



**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,
Simon Kelly, Richard Kendall, Kathleen M. Morris, Leslie Hill Paisley,
Kelly Pask, Elizabeth A. Pergam, Kathryn A. Price, Mark A. Roglán,
James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

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229 | Rouen Cathedral, the Façade in Sunlight

c. 1892–94

Oil on canvas, 106.7 x 73.7 cm

Lower right: Claude Monet 94

Acquired in memory of Anne Strang Baxter

1967.1

Completed in the final years of the nineteenth century, this painting is one of the most radical, forward-looking works at the Clark and is arguably among the culminating achievements of late Impressionism. Monet first exhibited twenty pictures from his “series” of Rouen Cathedral in 1895, when they were immediately perceived in extreme terms. For Georges Clemenceau, writing on the front page of the newspaper *La Justice*, they represented “a moment for art . . . a moment for mankind . . . a revolution without gunfire,” while the more cautious Camille Mauclair regarded the choice of subject as “disturbing” and “a bit offensive.”¹ Cited by later generations alongside the precursors of abstract and gestural art, the *Cathedrals* remained controversial for many decades.² For those astute admirers of Monet’s early and middle years, Sterling and Francine Clark, the serial images of the 1890s appear to have marked the limit of their taste.³ It was eleven years after the founding of the Clark that *Rouen Cathedral, the Façade in Sunlight* was acquired for the collection, under the directorship of George Heard Hamilton, a pioneer scholar of early modernism.

The circumstances in which Monet’s cathedral pictures were painted have often been described, but less frequently considered in terms of their practical consequences for images like the Clark canvas. By 1891, the artist had carried his engagement with the landscape to a new level of sophistication in two series of variants, the *Grainstacks* and the *Poplars*, which he self-consciously displayed as groups in 1891 and 1892, respectively.⁴ The climax of almost thirty years of first-hand study of rustic themes, these works were summarized as “luminous” and “masterful” by his colleague Camille Pissarro, while friendly critics such as Gustave Geffroy extolled their poetic responsiveness to nature at different times of the day.⁵ When Monet began the Rouen sequence in February 1892, he heightened some of these characteristics and abandoned others. Unexpectedly turning his back on the countryside, he now chose to paint a large, historic building at the center of a bustling modern city. After briefly experi-

menting with pictures of the cathedral made in the open air, he also varied his practice by executing the remainder of the canvases indoors, from a succession of premises overlooking the western façade. His decision to produce a sequence of paintings of a single, massively dominant motif, from what was virtually the same viewpoint, was without substantial precedent in his oeuvre.⁶ Far from hampering his creativity, however, these constraints seemed to intensify his involvement with a limited range of concerns: the changing light on the Gothic structure; his own shifting moods and perceptions as the days passed; and the challenge of translating these phenomena into paint.

Again departing from his previous initiatives, the Rouen cycle did not emerge gradually from Monet’s recent work, but was seemingly prompted by a chance confluence of events.⁷ From the beginning, however, he grasped the subject’s potential, becoming exhilarated by its visual richness and appalled by its demands: “The cathedral in sunshine is admirable,” he wrote to Alice Hoschedé on 25 February, adding, “What a task this cathedral is! It’s terrible, and I truly hope that there won’t be too many changes in the weather.”⁸ In the same letter he mentioned two new paintings begun that very day, and on later occasions noted progress on nine and then fourteen separate versions in a single session, as he labored from “seven in the morning to six-thirty in the evening, standing all the time.”⁹ Based in the city and less than eighty kilometers (fifty miles) from his Giverny studio, Monet had easy access to materials and equipment, and would eventually tackle approximately thirty canvases, most of them in a vertical format and closely similar in size.¹⁰ This consistency further underlines the focused nature of his new enterprise and perhaps points to a grander ambition for the cycle. On 29 February, he left Rouen to install fifteen of his *Poplars* at the Durand-Ruel gallery in Paris, barely lingering for the enthusiastic reception they received before returning to the *Cathedrals*. The freshly drafted paintings in Rouen may already have suggested themselves for a future exhibition and were perhaps designed to this end from their inception; where the *Poplars* varied considerably in scale and shape, the nearly identical-sized *Cathedrals* would allow for more direct comparison and would heighten the character of the suite as a continuous experience.

Rouen Cathedral, the Façade in Sunlight belongs to one of three subsets of the larger series, each defined by its composition and its subtly distinct framing of the motif.¹¹ In effect, Monet concentrated on a trio of



Fig. 229.1. Claude Monet, *Rouen Cathedral Façade*, c. 1892. Pencil on paper, 18 x 11 cm. Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris

overlapping sections of the building in front of him, which appear to correspond to his nuanced views of the cathedral as he moved from window to window in his work spaces.¹² The process of fixing these scenes is partly documented in a cluster of small drawings, where informal patterns of lines explored the rhythms of the structure and their relationship to his sketchbook page (fig. 229.1).¹³ In the sequence of works exemplified by the Clark picture, he was evidently somewhat to the south of the façade and looking back obliquely at it, remaining low enough for a strip of sky to open up between the bulk of the nave and the right-hand tower.¹⁴ From this position, the steep triangular form above the principal western doorway was made to fall at the exact center of the canvas, its carved pinnacle marking the vertical median. The result is a deeply satisfying fusion of the oblique and the symmetrical, with a regular pattern of buttresses and balanced portals, and framing towers to left and right, all of which is offset by understated diagonals, gentle recessions, and glimpses into the richly modeled edifice. As if to avoid distractions or hints of its

picturesque surroundings, Monet cropped the forms of the great church along the sides of his rectangle and showed the narrow strip of street at the lower edge devoid of worshipers or pedestrians. Allusions to the human were thus largely removed, as he had implicitly excluded nature when he began the project.¹⁵

Characteristically, Monet did not offer explanations for his prolonged attention to the Rouen Cathedral façade. In contrast to the series of *Grainstacks* and *Poplars*, however, which were painted close to his home, the emergence of this new sequence was illuminated by almost daily letters written from Rouen to his family in Giverny. Early in March 1892, he announced, “I’m hard at work, I’m taking great pains and think only of my *Cathedrals*,” insisting that “I have a clear view of what I’m doing.”¹⁶ He often despaired of making progress and expressed anxiety about the conditions outside his window, telling Alice that “the barometer is dropping” and noting “a moon surrounded by a huge double halo, which is a bad sign.”¹⁷ At least some of his pictures were associated with specific registers of light—he referred, for example, to two or three canvases of “gray weather” and to “the two gold and red motifs”—and he feared disaster if the climate was uncooperative: “a few more days of this beautiful sunshine,” he announced on 3 April, “and a good number of my canvases will be saved.”¹⁸ Reversals were sometimes drastic and by the middle of April he had abandoned Rouen altogether, “utterly discouraged and unhappy with what I’m doing here.”¹⁹ He was not to return for almost a year, when he brought back a number of canvases to the city for a further period of sustained innovation and revision.

Like the majority of the series, *Rouen Cathedral, the Façade in Sunlight* bears witness to the ebb and flow of Monet’s struggle with his “terrible” theme. Much of its surface consists of an irregular crust of color, the result of local changes in hue, superimposed brushstrokes, and the accumulation of thickly applied paint in certain areas (fig. 229.2).²⁰ Consistent with his “singular way of working” over a protracted period, this complex topography is not easily reduced to successive phases of work or related to events mentioned in his letters.²¹ Notable in the Clark painting is the virtual absence of visible changes to the composition itself, whether in its overall design or in the detailed forms of the church. Having begun by articulating the scene with some precision, he seems to have left it largely unaltered, directing all his later energies to subtle interrelationships of tone, atmosphere



and touch.²² Over time, the dense buildup of paint became a positive asset rather than the mere record of his labors, scattering the light as it fell on the picture and suggesting transience as well as materiality. Color and texture also combined to reflect the spatial identity of his subject, creating a kind of suppressed, relief-like version of the cathedral's architecture. Passages of canvas between the principal features tend to be relatively undeveloped, while the most heavily impastoed buttresses are both appropriately prominent and palpably stone-like.²³

Rouen Cathedral, the Façade in Sunlight is one of several studies in clear weather and a warm key, where bright blue skies thrust the bleached masonry forward into space or suffuse the architecture with reflected color. In the Clark canvas there is an unusually complex interweaving of hot and cold, flatness and modeling, with light glancing past the façade and softening its forms, apparently at the moment when the afternoon sun first disperses the morning gloom.²⁴ Its chromatic character is also transitional: ochers, corals, and mauves within the portals evoke the day's warmth, while ambiguous scatterings of powder-blue and near-white, especially noticeable on ledges and pinnacles, could suggest snow. Monet's letters recount his struggle to capture the most delicate as well as the most dramatic effects, and we might speculate that exceptional conditions, like the almost simultaneous "rain, snow, and sunshine" he reported on 17 March, played a role in this complex picture's genesis.²⁵

The extent to which Monet remodeled his 1892 paintings during the second campaign in Rouen is unknown, as is the number of entirely new works begun on the later visit.²⁶ What is again well documented, however, is the length of his stay—from mid-February to mid-April, 1893—and his fluctuating spirits as the weather changed and his pictures were again seen to fail or succeed. "The further I get, the more difficult it is for me to convey what I feel," he told Geffroy on 28 March, while protesting to Alice a few days later that he was producing "a stubborn encrustation of colors: it's not painting!"²⁷ In several instances, Monet described how he looked back at his "old paintings," or "returned" to earlier paintings, as the quality of the day's light recalled the conditions that had first inspired them.²⁸ Given its stratified surface, *Rouen Cathedral, the Façade in Sunlight* may well have developed in this way, as part of a continuing dialogue with his senses that remained crucial to the project. While



Fig. 229.2. Detail from the lower right of *Rouen Cathedral, the Façade in Sunlight*

he manipulated his medium with extreme license, Monet still stressed the links between individual pictures and unique climatic circumstances, timing his return to the city in the same winter months for this reason. In a fundamental sense, and despite his relatively remote, insulated relationship with the subject at Rouen, the series was still the product of visible fact, by this time inseparable from his personal feelings and his manifest enchantment with color.

When the exhibition of *Cathedrals* opened at the Durand-Ruel gallery, in May 1895, all twenty pictures had been signed by the artist and firmly dated 1894.²⁹ Earlier correspondence with Paul Durand-Ruel reveals that Monet hoped to complete the paintings for a spring show in 1894, but persistent doubts about them and his negotiations with other dealers delayed these plans.³⁰ The artist was increasingly frank about the time spent in his studio on such groups of canvases, confessing to Durand-Ruel after laboring on the Rouen scenes, in a letter sent from Giverny in February 1894, "I make no progress."³¹ Again, *Rouen Cathedral, the Façade in Sunlight* could have been further modified at this time, as he wrestled with individual works and prepared part of the cycle for exhibition, now even more distanced from the cathedral itself. The Clark picture, generally assumed to have been omitted from the 1895 exhibition, entered the collection of Maurice Masson at an unrecorded date and in

unknown circumstances during these years. The brief titles and spare information offered in the Durand-Ruel catalogue, however, leave some doubt about the identity of the works shown in 1895, and the possibility remains that it formed part of the original group of twenty. There is also reason to believe that it was exhibited in New York in 1896, placing it among the first of the series to be seen in the United States.³²

Where Monet had hesitated to define his ambition, dozens of critics and writers in the spring of 1895 rose enthusiastically to this challenge. Presented with a series in which the motif was repeated and the group identity strong, much of the published commentary was addressed to the entire cycle.³³ Clemenceau's lengthy, eulogistic essay proposed that the pictures should be grouped into four categories, according to their association with light and mood—"gray," "white," "rainbow," and "blue"—allowing us to imagine *Rouen Cathedral, the Façade in Sunlight* among the "white cathedrals with porticos of fire."³⁴ Other interpretations ranged widely, from nationalistic approval of Monet's focus on a French Gothic building to the contrary proposition that he had modernized the church, turning it into something "human," like "flesh and flowers."³⁵ The indefinable quality of the pictures prompted the usually verbose Octave Mirbeau to observe that "the slightest word . . . would seem like blasphemy"; while for the more doubtful André Michel, they proved that painting itself had "nothing more to say."³⁶ Insisting that he wrote as an amateur, Clemenceau nonetheless made some of the most vivid claims for the *Cathedrals*: "Monet's eye," he argued, "guides us in the visual evolution that renders our perceptions of the world more penetrating and more subtle": almost ecstatically, he evoked the "fury of live atoms" receiving their "life from the sun," and the artist's success in making "the stone vibrate."³⁷ Remarkably, Clemenceau's long, discursive text made no reference to the cathedral's religious significance or Monet's own response to it. This almost certainly reflected the politician's long-established and very public atheism and presumably his awareness that Monet himself was also assertively secular. In this challenging sense, they may both have understood that Monet had chosen to paint one of the great churches of France in order to move beyond it, emphasizing human engagement over divine symbolism. Without specifying his terms, however, Clemenceau was able to conclude that Monet's recent canvases from Rouen were "the ultimate perfection of art."³⁸ RK

PROVENANCE Maurice Masson, Paris (until 1911, his sale, Drouot, Paris, 22 June 1911, no. 26, as *Le portail de la cathédrale de Rouen*, possibly sold to Durand-Ruel); [Durand-Ruel, Paris and New York, possibly from 1911—at least 1914]; Frank F. Nicola, Pittsburgh (in 1925); Murdock (c. 1932); Lucius D. Humphrey, New York; [Wildenstein, New York, until at least 1952]; Ramon Aspillaga, Lima (by 1956); sale, Christie's, London, 2 Dec. 1966, no. 36, ill., as *La Cathédrale de Rouen*, sold to Arthur Tooth & Sons, London, as agent for the Clark; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1966.

EXHIBITIONS Possibly Paris 1895;³⁹ possibly New York 1896;⁴⁰ Paris 1911a, no. 27, as *Le portail de la cathédrale de Rouen*; Paris 1911b, no. 116; Vienna 1912, no. 18; Paris 1914a, no. 18, as *La Cathédrale de Rouen, le portail, plein midi, lumière reflétée*; Copenhagen 1914, no. 150, lent by Durand-Ruel; New York 1915, no. 3; possibly New York 1916, no. 12, as *La cathédrale de Rouen, le portail*; New York 1923, no. 16; Zurich 1952, no. 87, as *La cathédrale de Rouen*; The Hague 1952, no. 68; Chicago 1975, p. 34, no. 91, ill.; Williamstown 1975, no cat.; Williamstown 1978, no cat.; Williamstown 1985c, no cat.; Boston–Chicago–London 1990, pp. 149, 298, no. 56, pl. 48; London–Williamstown 2007, pp. 247–48, 302, fig. 248 (exhibited in Williamstown only).

REFERENCES Reuterswärd 1948, ill. opp. p. 124; Butor 1968, pp. 23, 30, ill.; GBA Suppl. 1968, pp. 88–89, no. 312, ill.; Hamilton 1960, not listed in 1st ed. (2nd ed., p. 22, ill. on cover); Pasadena–Seattle–Santa Barbara 1968–69, p. 24, fig. 3c; Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 3, pp. 168–69, no. 1358, ill., as *Cathédrale de Rouen, portail plein midi*; Isaacson 1975, p. 429; Brooks 1981, pp. 64–65, no. 28, ill.; Seiberling 1981, pp. 155, 165, 368, no. 25, as *Rouen Cathedral, Full Sunlight*; Suckale 1981, p. 52, pl. 7; Faison 1982, p. 320, fig. 254; Gordon and Forge 1983, p. 174, ill.; Gerdts 1984, pp. 73–74, pl. 65; Stuckey 1985, p. 371, ill.; Melin 1986, p. 58, fig. 5; Kendall 1989, pp. 213, 320, ill.; Dantzig 1990, p. 212, fig. 11.35; Myers 1990, p. 104, ill.; Pissarro 1990, pp. 74–75, ill.; Kapos 1991, p. 361, ill.; Taylor 1992, pp. 58–59, pl. 2; Garver 1993, p. 2, ill.; Smith 1994, p. 172, fig. 79; Rouen 1994, p. 97, ill.; Tucker 1995, p. 155, pl. 176; *Dictionary of Art* 1996, vol. 21, p. 865, fig. 3; Wildenstein 1996, vol. 3, pp. 559, 563–64, no. 1358, ill., as *The Portal of Rouen Cathedral at Midday*; Kern et al. 1996, pp. 92–93, ill.; *Antiques* 1997, pp. 529–30, pl. 16; Satullo 2002, p. 37, ill.; Cahill 2005, p. 115; Rand 2005, p. 293; Kendall 2006, pp. 136–38, pl. 23; Bernier 2007, p. 31, pl. 13; Kear 2008, p. 52, ill.; Paris 2010–11, ill. betw. cats. 119 and 123.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a fairly fine-weave linen (22 threads/cm). The painting was treated by William Suhr in New York in 1967. Old tears seen at the upper left corner fold-over suggest that the excess weight of the paint layers was causing stress to the tacking margins. Along with removing dirt and discolored varnish, followed by retouching and revarnishing, Suhr strip-lined the original tacking

edges using glue and linen, and replaced the stretcher with a new, six-member, mortise-and-tenon design. A surface veneer of the older crossbars was saved and reattached to the new stretcher in order to preserve numerous old labels and inscriptions. The cleaning looks fairly even, though there are deposits of yellowed resin deep inside the paint pockets. There are a few scattered, darkened retouches and inpainting along the upper left edge. A diagonal line of restored losses in the lower left quadrant, possibly from a scratch abrasion, is visible in infrared reflectography and ultraviolet light. The surface is slightly grimy, and some areas of varnish containing air bubbles are not adhered to the surface. There is slight paint chipping in the lower right corner through the date. Paint along some deep age cracks has lifted forward, although it seems stable. Considering the weight of the paint, the surface is staying in plane quite well.

The ground is a thin, cream-colored layer, probably commercially applied. There may be a slight shift in the placement of the round shape in the pinnacle in front of the rose window, as seen in infrared reflectography. The paint seems to be at least four or five layers deep in many places, preventing detailed analysis of the lower layers, although some areas are clearly less reworked. The layers were built up in downward vertical strokes, leaving soft overhanging forms and cavities devoid of traditional brush marks. The thick paint has deep age cracks throughout the surface, but a surprising lack of traction crackle. This suggests that some drying time elapsed between the applications of the multiple paint layers. The palette is very limited, and all the colors are heavily mixed with white.

1. Clemenceau 1895; translation from Stuckey 1985, p. 180. Maclair 1895, p. 357: “déconcertante”; “un peu blessante.”
2. For a survey of changing attitudes to the paintings, see Hamilton 1960, pp. 5–9.
3. Sterling Clark’s interest in the *Cathedrals* is mentioned briefly in his diaries, though it appears to have concerned the question of their date; see RSC Diary, 7 and 12 Jan. 1942.
4. For these exhibitions, and the works on other themes included on both occasions, see Boston–Chicago–London 1990, pp. 65–188.
5. Camille Pissarro to Lucien Pissarro, in Bailly-Herzberg 1980–91, vol. 3, p. 72; translation from Rewald 1972, p. 166. For Geffroy’s comments, see Paris 1891a, pp. 1–11.
6. The only comparable, if considerably more limited, event was when Monet painted briefly from the windows of the Louvre in 1867 (W 83–85).
7. Monet originally visited Rouen in early February 1892 to settle some family business with his brother Léon, who lived in the city. He appears to have conceived the painting project on this occasion; see Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 3, p. 44.
8. Claude Monet to Alice Hoschedé, 25 Feb. 1892, in

Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 3, p. 264, letter 1136: “quel travail que cette cathédrale! C’est terrible, et je souhaite bien de n’avoir pas trop de changements de temps.”

9. Claude Monet to Alice Hoschedé, 2 Apr. 1892, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 3, p. 266, letter 1145; translation from Kendall 1989, p. 175.
10. W 1314–29, 1345–61. Apart from the few preliminary studies (W 1314–16), most of the pictures are between 100 and 110 cm high. Some have added strips of canvas.
11. The exceptions are the works completed immediately after his arrival in Rouen for the painting project (W 1314–16), which are either picturesque, distant views of the cathedral or close-up studies of its towers and adjacent houses.
12. The intricate story of Monet’s progression from improvised studio spaces in commercial premises and apartments, and sometimes back again, is recounted in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 3, pp. 44–52, and in Pissarro 1990, pp. 15–21. Given Monet’s working methods, however, it cannot be assumed that each painting was executed solely from one vantage point.
13. Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 5, p. 88, no. D168. For more on these sketches, see London–Williamstown 2007, pp. 245–48.
14. Like most Gothic cathedrals, the building at Rouen is aligned on an approximate west-east axis, with the façade painted by Monet facing west. In the Clark picture, Monet looks from the right of the façade and must therefore have been slightly to the south of this axis. It seems probable that he first established this view from the premises of M. Macquit, which were at the southern end of the block; see note 12.
15. Some canvases include vague vertical forms at street level that may indicate figures; see W 1320, 1321, and 1324.
16. Claude Monet to Alice Hoschedé, 8 Mar. 1892, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 3, p. 264, letter 1137; translation from Kendall 1989, p. 174.
17. Claude Monet to Alice Hoschedé, 8 Mar. and 2 Apr. 1892, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 3, pp. 264, 266, letters 1137, 1145: “le baromètre baisse sensiblement”; “la lune entourée d’un double et immense cercle qui n’annonce rien de bon.”
18. Claude Monet to Alice Hoschedé, 31 Mar., 3 Apr., and 7 Apr. 1892, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 3, pp. 265–66, letters 1144, 1146, and 1150: “2 ou 3 [canvases of] temps gris” (31 Mar.); “le deux motifs dorés et rouges” (7 Apr.); “quelques jours encore de ce beau soleil, et bon nombre de mes toiles seront sauvées” (3 Apr.).
19. Claude Monet to Paul Durand-Ruel, 13 Apr. 1892, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 3, p. 267, letter 1153; translation from Kendall 1989, p. 175.
20. In some passages, these form “clogged” or “pitted” accretions, the result of numerous successive applications of color. For further observations on the progress of his painting in the series as a whole, see Seiberling 1981, pp. 157–59.