

## MONET IN THE 90'S

Come along. It's a fine day to visit 'Monet in the 90's', on display at London's Royal Academy of Art. Claude Monet was a French impressionist painter who was born in 1849 and died in 1926. Some eighty of his 'series' paintings have been reassembled for the first time since his death.

Advance booking is the only way to bypass the vast cues of people who fill the courtyard entrance. Come in. Find yourself climbing the wide curving stairway, leading to the six galleries that hold the paintings. Join the masses of people shifting and merging in the small rooms, filling all available space. Viewing is not easy with dozens of head bobbing between you and the paintings. Only by forcing yourself to the front of the crowds do the pictures in the first gallery come into view. Hill, valley and sky. Dull, dark sienna colours, densely painted beneath a hard grey-green sky. Unimpressive. Again. A painting of the same image, but differing in colour. A lighter handling of the hill. More ruddiness. The sky paler. Everything undefined. Rough. Unexciting. Then another painting of the hill - and another. This last one leaps out of the canvas, handled as if in a sudden burst of sunlight revelation. Yellow against purplish hues. Oranges set against blues. The same hill and valley are captured again and again in different lights, tones and intensities. Curiosity pulls you toward the second room.

This room too, is so densely packed in bodies that proper viewing is impossible. Here are a series of haystacks. Some fifteen paintings line the walls. Each one captures a time, a season, a weather moment. If it were possible to see them all circling the room, it would be like a calendar of the seasons surrounding you. The haystacks sit, as if unimportant, except as a shape against which light and shadow can play. Atmospheres grow around them. It is not the haystacks which capture the eyes, but the atmospheres in which the haystacks exist. Sun, snow, rain, dusk, dawn, midday, autumn. The hut-shaped haystacks tend to be densely painted, as if growing out of the ground. Short, uniform brush strokes of thick paint, laid carefully beside one another. Dark earthy hues, layer to give an impression of heaviness. Dark greens and reds. Look - in this painting the haystack is surrounded by pinkish white hues that contrast starkly with the dark haystack. Bits of canvas show through the painting as a whiter white. The almost uniform horizontal strip of blue-green behind suggests houses, or huts - but only but the direction of the brush stroke. The human element does not register. The paintings are more of an experience than a replica of a scene. Experiences of light, of dawn, of dusk, of cloud, of cold, of warm. Colours speak moods. Blue cold. Hot orange-yellows.

Behind you, a woman's voice says "I think I like the sunset one the best". But it is not a sunset. The haystack - the setting sun - the actual scene is unreal. It is the feeling invoked by a sunset. The feeling is emphasised by the differing moods of the surrounding paintings. Sketchy strokes, live in colour and are thrown against and beside colour. It is the series that speaks. That says *in one moment all moments are implied*. Nothing stays the same. One moment reaches into the next and still holds the vision of the moment before.

Move on into gallery three. Poplars. Lines of colour running from the top of each canvas to the bottom. A horizontal line splits each lower third of the canvas, separating land from water, tree-trunks from their reflections. The poplars are long lines of dark colour, overlaid with a rough stippling effect in lighter colours. A golden burst against a pale sky. or a dark shadow against rich colours of an evening sky. Then another - light on light with shape bordering a pale, ghostly realm. Perhaps the most insipid of this series is the painting that seems too real. Too defined. A too blue sky, with heavy, white, bubble clouds. Straight tree-trunks and reflections of dark green leaves. Where the other paintings capture an atmosphere of being, this one seems flat. Yet this very distraction brings the frame of the picture into notice. Then the frame of the other paintings come into stronger notice. Heavy, ornate, gilt frames surround most of the canvases. Frames that conflict with the modernistic, impressionist style. One or two of the paintings are simply frames, in unadorned, wooden borders, which allow the atmosphere of the painting to spread outwards. Monet's paintings are not paintings you can dive into. Rather, you are absorbed by them. You do not note them as a statement, but like reading a story, you grow into their timelessness.

When the heads of other viewers shift a bit, you catch glimpses of the paintings at far end of the room. Misty images. A tower - a cathedral - reaching into a sky that is somehow a part of the building itself. You move closer. Several paintings line the far wall. Views and angles of the same building, in blues, in yellows, in greyish reds. Capturing and re-capturing the spiritual sense of the building. Atmospheres, moods - time and timelessness. There are some thirty paintings in this series. What a pity that they could not all be brought together, to fill one wall, like a huge mosaic recording the endless world of the cathedral. Images implying days and year and experiences that echo in iridescent stone walls. To see these paintings is to feel the spiritual element of time itself, fragmented into a prism of images.

Gallery four. A headland, with a house placed midway upon it, that grows out of the land without emphasis or significance. It does not focus the attention but draws towards the sea beyond. Other canvases repeat the image - closer - more distant - the eye roves through the paintings and back again but is not arrested. Mood is captured. Atmosphere. But not the emotions. The paintings evoke no sense of love, hate, joy or anger. They capture the endlessness of mist, cloud, sunshine, rain. Like recollections of states of solitude.

The next room. Gallery five. Already the senses are overwhelmed. The constant pressure of people pushing and shoving becomes increasingly claustrophobic. You manage to block them out again, without treading on too many toes. Paintings. These paintings are of mornings on the Seine. Quiet colours. As if the river and trees and reflections were emerging from mist - from nothingness. Emptiness awakens into being. Short, even brush strokes. Thick paint over a dry surface, as if modelling reality into being. Each canvas seems halved, between reflections and the reflected. Tiny patches of unpainted canvas add another dimension into being - the origin out of which all emerges.

Gallery six. Water lilies. Paintings upon paintings of the pond - of the red-pink-white lilies - of the bridge that arches pond and lilies - images that have become synonymous with the name 'Monet'. Closer examination shows again that everything is suggestive. No boundaries. No edges of definition. A simple stroke of thick, green paint is a lily pad. With brief red and pink strokes, lilies and reflections appear. It is by colour intensity that the near and distant lilies are given dimension. By distant viewing, everything pulls together and begins to pulse. The bridge grows within a few simple brush strokes pulled across the canvas. It scarcely seems secure - but balances the composition as if a breath would upset it. An almost abstract design that holds all in place - as if its only purpose is to give definition to the world of water lilies and foliage. The observer is absorbed into this world as if into a meditation.

Enough. Much has been seen, yet not enough. More than eighty paintings. memory cannot hold them all. Only certain ones are retained. Not they any of these paintings can be properly viewed while fighting for room to see. The constant shuffle and bumping into arms and legs distracts and suffocates. It is time to leave. Time push past the arms and legs and bodies that distract and suffocate. Pass through the door of no return. Through the shop of Monet memorabilia - Monet T-shirts, Monet coffee mugs, Monet diaries, Monet calendars, Monet books, Monet prints. You wander through, and leave.

Into the open air of the court-yard. The cue of people still waiting to go in, stretches into the next street. Mentally you wish them well. To see a single Monet painting cannot properly describe this painter. To see these fragments of his series paintings these - fragments of his vision - is to realise some of the power and immensity of his work. A record of timelessness by recording moments in time. A sense of the origin out which all things spring into being. It is by atmosphere, that all is held in place. Through illusion, reality itself becomes more real - more intense.