

## Laberge on Alarcó et al. (2010)

Paloma Alarcó et al., *Monet et l'abstraction. Monet and Abstraction*. Paris: Éditions Hazan and Musée Marmottan Monet, 2010, 175 p. 29 €. ISBN: 978-2-7541-0479-1 (paperback).

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Should Claude Monet, considered the father of Impressionism, be seen as a precursor of abstraction? Or be considered as the first representative of the abstract expressionists, *avant la lettre*? This bilingual book, simply titled *Monet et l'abstraction. Monet and Abstraction*, accompanied an exhibition presented at the Musée Marmottan Monet in Paris during the summer of 2010 and later at the Museo de arte Thyssen-Bornemisza, in Madrid. The exhibit's *raison d'être* is twofold: first, it examines Claude Monet's aesthetics with a focus on abstraction, and second, it compares selected works by Monet with a variety of abstract artists from the second half of the twentieth century. These unusual oppositions enable curator Paloma Alarcó to provide unexpected comparisons between Monet and artists such as Jackson Pollock, André Masson, Zao Wou-ki, Nicolas de Staël and many others. Indeed, some portions of Monet's later works, and especially his water lilies series, contain abstract zones that can be compared to abstract painting aesthetics and other works that resolutely belong to abstract expressionists. Contributors to the catalog provide a missing link between the end of Impressionism (which was still figurative) and the beginnings of abstraction, which was already present in some nineteenth-century works.

Jacques Taddei of the Musée Marmottan Monet mentions in his short foreword how the works of Monet were "rediscovered" during the 1950s (11). Further on, referring to this moment of rediscovery, guest curator Paloma Alarcó explains her own strategy for this exhibition: "we propose to view Monet through the eyes of the abstract painters who championed him" (20). To illustrate the point, the catalog divides evenly the fifty full-page high-quality reproductions among Monet and various abstract artists.

In his excellent chapter, Michel Draguet recalls how painter Kandinsky was amazed when he discovered Monet's painting entitled *Meules (Haystack, 1895)* because it not only featured tangible objects, but also colors, light and shadows that made all elements unreal, since they seemed to float: "unconsciously, the object as an element indispensable to the picture was discredited by this" (90). The last essay by Thierry Dufrêne investigates various theoretical perspectives borrowed from sociologist of art Pierre Francastel and other thinkers. Making striking connections between Monet and contemporary Canadian and American expatriates Jean-Paul Riopelle and Joan Mitchell, Dufrêne documents how the French influence spread outside of Europe and inspired a group of North American artists. Because these painters living in France during the 1950s were located far from the center of abstract expressionism in New York City, Riopelle and Mitchell understood abstraction in different terms. Like many American avant-garde artists, the abstract expressionists rediscovered Monet (and Turner) and recognised them as an influence. An often-quoted definition of abstract expressionism by Heinrich Wöflin conceives this style as loose: "if the label 'abstract expressionism' means anything, it means painterliness: loose, rapid handling, or the look of it; masses that blotted and fused instead of shapes that stayed distinct; large and conspicuous rhythms; broken colour, uneven saturations or densities of paint, exhibited brush, knife or finger marks--in short, a constellation of qualities" (152). This final essay is especially strong because it links observations, art theory, and comparisons between images from seemingly very different artists.

Few other exhibitions--*Claude Monet jusqu'à l'impressionnisme numérique* (Prestel and Fondation Breyeler, 2002) would be one of them--adopt a similar comparative approach between Monet and his abstract followers. In my view, *Monet and Abstraction* is one of the most compelling recent books on Monet because of the ways it renews comparative and theoretical perspectives about such an immensely innovative artist. As such, it has earned a well-deserved spot among libraries' art historical collections.

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