An impressionist painting of a pond in Giverny, featuring lily pads and flowers. The brushwork is visible and textured, with a rich palette of greens, blues, and earthy tones. The composition is layered, with flowers in the foreground and middle ground, and a dark, atmospheric background.

MONET IN GIVERNY

LANDSCAPES OF REFLECTION

Edited by Benedict Leca



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cincinnati  art museum



This catalog accompanies the exhibition
Monet in Giverny: Landscapes of Reflection
on display at the Cincinnati Art Museum from
February 4, 2012–May 13, 2012.

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Waterlilies (detail), 1903, oil on canvas,
32 x 40 in. (81.3 x 101.6 cm), The Dayton Art
Institute, Gift of Mr. Joseph Rubin (1953.11)

Front flap: Nickolas Muray, *Claude Monet*,
1926, gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 in.
(25.4 x 20.3 cm), Courtesy of George
Eastman House, International Museum of
Photography and Film, Gift of Mrs. Nickolas
Muray (77:0188:2038) ©Nickolas Muray
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Frontispiece: Nickolas Muray, *Claude Monet*,
1926, gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 in.
(25.4 x 20.3 cm), Courtesy of George
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FROM INSTANT TO *ENVELOPPE*

REFLECTIONS ON MONET, PHOTOGRAPHY, AND TIME

By Beth E. Wilson



Fig. 12
Paul Nadar, *M. Félix Nadar Interviews M. Michel Eugène Chevreul on his Hundredth Birthday*, 1886, albumen prints, Courtesy of George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film (1977:0033:26 and 1977:0033:33)

On August 31, 1886, the renowned photographer Félix Nadar visited the chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul on the occasion of his hundredth birthday. Accompanying Nadar was his son, Paul, who photographed their conversation, in a series of twenty-seven negatives, capturing the lively expressions and gesticulations of the centenarian scientist. A selection of twenty-one of these images was published in September 1886 in the popular *Journal illustré*, accompanied by captions provided by Nadar, summarizing M. Chevreul's remarks (fig. 12). In the history of photography, this is often cited as the first photographic interview ever published.

I have used these images of Chevreul and Nadar as a starting point to discuss Claude Monet's work for several reasons. First, Chevreul's major contribution to science had been his publication of his law of simultaneous contrast (in 1839, the same year that Daguerre first unveiled his successful photographic process in Paris), in which he recognized the perceptual influence that various colors have upon each other, a theory that reverberated through much artistic practice well into the twentieth century. Despite Monet's frequent disavowal of any intellectual or scientific theory of painting, the one such concept he ever seems to have mentioned aloud is this one. Indeed, it would probably have been difficult to discuss with other artists the



Fig. 13
Claude Monet, *Boulevard des Capucines*, 1873–74, oil on canvas, 31 5/8 x 23 3/4 in. (80.3 x 60.3 cm), The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: The Kenneth A. and Helen F. Spencer Foundation Acquisition Fund (F72-35)

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FROM INSTANT TO
ENVELOPPE

sorts of aesthetic experiments with color that he pursued in the 1880s and beyond without some recourse to Chevreul, so deeply embedded had this scientific argot become in the vocabulary of his contemporaries.¹

The other person appearing in the interview photographs, Nadar, also figures prominently in the history of Impressionism. Born Gaspard Félix Tournachon, he began as a caricaturist for the popular press in the 1840s, changing his *métier* to photography in the 1850s. His enormously successful portrait practice grew to occupy an entire building at 35, Boulevard des Capucines in Paris, on one floor of which he allowed a group of artist friends to show their work in 1874—the first of what thereafter were called the “Impressionist Exhibitions.” (It was at this first group show that, much to the painter’s chagrin, the title of Monet’s *Impression: Sunrise* was seized upon by a hostile critic who then dubbed the group “Impressionists.”)

There is more to the relationship between Monet and photography than the mere accident of the location of his movement’s appellation; however, just as with his refusal to admit (at least publicly) his dependence on even rudimentary elements of color theory, the artist remained noticeably silent on the insights he might have drawn from the new medium. It is my contention here that even though there is little direct evidence in his public statements or correspondence on the subject, it is possible to infer a relationship between Monet’s painting and photography, especially as the latter grew to be such a fundamental component of visual culture in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Aaron Scharf was the first scholar to note the similarity between the blurred figures in motion appearing in popular photographic views taken in Paris in the 1860s and 1870s and the blurring of figures seen in the foreground of Monet’s painting of the *Boulevard des Capucines*, made in 1873–74 (fig. 13).² At this early point in his career, it certainly appears that Monet felt free to apply an effect found in photography to communicate the bustling foot traffic on the *grand boulevard*—in a painting that was made, by the way, from the vantage point of Nadar’s studio.

Much later, however, Monet seems to express a very different, almost hostile relationship to photography, at least as far as it was implicated in his own work. In a

1905 letter to his dealer Durand-Ruel, the artist responded angrily to the accusation by two English artists that he, in fact, had relied on photographs for some of his recent London paintings, asserting that

...whether my Cathedrals, my Londons and other canvasses were painted from life or not is nobody's business and totally unimportant. I know so many painters who paint only from life and who produce nothing but horrors....³

It is interesting to note that Monet here is not so much asserting the *plein air* purity of his pictures (which by this point he was starting *ad vivum*, but then extensively working over later in the studio), as he is distancing himself from what might be understood as a photographically conditioned mode of representation, understood as presenting the world in a meticulous and overwhelming profusion of detail. It is precisely this aesthetic that underpins the academic practice of what is often referred to as Naturalism in the last third of the nineteenth century, seen here in *October*, a Salon painting made by Jules Bastien-Lepage in 1878 (fig. 14). The sharp focus and extremely detailed rendering found in this work reflects Bastien-Lepage's openly acknowledged emulation of visual effects drawn from photography.

For Monet, this sort of Naturalism is the path not taken. It is worth noting that in the *Boulevard des Capucines* picture, the element of photography that Monet chooses to emulate is, in fact, the result of the medium's very inability to freeze and focus the detail of the figures in motion below. Thinking through this choice leads us to the key concept linking photography and Monet's practice: *instantaneity*. We must be careful before we leap to a conclusion about what exactly that term means, however. The notion of the "instant" is one that developed historically, a reflection of various technological advances and cultural conceptions over time. Today, most people probably think of an instant as a fraction of a second, something that takes place in the time it takes to snap one's fingers. But even within photography, such a temporally constricted instant was not technically possible, at least not until the 1880s, when the gelatin silver (or "dry plate") process came into widespread use. The new gelatin silver emulsions, in addition to providing much greater flexibility in exposure and development of the negative, also had the advantage of a much higher sensitivity to light; thus, it was possible for the first time to capture (and to freeze)



Fig. 14
Jules Bastien-Lepage, *October*,
1878, oil on canvas, 71 7/8 x 77 3/16 in.
(180.7 x 196 cm), National Gallery of
Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest,
1928 (3678-3)

motion at speeds much faster than the human eye could follow. In fact, it was not until the advent of dry plate that cameras required mechanical shutters—up to this time, photographers exposed their plates by simply removing the lens cap, waiting for the appropriate length of time, and then replacing it.

It is worth mentioning here that *plein air* landscape practice, emphasizing the immediacy of the painter's experience, first came to prominence during precisely the same few decades at the beginning of the nineteenth century in which two dozen or more individuals—often with no knowledge of each other—felt compelled to devise photochemical means to capture and record the ephemeral images of the camera obscura. In both cases, the desire to fix these fleeting images depends upon a newly emerging cultural conception of time, and the related epistemological drive to arrest and hold onto a particular moment from it—in other words, at the outset, there was a deep link between photography and *plein air* landscape practice, at the level of what we might identify as *instantaneity*, understood (at least initially) as it was experienced within the bounds of normal human perception.

During the first part of Monet's career, this earlier, more attenuated photographic instant would have been the common experience of the medium.

Monet's early work in the 1860s and 1870s emphasized relatively quick execution directly from the motif, reproducing in paint an analogue of his visual "impressions" of the scene before him. In *The Seine at Port-Villez*, 1883–90 (cat. 1), we see this *plein air* method in full force. Relatively quickly executed, most likely on the spot from the middle of the river in his studio boat, his translation of the trees caressed by the wind and the flow of the river in the foreground focuses on the play and relationship of color, certainly, but the lack of tight focus registers not only the relative speed of the painting's execution, but also a somewhat elastic relationship to the flow of time, as seen in the blurred movement of the elements of his motif.

In the 1880s, after his move to Giverny, Monet's practice becomes much more complex.⁴ In response to what seems to have been a growing frustration with trying to paint within the gap between the moment of perception and its representation on the canvas, he adopted a more recursive practice, "laying in" the landscape directly from the motif, then correcting (later, "harmonizing") the colors, overall balance of the picture, etc. in the studio, before declaring the work finished to his satisfaction.

This hybrid practice becomes institutionalized in Monet's series paintings of the early 1890s, represented here by the *Poplars*, 1891 (cat. 2). In 1877, Monet had anticipated the later, full-blown series work in a group of paintings of the Gare Saint-

Lazare railway station, which frame the atmospheric clouds of steam from the engines within the strikingly modern architectonics of the glass-roofed train shed. Yet despite this rather ambitious first attempt at an iconic, monumental series of related paintings, Monet did not return to the idea of working in series until he started painting the *Grainstacks* in the fields near his home in Giverny in 1890. What had happened in the interim, and how might we explain his return, after thirteen years, to the idea of series paintings—and not only a group of paintings of the same motif, but series that in the 1890s are much more systematic in approach, and often discussed as representing specific times of day, seasons, and/or particular lighting conditions?

One significant development taking place squarely in the gap between the Gare Saint-Lazare paintings and the later, more systematized series works of the 1890s was the advent of chronophotography (the photographic analysis of motion). In the early 1880s, French scientist Étienne-Jules Marey was inspired by the example of Eadweard Muybridge's photographic studies of galloping horses to analyze movement across a series of photographic exposures. These chronophotographic studies became widely known in the 1880s, through both scientific and popular journals, and through the publication of illustrated books such as Muybridge's *Animal Locomotion* in 1886. The major advances in this new field, while begun using the old collodion/wet plate process in the late 1870s, were dramatically facilitated with the introduction of the much faster gelatin silver process. George Eastman's innovation of applying the gelatin silver emulsion to a flexible roll of paper was used by Marey to quickly shoot a series of negatives that froze various stages of movement that were otherwise invisible to the naked eye. He also began photographing multiple exposures on a single plate, as seen here in his study of a pelican in flight (fig. 15).

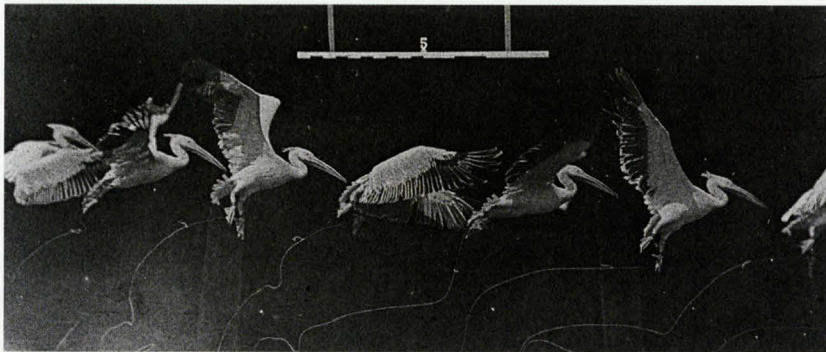


Fig. 15
Étienne-Jules Marey, *Pelican in Flight*, ca. 1882, chronophotography, albumen silver print. Collection of the Cinémaèque française (42125)

Seriality became something of a visual virus throughout the 1880s, applied photographically not only in scientific work such as Marey's analysis of motion or Charcot's medical work charting the postures of hysterics, but also in popular contexts such as the Nadar/Chevreul interview cited above, as well as in the striking series of photographs by Théophile Féau documenting the erection of the Eiffel Tower in the months leading up to the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris, to name but a few examples.

These serial images break down and transform the older conception of the lived instant, reorganizing temporal experience in ways that transcend the normal capacities of the human eye: placing them in sequence, it became possible to synthesize a new visual experience, whether expanding the perception of time in the motion studies, or collapsing it in Féau's "time-lapse" images. The next logical step, of course, was the development of the motion picture, a medium that reconstructs (synthesizes) the movement otherwise so artificially arrested in the still chronophotographic image.⁵

Monet anticipated exactly this shift in his hybrid painting practice, by first registering the immediacy of his motif *en plein air* (analysis), then summarizing the results by reworking the canvases in his studio, generating a synthesis reproducing his experience, more broadly understood. He worked his way to this new temporal conception by expanding the *plein air* instant to encompass the concept of the *enveloppe*, which is typically discussed as the envelope of light and atmosphere surrounding his motifs. As he wrote to Gustave Geffroy in 1890,

The further I go, the better I see that it takes a great deal of work to succeed in rendering what I want to render: "instantaneity", above all the *enveloppe*, the same light spread over everything, and I'm more than ever disgusted at things that come easily, at the first attempt.⁶

I would contend that this *enveloppe* extends beyond simply the play of light and atmosphere, and must be understood temporally (as Monet himself here seems to say), in terms of duration as well. The impossible gap presented by *plein air* practice is that between the ever-shifting light and the fixed nature of the marks placed on the canvas: how is one ever to keep up, even in as short a passage of time as a half-hour? With the development of his *enveloppe*, Monet dilates the *plein air* instant into a phenomenologically rich duration of time, one in which the human eye can

take its time to notice the colors, the flickers of light, as they arise and pass from consciousness. In essence, he shifts from analyzing, breaking down the immediacy of the visual in the earlier *plein air* work, toward a richer synthesis of perceptual experience, more holistically understood. (In this context, it is interesting to note that when visiting Giverny in person, the water garden in particular is alive with buzzing insect life, none of which ever finds its way into Monet's paintings; it was Marey the scientist, after all, who was interested in freezing the motion of animal life.) It must be understood that Monet's perceptual moment is not a naïve one: this duration is absolutely dependent on the existence of a well-steeped knowledge of the world and the representational logic(s) of the pictorial, including of course things like the artist's oft-mentioned extensive collection of Japanese prints, but which in the late nineteenth century most certainly also included the ubiquitous experience of photography as one of its significant constituents.

And so Monet's later work, developing after his move to Giverny, is far from a direct transcription of the mere appearance of that place. One could argue that the post-1900 paintings of the water garden, the *Nymphéas* (cats. 6–9), are really not so much paintings of the pond itself as they are recursive, mediated views of the reflected sky, clouds, and overhanging willows. Eliminating the horizon line, Monet focuses his attention on the landscape as seen upside-down on the surface of the water, a framing ironically reminiscent of the inverted image found on a photographer's ground glass; filtering this view through a lifetime of rich, nuanced, and informed aesthetic ruminations on time and place, these pictures then offer a much deeper opportunity for reflection than they are often given.

- 12 Tucker, *Claude Monet: Life and Art*, 212. As Tucker notes, he would need to post-date them to coincide with the Armistice.
- 13 Ibid., 225.
- 14 Ellen Johnson, *Fragments Recalled at Eighty: The Art Memoirs of Ellen H. Johnson*, ed. Athena Tacha (North Vancouver: Galerie, 1993), 52. Johnson compiled the memoirs from 1989 to 1991; as Tacha notes in her introduction, 14, "It is...a text about memory and the act of recalling." René Gimpel, in his *Journal*, as trans. in Stuckey, *Monet: A Retrospective*, 312, wrote of Blanche Hoschedé, on July 17, 1923, being "fed up with" Michel Monet, who didn't work and was "very spoiled by his father."
- 15 Seitz, *Claude Monet: Seasons and Moments*, 50. For the shell damage at the Orangerie, see among other publications Virginia Spate, *Claude Monet: Life and Work* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 316, 334 note 126.
- 16 Hoschedé was born August 20, 1877 and was seventy-three when Johnson met him. The youngest of Monet's six stepchildren, he liked in later life to refer to his physical resemblance to Monet and some scholars believe he may have been Monet's child. See Sylvie Patin, *Monet, The Ultimate Impressionist* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 50.
- 17 Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann*, vol. 1 of *À la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1919, printed for Québec: Les Éditions Variétés, 1944), 69–73. He writes, 73, both of "l'odeur et la saveur" engendering recollection, and of "les nymphéas de la Vivonne" as among the memories recalled. The river was in actuality the Loir, but was poetically renamed Vivonne in his works. Proust earlier had written of Monet's gardens, with their "earth flowers and also water flowers," in "'Les Éblouissements' par la comtesse de Noailles," *Le Figaro*, June 15, 1907, literary supplement.
- 18 Jay Gorney, "Oberlin's Tribute to Ellen Johnson," *Art News* 74, no. 4 (April 1975): 34, also quoted by Richard Spear in "Ellen H. Johnson, 1910–1992" in Johnson, *Fragments Recalled at Eighty*, 7.
- 19 Johnson, *Fragments Recalled at Eighty*, 61.
- 20 Charles Parkhurst, Allen Memorial Art Museum director, was in correspondence with Alexandre Rosenberg at Paul Rosenberg & Co., in September 1959, regarding Oberlin's purchase. Rosenberg indicated that the painting had been in Michel Monet's collection, and secured through Katia Granoff, though she had not owned it (corres. in museum files). E. A. Carmean, Jr., "Morris Louis and the Modern Tradition: II. Cubism, III. Impressionism," *Arts Magazine* 51, no. 2 (October 1976): 117, note 12, writes that "Charles Parkhurst, who was instrumental in Oberlin's acquisition of *Wisteria*, has recounted to me how radical the painting appeared to most people when Oberlin was considering its purchase in the late 1950s." Ellsworth Kelly visited Giverny in September 1952, and he too was bowled over by what he saw, as well as the disrepair into which the site had fallen; see James Yood, "Making Monet Matter: Giverny and Modern Art," in *In Monet's Garden: Artists and the Lure of Giverny* (Columbus, Ohio: Columbus Museum of Art, 2007), 97. Among the best publications on renewed interest in Monet in the 1950s is Michael Leja, "The Monet Revival and New York School Abstraction," in Tucker, *Monet in the 20th Century*, 98–108. For Katia Granoff's promotion of Monet's late works, see Leja, "The Monet Revival," 100, and Joseph Baillio, "Katia Granoff (1895–1989): Champion of the Late Works of Claude Monet," in *Claude Monet (1840–1926): A Tribute to Daniel Wildenstein and Katia Granoff* (New York: Wildenstein, 2007), 35–44.
- 21 Monet maintained, according to Maurice Kahn, "Claude Monet's Garden," *Le Temps* (June 7, 1904), as trans. in Stuckey, *Monet: A Retrospective*, 244, that the resemblance of his garden and bridge to Japanese precedents "is quite unintentional." Yet the importance of Japanese art for his own life's work, and for his garden design, has been amply written about by other scholars; see Virginia Spate, Gary Hickey, David Bromfield et al. *Monet & Japan* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2001).

FROM INSTANT TO ENVELOPPE

- 1 The complicated relationship between the Impressionists—and Monet, especially—and the (mis)application of Chevreul's theories in their work is discussed at length in Georges Roque, "Chevreul and Impressionism: A Reappraisal," *The Art Bulletin* 78 (March 1996): 26–39.
- 2 Aaron Scharf, *Art and Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 170–72.
- 3 Monet to Durand-Ruel, February 12, 1905, quoted in Jacqueline and Maurice Guillard,

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- 4 The best source describing this development in detail is John House, *Monet: Nature into Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986).
- 5 On Muybridge's direct contribution to Edison's invention of the motion picture, see Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2003), 228–31.
- 6 Monet to Geffroy, October 7, 1890, quoted in House, *Monet: Nature into Art*, 220.
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