

Bruno Delarue

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Boudin in Deauville-Trouville

Monographies citadines



When Eugène Boudin was born to a modest family in Honfleur on 12 July 1824, the activity of this small port bore very little resemblance to the bustling tourist town it is today. At the time, Honfleur was a port of little importance at the mouth of the Seine, struggling against two enemies: the build up of silt in the estuary and the maritime and commercial predominance of Le Havre, its noisy neighbour, from where the cries of the dockers could be heard when the winds veered westwards.

The atmosphere was more one of poverty than wealth in the closely built courtyards of Honfleur, lacking in light, surrounded by a medieval architecture which the population struggled to maintain. The fashion for the seaside would come later but it brought little wealth to Honfleur owing to the silt from the Seine which prevented the development of sea bathing.

At the time, the young Boudin could only dream about the painters who would bring glory to the small town, whom he, the son of a sailor who had not even studied art, would promote, assisted by the formidable Mère Toutain at her farm and inn in Saint-Siméon.

SEASIDE FASHION

Although the seaside fashion developed further north, in Dieppe, in the 1820s, Trouville was quick to join the race. By the time Boudin was

«YOU KNOW THAT A WOMAN IS METICULOUS ABOUT HER APPEARANCE AND IF YOU MAKE A MESS OF YOUR BATHERS, THEY WILL NOT CAST THEIR EYES OVER THE SKY, NOR OVER YOUR MISTY HORIZONS IN ORDER TO PARDON THE SHORTCOMINGS OF YOUR BRUSH FOR THEIR PARASOL OR HEADRESS.»

FERDINAND MARTIN





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Casino de Trouville
painting on canvas
 Collection privée / Photo© Paris, Christie's / Bridgeman Images

ABOVE
L'Heure du bain
lithography by Vernier
 19,9 x 21 cm
 © Collection privée

ON THE LEFT
Crinolines sur la plage, vers 1865
watercolor
 19,9 x 21 cm
 ©Akg-images / Quint & Lox

a young man, the fishing port, a stone's throw from Honfleur, could already boast a reputation as the Queen of the Beaches and attracted the international cream of the aristocracy and industry to its sweeping foreshore and to the gold colours of its recently built Casino.

Le Havre, where the Boudin family moved to in 1835, was not to be outdone. People could bathe there too and, soon, Frascati, a magnificent bathing centre, was built, taking advantage of the town's inauguration of the first railway line between Paris and the sea in 1847.

Therefore, Boudin belonged to a generation which saw the transformation of the coast over the space of a few decades and experienced the shock of the mass arrival of wealthy Parisians, inevitably including potential art enthusiasts and buyers. The summer exodus from the city to the new seaside resorts resulted in the greatest social revolution which the country had ever seen with the holidaymakers and local people coming from two diametrically opposed worlds as much in terms of wealth as in terms of culture. The shock, which took the form of hate and envy, was all the stronger for this and the repercussions are still visible today.

The painter was intelligent enough to understand two fundamental things:

Firstly, that the seaside, this tasteful display of wealthy people on the beach during the summer period, was, itself, a brand-new form of modernity.

Secondly, that there was no point in painting portraits of these elegant people. Showing them in groups on the beach was enough to immortalise this new practice. Also, Boudin very quickly understood that it was not so much the actual bathing which revealed the new aesthetic aspect of the seaside rather than the post-bathing activities, so specific to the French coast. This time devoted to rest and diletantism which continued through to the end of the afternoon astonished our new English friends, who, nevertheless, taught us how to take advantage of the benefits and joys of the sea. They returned as soon as they came out of the water, while the French invented a new form of sociability on the foreshore.

This theme, appropriated by Boudin, became his sort of trademark and nobody could now paint the crowd of holidaymakers on the sandy beach without being accused of being a lowly plagiarist.

Boudin referred to these women in crinolines, whom he painted to his heart's content, as "his little dolls". Thanks to them, he survived through hard times and even acquired a certain level of comfort. Very soon, he was constantly being asked for them and he produced hundreds of them, at the risk of damaging his integrity, by reproducing a perfectly developed system. But, Boudin had enough intellectual and moral standards to not fall into that trap (or, at least just graze it), and, above all, as we will see, he applied a few new concepts which transformed this highly commercial subject into an actual genre.

ON THE RIGHT
L'Embarcadère à Trouville, 1864
painting on panel
30,4 x 47,7 cm
Photo © Christie's Images



DEAUVILLE

In the 1860s, the seaside economy had become extremely important on the Normandy coast and many poor villages attempted to offer “small inexpensive places” in order to accommodate the overflow of guests from the rich resorts as well as the lower middle classes who now prided themselves in imitating the aristocracy.

In Trouville, the marshes which line the River Touques, around the small village of Deauville (131 inhabitants in 1861) were bought by the Duke of Morny, an associate of the banker Donon and the Englishman Olliffe, who built a town from scratch, in the form of a checkerboard, devoted entirely to seaside activities. It was located on the coast, not far from the former village, which, at that time, could be found on the slopes of Mont Canisy.

The financial and political power of these three men enabled the implementation of monumental drainage works and, in the space of a few years, the construction of an entire town, with baths, Casino and the first racing track. The coordination of the works was entrusted to a disciple of Hausmann, Mr Breney, a Parisian architect. Soon, Deauville, was able to welcome an international clientele, but it also became a competitor for its neighbour, Trouville. However, over the forty remaining years of the 19th century, Deauville continued to be a quiet resort. It was not until 1910 and the transfer of the Casino's

ON THE RIGHT
Deauville, la Terrasse, 1882
painting on canvas
36,8 x 58,1 cm

Museum of Art, Pennsylvania / Bridgeman Images



management to Cornuché, who had been removed as manager of the Casino in Trouville, that Deauville became the town of all excesses. Boudin started to depict holidaymakers on the beach in about 1860, at a time when all the coastal villages of the Channel had completed their transformation and were now all equipped with bathing facilities able to cater for the constant flow of visitors.

The beach scene very quickly became Boudin's subject of choice and he became used to leaving Paris when the weather turned fine and returning to the city once winter started to be felt. "I'll do something else, but I'll always be the beach painter", he wrote to his brother in 1865. In his account of the 1869 Exhibition, the critic Castagnary wrote: "Boudin has made the Normandy coast a speciality. He has even invented his very own marine genre which involves painting the beach and all the exotic high society which gathers in our seaside towns over the summer months." Of course, it was impossible to know on which beach each picture was painted, since Trouville did not have a monopoly on these types of gatherings, and many of them were probably painted in Le Havre, Sainte-Adresse, Dieppe, Berck, or even in Brittany, on the Atlantic coast. Nevertheless, it was to the Normandy of his childhood, which was also the birthplace of the fashion for seaside activities, that he travelled most often. And, it is only logical that he was particularly loyal to Trouville and Deauville with the southern beaches of the Seine estuary offering the most exceptional foreshores, where the gentry could gather after the ceremonial bath and women

ON THE RIGHT
Scène de plage à Trouville, 1864
painting on panel

Collection privée / photo © Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images





«IT IS NECESSARY TO USE
THE FRESHNESS OF
COLOURS TO TRY TO
CREATE RADIANCE.»



ON THE LEFT
Vue de plage à Trouville, 1864
painting on panel
38 x 58 cm
Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris © AKG-Images

could spread out the folds of their incredible and sumptuous crinolines, the colours of which stood out against the men's consistently black clothes. Although the beaches further north, beyond the Bay of Somme, also offered similar spaces, they did not attract the same smart clientele because many of them, for example Berck, had opted for the medical side of sea bathing as opposed to the hedonistic side.

In Trouville and Deauville, the horse-drawn changing booths added to the beauty of the scene and complemented the shimmering colours of the women's dresses. This puritanical and corseted world became a gay and carefree world. Boudin used it as a pretext to paint immense skies, the skies he loved so much and which made him so want to flee Paris: "I can't bear to think about the beaches flooded with sunlight, the beautiful stormy skies which would be so wonderful to paint surrounded by the sea air", he wrote to Ferdinand Martin.

But why then did Boudin not choose to spend his entire life in Normandy rather than spend his winters in Paris, a city he clearly did not like and which he never painted? Because life in the provinces enclosed the painter within dangerous certitudes and, as he explained: "I assure you that province bleaches talent." Indeed, he was not wrong and many people ruined their chances by failing to understand that art requires emulation and comparison, believing themselves to be geniuses in their small corner of province although they were no more than notables surrounded by the ignorant.