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Le temps retrouvé: Claude Monet's Series between Impression and Belatedness

Impressionist paintings are setting suns.¹

—T. J. Clark

Authors – Paul Valéry states it clearly – know not what they do. The author is the most unsuitable person imaginable “to know what others call his work.”² This fact is all the more true when more time has passed in their life’s work. For according to Valéry, with the passage of time, memory also becomes influential, the memory of the work’s laborious development, of the “whole *context* of incidents, hesitations, parts that have been deleted or never executed, makeshifts and surprises.”³ For the author, there can therefore never be a completed work, only accidentally finished and, above all, abandoned works.

By comparison, the interpreter has it easy, because in reading and viewing, texts and pictures become delimited as timeless and readable forms, losing their character as things that were made and developed. But what if an artist wanted to make subjective experiences the content of their art? What if this artist were an impressionist whose works did not overcome or suppress the contingency of the conditions of their creation but rather made the arbitrariness of the moment the theme of paintings? Wouldn’t this impressionist have to work to lift the hermeneutic asymmetry between production and reception, and wouldn’t the proliferating

1 T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 113.

2 Paul Valéry, “The Creation of Art,” in *Aesthetics*, trans. Ralph Manheim, vol. 13 of *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, ed. Jackson Mathews (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 125.

3 Valéry, 125.

Note: This is a translation of an essay published in 2004 under the title “*Le temps retrouvé: Claude Monets Getreideschober zwischen Impression und Nachträglichkeit*,” in *Momente im Prozess: Zeitlichkeit künstlerischer Produktion*, ed. Karin Gludovatz and Martin Peschken (Berlin: Reimer, 2004), 211–226. In the course of preparing this essay for republication, I have revised and expanded it and, where necessary, updated the bibliographical references, but I have largely retained the argumentation from the original version.

Translated by Anthony Mahler

time of representation (the winding paths of memory) then become visible in the represented time (of the moment, of the impression)?

In the following, I will treat – using the example of a particularly significant individual case – the fetishization of the first moment in impressionism and the consequences of that fetishization for producing and finishing a work. It will be about the (fantasized) origin of the impressionistic picture, about the ruse of the impression as the epiphanic moment in aesthetic production when a sensation becomes, as it were, physically imprinted on an artist's sense of sight so that they can produce paintings that, for their part, can then be titled “impressions” again. Precisely this short-circuiting of origin and work determines the specific incompleteness of impressionistic paintings; for it is precisely their devices for producing immediacy – their character as cropped selections and their open brushwork – that make finished paintings too appear more abandoned than completed.

More than any other impressionist, Claude Monet was concerned with his paintings' lack of unity, a unity that was perhaps to be created at some point in the future: “I tell myself that anyone who claims to have finished a painting is terribly arrogant. To finish means complete, perfect, and I toil away without advancing, searching, groping, without accomplishing anything much, but to the point of tiring of it” (Je me dis que celui qui dit avoir fini une toile est un terrible orgueilleux. Finir voulant dire complet, parfait, et je travaille à force sans avancer, cherchant, tâtonnant, sans aboutir à grand'chose, mais au point d'en être fatigué).⁴ Once Monet had adopted completion as a requirement, he turned his attention to the contextual possibilities for retroactively transforming abandoned works into finished ones. Beginning in the early 1890s, Monet required his gallerist, Paul Durand-Ruel, to present his works exclusively in solo exhibitions.⁵ If, as Clement Greenberg has noted

⁴ Claude Monet to Gustave Geffroy, 28 March 1893; quoted from Gustave Geffroy, *Monet: Sa vie, son œuvre*, ed. Claudie Judrin (Paris: Macula, 1980), 323; all translations from French into English are by Chad Jorgensen unless otherwise noted. In this sense, Monet's stepson, Jean-Pierre Hoschedé, also reported: “I never heard Monet say about one of his paintings, even the most beautiful, that it was ‘finished.’ The word ‘finished’ did not exist in his vocabulary” (Je n'ai jamais entendu Monet déclarer de l'une de ses œuvres, même des plus belles, qu'elle fut “finie”. Pour lui, le mot fini n'existe pas en peinture – la sienne). Jean-Pierre Hoschedé, *Claude Monet ce mal connu*, in *Monet: A Retrospective*, ed. Charles F. Stuckey (New York: Park Lane, 1985), 135; Jean-Pierre Hoschedé, *Claude Monet, ce mal connu: Intimité familiale d'un demi siècle à Giverny de 1883 à 1926*, vol. 1 (Genève: P. Cailler, 1960), 113.

⁵ See Grace Seiberling, *Monet's Series* (New York: Garland, 1981), 100; Kermit Swiler Champa, “Monet and the Embrace of the Series,” in “Masterpiece” Studies: *Manet, Zola, Van Gogh, and Monet* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 119–143; on the impressionists' exhibition program in general, see Martha Ward, “Impressionist Installations and Private Exhibitions,” *Art Bulletin* 73.4 (1991): 599–622.

regarding Monet, the individual canvas acts as a cutout segment of a much larger image, then the larger context of the oeuvre acquires – as it is produced in the solo exhibition – a central significance.⁶ Yet ultimately in Monet's case, only the complete oeuvre in its totality can ensure such unity, which the piecemeal character and open, impressionistic brushwork of the single paintings negate. Even solo exhibitions can only guarantee the unity of the paintings – as Monet's contemporaries often regretted – for a short period of time.⁷ That is why the oeuvre must develop an inner coherence that will even endure after the art market has dispersed the ensemble into private collections and museums. What kind of inner coherence this is becomes clear if we look at contemporaneous art criticism. In 1887, Gustave Geffroy was already writing the script for the ideal reception of Monet's landscapes: "Observe [...] all these different states of nature [...] and you will see mornings rise before you, afternoons grow radiant, and the darkness of evening descend" (Observez [...] tous ces états si différents d'une même nature, et vous verrez devant vous se lever des matins, s'épanouir des midis, tomber des soirs).⁸ It seems as if the painter's work follows the cyclic temporality of nature, as if the winding time of the creative process imitates the continuous rhythm of the seasons and times of day, of weather and vegetation, and in this way overcomes the contingency and incompleteness of individual paintings. From that point on, as Maurice Kahn remarked, a single work would always be the sum of all the canvases needed to capture the

⁶ See Clement Greenberg, "Review of an Exhibition of Claude Monet," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, vol. 2, *Arrogant Purpose, 1945–1949* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 20.

⁷ For example, Louis Gillet wrote: "In some years when the artist's works are scattered through every museum in the Old and New Worlds, who will know that its most precious aspect has vanished into thin air, and that the whole striving of an artist's life has been needlessly squandered – a striving which was the most powerful effort ever made to give a decorative value to the intimate landscape, the painting of inwardness, and to bring to painting a sense of *continuity*?" (Qui saura dans quelque années, lorsque les œuvres de l'artiste se trouveront éparses dans tous les musées des deux mondes, que le plus précieux s'en est évaporé et qu'on aura laissé se perdre inutilement l'effort d'une vie d'artiste, l'effort le plus puissant qui ait été tenté pour donner au paysage intime, au tableau d'intérieur une valeur décorative et faire entrer dans la peinture le sens de la *continuité*?). Louis Gillet, "Les *Nymphéas* de M. Claude Monet," in *The Impressionists: A Retrospective*, ed. Martha Kapos (New York: Hugh Haughton Levin, 1991), 299; Louis Gillet, "L'épilogue de l'impressionnisme: Les *Nymphéas* de M. Claude Monet," *La revue hebdomadaire*, 21 August 1909, 414; quoted from Steven Z. Levine, *Monet and His Critics* (New York: Garland, 1976), 331.

⁸ Gustave Geffroy, "Salon de 1887, IV, Hors de Salon – Claude Monet, II," *La Justice*, 2 June 1887; quoted from Daniel Wildenstein, *Claude Monet: Biographie et catalogue raisonné*, vol. 3, *1887–1898: Peintures* (Lausanne: La Bibliothèque des arts, 1979), 3; English translation quoted from Daniel Wildenstein, *Monet or the Triumph of Impressionism* (Cologne: Taschen, 2003), 234.

moments of a landscape: “Thus, it can be said that a particular work by Monet consists of the number of canvases it takes to fix the varied moods of a certain landscape” (On peut donc dire qu’une œuvre de Monet c’est autant de toiles qu’il en fallu pour fixer les divers instants d’un paysage).⁹

Working with series in the manner Monet established as his privileged mode of production beginning in the late 1880s and early 1890s produces a close relationship between individual paintings: as a second-order work, a series compensates for the fragmentary character of individual paintings. Producing a unity through serialization seems to be diametrically opposed, however, to the idea of an organic œuvre spanning a whole life, an ideal that we may presume was still pursued in the late nineteenth century.¹⁰ Œuvre and series – that is, a life’s work and organic wholeness on the one hand, incomplete repetition and permutation on the other – do not, of course, represent simple opposites. In the following, I would like to place Monet’s series of grain stacks at the center of my analysis not only because they are considered the incunables of the principle of seriality but also because they make visible the productive tension between the time of life and the series more than any subsequent series of paintings ever has.

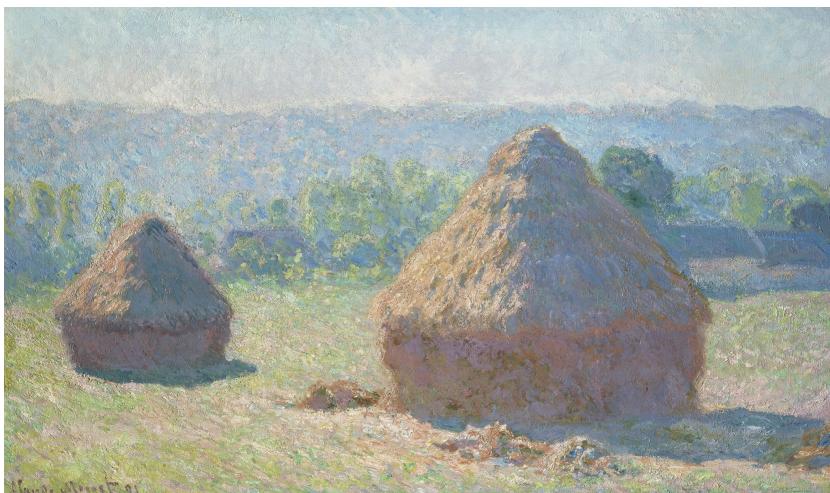


Figure 5.1: Claude Monet, *Grainstacks, End of Summer*, 1891. Paris, Musée d’Orsay, W 1266.

⁹ Maurice Kahn, “Claude Monet’s Garden,” in Stuckey, *Monet*, 242; Maurice Kahn, “Le jardin de Claude Monet,” *Le Temps*, 7 June 1904; quoted from Levine, *Monet and His Critics*, 289.

¹⁰ On the development of the notion of the œuvre as a multidimensional, organic whole, see Gabriele Guercio, *Art as Existence: The Artist’s Monograph and Its Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

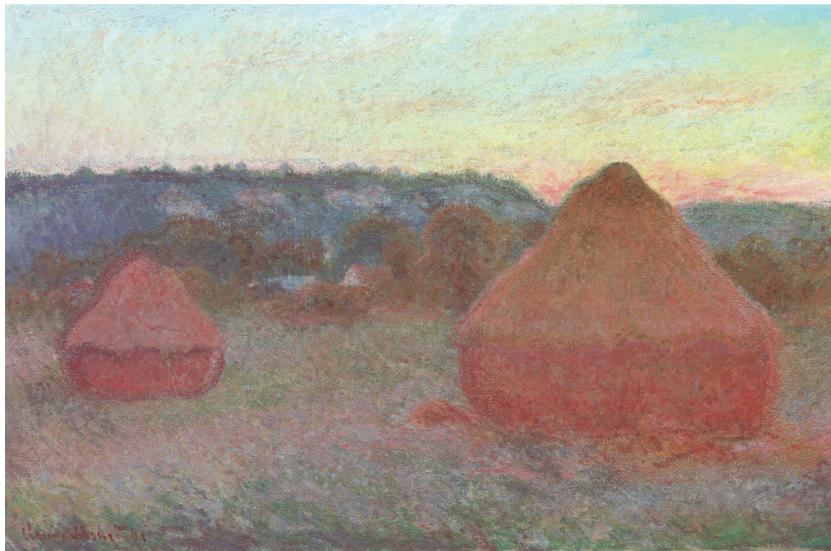


Figure 5.2: Claude Monet, *Grainstacks (End of Day, Autumn)*, 1890. Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, W 1270.

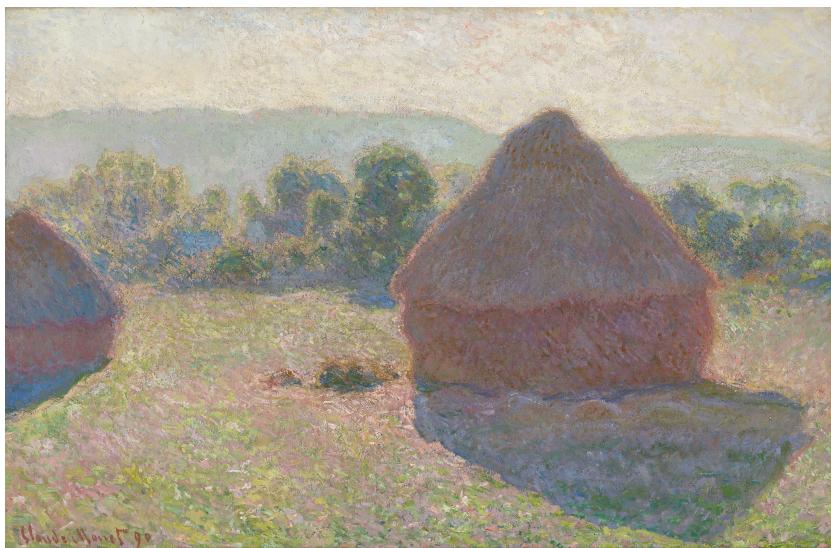


Figure 5.3: Claude Monet, *Grainstacks, Midday*, 1890. Canberra, National Gallery of Australia, W 1271.

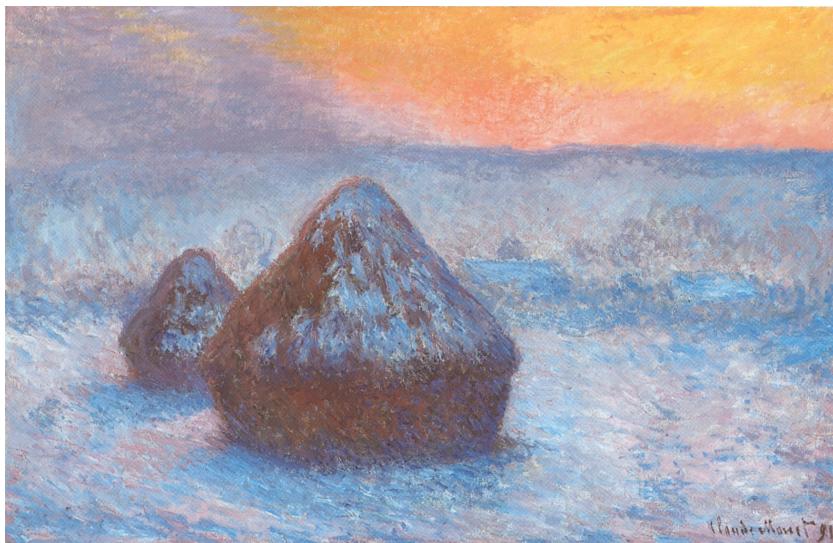


Figure 5.4: Claude Monet, *Grainstacks (Sunset, Snow Effect)*, 1891. Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, W 1278.



Figure 5.5: Claude Monet, *Grainstacks (Effect of Snow and Sun)*, 1891. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, W 1279.



Figure 5.6: Claude Monet, *Grainstack, Morning Snow Effect*, 1891. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, W 1280.

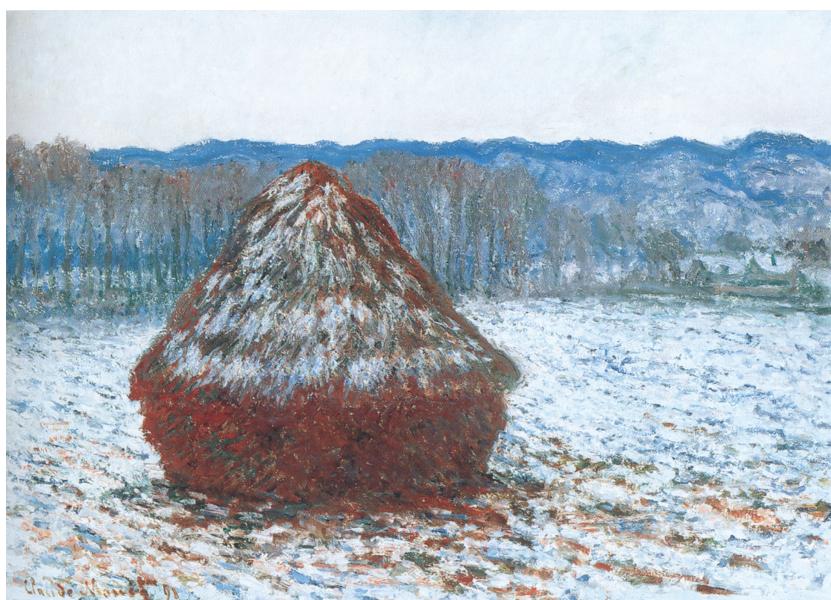


Figure 5.7: Claude Monet, *Grainstack*, 1891. Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, W 1283.



Figure 5.8: Claude Monet, *Grainstack in the Sunlight, Snow Effect*, 1891. Potsdam, Museum Barberini, Sammlung Hasso Plattner, W 1287.



Figure 5.9: Claude Monet, *Grainstack in Sunshine*, 1891. Zurich, Kunsthaus Zürich, W 1288.

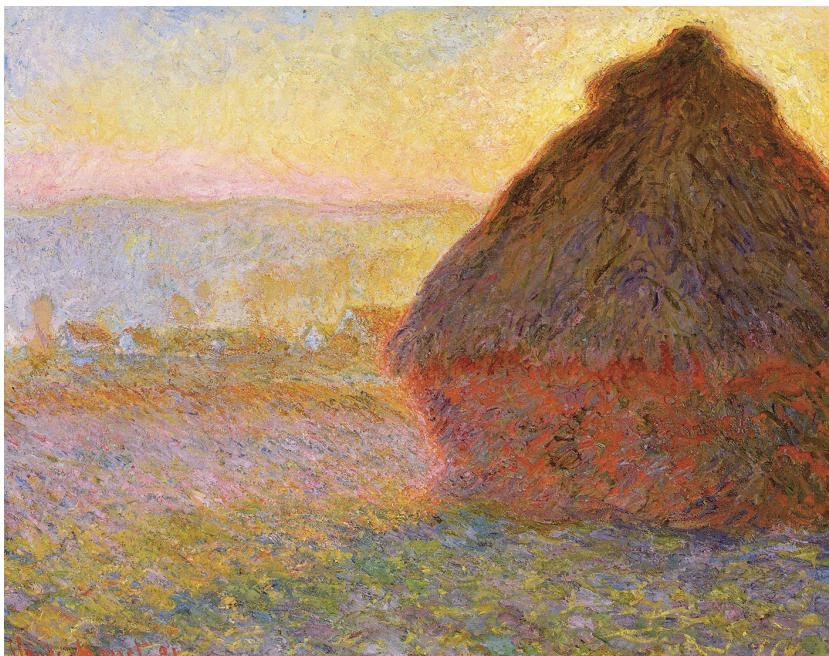


Figure 5.10: Claude Monet, *Grainstack (Sunset)*, 1891. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, W 1289.

The series of grain stacks

In May 1891, Monet exhibited twenty-two paintings in the gallery of the important dealer of impressionistic art Durand-Ruel: a view of the rocky landscape of the Creuse (*Le Bloc*), two versions of a field of oats and poppies, two other views, one of a meadow and one of a field of poppies, two paintings of summery strollers, and fifteen views of one or sometimes two grain stacks (see Figures 5.1–5.10) that a farmer had erected in the field behind Monet's house in Giverny and covered with rye straw to protect the grain.¹¹ The exhibition established a model for the “one-

¹¹ On the series of grain stacks, their exhibition at Durand-Ruel, and the principle of the series in Monet's work in general, see Seiberling, *Monet's Series*; Charles Moffett, “Monet's Haystacks,” in *Aspects of Monet: A Symposium on the Artist's Life and Times*, ed. John Rewald and Frances Weitzenhofer (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1984), 142–159; Steven Z. Levine, “Monet's Series: Repetition, Obsession,” *October* 37 (1986): 65–75; Paul Hayes Tucker, *Monet in the '90s: The Series Paintings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 65–105; Champa, “Monet and the Embrace of the Series”; Gottfried Boehm, “Werk und Serie: Probleme des modernen Bildbegriffs seit Monet,”

man show,” which Monet would adhere to from then on until the end of his life. Although he had already presented his work in the 1880s as part of solo exhibitions, those exhibitions were either very small in scope or designed as retrospectives.¹² In contrast to those exhibitions, Monet was now exclusively exhibiting current productions from the years 1889 to 1891. In the small, intimate rooms of the gallery, the formal homogeneity of the paintings stood out more clearly than ever before. The simplicity and reduction of the motifs led to the effective exclusion of intrapictorial narrative elements; instead, the gallery walls as a whole formulated a grand narrative of the changing atmosphere and vegetation. This coherence was, of course, particularly clear in the series that was the focus of the exhibition. It was a selection from more than thirty landscapes with grain stacks that Monet had painted since 1888, the majority of which were done between the late summer of 1890 and spring 1891. As Sylvie Patin has shown, the term *series* appears very early in connection with Monet, albeit in a quite unspecific sense, and probably for the first time in Émile Zola’s criticism of the 1868 Salon, in which he speaks of Monet’s garden paintings as a “series of canvases done in gardens” (*série de toiles prises dans des jardins*).¹³ In the 1870s and 1880s, the painter himself used the term several times in his correspondence, but always very generally in the quantitative sense of “several” or “many” paintings on a related theme.¹⁴ *Series* was first elevated to a term for a genre in the context of the exhibition of the grain stacks in Durand-Ruel’s gallery; after Geffroy’s preface, the catalogue begins with the entry “Série de Meules 1890–1891.”¹⁵ Despite this elevated employment, the historical term is hardly suitable as a tool for art-historical analysis due to its theoretical underdetermination. A few decades ago, Gottfried Boehm made a viable proposal for how to define the concept in art history in his valuable essay “Werk und Serie: Probleme des modernen Bildbegriffs seit Monet.” There he defines a series of paintings as a series whose members do not exhibit any convergence on a goal, any development or “virtual completion,” but rather

in *Kreativität und Werkerfahrung: Festschrift für Ilse Krahl zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Daniel Hees and Gundolf Winter (Duisburg: Gilles & Francke, 1988), 17–24; Karin Sagner-Düchting, ed., *Claude Monet und die Moderne* (Munich: Prestel, 2001); Uwe M. Schneede and Christoph Heinrich, eds., *Monets Vermächtnis: Serie – Ordnung und Obsession* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2001).

12 See Seiberling, *Monet’s Series*, 100.

13 Émile Zola, “Mon Salon, IV,” in *Écrits sur l’art*, ed. Jean-Pierre Leduc-Adine (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 209–210; English translation quoted from Sylvie Patin, “Repetitions and ‘Series,’” in Galeries nationales, *Claude Monet, 1840–1926*, ed. Réunion des musées nationaux and the Musée d’Orsay (Paris: ADAGP, Réunion des musées nationaux, Musée d’Orsay, 2010), 260.

14 See Patin, “Repetitions and ‘Series,’” 261.

15 Quoted from Patin, 263.

form an iterative structure that limits the “individuality” of single paintings, their status as unique specimens and thus as works.¹⁶

Following Boehm, I will describe Monet’s series of grain stacks as an ensemble of paintings that iteratively refer to a structure that exceeds thematic proximity, is given or developed in the work on the series, and is understood as a set of formal variables. In contrast to the cycle, which aims at (narrative) closure and infinite recurrence, the series forms an open and potentially infinitely continuable permutational form.

There is an anecdote about how Monet developed his pioneering principle of the series that has been handed down in various versions by his relatives and friends who were critics. In his monograph on Monet, the Duc de Trévise puts the story into the painter’s own mouth as follows:

Quand j’ai commencé, j’étais comme les autres; je croyais qu’il suffisait de deux toiles, une pour “temps gris”, une pour “soleil”. Je peignais alors des meules qui m’avaient frappé et qui faisaient un groupe magnifique, à deux pas d’ici; un jour, je vois que mon éclairage a changé: Je dis à ma belle-fille: “Allez donc à la maison, si vous voulez bien, et apportez-moi une autre toile.” Elle me l’apporte, mais peu après, c’est encore différent: une autre! encore une autre! Et je ne travaillais à chacune que quand j’avais mon effet, voilà tout. Ce n’est pas très difficile à comprendre.

When I started, I was just like the others; I thought two canvases were enough – one for a “gray” day, one for a “sunny” day. At that time I was painting haystacks that had caught my eye; they formed a magnificent group, right near here. One day I noticed that the light had changed. I said to my daughter-in-law, “Would you go back to the house, please, and bring me another canvas.” She brought it to me, but very soon the light had again changed. “One more!” and, “One more still!” And I worked on each one only until I had achieved the effect I wanted; that’s all. That’s not very hard to understand.¹⁷

When Monet initially states that he, “like others,” only requires two canvases, he alludes to a common method of landscape painters, which eighteenth-century manuals had already recommended and which was practiced, for example, in the Barbizon school. In the late 1860s and 1870s, Monet had already painted pairs of paintings that – following this practice – capture a motif under two different atmospheric conditions.¹⁸ The formation of the series as a pictorial form can be understood as an

16 Boehm, “Werk und Serie,” 18–19.

17 Duc de Trévise, “Le pèlerinage de Giverny,” *Revue de l’art ancien et moderne* 51 (1927): 126; Trévise, “Pilgrimage to Giverny,” in Stuckey, *Monet*, 337.

18 See John Rewald, *The History of Impressionism*, rev. ed. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961), 113–116; Werner Busch, “Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes: Éléments de perspective pratique (1799/1800),” in *Landschaftsmalerei*, ed. Busch (Berlin: D. Reimer, 1997), 233–240; Patin, “Repetitions and ‘Series,’” 260–268. For a detailed genealogy of Monet’s principle of the series, albeit one that presupposes a very broad, unspecific concept of the series, see Charles Stuckey, “The Predictions and Implications of Monet’s Series,” in *The Repeating Image: Multiples in French Painting from David to Matisse*, ed. Eik Kahng (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 83–125.

emancipation from this practice. In Monet's practice, the doubled and multiplied motifs overcome their status as mere preliminary studies and claim from then on – not only retrospectively, but already conceptually – the status of pieces for exhibition.

The pictorial composition of the now serially produced grain stacks is conceivably simple: the painter divides the picture plane into three horizontal stripes that taper toward the top; through changes in the coloration and brushstrokes, these stripes are transformed into a meadow, a chain of hills, and the sky. On the flat terrain of the foremost or lowermost strip, which is only differentiated by color, one or sometimes two stacks of grain rise up. The contours of their heavy bases bulge out roundly. While the grass or the snow slightly gives way at the base and defines the location of the heap in the otherwise uniform landscape, their conical tops seem to stretch toward the horizon line; they only reach it, however, in exceptional cases: then the painter and the beholder have fixed the heap of sheaves in the center of their field of vision or have approached so close that its contours overlap with the edge of the picture.

Neither in the close-up versions nor in the versions with a distanced point of view can the gaze become lost in studying a wide and varied surface of the earth, as was usually the case both in classical landscape painting and still in realistic landscape painting until the middle of the nineteenth century. By means of the horizontal composition and the emphasis on the horizon, the gaze is virtually led out of the picture and into the neighboring painting.¹⁹ The beholder is not given any opportunity to enter the field on paths leading into the depth of the image; and no changes in the terrain or vegetation facilitate comprehending it. Despite the proximity of a village, the landscape remains deserted and without any traces. Monet developed his landscapes as purely optical phenomena that do not allow any space to arise that could be spatially entered or measured in any way.

It's raining, it's snowing, it's painting

Temporally, the grain stacks can largely be arranged according to the cycle of nature and were probably also exhibited in this way at Durand-Ruel. In walking along the gallery walls, the beholder would have traced the cyclic change of the

¹⁹ Anthea Callen has already pointed this out in "Technique and Gender: Landscape, Ideology and the Art of Monet in the 1890s," in *Gendering Landscape Art*, ed. Steven Adams and Anna Gruetzner Robins (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 34.

times of day and the seasons of the year. It begins with the airy and light landscapes of late summer. The vegetation determines the color effect with its rich yellow-green tones, and the hazy atmosphere imbues things with a chalky surface. Autumn removes the spectrum of bright colors from the landscape; the meadow, the grain stack, and the background approach each other in color; only the sky still shines in a cool light yellow. And then the snow falls. The grain stacks stand more plastically and more heavily than before in the landscape covered with thick white brushstrokes. Sometimes the nearby village also disappears and the grain ricks lose their connection to the people living there. Forgotten by agriculture and detached from the landscape that is buried under the *facture*, these products of nature, freshly harvested only a few months ago, seem to age rapidly. The stacks stand like mighty monoliths in an entirely inorganic desert of snow and light. Then it begins to thaw; the sun returns and casts golden reflections of light on the stacks. The snow cover becomes patchy; the ground of the field begins to shimmer through; the cool coloring of the winter landscape gradually transforms into warmer color values, until the cold tones have almost completely retreated and the grain stacks glow orange-red in the afternoon and evening sun, as they did in late summer, though ice-blue brushstrokes dominate in the terrain and especially in the shadowy zones, reminding us that the cold time of year is not long behind us. And finally, the evening light of spring makes the grain stacks glow; where their contours stand out against the background and sky, they seem to be on fire. The *facture* becomes more expressive, the individual brushstrokes begin to become distinguishable in the abundance of grain sheaves, and the sky flickers in a soft light yellow.

Even Monet's working method can be read as imitating the cycle of nature. As already mentioned, Monet always worked on several (up to ten) paintings at the same time; that means, that at a certain time of day he would go observe his grain stacks and begin to work on one canvas, then switch to another canvas as soon as the lighting conditions had changed (which, according to his own statements, occurred after about half an hour), and so on. The next day he would set off again with the same pictures and paint at the same times of day on the same canvases. But the landscape would change a little every day, and the painter would reflect those changes of nature in the paintings. There are thus versions of the grain stacks that can be proven to have been started in summer and then painted over again and again until winter descended on the landscape, at which point Monet also made it snow in his paintings.²⁰

20 See Seiberling, *Monet's Series*, 96.

Monet's procedure resembles the other activity that mainly occupied him besides painting: gardening.²¹ Just as Monet the gardener monitored the daily care of his little plants, making sure that his species-rich flower garden was watered, weeded, planted, and pruned, Monet the painter tended to his paintings daily, constantly returning to the same grain stack at the same time (transporting his canvases there in a wheelbarrow). Even the facture seems to resemble agricultural work: in contrast to the spontaneous and sketchy landscapes from the 1870s, Monet now superimposed several layers and hardly varied the brushstrokes within a painting.²² The individual brushstrokes behave largely independently from one another yet nevertheless build a firmly constructed surface, similar to how the architectural form of the grain stacks arises from the disorder of the layered grain.

The series versus the cycle of nature

Despite all the searched-for equivalences between the act of painting and nature, the cycles of human action and “natural history” are completely out of sync in Monet's paintings. In the history of painting up through modernity, grain stacks have functioned as conventionalized signs for the season of autumn; in Jean-François Millet's painting entitled *L'automne* (see Figure 5.11) – which was produced in the context of a cycle of the seasons between 1868 and 1874 – the rick of grain still represents the season of autumn as a whole. Significantly, Monet's series also begins in late summer, so it once again employs the metaphorical field of the completed harvest and the coming death of nature. But then something strange happens: the grain stacks are not collected and threshed but remain – stripped of their agricultural function – standing in the fields in winter. The painter had rented them in order to delay their removal.²³ This interrupts the parallel courses of the cycle of nature and agricultural work, which had often been allegorically captured in paintings of the seasons. This renders a fascinating but also alien view of the products of nature, which no longer conform to their cycle. And the break between the painter's work and nature's time is not only carried in the paintings' motif; this break is also the condition for the emergence of the series as a specifically modern artistic technique.

²¹ On the significance of gardens and gardening to Monet's art, see Champa, “Monet and the Embrace of the Series”; Paul Hayes Tucker, “The Revolution in the Garden: Monet in the Twentieth Century,” in *Monet in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Tucker, George T. M. Shackelford, and Mary-Anne Stevens (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 14–85.

²² See Robert Herbert, “Method and Meaning in Monet,” *Art in America* 67 (1979): 106.

²³ See Hoschedé, *Claude Monet*, 1:47.



Figure 5.11: Jean-François Millet, *Haystacks: Autumn*, ca. 1874. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In the over thirty paintings, there is no development of any kind; all the important decisions had to be made at the beginning when Monet decided not to leave it at one picture. The grain stacks thus arise from combining various techniques that are anything but spontaneous and that are placed in a new relationship from one painting to the next. We can name three variables that Monet combines in an almost arbitrary manner. (1) The painter chose a favorable moment; he determined the season, time of day, and weather. The choice of the moment affects the coloristic composition and the facture. (2) Monet looked for a suitable cropped selection for the painting and selected the distance. Usually there are one or two grain stacks in the anterior middle ground, but sometimes the painter (viewer) moved closer so that the rick of grain overlaps with the edges of the painting. The fundamental compositional changes between the individual versions of the grain stacks result from the fact that Monet moved the borders of the image around the motifs as if with the viewfinder of a camera (see Figure 5.12).²⁴ (3) Monet changes the line of sight several times, which means that we move around the ricks of

²⁴ See Jean Clay, *Comprendre l'impressionnisme* (Paris: Chêne, 1984), 84–85. Hoschedé also describes these events: “If Monet stopped [. . .] during a walk in the countryside or in his gardens and, using his right hand as a visor to enhance his vision, backed up, advanced, moved a little further to the right, a little further to the left, and then continued on his walk, it was because,

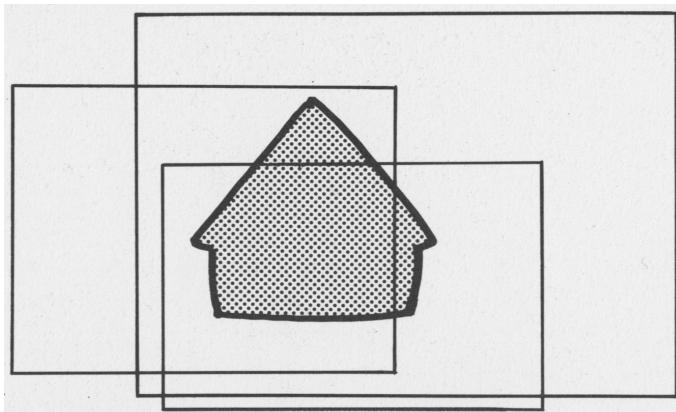


Figure 5.12: Diagram of the compositional method of the *Grainstacks*. Reprinted from Jean Clay, *Comprendre l'impressionnisme* (Paris: Chêne, 1984), 85.

grain with the painter. We thus go a few steps around to the right from Figures 5.4 to 5.5; in the background, the snow-covered housetops have disappeared, making way for the forest bordering on the village to the left.

These aesthetic choices can be freely combined with one another; there are pairs of paintings whose difference consists in a change to only one of the variables, but there are also paintings that differ with regard to all three variables. Monet's repertoire resembles the classical choices of a photographer: a potentially infinite chain of images of the same motif emerges simply from variating the viewpoint, distance, and selected moment. One can hardly make any discernible connection between particular lighting conditions and the painter's compositional choices. Monet translates the continuous, uniform change of nature into discontinuous combinations of individual compositional elements.

very often, at that moment he had just chosen a motif" (Si, au cours d'une promenade dans la campagne ou ses jardins, Monet s'arrêtait [. . .], faisant une visière de sa main droite pour augmenter sa vision, reculait, avançait, allait un peu plus à droite, un peu plus à gauche et puis continuait sa promenade, c'était qu'alors, bien souvent, il venait de choisir un motif). Hoschedé, *Claude Monet*, 1:107.

The belatedness of impressionist paintings

But it is not only the synchronism of human labor and nature that seems to be permanently called into question; the cycle of nature has also lost its fixed structure and clarity. The depiction of a grain stack served Millet to mark his landscape decisively as autumnal; it is precisely this binding association that the motif has lost in Monet's work. Even though all the known paintings in the series depict different lighting conditions that are very specific when taken alone, they can hardly be assigned to a particular time of year or day (apart from the winter landscapes). Without their dating, it would be difficult to distinguish, for example, the paintings from late autumn and spring, and in the whole series, it is practically impossible to determine what precise time of day it is in each case, which also leads to the fact that one can find different titles for the same painting in the scholarship. Monet insists so emphatically on the uniqueness of atmospheric conditions that the possibility of recognizing and identifying them is made considerably more difficult. The famous politician George Clemenceau, a close friend of Monet's, already pointed out how the moment is extracted from time, and he recognized how it breaks open the cyclic duration of nature:

L'artiste avait compris qu'il ne pouvait échapper à l'analyse du phénomène, et que si, dans une même journée, le matin rejoint le soir, par une série de transitions infinies, chaque moment nouveau de chaque jour variable constitue, sous les ruées de la lumière, un nouvel état de l'objet *qui n'avait jamais été et jamais ne sera plus*.

The artist had come to know that there is no escape from careful attention to things as they are, and that if, in the course of one single day, morning conjoins with evening through a sequence of infinitely subtle transitions, every new instant of each ever-changing day becomes, under these inundations of light, a new state of being that has never existed before and shall never be so again.²⁵

Monet transforms the eternally uniform self-reproduction of nature, which was symbolically reflected in the cycles and rituals of everyday agricultural life, into a discontinuous sequence of moments detached from the fabric of time. This atomization of moments into an open series without a goal is an essential condition for the emergence of the series as a modern pictorial concept.²⁶ A comparison with photography is informative for characterizing the specificity of Monet's solution,

²⁵ Georges Clemenceau, *Claude Monet: Les Nymphéas* (Paris: Plon, 1928), 85; Georges Clemenceau, *Claude Monet: The Water-Lilies and Other Writings on Art*, trans. Bruce Michelson (Urbana: Windsor & Down, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.21900/wd.1>.

²⁶ See Boehm, "Werk und Serie."

since, as is well known, it was this new medium that created an important precondition for the development of the principle of seriality.²⁷

While Monet's technique has its roots in a practice of mid-century realistic landscape painting, it owes its topicality to photography, which had considerably accelerated the production of images. On 7 July 1839, a few days after the French state had acquired the right to publish the so-called daguerreotype process, thereby laying the foundation for its rapid dissemination and further development, its inventor exhibited six of his photographs in the Chamber of Deputies. Even before the daguerreotype process was explained in all its technical detail at a joint meeting of the Academy of Sciences and the Academy of Fine Arts in August of the same year, this small photography exhibition, the very first one in history, astonished the public. According to the voices of contemporaries, not only did the accuracy of the detail and the fineness of the portrayal exceed all the hopes previously placed in painting and the graphic arts, but the new medium also depicted the most fleeting phenomena of reality, the incidence of the sun's rays, and the manifold effects of light with greater precision and truth than brushes and etching needles had ever been able to do.²⁸

Among the six daguerreotypes exhibited were three pictures (see Figures 5.13–5.14) that deserve special attention in our present context. They show a large Parisian boulevard, the Boulevard du Temple, which leads south from the Place de la République. As if to specifically exhibit the passivity of the photographic act, Daguerre set up his camera on the top floor of a tall building, selected what would be in the view-finder, and pressed the shutter release three times: morning, noon, and evening.²⁹ The images do not differ from each other because of the photographer's active intervention; neither the selected field of view nor the distance from the motif is changed. Instead, authorship is left to the effect of light, which dresses the houses and street in their changing shells, immerses still-illuminated walls in opaque gray, or, conversely, allows still-shaded details to enter the light. While the passers-by on the Paris boulevard have disappeared in the long exposure time (probably well over a quarter of

27 See Ludger Derenthal, "Die Erziehung des Auges": Die serielle Photographie, das wissenschaftliche Experiment und Monets *Getreideschober*," in Schneede and Heinrich, *Monets Vermächtnis*, 23–28. On the development of the series as a necessary consequence of the photographic technique, see Timm Starl, *Im Prisma des Fortschritts: Zur Fotografie des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Marburg: Jonas, 1991); Danielle Leenaerts, "Temps et image: Particularités de la pratique séquentielle en photographie," *Annales d'histoire de l'art et d'archéologie* 21 (1999): 127–145; Phillip Prodger, *Time Stands Still: Muybridge and the Instantaneous Photography Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

28 See Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present*, 5th rev. and enlarged edition (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982), 13–25.

29 See Timm Starl, "Schuhputzer," Kritik der Fotografie, updated 24 June and 11 September 2008, <http://www.kritik-der-fotografie.at/29-Schuhputzer.htm>.

an hour) as if in a wrinkle in time, the shadows of the trees and chimneys wander over the roof tiles and cobblestones. The viewer follows their trail and tries, by looking back and forth between three shots, to find the meaning or narrative that the individual image withholds.

The incredibly fast creation time of the daguerreotype in relation to the traditional medium of panel painting extracts a moment out of the temporal continuum and robs the captured situation of its beginning and end. To quote the historian of photography Timm Starl: "This is a specific feature of snapshot photography: its ambiguity. Like the pictorial objects that have been abruptly catapulted out of time and space, the gaze wanders aimlessly over them and yet is unable to recognize anything other than what is coincidental, which presents itself in the mantle of the spontaneous and (often) of the current as the only correspondence to the present."³⁰

The photographic image is therefore in need of commentary in a heightened sense; captions or labels in family albums frame the artificially isolated, alien moment and embed it in a historical explanation and episodic narrative. If an image is not assisted by text, it restlessly awakens an expectation of the next moment, the next shot, in the hope that it might be able to untie the hollow knot of time and put an end to the endless "And then?" questions. The specific temporal structure of the photographic image – the permanently frozen moment – demands resolution in the series. Daguerre's answer to this problem consisted in drawing on quasi-narrative possibilities that had been developed in the early nineteenth century by both innovative and popular visual media. Variating one and the same landscape through the alienating power of lighting conditions originated from the repertoire of tricks for the magic lantern and diorama, in other words, from those media in which light was fundamentally involved in creating an image.³¹ Before turning to photography, Daguerre was himself the full-time operator of an extremely successful diorama, entertaining his audience with painted backdrop landscapes and artificial lighting that simulated changing times of day and atmospheric conditions. While the subjects hardly varied, lighting tricks and dissolves made the sun go down and thunderstorms roll in or shrouded the scenery in deep night. In 1822, the year of the premiere of the first diorama, the London-based *Times* reported

³⁰ Timm Starl, "Geschoß und Unfall: Bewegung und Moment in der Fotografie um 1900," in *Ins Innere des Bilderbergs: Fotografien aus den Bibliotheken der Hochschule der Künste und der Technischen Universität Berlin*, ed. Joachim Schmid (Göttingen: European Photography Andreas Müller-Pohle, 1988), 10; translated by Anthony Mahler.

³¹ See Heinz Buddemeier, *Panorama, Diorama, Photographie: Entstehung und Wirkung neuer Medien im 19. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1970); Detlev Hoffmann and Almut Junker, *Laterna magica: Lichtbilder aus Menschenwelt und Götterwelt* (Berlin: Frölich & Kaufmann, 1982); Birgit Verwiebe, *Lichtspiele: Vom Mondscheintransparent zum Diorama* (Stuttgart: Füsslin, 1997).

from Paris: "The most striking effect, however, certainly, is the change of light in this scene. From a calm, soft, delicious, serene, day in summer, the horizon gradually changes, becoming more and more overcast, until a darkness, not the effect of night, but evidently of approaching storm, – a murky tempestuous blackness discolours every object, making us listen almost for the thunder which is to grow in the distance, or fancy we feel the large drops, the *avant couriers* of the shower."³²

In dioramas (and in performances with magic lanterns), there was a tendency not to enliven the landscape by means of changing the staffage or with moving figures but rather to pass on the role of narration to nature. As in the painted backdrop landscapes of Daguerre's dioramas, light took over the dramaturgy of the image in the new medium of the daguerreotype as well, even if the spectacular character of the phenomena in the diorama and the magic lantern had to give way to the prosaic effects of changing sunlight at different times of day.

The serialization of daguerreotypes can, to be sure, only offset the irritating quality of the frozen light in a photographic image to a limited extent. For although a daguerreotype captures an infinite number of random details and promises to record light-and-shadow conditions precisely, early photographic images convey only a very distorted impression of actual lighting conditions. Daguerre released his camera shutter for the first shot of the miniseries at eight o'clock in the morning (see Figure 5.13): the trees cast long shadows, and the light comes from the west-southwest. The second shot (see Figure 5.14) was taken a few hours later at noon: the shadows are short, and the sun is already almost in the south. Although the shadows and knowledge of the location of the boulevard make it possible to draw conclusions about the time of day, the depiction of the atmospheric phenomena in the photographic image remains peculiarly abstract.

What is the relationship between Monet's series and the implicit, media-specific seriality of photography? Even his contemporaries liked to describe Monet's paintings with metaphors from photography: the writer and art critic Rémy de Gourmont, for example, characterized Monet's paintings as similar to photography ("The mechanism seems photographic"; *Le mécanisme semble photographique*) and described them further as "the work of an instant, captured in fewer minutes than are required to see it properly with profane eyes" (*l'œuvre d'un instant, enlevée en moins de minutes qu'il n'en faut pour la bien voir à des yeux profanes*).³³ But in stark opposition to Gourmont's description, Monet did not create his paintings in the moment of a single sitting. Creating one of his paintings was an extremely lengthy process, and the particular moment had to be found

32 "Diorama," *Times*, 4 October 1823.

33 Rémy de Gourmont, "Note sur Claude Monet," *L'art moderne*, 28 July 1901, 255.

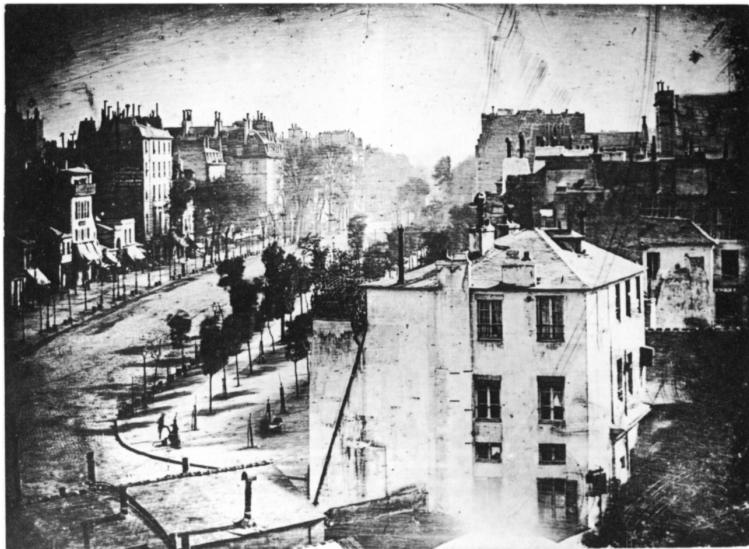


Figure 5.13: Louis Daguerre, *Boulevard du Temple, Eight O'Clock in the Morning*, between 24 April and 4 May 1838. Daguerreotype (destroyed).



Figure 5.14: Louis Daguerre, *Boulevard du Temple, Midday*, between 24 April and 4 May 1838. Daguerreotype (destroyed).

again and again.³⁴ As already described, Monet visited his grain stacks daily and would work, for example, between four o'clock in the afternoon and half past four on the same canvas on which he had painted the day before. He would return at the same time to work on the same canvas for several weeks, perhaps even for months, but nature could change enormously during this time. As early as 1883 – so a few years before the creation of the *Grain Stacks* – Jules Laforgue, one of the most astute theorists of impressionism, described this time loop as the foundational aporia of an impression:

Critiques qui codifiez le beau et guidez l'art, voici un peintre qui vient planter son chevalet devant un paysage assez stable comme lumière, un état d'après-midi, par exemple. Supposons qu'au lieu de peindre son paysage en plusieurs séances, il a le bon sens d'en établir la vie de tons en *quinze minutes*, c'est-à-dire qu'il est impressionniste. [. . .] Dans ces quinze minutes l'éclairage du paysage: le ciel vivant, les terrains, les verdures, tout cela dans le réseau immatériel de la riche atmosphère avec la vie incessamment ondulatoire de ses corpuscules invisibles réfléchissants ou réfractants, l'éclairage du paysage a infinitement varié, a vécu en un mot.

You critics who codify the beautiful and guide the development of art, I would have you look at this painter who sets down his easel before a rather evenly lighted landscape – an afternoon scene, for example. Let us suppose that instead of painting his landscape in several sittings, he has the good sense to record its tonal values in *fifteen minutes* – that is, let us suppose that he is an Impressionist. [. . .] In the course of these fifteen minutes, the lighting of the landscape – the vibrant sky, the fields, the trees, everything within the insubstantial network of the rich atmosphere with the constantly undulating life of its invisible reflecting and refracting corpuscles – has undergone infinite changes, has, in a word, lived.³⁵

But it is not only the external conditions of perception that continuously change; the physiological perceptive faculty of the painter is also subject to constant impairments and fatigue:

Un exemple entre des milliards. Je vois tel violet, j'abaisse mes yeux vers ma palette pour l'y combiner, mon œil est involontairement tiré par la blancheur de ma manchette; mon œil a changé, mon violet en souffre, etc., etc. De sorte qu'en définitive, même en ne restant que quinze minutes devant un paysage, l'œuvre ne sera jamais l'équivalent de la réalité fugitive, mais le compte rendu d'une certaine sensibilité optique sans identique à un moment qui ne se reproduira plus identique chez cet individu, sous l'excitation d'un paysage à un moment de sa vie lumineuse qui n'aura plus l'état identique de ce moment.

34 See Seiberling, *Monet's Series*, 92.

35 Jules Laforgue, “L'impressionnisme (1883),” in *Les écrivains devant l'impressionnisme*, ed. Denys Riout (Paris: Macula, 1989), 337–338; Jules Laforgue, “The Eye and the Poet,” in Kapos, *The Impressionists*, 188–189.

One of a myriad [of] examples: I see a certain shade of violet; I lower my eyes towards my palette to mix it and my eye is involuntarily drawn by the white of my shirt sleeve; my eye has changed, my violet suffers. So, in short, even if one remains only fifteen minutes before a landscape, one's work will never be the real equivalent of the fugitive reality, but rather the record of the response of a certain unique sensibility to a moment which can never be reproduced exactly for the individual, under the excitement of a landscape at a certain moment of its luminous life which can never be duplicated.³⁶

The shortening of the production time to a (dilated) “first moment” gives birth – as Laforgue’s text shows – to a previously unknown artistic paranoia nesting in the interstice between the representational means and the represented world, between the violet of the landscape, the palette, and the white of the painter’s cuff. If sensory perception already changes in the infinitesimally short moment of shifting one’s gaze, then one can indeed no longer trust one’s eyes. The homogeneity of the impression disappears here in the interim of a distracted gaze, and the time of the landscape – the atmospheric change of nature – escapes when the painter turns his back.

Laforgue’s reflections make clear that the time of the impressionistic process of production is borrowed from another medium. In contrast to the painted image, the photographic image arises not only in an extremely short time, it is also characterized by a specific synchronism, that is, by the completely simultaneous emergence of all the elements in the image, very much in contrast to gradual production, stroke by stroke, and line by line. The utopia of the temporal unity of perception and production characterizes Monet’s work on the specific temporality of his own medium under the conditions of another. When the temporal logic of photography begins to determine that of painting, one can go mad with Laforgue, or one can discover belatedness as the actual mode of working on a canvas.

Thus, Monet did not sacrifice completing a painting – at least in the majority of cases – to the rapid progress of time but rather made use of a skill that the momentary character of the grain stacks seemed to preclude: he remembered, that is, he tried to find and reproduce the particular atmospheric effect in front the subject, or if necessary, in the studio. The painter’s stepson, Jean-Pierre Hirschédé, reported on Monet’s practice as follows:

Et, chaque jour, il le ramenait infailliblement à ce même endroit, à la même heure que la veille et le lendemain, fidèle au rendez-vous fixé par cette même heure, ce même instant pour se retrouver face à face avec la même émotion, avec la même volonté de l’inscrire sur sa toile.

And, each day, he would infallibly bring it back to that same place, at the same time as the day before and the day after, faithful to the appointment fixed by that same time, that

36 Laforgue, “L’impressionnisme (1883),” 338; Laforgue, “The Eye and the Poet,” 189.

same moment, to *find* himself face-to-face with the same emotion, with the same will to inscribe it on his canvas.³⁷

Monet's problem in aesthetic production thus consists in a kind of automimesis; the artist constantly imitates who he was in a particular moment. Admittedly, this psychotechnique is in the greatest conceivable tension with a basic principle of impressionism, a principle whose apodictic character is clearly expressed in Félix Fénéon's formulation: "As a working method – execution directly from nature, and not in the studio from memories, sketches, written documents" (Comme méthode de travail, – l'exécution d'après la nature directement, et non dans l'atelier d'après des souvenirs, des croquis, des documents écrits).³⁸

By continuing working in his studio on a painting begun in the open air, Monet surprisingly returned to a traditional practice of landscape painters such as Camille Corot. Corot did not paint in the open air, but he did produce his studies in plein air, following a convention of the genre. The painter's workshop is here – as in Monet's case – the place for recovering a lost impression. But one does not see this conflict in Corot's landscapes (see Figure 5.15): the distancing chiaroscuro clothes meadows, trees, and lakes in the closed past of a nostalgic memory. In the wake of Claude Lorrain, the chiaroscuro of landscape painting created – as Richard Schiff has noted – a kind of time capsule in which a specific atmospheric moment dilates into an infinitely long duration, as if several moments in memory had overlapped and thereby robbed the setting of its sharp contours.³⁹ The subject and figures sometimes underscore this effect of the irretrievable past, such as when Corot transforms woods and meadows into stages for the appearance of nymphs or, more profanely, titles his paintings *Memory of the Ville-d'Avray*.

In contrast, Monet passes the conflict between presence and memory on to the viewer: through cropping, colorism, and brushstrokes, he emphasizes the subjective nature of an impression already lost in the next moment. The painter looks for a specific moment – for lighting and weather conditions that will only last for a short time and so bear with them an awareness of their impending, inevitable loss. This is why he is fond of the quickly fading evening glow or of snowy landscapes whose

37 Hoschedé, *Claude Monet*, 1:107–108; emphasis mine.

38 Félix Fénéon, "L'impressionnisme," in *Œuvres plus que complètes*, ed. Joan U. Halperin, vol. 1 (Paris: Droz, 1970), 65.

39 See Richard Schiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 99–108.



Figure 5.15: Camille Corot, *The Clearing: Memory of Ville d'Avray*, 1872. Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

icy cover already seems threatened again by the incidence of light.⁴⁰ The preferred backlit settings reinforce the impression of belatedness – the awareness that we always arrive a little too late and only catch the transient state of light while it is disappearing. One of the most attentive visitors to the 1891 exhibition, Monet's fellow painter Camille Pissarro, referred to the grain stacks as "Monet's marvelous *Sunsets*" (*les merveilleux Soleils couchants de Monet*);⁴¹ following this comment, T. J. Clark asks: "What do sunsets do, then? They make Nature grimace, of course, 'in order to prove [...] that the moment is unique and we shall never look on its like again.'"⁴²

⁴⁰ Grace Seiberling has pointed out that the specific tonality of the sunset (warm red and orange tones, intense blues and purples) defines most of the paintings in the series, even those depicting entirely different moments in the day. See Seiberling, *Monet's Series*, 97.

⁴¹ Camille Pissarro to Lucien Pissarro, 5 May 1891; quoted from Seiberling, *Monet's Series*, 101.

⁴² Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 112. Clark paraphrases Fénéon's 1887 criticism on Monet: "The primary goal is to capture some of these fugitive appearances on the canvas. Hence the necessity of completing a landscape in a single sitting and of causing nature to make faces so as to establish beyond doubt that it was caught in a unique moment never to be recaptured" (Empreindre une de ces fugitives apparences sur le sujetile, c'est le but. – De là résultaient la nécessité d'enlever un paysage en une séance et une propension à faire grimacer la nature pour bien prouver que

The epiphanic moment

In the context of the first exhibition of the grain stacks at Durand-Ruel, this aspect of the series must have stood out even more clearly. We are confronted by two female strollers that Monet placed directly above the landscapes and that seem as if they could be turned-around figures of viewers from a painting by Caspar David Friedrich (see Figures 5.16–5.17). They suggest that the ideal viewer of Monet's grain stacks is never a farmer, never an autochthonous inhabitant and user of the landscape, but a visitor and stroller (or, like Monet, even the renter of this landscape). The strollers are representatives of a recipient who rarely deviates from the existing paths, who will not enter the field of the grain stacks, and to whom the landscape is revealed in a *déjà vu*. In his monographic essay on Monet from 1891, the art critic Octave Mirbeau emphatically stresses the experiential quality of these paintings:

Sur un coteau ensoleillé dont on ne voit que l'extrême sommet, terre rose, herbes roussies, en plein ciel, en pleine sonorité de ciel, parmi les nuages blancs et roses, qui se hâtent sur l'azur firmamental, une femme s'avance, svelte, légère, impondérable, un coup de vent dans la mousseline ondulante de son voile, le bas de sa robe un peu soulevé en arrière et balance par l'envolée de la marche, elle semble glisser au ras des herbes. Elle a, dans sa modernité, la grâce lointaine d'un rêve, le charme inattendu d'une aérienne apparition. Regardez-la bien. On dirait que tout à l'heure elle aura passé.

On a sunlit hillside – we see only the summit, the rose-pink earth, the dry grasses – against the sky, against the sweet-toned sky, among the white and rose clouds that race across the azure of the firmament, a woman makes her way, slender, light, imponderable; a gust of wind is in the fluttering chiffon of her veil, the bottom of her dress is raised in back, tossed by the flight of her stride; she seems to skim across the grass. In her modernity, she has the distant grace of a dream, the unexpected charm of an airy apparition. Observe her closely. It is almost as if she will be gone shortly.⁴³

la minute était unique et qu'on ne la reverrait jamais plus). Félix Fénéon, “Neo-Impressionism (1887),” in *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henri Dorra (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 162; Félix Fénéon, “Le néo-impressionnisme,” in Fénéon, *Œuvres*, 1:73. Also before Clark, art critics liked to read the grain stacks as “allegories” for the end – the “sunset” – of impressionism. Julius Meier-Graefe thus dates the beginning of the end of impressionism based on Monet's series. He exposes Monet's method as pseudoscientific and accuses him of adhering to the “Romanticism of an optician.” See Julius Meier-Graefe, “Monet,” in *Kunst-Schreiberei: Essays und Kunstkritik* (Leipzig: Kiepenhauer, 1987), 169.

⁴³ Octave Mirbeau, “Claude Monet,” *L'art dans les deux mondes*, 7 March 1891, 185; Octave Mirbeau, “Claude Monet,” in Stuckey, *Monet*, 160.

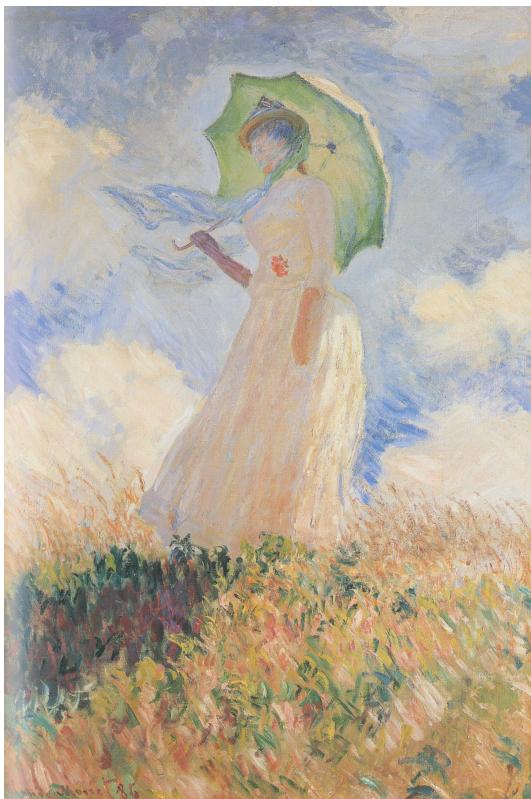


Figure 5.16: Claude Monet, *Study of a Figure Outdoors, Women with a Parasol, Facing Right*, 1886. Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

In Mirbeau's evocation, Monet's stroller acquires the character of an apparition: the viewer who follows the critic's invitation and looks at her closely ("Regardez-la bien") will have already missed her ("tout à l'heure elle aura passé"). But the two elusive figures of viewers are not only indications of a reception experience that always precedes ours,⁴⁴ in an even stronger private sense, they are figures of memory. With the two summery-dressed girls, for whom Monet's step-daughter Suzanne Hoschedé served as the model, the painter repeats a picture he had made eleven years earlier of his now deceased first wife, Camille, and their

44 Precisely these conditions in aesthetic reception were already defined by Caspar David Friedrich's landscape painting. See Joseph Leo Koerner's brilliant reading of Friedrich's *Rückenfiguren* (figures with their backs turned toward the viewer) in *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), 233–244.



Figure 5.17: Claude Monet, *Study of a Figure Outdoors, Woman with a Parasol, Facing Left*, 1886. Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

son Jean (see Figure 5.18). Compared with the “original” version from 1875, Monet stages the two versions created in 1886 as if they were blurry phantom images, overexposed by the sudden flash of memory. While Camille, who is indeed backlit but has a physical presence, casts a large moving shadow on the grass and looks directly at us with her veiled face, in the late paintings Suzanne remains without a gaze and in one version even without a shadow.

Monet’s strollers thus conceal the protracted and arbitrary (production) process of remembering behind the sudden appearance of a *mémoire involontaire*, which ensures the authenticity of immediate perception, even if it is conjugated in the past tense – and not, like the *impression*, in the present tense. After Hippolyte Taine’s widely read investigation “De l’intelligence,” the *mémoire involontaire* was furthermore suspected of enabling a particularly intense form of remembering: while the images of perception abrade each other, immediate memory leads,



Figure 5.18: Claude Monet, *Woman with a Parasol – Madame Monet and Her Son*, 1875. Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art.

according to Taine, to the complete reproduction of the remembered moment, to a “total rebirth” (renaissance totale).⁴⁵ A decade earlier, Charles Baudelaire had already devoted a separate chapter in “Le peintre de la vie modern” to “mnemonic art” (l’art mnémonique), and it should be understood as the heart of his famous essay’s reflections on aesthetic production.⁴⁶ Baudelaire’s exemplary artist, Constantin Guy, also doesn’t respond to the acceleration of perception –

⁴⁵ Hippolyte Taine, *De l'intelligence*, vol. 1 (Paris: Hachette, 1870), 161. See Jean-François Perrin, “Taine et la mémoire involontaire,” *Romantisme* 82 (1993): 73–81. On Taine’s significance for Monet’s work, see Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, “Le grand tout: Monet on Belle-Île and the Impulse toward Unity,” *Art Bulletin* 97 (2015): 323–341.

⁴⁶ Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964), 1–40; Charles Baudelaire, “Le peintre de la vie modern,” in *Critique d'art, suivi de Critique musicale*, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 343–384.

triggered here by modern city life – by synchronizing reception and production: while Guy strolls through the streets during the day and records his impressions only cursorily in a sketchbook, he creates the actual drawings at night in his studio on the basis of a “memory that [. . .] calls back to life” (mémoire résurrectionniste) and resurrects the most fleeting impressions like “Lazarus” (Lazare).⁴⁷ The immediacy with which these memories return distinguishes them as images that have a motivation and so are capable of overcoming the contingency of their origin.

It is precisely this epiphany of previously experienced and remembered moments that distinguishes Monet’s paintings from the arbitrary snapshots of photography.⁴⁸ In this respect, Monet’s series can be understood as an attempt to counter the momentariness of the new medium. The photographic moment is – as Siegfried Kracauer writes in his essay on photography – dissimilar to memory.⁴⁹ The abundance of details provided by the photograph overloads what one experienced with contingent information and immerses it in an alienating light. Against this amnesia of the photographed moment, Monet offers a utopian moment in which nonrepeatable lighting conditions return as an epiphany. This epiphany is only possible, however, under the condition of duplicating moments, because only a sequence of several pictures activates the time between the different times of day and seasons, thereby allowing the viewer to recover specific lighting or weather conditions.

To summarize, in Monet, the utopia of the impression leads to recognizing the genuinely aesthetic condition of the works as “shards of the future,”⁵⁰ that is, as fragments whose unity and completeness is postponed into an uncertain future. The technique of the series should cancel the fragmentary character of the single picture in the larger unity of the cycle of nature. But the individuality of the single moments and the aimless openness of the series of images then lead to the cyclic course of nature dissolving into an endless linear band of dissociated moments. Comparing it with photography reveals that time is not simply atomized in Monet’s grain stacks but rather distilled – distilled to the serendipitous moment in which

⁴⁷ Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” 17; Baudelaire, “Le peintre de la vie moderne,” 359.

⁴⁸ On the “profane” epiphany of memory in the late nineteenth century, see Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Suddenness: On the Moment of Aesthetic Appearance*, trans. Ruth Crowley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); on epiphany as the aesthetic moment par excellence, see Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, trans. John Farrell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “Epiphanien,” in *Dimensionen ästhetischer Erfahrung*, ed. Joachim Küpper and Christoph Menke (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 203–222.

⁴⁹ Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 47–63.

⁵⁰ Valéry, “The Creation of Art,” 127.

what is unique and unrepeatable in nature becomes visible. Monet subordinated his work to the cycle of nature but ultimately transformed its cyclic course into a series of epiphanic moments resembling the subjective gaze of the *mémoire involontaire*. This ruse of aesthetic production legitimizes the (claimed) equivalence of the sense perception and the image, even when the belatedness of the production process is already beyond question.

Finally, it should be recalled that in the discipline of art history, Monet is often placed as a pioneer at the beginning of a series of twentieth-century artists who engage with the principle of seriality,⁵¹ despite the fact that Monet's conception is clearly different from most serial strategies in classical modernism and postwar art. In Mondrian, Albers, Warhol, or also in the work of the American minimalists, seriality serves as a technique of pictorial permutation and decisively opposes the notion of the work as an experienced time in the artist's life. By contrast, in Monet's work, the series can be considered the condition of an experiential aesthetic reception that emerges from the work's permeability to its (fictionalized) process of production and passes the moment of the always already lost first perception in aesthetic production on to the viewer. Through this experiential quality, the completed painting refers to its "origin" and thus recalls a particularly exceptional moment that was lifted out of serial repetition and at the same time emerged from it.

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⁵¹ See Katharina Sykora, *Das Phänomen des Seriellen in der Kunst: Aspekte einer künstlerischen Methode von Monet bis zur amerikanischen Pop Art* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1983); Sagner-Düchting, *Claude Monet und die Moderne*; Schneede and Heinrich, *Monets Vermächtnis*.

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