

Hanson on Shackelford et al. (2016)

Shackelford, George, et al. *Monet: The Early Years*. Yale UP, 2016, pp. 206, ISBN 978-0-300-22185-5

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Monet: The Early Years invites us to look afresh at a group of paintings that Claude Monet produced between 1858 and 1872. The exhibition catalogue demonstrates that, in the case of this long-lived and extraordinarily prolific painter, it is extremely rewarding to focus intently on his formative years. The publication, although a survey, largely avoids two pitfalls associated with chronological and monographic studies: their tendencies to advance teleological narratives and mythologize historical subjects. Instead, the book's thematic essays and ample color plates show us that Monet's early output was astonishingly varied. Because the texts cover roughly the same period, key topics reoccur like refrains, enriching our understanding of the artist's oeuvre.

Monet's *Pointe de la Hève, Low Tide*, a painting owned by the Kimbell Art Museum, served as the impetus for this exhibition (also entitled *Monet: The Early Years*). That the 1865 canvas was the first of Monet's to appear at the Salon prompted art historians at the Kimbell and its partnering institution, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, to develop a show that examined the artist's formative years in greater depth than ever before. The organizing curator, George T. M. Shackelford, in collaboration with Esther Bell, selected roughly fifty paintings from a possible 250. The catalogue provides an overview of these well- and little-known works, enhancing our knowledge of the painter's early output. A companion exhibition, *Monet: The Late Years*, will open at the same venues in 2019.

Monet: The Early Years includes five essays, a chronology, and a series of catalogue entries. Each essay-writer—Shackelford, Anthea Callen, Mary Dailey Desmarais, Richard Shiff, and Richard Thomson—brings a unique perspective to the task of elucidating how Monet developed his artistic identity and promoted his art. The authors successfully advance an overarching thesis: Monet was as deliberate a painter as he was a strategist, especially when producing canvases for submission to the Salon and sale through dealers. I would have appreciated an essay on Monet's depictions of Camille Doncieux, whom he met in the mid 1860s and married in 1870, after she bore him the first of two sons. Instead, we must content ourselves with Shackelford's insightful though all too brief entries on pictures for which Camille posed.

Shackelford's "Introduction: The Invention of Monet" anchors the book. Building on John House's scholarship, Shackelford explores Monet's deep concern with publicizing his art by displaying it at prominent exhibitions. The author impresses upon us the degree to which Monet's choice of subject matter, for his large-scale paintings of the 1860s, evinces his well-considered effort to gain acceptance to the Salon and garner favorable press. More salient is Shackelford's point that Monet's early works remained important to him throughout his life. This idea is borne out in the artist's practice of buying back pictures he produced in the 1860s and displaying them at exhibitions in the 1870s and 1880s. Regarding such gaps between a work's creation and display dates, Shackelford astutely suggests that "savvy" viewers who saw Monet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* at the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874 would have found the 1865–66 painting strikingly outdated (16).

Desmarais's "Hunting for Light: *Luncheon on the Grass*" also singles out this monumental painting of well-dressed picnickers for analysis. The essay encourages us to reconsider one of Monet's most celebrated works, now known through two fragments and several studies. Desmarais effectively intervenes in the critical commentary about this painting, which, as she maintains, often construes Monet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* as an audacious response to Édouard Manet's eponymous 1863 canvas. Departing from this trend, Desmarais explores the likelihood that Monet also borrowed from the eighteenth-century artist Jean-Antoine Watteau's *fêtes galantes*. The author's efforts to identify specific sources for *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* are less compelling than her interpretations of the painting within the social-historical and geographic context of Fontainebleau in the 1860s. By consulting travel guides, novels, and images, Desmarais establishes that hunters, painters, and tourists increasingly competed for use of this forest. Her description of the green space's transformation from a royal hunting ground to which artists flocked into a public leisure area for the middle classes complicates current thought about the significance of place in Monet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*.

When read in succession, Thomson's and Callen's essays sustain a productive dialogue about topics such as the art market, place and travel, and nature and artifice. In "Emergent Naturalism: Reflections on Monet's Early Paintings, 1864–1874," Thomson considers how Monet negotiated between a commitment to direct observation and an ambition to craft a personal style. By contrast, Callen's "Taking Shape: Monet's Compositional Techniques" tracks changes in the artist's manner of painting in relation to changes in the manufacture of canvases and collecting practices. In spite of their different approaches,

both authors construe Monet as an artist who carefully calibrated his paintings' subject matter, style, size, and shape to be distinctive yet marketable. Another thread weaving through the essays is Monet's remarkable inventiveness when scouting sites and determining the best angle from which to depict them.

The final essay, Shiff's "Paraph Painter," is something of an outlier in its departure from social-historical concerns. Shiff explores how twenty-first-century viewers, who regularly consume high-resolution images, experience works such as Monet's *Boulevard des Capucines*. For Shiff, to view this painting is to encounter a low-resolution surface whose marks have visible separations between them. Shiff advances the evocative claim that such marks manifest Monet's personal style, whether these applications of paint are a paraph of the artist's signature or a stroke implying, without representing, a figure.

Monet: The Early Years is an essential read for those interested in the formation of this artist. The book continues a trend in the field to examine Monet's oeuvre in the context of the art market and collecting practices, as evidenced by the exhibition catalogues *Inventing Impressionism: Paul Durand-Ruel and the Modern Art Market* (2015) and *Monet the Collector* (2017).

Volume: 47.1–2

Year:

- 2018