



**NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEAN PAINTINGS
AT THE STERLING AND FRANCINE CLARK ART INSTITUTE**

VOLUME TWO

Edited by Sarah Lees

With an essay by Richard Rand
and technical reports by Sandra L. Webber

With contributions by Katharine J. Albert, Philippe Bordes, Dan Cohen,
Kathryn Calley Galitz, Alexis Goodin, Marc Gotlieb, John House,
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226 | Cliffs at Étretat (The Rock Needle and the Porte d'Aval) 1885

Oil on canvas, 65.1 x 81.3 cm
Lower right: Claude Monet 85
1955.528

Several personal themes from Monet's formative years, all of them encountered in earlier works in the Clark collection, are woven together in this masterly canvas of 1885. His lifelong romance with the moods of the sea, for example, already given such forceful expression in *Seascape, Storm* (cat. 222), takes on a mellower, more pondered form in the Étretat composition, completed almost twenty years later. Like both *Seascape, Storm* and *Street in Sainte-Adresse* (cat. 223), it was executed on the Normandy coast, the site of his earliest paintings and at this period increasingly the haunt of holidaymakers and celebrities, from Paris

and elsewhere. Two years before he completed *Cliffs at Étretat*, Monet was persuaded by the novelist Guy de Maupassant, an occasional resident of Étretat, to visit the Mediterranean resort of Bordighera, another excursion that brought him into contact with tourist panoramas and there resulted in the dramatic *Bridge at Dolceacqua* (cat. 225). And when Monet arrived at Étretat in 1885, he stayed at the holiday home of Jean-Baptiste Faure, the renowned opera singer who was a pioneer patron of his art and the first owner of the Clark's *The Geese* (cat. 224).¹

A number of strands in Monet's professional life also converged in the Étretat painting. After exhibiting with his Impressionist colleagues throughout the 1870s, he had broken ranks to show at the Salon and at commercial galleries, encountering both success and the tensions of the market. Monet's emergence as an independent, sought-after artist obliged him to produce steadily and further define his public profile, while remaining alert to the tastes of his supporters.

An exquisitely finished canvas such as *Cliffs at Étretat* was part of his response to this challenge, while also signaling a more specific claim to Monet's place in the tradition of French landscape art. As he was well aware, several generations of native and foreign artists had engaged with the picturesque beach, fishing craft, and spectacularly eroded cliffs at Étretat, in effect treating them as a touchstone of their own originality and ambition. Henri-Eugène Delacroix, Eugène Isabey, and Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot made studies there, along with Eugène-Modeste-Edmond Lepoittevin, a minor Salon painter related by marriage to Maupas-sant; more pointedly, all three of the principal mentors of Monet's younger days—Eugène-Louis Boudin, Johan Barthold Jongkind, and Gustave Courbet—had tackled its vistas, the latter in a sequence of major canvases dated between 1866 and 1872 (fig. 226.1).² For Monet, the 1885 trip was the last of no less than six working stays in the village over two decades, leaving no doubt of his determination to measure himself against the achievements of his forebears.³

Cliffs at Étretat was one of approximately fifty paintings of the area begun by Monet in an extraordinarily sustained, historically self-conscious phase of activity between early October and mid-December 1885.⁴ This visit to Étretat was by far the longest and most productive of his career: the campaign of 1883 had come closest in output but resulted in about twenty pictures. Fundamental to Monet's conception of the new works—and of particular importance to *Cliffs at Étretat*—was his choice of motif and viewpoint. Robert Herbert has analyzed the artist's repeated sojourns in the area and subtly assessed the range of human and topographical images at his disposal, emphasizing that many had already been codified or reduced to clichés by his predecessors.⁵ Herbert goes further, insisting on the selectivity of Monet's choice and arguing that Monet set out "to avoid signs of bathing and tourism" altogether, as well as the life of the fishing community: "for him, art was dedicated to a realm of work-free nature . . . incompatible with his conception of a 'motif' or a 'grand view.'"⁶ What is indisputable is that Monet's literal attention was directed away from the village, toward the English Channel and the massive cliffs that bounded the bay at both its upper and lower extremities. On earlier trips, he based several compositions on the rocky escarpments to the northeast, but more frequently gazed southwest at the great spur of land culminating in the famous natural cleft—the Porte d'Aval—which had become the virtual

signature of the locale. In 1885, however, he seemed determined to enlarge this repertoire, re-energizing the canonical views with gilded sunsets and thunderous storms, and searching within and beyond them for novel combinations of water, sky, and sculpted stone.

Where many of Monet's Étretat pictures consisted of groups of variants on a single view, the precise configuration of *Cliffs at Étretat* is unique to this canvas. Again focusing on the Porte d'Aval, he avoided the familiar perspective of Courbet and others by moving southwest beyond the main promontory, then turning to look back at its hidden flank. A trio of canvases shows this little-noted view from a height, where Monet has gazed down from the cliff-top on the unpopulated bay and the surface of the sea.⁷ But for the Clark composition he boldly descended to the water's edge, now directly confronting the Porte d'Aval and the cliff face to his right and balancing them at left with the prodigious needle of rock—called L'Aiguille—which is invisible from Étretat.⁸ In Herbert's terms, this "grand view" was both sublime and remote from the resort itself, offering a glimpse of the elemental spectacle that the ordinary holidaymaker would not see. Monet's vantage point was accessible on foot only by means of a precipitous cliff path, though he probably chose to transport himself and his materials by water while working on the Clark composition: the awe-inspiring journey beneath the arch is perhaps remembered in the diminutive rowing boat near the center of the canvas.⁹ In the towering, solitary forms of *Cliffs at Étretat*, we almost sense Monet's pride in his discovery and in the effort expended as he looked across the deserted beach, past the freshly visualized landmarks, and beyond to the low horizon and vast, sun-filled sky.

Given its serene appearance, the circumstances in which *Cliffs at Étretat* was painted are distinctly unexpected. Some fifty-five letters written by Monet during his autumn stay have survived, few referring to specific pictures but the majority including complaints about persistent bad weather. "It's freezing cold and raining continually," he reported to Alice Hoschedé on 13 October 1885. "The weather is so variable that I can finish nothing," he told Paul Durand-Ruel on 22 October; and subsequent accounts described violent storms, drastically changing light, and even a fall of snow.¹⁰ Though he was often moved as well as frustrated by the elements, Monet's exhilaration during a fine spell was intense. "Étretat is becoming more and more splendid," he exclaimed at one moment, "the beach with all those fine boats, it's superb and I rage



Fig. 226.1. Gustave Courbet (French, 1819–1877), *Cliff at Étretat*, 1869. Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 123.1 cm. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham, England

at my inability to express it all better.”¹¹ Some of these rare, bright interludes occurred in late October and early November, and it was perhaps then that *Cliffs at Étretat* was begun. He had been waiting anxiously for the fishing fleet to put to sea and on 30 October was able to announce how “admirable” the event was, anticipating a number of sketches of the sight.¹² Easily mistaken for pleasure craft, this flotilla with its distant russet sails does much to emphasize the scale of the cliff-scape in the Clark scene, while coincidentally suggesting a more precise date for its execution.

Monet’s Étretat correspondence is frank about the procedures by which such vivid impressions were translated into completed paintings. When the storms permitted, he walked or went by boat to the motifs that attracted him, beginning what he called a *pochade* (or quick sketch) that might be left largely unrevised or developed subsequently. Some of these canvases were attacked with broad brushes and unevenly covered with vivid ribbons of color, to be left in this state and in certain cases signed and exhibited.¹³ Others were persistently worked in a number of registers, while rarer examples—such as *Cliffs at Étretat*—were elaborately advanced in successive stages and with extreme attention to detail. It was the delays in this tense process of completion, which ideally required unchanging conditions of light and water, that most challenged him. On 3 November Monet noted a “delicious day” without rain, while regretting the overcast conditions “because I need sunshine for so many of

my studies”; and three days later, he described “working without pause” in “sunshine as at Giverny,” with the tide “exactly right for several motifs.”¹⁴ Implicit in these remarks are the need to maintain the visual dialogue with his subjects, without which the canvas in question could not be resolved, and his anxiety about leaving Étretat with many unfinished pictures as the winter set in.

Though Monet’s letters tell us that rain obliged him to paint a group of fishing boats from his hotel window, he otherwise made no reference to working on the Étretat canvases indoors, complaining that he could only look sadly at his once-promising studies in such conditions.¹⁵ There is every reason, therefore, to believe that *Cliffs at Étretat* was begun in front of the motif and pursued on later visits to the same inhospitable location, while his frequent practice of adding final touches elsewhere should not be discounted. Maupassant recalled the sight of Monet at work in Étretat: “Standing before his subject, he waited, watched the sun and the shadows, capturing in a few brushstrokes a falling ray of light or a passing cloud. . . . I saw him catch a sparkling stream of light on a white cliff,” he wrote in 1886.¹⁶ Consistent with this memory is the high degree of particularity in the description of L’Aiguille, the Porte d’Aval, and adjacent cliffs in the Clark picture, and the precisely controlled effects of light on their forms and textures. So careful is Monet’s rendering that the time of his encounter can be deduced, with the shadowed rocks and beach indicating that the rising sun to the east has yet to reach the bay in the early morning. The glowing tip of the needle-like pillar is even more suggestive, reminding us that within minutes all will be changed, as this golden band of light slips down over the gloomy strata beneath.

Close inspection of the canvas surface shows that these subtle qualities were arrived at with considerable patience but with little hesitation.¹⁷ The majestic pattern of repeated vertical masses and intervals, echoed by complementary curves and voids, was established at the outset and left effectively unchanged, to be subtly articulated through Monet’s brushwork and his mastery of color. Countering the weightless washes of sky with the chromatic density of the waves, he spread a smooth warmth across the sand and a scattering of granular marks—later likened by Clement Greenberg to the calligraphy of the artist’s letters—over the cliff face.¹⁸ Still in superb condition, the painting demonstrates the extreme technical sophistication that Monet was capable of at this date,

as well as his effectiveness in conveying the visual and tactile experience of such sites. Many of his critics had come to acknowledge these skills, while noting the increased role of “feeling,” of the “refined and poetic” in his latest work.¹⁹ Characteristically, Monet himself said little on these matters, resisting the commonplace tendency to see the rocky architecture of Étretat in terms of buttresses, spires, and arches, and leaving us with the secular geometry and the geological grandeur of his hard-won design. This aspect of *Cliffs at Étretat* can now be understood as part of a broader concern with the material character of his natural surroundings that had informed Monet’s art for more than a decade. A lifelong non-believer who often chose to consort with atheists and radicals, Monet was implicitly included when critics likened the Impressionist group to mere scientists working in their own kind of “laboratory.”²⁰ For Monet and his colleagues, sites such as the Étretat cliffs—which had been studied by Charles Darwin’s mentor in geology, Charles Lyell—were as much a proof of majestic earthly forces as they were of divine power.²¹

Taken back to Giverny with his other canvases in December 1885, *Cliffs at Étretat* surprisingly disappeared from the record for almost half a century. Though firmly signed and dated, there is no evidence that the painting was among the group of recent works shown at the Galerie Georges Petit in May 1886, when at least one similar view was included in the exhibition.²² At an unknown date it was bought by the New York collector James F. Sutton, remaining with his family until its acquisition by Robert Sterling Clark in 1933.²³ Clark’s diary mentions his first encounter with the picture on 24 October 1933, at the Sutton sale (“Some good Monets”), his decision the next day to bid up to \$5,000 for “Falaises, Etretat,” and his purchase of the work on 26 October for \$5,500, bidding successfully against Chester Dale.²⁴ Six years later Clark decided to have the painting cleaned, announcing the following week that it was “much improved”—and adding with some justified self-satisfaction—“I was quite right about it.”²⁵ RK

PROVENANCE The artist, sold to Sutton; James F. Sutton, New York (d. 1915); Mrs. James F. Sutton, New York, by descent (1915–33, sale, American Art Association, New York, 26 Oct. 1933, no. 60, ill., as *Les Falaises d’Etretat, Normandie*, sold to Durand-Ruel); [Durand-Ruel, New York, sold to Clark, 30 Oct. 1933]; Robert Sterling Clark (1933–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Williamstown 1956a, no. 120, pl. 37; New York 1967, no. 25; Williamstown 1985c, no cat.; Madison 1987, no cat.; Williamstown 1988a, no cat.; Springfield 1988, p. 33, no. 9, ill., and ill. on cover; Tokyo–Nagoya–Hiroshima 1994, pp. 146–47, no. 37, ill.; Chicago 1995, p. 100, no. 79, ill., as *The Needle, Etretat*; Vienna 1996, pp. 99, 218, no. 45, ill., as *The Aiguille and the Falaise d’Aval*; San Francisco–Raleigh–Cleveland 2006–7, pp. 138–39, 185, no. 44, ill., as *The Needle Rock and the Porte d’Aval, Étretat* (exhibited in San Francisco and Raleigh only); London–Williamstown 2007, pp. 152–53, 156, 302, fig. 134.

REFERENCES Greenberg 1957, p. 148, ill.; Seitz 1960, pp. 31, 120, fig. 40; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 84, ill.; Kasanof 1968, p. 9, fig. 5; Rossi Bortolatto 1972a, p. 105, no. 258, ill. (French ed., 1981, p. 106, no. 287, ill., as *L’aiguille et la falaise d’aval*); Courthion 1972, p. 24, ill. (rev. ed., p. 22, ill.); Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, p. 176, no. 1034, ill., as *L’aiguille et la falaise d’aval*; Ironside 1975, p. 201, fig. 2; White 1978, fig. 10; Petrie 1979, pp. 57–58, pl. 49; Mabuchi 1980, p. 117, ill., and pl. 31; Brooks 1981, pp. 62–63, no. 27, ill.; Gordon and Forge 1983, pp. 103, 291, ill.; Stuckey 1985, p. 146, pl. 64; Elvehjem 1987, p. 1, ill.; Eitner 1988, vol. 1, p. 360 (rev. ed., p. 372); Howard 1989, pp. 132–33, ill.; Kendall 1989, pp. 142, 319, ill.; Myers 1990, p. 82, ill.; Stuckey 1991, p. 168, ill.; Delouche 1992, pp. 18–19, 32, ill.; Koch-Hillebrecht 1992, p. 57; Herbert 1994, pp. 114–15, figs. 104, 127, and ill. on jacket, as *The Needle and the Porte d’Aval*; Kodansha 1995, pp. 22–23; Tucker 1995, p. 118, pl. 135, as *The Needle Rock and the Porte d’Aval*; Kern et al. 1996, pp. 90–91, ill.; Morgan 1996, pp. 50–51, ill.; Wildenstein 1996, vol. 3, p. 391, no. 1034, ill., as *The Rock Needle and the Porte d’Aval*; Williamstown 1996–97, p. 23, fig. 14; *Antiques* 1997, p. 529, pl. 19; Shimada and Sakagami 2001, vol. 2, fig. 163; Treviso 2001–2, p. 30, ill.; Kendall 2006, pp. 120, 135–36, ill.; Williamstown–New York 2006–7, p. 77.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a fairly coarse-weave linen (16–19 threads/cm) whose texture is evident throughout the surface, especially in the horizontal direction. The picture, glue-lined to a heavy double-weave linen (9–13 doubled threads/cm), retains the artist’s tacking margins and may also have its original five-member stretcher. The painting was cleaned in 1939 by Murray of Beers Brothers, via Durand-Ruel, and may have been lined at the same time. The lining appears to be stable. The paint has linear and branched age cracks throughout, especially noticeable in the sky. There are traction cracks locally in the rocks, beach, and the thickest water areas. In 1979, a brush coat of yellowed natural resin varnish was removed from the surface. Using magnification, small deposits of old resin can still be detected trapped around the impastos. Slightly chalky overpaint covering traction cracks in the sky to the left and below the arch may be either the artist’s reworkings or very early restorations. The surface has a light spray coat of synthetic varnish.

The ground layer may be glue based. It is thin enough to allow the canvas weave to show and its pale gray color contributes to the composition. Although there are dark painted outlines around some rock formations, these appear to be part of the final paint layer and do not constitute a preliminary underdrawing. Using infrared reflectography, one can see some alteration in the line of the cliff at the upper right and along the straight inside edge of the arch. The dry and flickering final appearance of the surface was created using scumbled strokes applied wet-into-wet, which helps explain the traction cracks in several locations. White bristle brush hairs are scattered in the surface. Cracks in the more thickly applied yellow-brown color seen at the top of the ridge may indicate the use of the translucent, resinous pigment gamboge.

1. Monet stayed at Faure's home while his family was in Étretat, then moved to a hotel when he began painting.
2. The most complete account of this history is in Herbert 1994, pp. 61–89. Several Courbet canvases of Étretat had been shown in public and probably seen by Monet, including a group in the Courbet retrospective exhibition of 1882.
3. Paintings were made on previous visits in 1864, 1868–69, 1873, 1883, and 1884. In a letter written from Étretat to Alice Hoschedé on 1 Feb. 1883 (Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, p. 223, letter 312), Monet specified the precedent of Courbet.
4. Monet arrived in mid-September but started work when his family left in the second week of October.
5. Herbert 1994.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 101, 104.
7. W 1032–33, 1051.
8. Though he painted two other canvases from this spot in 1885 (W 1042 and 1043), both are in a vertical format and focus on the offshore rocks and engulfing sea. A single picture based on the same site is dated 1883 (W 831), though the artist directed his gaze more out to sea than in the Clark scene.
9. See Herbert 1994, pp. 114–15. Monet's letters make reference to the occasional use of boats on his painting expeditions, while Maupassant's account of the artist at work (see note 17) records that local children sometimes acted as carriers. Because of the narrow beach, which is clearly visible in the Clark painting, his location would have been accessible only at low tide. A story of a similar outing related by Monet (see Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, p. 268, letter 631) tells how he was surprised by the returning tide and drenched by the waves, though he does not specify which view was being painted on this occasion.
10. Claude Monet to Alice Hoschedé, 13 Oct. 1885, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, p. 262, letter 589: "Il fait un froid de loup et de la pluie à chaque instant"; and Claude Monet to Paul Durand-Ruel, 22 Oct. 1885, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, p. 262, letter 596: "Il fait un temps si variable que je ne puis arriver à rien terminer."
11. Claude Monet to Alice Hoschedé, 20 Oct. 1885, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, p. 262, letter 592: "Étretat devient de plus en plus épatant, c'est la vrai moment, la plage avec tous ces beaux bateaux, c'est superbe et j'enrage de ne pas être plus habile à rendre tout cela."
12. Claude Monet to Alice Hoschedé, 30 Oct. 1885, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, p. 263, letter 603: "C'est admirable."
13. For example, W 1036 and 1044.
14. Claude Monet to Alice Hoschedé, 3 Nov. 1885, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, p. 264, letter 596, 607: "Tout le jour . . . c'est délicieux . . . car j'aspire au soleil pour bien des études aussi"; and Claude Monet to Alice Hoschedé, 7 Nov. 1885, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, p. 265, letter 612: "Aussi ai-je travaillé sans m'arrêter, car la marée est en ce moment juste comme il faut pour plusieurs motifs," "un soleil superbe comme à Giverny."
15. Claude Monet to Alice Hoschedé, 31 Oct. 1885, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, p. 264, letter 604.
16. Maupassant 1886; translation from Stuckey 1985, pp. 122–23.
17. Study with the naked eye and under infrared light indicates that very few changes were made to the composition as it developed.
18. Greenberg 1957, p. 148.
19. Lostalot 1883, p. 343; translation from Stuckey 1985, p. 102.
20. Blavet 1876, p. 1: "C'est que le mouvement dont ils ont pris l'initiative a besoin d'une grande liberté d'expérience et qu'il lui faut comme un laboratoire à lui" ("It is because the movement for which they have taken the initiative requires a great liberty of experience and it must have its own sort of laboratory").
21. See Kendall 2006, and New Haven–Cambridge 2009, pp. 293–316.
22. W 1032.
23. See American Art Association 1933a, no. 60. The sale catalogue specifies that Sutton bought the work directly from the artist. Invoices relating to the 1933 sale in the Clark curatorial files indicate that the purchase was made on Clark's behalf by Durand-Ruel, New York.
24. RSC Diary, 24 Oct. 1933.
25. RSC Diary, 23 Oct. 1939.