benefit from the seaside economy, but the clash between these two populations, which cannot understand each other because of their incompatible lifestyles, created an understandable resentment among indigenous people, which continues to this day.

Summarising this hectic history in just a few lines should not take away from the fact that Etretat is above all special because of its extraordinary landscape, punctuated by grandiose arches bequeathed by nature: The beach is nestled between the upstream arch that Maupassant compared to an elephant dipping its trunk in the water, and the downstream arch, with its needle. And then as a supreme gift, Manneporte, further east after the Jambourg beach may be the most amazing arch of them all. Such a romantic landscape with its caves and arches could only appeal to landscape artists and the greatest came: Bonington, Corot, Whistler...

Of course Claude Monet, who had spent his youth in Le Havre had always known Etretat. It therefore made sense that he visited Etretat time and time again for long periods. But the proximity to Le Havre alone is not enough to justify his love of the Normandy coast, and especially Etretat. Three other reasons can be identified:

- No landscape was more appropriate to the impressionist touch than

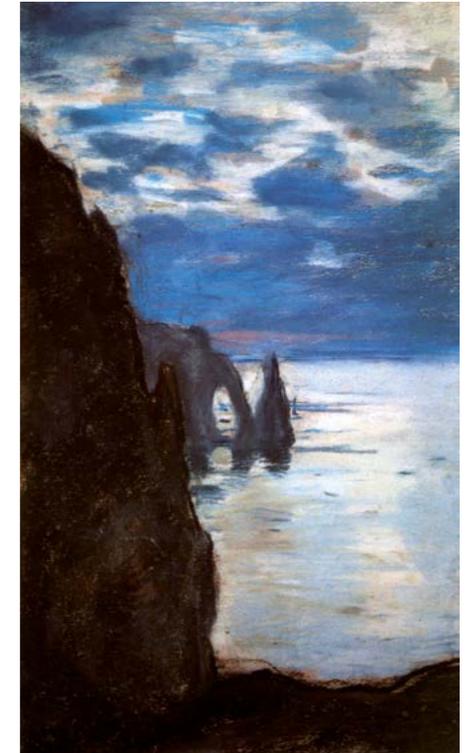




the seascape as impressionist artists aimed to capture the vibrations of air and light. The wind and the sea spray were as much of a subject as the cliffs or the sea. Impressionists may have made fun of romantics, but they were not indifferent to the power of the elements highlighting the specificities of the cliffs of Etretat. These surroundings were a great benefit to painters. We will see that before Manneporte, by literally sticking to its subject, Monet produced a romantic art piece because he magnified the landscape he painted, even if the palettes and style are of a completely different spirit.

- Another reason was the commercial aspect. Money had always been very concerned with financial matters, and money was always on his mind. Durand-Ruel asked him to go to Etretat because it was easier to sell a view of world famous cliffs than of an anonymous woodland or valley. Let's not forget that in 1869, Courbet didn't hide the fact that he was also working in Etretat on commission. Even if like Monet, he painted the sea and the cliffs, Courbet was able to make money from the wealthy tourists by painting their portraits, but Monet persistently ran away from this clientele.

- Lastly, in addition to the obvious need to renew its subjects, the main reason driving Monet away from Paris was the possibility to find himself alone with his art, this is why he spent his life (from 1884) between Paris, Giverny, and solitary countryside retreats. In a very telling letter sent from Etretat to his friend Bazille in December 1868, Monet wrote



PAGE ON THE RIGHT
Stormy weather in Etretat (W 826), 1883
oil on canvas
65 x 81 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne © Awesome art

PAGE 13
Etretat needle, low tide (W 831), 1883
oil on canvas
60 x 81 cm
Private collection © Awesome art

PAGE 14
The Manneporte (W 832), 1883
oil on canvas
65 x 81 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York © Awesome art



“As strong as one may be, one is always too focused on all that can be seen and heard in Paris, at least here we don’t look like anyone else, or at least I believe so, because this will only be the expression of what I have felt as an artist”.

To avoid the crowds of tourists, Monet as much as possible came to Etretat in autumn and winter, he said that at this time the countryside was at its most beautiful, even if one had to suffer the climate. Similarly he always endeavoured to avoid showing the village, he centred his views on the bottom of houses, thus showing a timeless Etretat that no progress could come and change. This allows today’s viewer to find in Monet’s painting the same landscape as the one that can be seen today. Only the rare views of boats painted from Hotel Blanquet present an involuntary historic aspect.

However, avoiding tourists (called “horsains” in Norman dialect, which is not a very courteous term) didn’t in any way stopped Monet from going to the same places as them. Because in Etretat no one can escape the magic of the cliffs, the arches, and the needle; because regardless when one stands on the beach, looking east or west, the view of the cliffs cannot escape even the most distracted onlooker. Here, everything is an invitation to marvel. Trying to avoid it would be the most silly of behaviours.



Monet was not worried about depicting a landscape of such strength, but he was concerned about competing with his eminent fellows. The challenge was to paint differently, as well and if not better than them, especially since in 1869 and 1870, Courbet had painted some revolutionary masterpieces in Etretat that were displayed at the 1870 Paris Salon, and that of course had been seen and commented by everyone. These representations of the downstream cliffs and the *Vagues*, for the first time in art history, showed the sea, itself, without any nymphs or even fishermen, thus breaking through painting traditions. This was not only painting, but the heart of a revolution that gave birth to modernity. On the 1st February 1883, Monet wrote to Alice:

“I intend to paint a large piece representing the cliffs of Etretat, although it is very daring for me to attempt this after Courbet did it so admirably, I will try to do it differently ...”

The bar had been set extremely high. To meet this challenge, Monet had to fight, and he won his battle by embracing another challenge: Fight against time which was constantly changing the light. To win, two solutions were possible: The first was to paint quickly, this implied not misjudging the sketch despite the rants of the art merchant demanding polished pictures because the public had been used to the very sleek work of conventional painters like Cabanel, Bougereau, and so forth. The second was to not to try and finish one painting before starting

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TO ALICE,
3RD FEBRUARY 1883

