1-1-2014

From Instantaneities To The Eternal: Shifting Pictorial Temporalities In Monet's Rouen Cathedral

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---Georges Clemenceau, 1895

Let us take the most stable of internal states, the visual perception of a motionless external object. The object may remain the same, I may look at it from the same side, at the same angle, in the same light; nevertheless the vision I now have of it differs from that which I have just had, even if only because the one is an instant older than the other. My memory is there which conveys something of the past into the present. My mental state, as it advances on the road of time, is continually swelling with the duration which it accumulates: it goes on increasing – rolling upon itself, as a snowball on the snow.

---Henri Bergson, L'Évolution Créatrice, 1907

Introduction

Claude Monet has long been hailed as the father of Impressionism and representative icon of the group of painters who took their name from a critique of his early work, Impression, Sunrise (Figure 1). Monet's prominence was largely due to his unparalleled skill at capturing the fleeting conditions of atmosphere and light as they affected his subjects, a gift that is particularly evident in his earlier series paintings. But as Monet’s preoccupation with the series grew, so too did his distance from the goals of Impressionism. By the time he began his Rouen Cathedral paintings in February of 1892 the artist’s goals in serial painting had undergone a massive change. He was no longer concerned with rendering instantaneity through strict plein-air practice (as he had been when he feverishly began the Grainstacks in

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1 Quoted in Robert L. Herbert, "The Decorative and Natural in Monet's Cathedrals," 170.
the fall of 1890), but rather with a more enduring representation of his motifs. This is evidenced by the lengthy process the artist undertook to execute and, later, to rework the *Rouen Cathedral* canvases; a practice much opposed to his mythic commitment to the *plein-air* picture. *Rouen Cathedral* marks a distinct shift in Monet’s project. With this series, the artist sought to transcend the momentary by transforming the motif into a timeless presence. The materiality of the canvases shows his careful construction of the cathedral’s form, where the motif represents a meditation on the nature of art-making and pictorial contemplation, and a decisive move away from his Impressionist pedigree.

Within a group of artists who were intensely preoccupied with rendering transitory effects, Monet was the master of reproducing the subtle nuances in changing light and climate. When he began his career as an Impressionist in the 1870s he was driven by this desire to capture atmospheric qualities and local color; it was this very aspiration that led him easily to the practice of series painting in the 1890s. By studying the same object in many different conditions, Monet could rehearse and master subtle nuances in changing light and climate. Essentially, his first attempts at series painting were simply repeated exercises in these effects. But for Monet, the format quickly became an obsession. The *Grainstacks* (Figures 2-4), first exhibited in May 1891, were his first formal series. These were quickly followed by the *Poplars* (Figures 5-6) and, of course, the *Cathedrals*. But in spite of

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5 House, “Monet in 1890,” 129. The author also notes Monet’s excitement and enthusiasm for his newly developed serial practice by citing a letter the artist wrote to critic and friend Gustave Geffroy, dating to October 7th, 1890: “I’m working away, I’m planning a series of different effects, of *meules*, but at this time of year the sun sets so quickly I cannot keep up with it.” House, “Monet in 1890,” 138.
the short window of time between the execution of each of these cycles, Monet’s interests and intentions in seriality evolved so rapidly that the process behind the *Rouen Cathedral* paintings was markedly different than that of the *Grainstacks*, and embodied the artist’s evolution away from the instantaneous focus of Impressionism.

It was in February 1892, only a year after exhibiting the *Grainstacks*, that Monet traveled to Rouen (just downriver from his studio-home in Giverny) to paint the town’s main cathedral. He installed himself in the window of a textile shop across the square from the building’s western façade and began the series that would arguably become the most important work of his career.⁶ The *Rouen Cathedral* canvases are a significant project within Monet’s oeuvre. The value of these works lies not only in their critical acclaim and commercial success, but also in their embodiment of a distinct shift in the artist’s serial practice and production. These paintings are, as George Heard Hamilton proposes, “one of the principal documents for the history and understanding of later impressionism, of that kind of painting for which the term post-impressionist suggests only its chronological position and fails even to hint at the elements within it which are different from and even antithetical to the character of earlier impressionism.”⁷ Hamilton’s words emphasize that the *Rouen Cathedral* series is not a part of Monet’s larger Impressionist body of work. I will argue that, furthermore, the cathedral paintings do not fit with the artist’s aims in earlier series such as the *Haystacks* or *Poplars*.

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⁶ Knott believes this retail space belonged to a milliner, while Grace Seiberling describes it as the temporary venue of a ribbon-seller whose primary location was under construction. Knott, “Monet’s Cathedrals,” 174; Grace Seiberling, *Monet’s Series: A Dissertation*, 141.

Rouen Cathedral, as one of the artist’s last efforts in formal series painting, belongs to a point in Monet’s career when he was no longer interested in or committed to the tenets of the Impressionist movement.

Even within Monet’s own serial practice, therefore, the Rouen Cathedral canvases are distinct. The cathedral project marks a massive shift in the artist’s ambitions, one that distances the series from his former examples. Both the Haystacks and the Poplars are truly Impressionist works. The canvases for each series cohere to the standards so characteristic of Impressionism at its height: the artist’s skill in reproducing the effects of light, the attention to changes in weather, and most of all the dedication to the snapshot aesthetic of capturing a fleeting moment in time. The moments arrested in the paintings are instantaneous and transitory.

I will argue that this momentary quality does not manifest itself in the same way within the Rouen Cathedral series. Instead, the canvases embody Monet’s desire to create “something more lasting... he wanted to claim an enduring status as a constructive, synthetic artist, more than a painter of mere sensations before the landscape. The series were Monet’s claim to individuality, and his bid for posterity.” The Rouen Cathedral series is essentially Monet’s departure from and abandonment of his Impressionist roots, the demarcation point between what

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8 Although it is important to note that “Monet himself essentially had abandoned the Impressionists before the group’s last exhibition, held in the spring of 1886, and refused to participate in that event,” these first two forays into systematized seriality – the Grainstacks and Poplars – were still undeniably Impressionist in their treatment of natural elements and their execution as plein-air pictures intended to capture the specificity of an exact moment in the cycle of the day. Richard R. Brettell, “Monet’s Haystacks Reconsidered,” 5.

Hamilton has termed the artist’s ‘earlier impressionism,’ and ‘later’ or ‘post-impressionism.’ With the Cathedrals Monet hoped to stake his reputation on terms beyond his Impressionist accomplishments; to work, as John Klein succinctly states, in methods both ‘constructive’ and ‘synthetic.’ Monet’s cathedral paintings have been both influential and enduring, as evidenced by their continued relevance. The canvases were a declaration of Monet’s new grand ambition: to construct paintings that would endure through both their physicality and their timeless subject matter.

**State of the Literature: Historical Readings of Monet’s Rouen**

To understand the true significance of Rouen Cathedral and its status as the physical manifestation of Monet’s new ambitions as a painter and his changing conceptions of pictorial time, we must first situate the series within the tradition of scholarly literature. Previous scholarship on the Rouen Cathedral works has largely operated within the context of Monet’s entire serial practice and his powerful heritage as an Impressionist painter. It is certainly true that an understanding of Monet’s oeuvre, and especially the earlier Impressionist series (namely the Grainstacks and Poplars), is an informative analytical tool for approaching the Rouen Cathedral canvases. But it is the departure from the framework of his Impressionist background that marks the cathedral series as a provocatively distinct moment in the artist’s career; and a shift towards a new kind of image-making. To categorize the cathedral series as merely an extension of Monet’s earlier serial practice and production is to oversimplify the project and to downplay its significance as a clear
and conscious break with Impressionist thought and attitudes. John Rewald, for example, appraised the *Cathedral* series as follows:

Carrying to an extreme his disregard for the actual subject, Monet abandoned form completely and sought to retain in an uniform tissue of subtle nuances the single miracle of light. At the very moment when he imagined he had attained the apogee of impressionism, he turned away from its spirit and lost the freshness and strength of the initial impression.\(^{10}\)

These observations are meaningful because Rewald notes that these paintings mark a shift for Monet, a turn away from the goals of earlier Impressionism. However, the author sees this as a failure: since his approach to the cathedral works classifies them as an extension or continuation of the earlier Impressionist series, their difference and lack of spontaneity become flaws, and therefore make them unsatisfactory examples of Impressionist values. But as I shall demonstrate, in *Rouen Cathedral* Monet was no longer working under the influence of Impressionism but instead towards a set of new goals that underlie the serial project of the *Cathedrals*.

Like Rewald, many scholars have acknowledged that the *Rouen Cathedral* works are in fact unique within Monet’s serial practice, but none have successfully articulated the profound importance of this difference. Instead of focusing specifically on the changing and evolving nature of time within the paintings, most critics and historians fixate on a singular element that distinguishes the *Cathedrals* from the rest of the series, such as stylistic handling, Monet’s painting procedure, or

the painter’s shifting intentions. While each of these avenues of interpretation contributes to a full understanding of Monet’s *Rouen Cathedral* project, they fail to identify Monet’s treatment of time as the essential characteristic that defines the series as unique.

Two of the most significant evaluations of Monet’s *Rouen Cathedral* project came from his contemporaries Gustave Geffroy and Georges Clemenceau, who each published reviews of the canvases’ debut in 1895. In his detailed dissertation on *Monet and His Critics*, Steven Z. Levine articulates the difference in opinion between the two formidable reviewers, whose writings on the *Cathedral* show were the most favorable and most cited of the contemporary critiques. He notes that for Geffroy, “perception [in the *Cathedrals*]... was a balanced pictorial unity composed of permanent and transitory elements, whereas Clemenceau saw the immutable subject as a foil that revealed by way of contrast the actual mobility of light.” Levine further clarifies the positions of the two by simply stating that, “Clemenceau

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11 Seiberling’s analysis categorizes the *Rouen Cathedral* project as a building block within Monet’s entire serial practice. She categorizes the paintings through an evolution of stylistic handling that progresses constantly towards more unified and homogenous surface treatment between the individual canvases in each series, which culminates, she argues, with the *Waterlilies*. Pissarro instead puts intense focus on the painting procedure behind the *Cathedrals*, even labeling them with what he believes to be the correct address where each canvas was executed based on the angle of vision, sunlight, and the chronological relationships he constructs between the canvases. Another approach to the works is embodied by Hamilton, who believes the triumph of the *Rouen Cathedral* works lies not in their stylistic handling, but instead their role as “an exploration of the psychic processes of picture-making” in which the artist was able to manifest his own sensations and experiences in front of the façade and reproduce them on the canvas for a vicarious sort of viewing experience. Seiberling, *Monet’s Series*, 135; Joachim Pissarro, *Monet’s Cathedral, Rouen 1892 – 1894*, 15-21; Hamilton, *Claude Monet’s Paintings*, 3.

12 Here it is interesting to note that Geffroy was formerly employed by Clemenceau, and thus their attitudes and appraisals are not mutually exclusive, as the two certainly would have had some influence over one another. Steven Z. Levine, *Monet and His Critics*, 182.
emphasized change over permanence,” while Geffroy on the other hand was interested in the work’s more lasting elements.\textsuperscript{13}

Essentially, for Clemenceau the \textit{Cathedrals} were still rooted heavily in Impressionism and in that movement’s preoccupation with the ‘mobility’ of light and the effects of nature. According to the critic, this project was still concerned with ultimately ephemeral qualities; what made the \textit{Cathedrals} so distinctive and unprecedented for Clemenceau was the new contrast between the permanence of the motif and the fleeting quality of Monet’s rendering of light and air. Geffroy also recognized the new elements of permanence brought to Monet’s serial practice; for him, however, the significance of this permanence lay not in its contrast to the short-lived effects of light and weather but rather in its relationship to time. While “Clemenceau believed that Monet’s series format was essentially an analytical tool for the decomposition of a single object into its constituent temporal aspects…” Geffroy, Mirbeau, and others saw in it the synthesis of duration, of decoration.”\textsuperscript{14}

Geffroy’s focus on temporality versus duration, and its contrast to Clemenceau’s interest in the fleeting, can also be evidenced by each critics’ suggested ideal hanging method for the show: Clemenceau grouped the paintings along chromatic designations (citing the “grey series,” “white series,” “rainbow series,” and “blue series”) while Geffroy “gave priority to the succession of hours,” by grouping the works along chronological lines instead.\textsuperscript{15} The flaw in Clemenceau’s design, as well as in his written review of the series, is that it groups the \textit{Rouen} Cathedral canvases

\textsuperscript{13} Levine, \textit{Monet and His Critics}, 184.
\textsuperscript{14} Levine, \textit{Monet and His Critics}, 184.
\textsuperscript{15} Pissarro, \textit{Monet’s Cathedral}, 30-31.
too closely with the rest of Monet’s more Impressionist serial practice. It is certainly true that the *Rouen* canvases grew out of the artist’s earlier experiments in seriality, and that the project would not exist without the artist’s Impressionist pedigree. But, as we shall see, to categorize the *Cathedral* paintings as Impressionist works undermines their status as a pivotal turning point in the artist’s practice. Geffroy’s analysis of the *Rouen Cathedral* series, on the other hand, was one of the first to suggest the importance of Monet’s evolving concept of time and the loss of the instantaneity found in his earlier Impressionist series. Despite the fact that his hypothetical hanging of the works centered on constructing a cyclical narrative of time that would ultimately root the paintings in the real world progression from dawn to dusk, Geffroy identified (albeit indirectly) Monet’s new treatment of a more eternal, enduring moment contained within each canvas.

Hamilton is another of the exceptional scholars whose analysis of the *Rouen Cathedral* paintings includes a focus on the element of time, but his overall argument is instead that the canvases are ultimately “not so many separate objects as so many variations on a theme... an exploration of the psychic processes of picture-making.”

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sensibility, as a fact of consciousness rather than merely of observation.”

For Hamilton, the role of the artist transcends the ability to capture a scene by merely recording it ‘objectively.’ Instead, the role of the artist is to make visible on the canvas his or her own personal vision and psychological processing of the motif. In constructing his argument, Hamilton explicitly acknowledges the changing nature of time within Monet’s Impressionist practice, stating,

...especially in the serial paintings, the creation of multiple views of the same object implies a different conception of vision and time. The ‘instantaneity’ he sought in the ‘Haystack’ is... less an analysis of the perceptual character of the passing instant than a prolonged concentration on the psychological factors of duration implicit in the sequence of instants.

Here he eloquently notes that the spontaneous qualities of light and atmosphere as Monet has captured them on the canvas do not necessarily denote a singular fleeting moment. For Hamilton, a reinterpretation of the Cathedrals rests on the idea of the artist’s own subjectivity and psychological presence; his specific and individual experience as he encounters his motif. In this way, his methodology characterizes Rouen Cathedral as an evolution from Monet’s previous series works since according to Hamilton these canvases, more than any of the others, exemplify Impressionist vision as “the painter’s experience, the projection of his particular feelings.”

It is their testimony as documents of Monet’s own visual and mental experiences before the cathedral itself that makes the Cathedral canvases so impressive to Hamilton. They excel not because of their mastery of subtle effects in changing conditions, but rather due to their representation of Monet’s own subjective experiences and,

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therefore, their meditation on perception and vision. These claims are valuable to
an informed viewing of the canvases, but Hamilton makes his focus the artist’s
subjectivity and personal vision, which can never truly be known to anyone other
than the artist himself. The temperament of the artist could be said to influence any
work within the history of art; what makes *Rouen Cathedral* so distinctive is its
unprecedented lengthening of pictorial time, particularly at a moment when
Impressionists sensibilities and a general “Baudelairean privileging of the
transitory, the ephemeral, [and] the provisional” ruled the day.\(^{20}\) Undeniably, the
paintings are manifestations of Monet’s specific views and aims as a painter, but
they gain more universal relevance in their achievements in the treatment of time
than in their record of the artist’s individual thoughts and feelings.

Grace Seiberling’s doctoral dissertation also discusses “the emotions [Monet]
experienced in front of... the cathedral,” but her focus is on the evolution of the
artist’s serial practice as a whole.\(^{21}\) Her work is divided into chapters, each
specifically addressing a particular series, and this format contextualizes Monet’s
series paintings in sequential relation to one another where each builds on the
qualities and issues of the previous series. This evolutionary assessment reaches its
zenith, for Seiberling, with the *Waterlily* paintings rather than the *Cathedrals*. In her
analysis, the Rouen canvases are simply a building block, albeit a crucial one, in the
realization of Monet’s final serial subject, his gardens at Giverny. However,
Seiberling notes the importance of the *Cathedrals* as a crucial turning point in
Monet’s career. She emphasizes that the amount of time he spent working on this

\(^{21}\) Seiberling, *Monet’s Series*, 186
series, its essentially fixed viewpoint, and its cohesiveness in concept and execution are unprecedented in the artist’s oeuvre. Furthermore, she stresses Monet’s intensive reworking of the *Rouen Cathedral* series. Of course, it is true that the artist had revisited and retouched his previous series in the studio before their exhibition. But in the case of the *Cathedral* works these revisions were more extensive; the artist adjusted the paintings obsessively in his studio for years after their initial execution and even after their debut exhibition at the Durand-Ruel Gallery in 1895. The extent of this laborious revision meant that for Monet, the *Rouen Cathedral* series were clearly one of the most important and significant undertakings of his career. This preoccupation is meaningful since at this point in his career the artist had already enjoyed a great deal of commercial and critical success and was therefore financially secure as well as firmly established with a reputation as an ambitious French painter. With the *Rouen Cathedral* series, the fact that he still felt compelled to continually rework the surface of his already tactility wrought canvases meant that for Monet more was at stake than ever before. As Seiberling succinctly states, “In the Cathedrals, the painting as an object takes on autonomy as the object in the painting loses its identity.” These canvases are more than simple records of instants of nature seen through a temperament. They address the process of painting itself.

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23 In fact, Seiberling notes that the artist held on to some of the *Rouen Cathedral* canvases until after 1900, and that he continued to revisit and retouch the works even after the turn of the century. Seiberling, *Monet’s Series*, 164.
Joachim Pissarro analyzes the cathedral series in similar terms; for him “the series deals expressly, and in a climatic sense, with the notion of the impossibility of finishing a painting.”\textsuperscript{25} Pissarro argues that there is a shift in Monet’s oeuvre with the \textit{Cathedral} series. No longer is there an Impressionist correlation between style and subject (a fleeting, hasty style for moving and transitory subjects such as changing weather, water, urban strollers, etc.); since the series takes as its subject a fixed and essentially immoveable motif, this correspondence between style and subject matter no longer applies. “Monet’s \textit{Cathedral} series constitutes a radical break with Impressionism...” the author notes, “...The \textit{Cathedral} series cuts Monet’s ties with Impressionism.”\textsuperscript{26} Here Pissarro, like other historians before him (such as Hamilton) has observed that the \textit{Cathedral} series marks a break for Monet from his Impressionist roots. History must look at this series “as something less simple, less straightforward than a merely realistic account of the changes of light on a stone façade.”\textsuperscript{27} Pissarro’s thesis builds around the concept that Monet is not painting the cathedral itself, but rather the \textit{enveloppe}: the air, space, moisture, and atmosphere between himself and the cathedral façade. For him, Monet’s break with Impressionism and shift towards something new is embodied by the artist’s new project to render “what makes reality visible, [while] itself remaining invisible- the air or the \textit{enveloppe}, an invisible filter of light.”\textsuperscript{28} Pissarro’s argument underscores Monet’s irritation with himself and his own belief that what he was attempting was impossible. The artist’s premonitions of failure and anxieties about rendering these

\textsuperscript{25} Pissarro, \textit{Monet’s Cathedral,} 6.

\textsuperscript{26} Pissarro, \textit{Monet’s Cathedral,} 14.

\textsuperscript{27} Pissarro, \textit{Monet’s Cathedral,} 18.

\textsuperscript{28} Pissarro, \textit{Monet’s Cathedral,} 25.
effects and finishing what he had set out to do are powerful circumstances surrounding the production of the *Rouen Cathedral* series, but Pissarro’s focus overlooks the project’s central element of time.

Monet’s obsession with trying to capture the *enveloppe* and its elusive qualities has also lent itself to psychoanalytical interpretations of his projects, particularly in relation to his serial works. Both Levine and Emily Apter assess the artist’s fervor and anxiety surrounding the production and execution of the *Rouen Cathedral* canvases in terms of Freudian psychology. Levine’s psychoanalytic interpretation of Monet’s serial practice investigates what he believes to be the psychoanalytic implications evidenced in Monet’s serial works. He argues that Monet’s series painting are a sort of “repetition compulsion” through which the artist is simultaneously attempting to overthrow his fatherly influences in art (namely Boudin and Corot) and also realize his own unique artistic vision of the world independently of any prior influences.29 The artist’s own acknowledgement and subsequent denial of his artistic influences is extremely consistent with Freudian oedipal theories.30 And Levine points out that, of course, it is impossible for Monet (or any artist) to claim a totally independent vision of the world, when ultimately the very uniqueness of that vision can only stand in within the context of “the prior existence of a symbolic system whose repetitions and reflections one must be taught to know.”31 Levine’s claim is that Monet paints in series, obsessing

29 Steven Z. Levine, “Monet’s Series: Repetition, Obsession,” 66-68.
30 Levine cites a letter to Bazille where Monet compares his own painting to a work by Corot and then tries to distance himself from this fatherly legacy by claiming direct contact with nature through *plein-air* practice. Steven Z. Levine, “Monet’s Series, Repetition, Obsession,” 67.
31 Levine, “Monet’s Series,” 66.
over the same motif, to perfect and manifest his own independent vision; attempts
doomed to failure in a visual world already defined by previous masters with a
deeply rooted hold on Monet’s own eye, whether conscious or subconscious. The
artist’s anxieties and letters full of despair and melodramatics at his inability to
finish his serial studies to his satisfaction are, for Levine, evidence of his
psychoanalytic paradox: the inability to claim a completely uninfluenced visual
imaginary. Although thought-provoking, this argument is highly specific: it pertains
to particular works which were both executed in multiples by Monet and for which
previous examples existed within the history of French painting. It is true that more
than one of Monet’s chosen motifs fit these dual criteria, but not all of his serial
works centered on previously explored motifs. One could also argue that any artist
could as easily struggle with asserting his or her artistic independence, since
learning and perfecting any art form can only be a result of careful study of past
examples. Levine would argue that Monet’s repetitions denote an unnatural
preoccupation with this problem, but Monet was not the first (nor the last) painter
to create multiple views of a motif. Although the desire to proclaim his own
independent and unique vision of the world might have been a contributing factor in
Monet’s serial practice, it is by no means the only or most important part of these
works.

For Apter, Monet’s act of painting the same motifs, compounded by his
repeated reenactment of serial execution, is evidence of the artist’s “love of looking,”
which she equates to Freud’s *scopophilia*. She likens Monet’s *Waterlilies* series and

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gardens at Giverny to Octave Mirbeau’s contemporary pornographic novel *Les Jardin des Supplices*, which details the perverse (and often sexualized) methods of an Oriental torture chamber.\textsuperscript{33} For her the similarities between the layout of Mirbeau’s hierarchical torture garden (much like Dante’s Inferno in its organization) and Monet’s gardens at Giverny are striking. The author did in fact spend time at Giverny as a guest of the artist, and Apter quotes a lengthy description Mirbeau wrote of the plan for his torture garden which could as easily be read as a description of Giverny. Apter claims that “hysterical vision and hypnotic fixation come together in this impression-showered garden.”\textsuperscript{34} Her thesis diagnoses Monet’s *scopophila* as a sort of madness (she cites Jean-Martin Charcot’s neurological experiments with hysterics from French mental asylums who had “a malady of the retina” resulting in changed color perception) and suggests that his Impressionist vision is a form of hysteric affliction and the overindulgence of an ego given over to ‘love of looking.’\textsuperscript{35} Apter’s psychoanalysis is undeniably interesting, particularly her comparisons of Monet and Mirbeau who were in fact contemporaries and friends. However, to dismiss Monet’s distinctive stylistic handling as a mere malady of the eyes (and, furthermore, to suggest all Impressionist vision is a result of such affliction- and therefore that all Impressionist painters are coincidentally hysterics) is to ignore and essentially invalidate his profound contributions to and influence within the history of French painting. His fervor for his work descended at times into an unhealthy obsession, but the artist was a coherent and eloquent painter

\textsuperscript{33} Apter, “Garden of Scopic Perversion,” 95-96.
\textsuperscript{34} Apter, “Garden of Scopic Perversion,” 103.
\textsuperscript{35} Apter, “Garden of Scopic Perversion,” 104.
whose goals were lofty and ambitious. It seems more likely that his anxieties came not from an inner madness that produced defective optical performance or stemmed from sexual inadequacies, but from the impossibly high expectations he had set for himself in his serial projects, particularly with his work in Rouen.

When it comes to the work Monet completed during his time in Rouen, it is the scholarly analyses of Robert Knott and Ronald R. Bernier that most explicitly address the artist’s shifting element of time. Knott was one of the first scholars to recognize the importance of Monet’s changing vision of time incarnate within the Rouen Cathedral series. His work, a 1993 article entitled “Monet’s Cathedrals: A Point in Time,” makes its subject the particular treatment of time within the Cathedral canvases, where Knott believes the eternal nature of the moment signifies “that more mysterious realm of ‘spiritual adventure.’”\(^{36}\) Knott’s contributions to the understanding of Monet’s changing treatment of time within the series are entirely new to the scholarship on Monet. He distinguishes between the Impressionist definition of time, which he describes as “time: the moment captured in light,” and the conception of time as it exists within Monet’s Rouen Cathedrals, “a more enduring sense of time... a more complex layering of the meaning of time in nature and in his work.”\(^{37}\) According to Knott, Monet’s extension of time lay in his “transformation and unification of the paintings in the reworking stage,” where the artist’s own perception and experience of interacting with the cathedral façade over time precipitates a meditation on the “mystery of his unification of substance and


light.” Though he builds his thesis around the artist’s distinct shift towards a more enduring pictorial moment, Knott’s ultimate concerns lie in the abstract realm of experience, perception, and subjectivity in terms of the mystery and eternal nature of the religious monument.

In his 2007 book *Monument, Moment and Memory: Monet’s Cathedral in Fin de Siècle France*, Bernier also stakes his argument in terms of the artist’s evolving treatment of time. Of the Durand-Ruel *Cathedral* exhibition in 1895, Bernier states, “Monet placed the notion of the painting of transience in the radically different and difficult context of the immutable façade of a Gothic cathedral.” Bernier argues that Monet’s typical Impressionist vocabulary is one that deals in transience and, therefore, implies a rapid execution. With the *Cathedrals*, Bernier (much like Pissarro) notes that the fixed motif no longer matches the fleeting qualities of sun and shade the artist sought to render. What, then, is Monet’s intent in taking an immovable object for his studies of atmosphere and light?

For Bernier, the answer is multidimensional; the artist’s new project in the *Rouen Cathedral* series deals with perception through time (or duration versus the instantaneous), but also with what Bernier calls “the temporality involved in the real historical character of the motif itself, a sense of the persistence of memory [sic] embedded in the medieval edifice and the significations of heritage and nation in its representation.” According to the scholar, the painter’s treatment of time in the *Cathedral* series – namely, as duration rather than as a momentary impression – is

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manifested dually in both the choice of motif and also in the historical past embedded in and embodied by the edifice of the monument itself. The cathedral marks a new thematic choice for Monet’s serial work because it is a fixed motif relatively unaffected by nature and its changes and therefore the impetus for an eternal type of painting.

But Bernier’s claim goes further: as a work of man, the cathedral is inextricably bound up in the history of man and his collective past memory, which is ever present, but by definition always an extension of the past moment. The author grounds this complex reading of time in the Cathedral series with discussions on Monet’s critics, ideas about viewing and perception, and contemporary writings on both art and changing notions of time, resulting in an insightful and comprehensive interpretation of Rouen Cathedral’s very specific relationship to pictorial time. But Bernier’s reading of time is extremely multilayered and therefore more ambiguous. Rather than simply assert that the ‘instant’ is lengthened to extremes, or even altogether absent, within the Cathedral series Bernier argues that Monet’s new ‘eternal’ time is informed by written criticisms, architectural and religious histories, modern philosophy, and the contemporary scientific investigations of optics, perception, and duration. Although these influences could have impacted Monet’s work, it is unlikely the artist would have been aware of each of these factors to the extent that Bernier investigates them in his book. It seems more likely that changing attitudes were prevalent between all disciplines at the end of the century, and that Monet’s work and its new definition of pictorial time were physical
examples of these evolving concepts found in multidisciplinary arts and writings of the same era.

There have been many historical interpretations of Monet’s *Rouen Cathedral* project since its debut as a formal series in 1895. Though scholars have offered various lenses for analysis, it is true that “almost all agree that they [the *Cathedral* paintings] mark a crucial turning point in [Monet’s] career, and many attempts have been made to categorize and define this new direction.” Lenses of scholarly analysis have ranged from contextual to psychoanalytic; from classifying the canvases as an extension of Impressionism to more Post-Impressionist to a clear break with any Impressionist roots; and from focusing on the motif itself – the Gothic monument – to insisting that Monet’s immaterial and abstract subject is instead the air and atmosphere between his own eye and the cathedral’s façade. Each of these interpretations holds some merit and many are not mutually exclusive. As I shall demonstrate, it is, however, the critical element of time that holds the key to understanding the mammoth shift and extraordinary accomplishment Monet achieved through the *Rouen Cathedral* series. As both Knott and Bernier observe, the time contained within a *Rouen Cathedral* canvas is markedly different from that contained within the individual *Poplars or Grainstacks*. The *Cathedrals* are not pictorial instants, and they are not fleeting impressions. With *Rouen Cathedral*, Monet abandons the instantaneous for a more eternal

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painting based in duration and complexity, a new painting that would forever proclaim his status as “more than a painter of mere sensations.”

**Seriality and the Road to Rouen**

As has now been established, the amount of scholarly attention and historical criticism given to Monet’s *Rouen Cathedral* project distinguishes it as one of the most significant endeavors of the artist’s long and prestigious career. The *Cathedral* works, however, cannot be viewed as an isolated moment and must instead be situated contextually within the painter’s larger body of work. Monet began his career as an Impressionist in the 1870s with the birth of the movement, and he gradually explored multiple canvases of his motifs before progressing to his own uniquely formulated serial practice in the 1890s. From the *Grainstacks* through the *Poplars* and, most importantly, the *Cathedrals*, the artist evolved and perfected both his execution and formal structuring of his series works. It is also important to note that his serial practice was not static, nor was it entirely homogeneous. As this thesis argues, *Rouen Cathedral* represents a momentous shift in Monet’s career, but also in his methods of seriality. As the artist honed his skills in painting series, his ideas and his artistic intent evolved as well.

Within the history of art, there are, of course, precursors to Monet’s formal serial practice. Perhaps most importantly, the Barbizon painters were known to practice landscape motifs by painting multiple works of the same sites. Working in the French forest, these artists provide a European precedent for Monet’s later,

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more systematic method of working in series. Also noteworthy is the strong influence of Japanese landscape prints (Figures 7-8), which often came in sets (such as Hokusai’s *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* dating to the 1820s and 1830s). Monet was an “avid collector of Japanese art,” and the walls of his home in Giverny were crowded with such prints (Figure 9); he “must have had occasion to see landscape prints as sets.”  

Like the Barbizon painters, the Japanese printmakers often produced their sets as meditations around one particular theme or motif, approached in each individual piece from varying perspectives and vantage points. This method and its repetitions are highly relevant to Monet’s own practices, particularly in reference to the Cathedral works.

Finally, the relatively contemporary invention of photography would have also contributed to the Impressionist landscape painters’ sensibilities. Seiberling discusses this influence briefly in her analysis of Monet’s evolution to seriality, particularly in her observation that, “there was a shift in the mid-nineteenth century away from the single and static presentation. Processes like photography and printmaking multiplied the variants of one scene and provided a collection of views, no one of which was final.”  

Art historians have often noted the close relationship between photography and Impressionism, which emerged as visual phenomena almost simultaneously. The ‘snapshot aesthetic’ of Impressionist paintings, combined with the intensive interest in light and atmosphere, make it a close cousin

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of its more technologically driven counterpart. Furthermore, the possibility of multiple exposures allowed by the camera directly parallels Monet’s approach in his early Impressionist series.

Each of these graphic predecessors would almost certainly have had an impact on Monet’s serial works, whether the artist himself was conscious of the influence or not. However, the loosely shared characteristics of Barbizon paintings of the same motif, Japanese landscape sets, and early photographic landscape studies hardly compare to the cohesiveness and structured unity of Monet’s formal series. The *Grainstacks, Poplars, and Cathedrals* pioneer a more defined and methodical type of series work than any precedent within the aesthetic milieu of nineteenth century French painting. Their production, execution, and formal aesthetics were unique to Monet, and it was the dynamic combination of his serial formula, painterly style, and skill in rendering the transitory effects of nature that earned him an enduring reputation.

By the time he had begun the *Rouen Cathedral* paintings Monet was well rehearsed in the art of the series. He had already completed his *Gare Sainte Lazare* paintings, as well as the *Haystacks* and *Poplars* series. The artist had evolved from his early interest in multiple views of a singular motif to a systematized approach to seriality. The *Grainstacks, Poplars, and Rouen Cathedral* canvases evidence a conscious decision to treat the same theme in many paintings, but additionally they

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46 “The feeling in the air was that life was passing by, the crowded moments must be brief, so the painter became intent on catching the fugitive impression, the fleeting moment of a gesture, of light at a certain hour, all of which was much in evidence in the photographs of the day.” Lillian Myers Pear, *Relationship between Photography and French Impressionism in the Nineteenth Century*, 50.

feature strong relationships between the individual works through a limited number of fixed viewpoints and compositional formats.\textsuperscript{48} The unity of these series is reinforced by the fact that the multiple canvases were thought of by the artist as a whole; the opening exhibitions of each grouping meant Monet was particularly conscious of overall harmony during the execution of the works.

The inaugural exhibition for Monet's serial work took place at Paul Durand-Ruel's gallery in 1891 with the \textit{Grainstacks}.\textsuperscript{49} Although the \textit{Gare Sainte Lazare} paintings pre-date this project, historically the train station paintings have not usually been recognized or treated as a formal series, but rather as a loose grouping of paintings sharing a common motif.\textsuperscript{50} It was with the \textit{Grainstacks} that Monet, for the first time, consciously asserted himself as a serial artist. These canvases are markedly different from the later \textit{Rouen Cathedral} works. The most pronounced and significant of these differences were Monet’s method and pace of execution while completing the \textit{Grainstacks} during 1890. The artist worked feverishly and became increasingly vexed with his inability to work quickly enough to capture the delicate qualities of light and weather. In his study of Monet in the year 1890, John House speaks of Monet's "need to start new painting after new painting to keep up

\textsuperscript{48} Seiberling, \textit{Monet's Series}, 4-5.
\textsuperscript{49} House, "Monet in 1890," 129.
\textsuperscript{50} Seiberling, \textit{Monet's Series}, 47-49. The author elaborates on the categorization of the \textit{Gare Sainte Lazare} paintings, ultimately choosing to categorize them as a "sequence" rather than a series: "[Monet] had decided in advance to paint the station and dealt in all the works with the common pictorial theme of smoke. But the paintings evolve in composition and treatment and do not form a unified group. They are more closely related to the sequences which the artist would make at Varengeville Etretat, Belle Isle and other sites he depicted in the eighties than they are to the Haystacks [sic] and other series of the nineties." Seiberling, \textit{Monet's Series}, 48. She goes on to note that the palettes of the individual canvases are not cohesively uniform and that the works were not exhibited together as a series by the artist (they were not numbered together sequentially nor reviewed by the critics as a unit).
with the rapidly changing light on the stacks, and Blanche Hoschedé’s repeated expeditions back to the house to fetch him a fresh canvas." Due to his frustration with the constantly shifting conditions, Monet began a new canvas each time he felt that atmospheric effects had slightly altered. He returned to the abandoned paintings only when he felt that the conditions produced a satisfyingly similar effect to those under which he had begun. This resulted in many canvases of *Grainstacks*. After their completion, Monet shrewdly decided to exhibit these as a deliberate ensemble at the gallery of Durand-Ruel. The artist insisted that these paintings be shown exclusively as part of a one-man show and not as part of a larger group exhibition. This was the moment when Monet began his break with fellow Impressionists, and subsequently he would “clearly... mov[e] away from presenting a painting as if it were a passive record of an impression.” Even this earliest series represented an evolution in the artist’s practice, one that constituted the end of Monet’s Impressionist work.

This movement away from Impressionism and its focus on the instant continued with the artist’s subsequent exercises in seriality. After the *Grainstacks* debuted to great critical and commercial success, Monet’s next serial undertaking was the *Poplars*. Seiberling articulates this series as a continued development in

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51 House, "Monet in 1890," 128. Blanche is, of course, the daughter of Alice Hoschedé, who eventually became Monet’s second wife after the death of Camille Monet.
52 Klein, “Dispersal of Modernist Series,” 124. House provides further details of the *Grainstacks* show at Durand-Ruel’s gallery, noting that fifteen *Grainstacks* were shown as the “centerpiece” of the show, among other selected Monet works. Klein, *Dispersal of Modernist Series*, 129.
54 Klein, “Dispersal of Modernist Series,” 126-128.
the artist’s serial work that expands on the *Grainstacks* in its departure from the close natural observation of Impressionism. She notes,

As Monet moved toward compositions with assertive shapes and worked longer on his paintings, the individual brushstroke lost expressive significance and would become, in later works, subsumed into an overall facture where the very overlapping and intermingling of colors created its own effect. The *Poplars* differ from the *Haystacks* in that the format provided a ready-made framework within which the painting could be contained. The composition is not only one of strong shapes, it is one in which the artist emphasized the grid of trees and bank and the play of curves against it [...] in the *Poplars* he played more deliberately with the integration of the whole as surface design.55

These careful observations highlight the artist’s shifting concerns as he became more and more preoccupied with the concept of working in series, and therefore disinterested in his earlier commitment to Impressionism and its focus on careful natural observation. Seiberling’s quote includes two important assertions about Monet’s serial progression embedded in the *Poplars*. The first is that overall composition, structure, and visual harmony, or “the integration of the whole as surface design,” had quickly become the artist’s main priority. What mattered was no longer the frantic recording of passing optical sensations, denoted by so many hastily sketched and wholly independent brushstrokes. Instead, the new goal was one of cohesion and a balanced color palette to create harmonious, unified optical sensations for the viewer. Secondly, this scholarly account discusses Monet’s developing concern for composition and design. The undulating S-curve, the exemplary signature of the *Poplars*, as well as the rhythmic verticality of the tree trunks marks an almost geometric structuring of form and space. Each of these

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pieces of visual evidence mark Monet’s shift away from obsessing over exacting replications of nature’s effects. Rather than continue to churn out canvases in which the everyday, elusive effects of weather and light were arrested with perfect accuracy, Monet, who had already mastered such techniques by this point in his career, was investigating more abstract and ambitious methods of painting through his serial works.

These trends would only continue with the *Rouen Cathedral* canvases, which are thickly encrusted with paint and arguably the most tactile of all the artist’s series (Figures 10-12). Monet’s increased attention to composition and format, evidenced in the *Poplars*, is certainly present in the *Cathedral* works. His cropping of the façade is so close that it leaves almost no room for the surrounding environment, save for a few glimpses of sky near the top and left edges of the canvases. This tightened view of his motif was partly out of necessity: the artist was painting from a facing window rather than in true *plein-air* practice; however the close framing of the series also served to limit the spatial and temporal aspects of the painting. The encounter between the painter and the façade (and, subsequently, the viewer and the façade) is almost confrontational because the cathedral hovers at the forefront of the picture plane. The lack of specificity in the treatment of the façade’s sculptural details, combined with the almost non-existent surroundings, produces an effect of an immutable element outside both place and time. And, as with the *Poplars* before it and the *Waterlilies* after, Monet’s *Rouen Cathedral* marks a two-fold transition in terms of lengthened time: the temporal aspects of the picture are no longer fleeting and instantaneous, and neither is the painter’s execution of
the paintings. In direct opposition to the anxious and hurried realization of the *Grainstacks*, the *Cathedrals* were produced under methodical circumstances, over a more extended period of time, and with repeated attempts at reworking and finishing the canvases.

Monet began painting *Rouen Cathedral* in February 1892. During this initial trip, the artist worked from a shop window across from the cathedral. His desire to set up a makeshift studio as his base of operations suggests that Monet intended a rather lengthy stay in Rouen entirely based around his need to paint the cathedral. The planning was deliberate and the studio arrangements made in advance.\(^{56}\) Pissarro, among other scholars, argues against this claim, believing instead that Monet did not arrive in Rouen intending to paint the cathedral. According to Pissarro, the existence of three paintings executed in Rouen in 1892 before the artist began his formal series on the façade is evidence that the artist was casting about for a subject after his arrival rather than having settled on it in advance. Pissarro claims that these canvases, including *Vue de Rouen, Depuis La Côte Sainte-Catherine* (Figure 13), “cast a serious doubt on the hypothesis that Monet had already decided to tackle the cathedral before he set off for Rouen.”\(^{57}\) However, Seriberling’s research details arrangements made between Monet and “an influential friend and patron from Rouen” to secure the artist a place where he could paint the cathedral inside and away from the elements.\(^{58}\) This prior request by Monet through his acquaintance in Rouen makes it more likely that the less precise views of the

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\(^{56}\) Seiberling, *Monet’s Series*, 141.

\(^{57}\) Pissarro, *Monet’s Cathedral*, 12.

\(^{58}\) Seiberling, *Monet’s Series*, 141.
cathedral Pissarro mentions are simply paintings made while in the city that do not necessarily relate directly to the execution of the series itself. In fact, in 1879 Monet had painted another cathedral, *Vétheuil dans le brouillard*; in an interview with Thiébault-Sisson published in *Le Temps* on January 8th, 1927 (just after Monet’s death) the artist had mentioned that it was this canvas that gave him the idea for series paintings. The artist remembered watching the sun

only slowly dissolve the mists which clung to all the rough surfaces of the building, and which cloaked the time-gilded stonework with an envelope of atmosphere. This observation was the starting point of my cathedral series. I told myself that it would not be trivial to study a single motif at different times of the day and to note the effects of light which modified in such a noticeable way, from one hour to the next, the appearance and coloring of the building. I didn’t at once put the idea into practice, but it gradually developed in my mind."

The artist’s conception of the series certainly predates his trip to Rouen; it is therefore extremely probable that his plans to paint the façade were made in advance of his arrival in Rouen.

By this time Monet had further refined and formalized his serial process, and so the conceptualization of the *Rouen Cathedral* paintings was not a spontaneous experience of simply erecting an easel out-of-doors in front of a variable landscape motif. His artistic aims were loftier, and thus his planning and procedure had become more systematic. Significantly, his temporary studio also meant that Monet was, as previously mentioned, committed to a singular view of the façade entirely dictated by the frame of the window. This solitary viewpoint was revolutionary; never before had Monet produced an entire serial cycle with such nearly identical cropping. The resulting compositional unity greatly enhanced the overall

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cohesiveness of the ensemble. It also served Monet’s new artist interests by visually reinforcing the cathedral’s enduring and unchanging nature.

His first trip to Rouen ended in May 1892, but Monet was so dissatisfied with his work that he already intended to return. He made a second pilgrimage to Rouen in February 1893. This trip proved more difficult than the first; Monet’s stay was shorter and he was not allowed to work from the same shop window as before because his presence had apparently been disruptive to business. Instead, he was forced to work from two different addresses in an attempt to approximate his original view of the cathedral. Pissarro describes Monet’s various locations and working format in great detail. His analysis lists the Lévy address (where Monet was allowed to work in 1892) as 23 Place de la Cathédrale. In 1893, on the other hand, the artist most likely worked from 31 Place de la Cathédrale, the home of Jean Louvet, and also from 81 Rue du Grand-Pont, the home of Edouard Mauquit. Working long hours, Monet relentlessly struggled to realize his project to his own satisfaction during this second trip. His letters home are full of self-criticism and doubt, as well as constant frustration with the weather. It is through a careful and thorough reading of these letters between Monet and Alice that Pissarro attempts to reconstruct the artist’s typical workday in Rouen:

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60 Seiberling, Monet’s Series, 146. The author goes on to suggest that at least a dozen of the final twenty canvases shown in the Durand-Ruel exhibition were begun during the initial period of working in Rouen from February to May of 1892. Seiberling, Monet’s Series, 147.


62 Pissarro, Monet’s Cathedral, 16. The author also believes that the Louvet home may have been the initial working location, even predating the Lévy shop. His explanation is that Monet moved from the Louvet home while the floors were being refinished, relocating to the Lévy property for the remainder of his stay in 1892. In 1893, Monet was allowed to both resume work at the Louvet house and take up a second room in the Mauquit home, though the most frontal views would have been executed chez Louvet. It should be noted that much of Pissarro’s evidence comes from an in-depth analysis of Monet’s own letters to Alice Hoschedé.
We now know that Monet’s working day lasted from 8am (letter of 8 March) until 6 or 6:30pm (letter of 18 March). Assuming that Monet took an hour for lunch, it meant that he worked steadily for 10 hours. Another crucial detail is found in the 18 March letter: “I worked like a slave,” he wrote, “today nine canvases.” This implies that Monet was at that time working on one canvas per hour, approximately.63

When he left Rouen once more for his permanent studio in Giverny, he had in his possession “perhaps more than thirty canvases,” (though only twenty would be shown at the Durand-Ruel exhibition), and despite his second trip Monet still considered each of these to be unfinished.64

The nature of painting a series was problematic for the artist: although Monet’s intent with the _Rouen Cathedral_ works was always to debut them as a formal series, it was also important that each canvas function as its own independent painting. Inevitably, the artist knew, the canvases would be split up and sold individually by his dealer to maximize profits. This did not, however, deter Monet from bringing the series to a more homogeneous finish once he returned to his permanent studio. In Rouen, his workspaces had been temporary and cramped. Back in his Giverny studio (Figure 14) the artist had enough room to spread out the paintings and view them together as an ensemble. Still unhappy with his efforts, in Giverny Monet continued to vigorously rework each canvas. This level of intensity and duration of the studio reworking, most principally in its intent of overall pictorial harmony, plainly demonstrate the artist’s continued distance from Impressionism. Monet had turned his back on the strict reproduction of the

63 Pissarro, _Monet’s Cathedral_, 17. Pissarro later cites another letter dated to March 29th, 1893 in which Monet describes working on 14 canvases in a single day, exclaiming “never has such a thing happened to me.” Pissarro, _Monet’s Cathedral_, 20.
64 Seiberling, _Monet’s Series_, 153-154.
atmospheric effects he had observed during his trips. Rather than limit *Rouen Cathedral* in such a way, Monet’s greatest concerns were now establishing consistent relationships among the canvases and striving for an impressive overall quality of surface detail and compositional structure. These aims were only achieved to his satisfaction through his lengthy studio repainting. Again and again Monet wrote to Durand-Ruel, diminishing his own efforts and postponing his exhibition opening. Only when he believed that the *Cathedrals* were an aesthetically unified group did Monet finally allow them to be exhibited.

Durand-Ruel opened his gallery doors for the *Rouen Cathedral* show in May 1895. The exhibit, a one-man show consisting of fifty paintings overall (twenty of which were *Rouen Cathedral* canvases selected by the artist), was a highly anticipated event. By this time in his career Monet was a well-known and respected painter. Durand-Ruel, who had previously exhibited serial works by the artist, understood and appreciated the economic draw of the series well. By solely exhibiting works that resembled one another he stood to sell more paintings; if a canvas desired by a collector was already spoken for there were nineteen similar

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65 This anxiety and self-doubt on the part of Monet did have a history. Levine notes the artist’s insecurities while discussing his earlier paintings of Étretat, during which “Monet [was] forever writing to Durand-Ruel about the repetitive operations in which his endlessly deferred paintings [were] enmeshed.” Levine, “Monet’s Series,” 70-71. In a letter dated 21 May, 1894 Monet wrote to Durand-Ruel: “I rather fear you’re angry with me for having given up my exhibition and most particularly for having given you so little warning,” referring to another delay in the opening for the *Cathedrals*. Quoted in Richard Kendall, *Monet by Himself: Paintings, Drawings, Pastels, Letters*, 128.  
66 The show had originally been scheduled for the spring of 1893, but Monet had delayed the opening due to his inability to finish the paintings to his own satisfaction. Seiberling, *Monet’s Series*, 165.  
works hanging by its side. Some critics of Monet’s series practice have suggested that the easy marketability of such a format was the artist’s primary motive.\textsuperscript{68} This narrow reading, however, loses validity in the face of the amount of time and effort Monet spent agonizing over the \textit{Rouen Cathedral} canvases. If maximizing profits had been his goal, Monet would have been concerned with the sheer quantity of canvases rather than their quality (here it is notable that he only exhibited a limited number of \textit{Cathedral} paintings in 1895, though he had many more sitting in his studio). Monet was already financially secure in 1895.\textsuperscript{69} The goal of his exhibit was not merely profit, but rather a cohesive statement about his evolving artistic vision. These paintings ultimately divorced Monet from the goals of his earlier Impressionist imagery. But even after the initial exhibition, Monet was still not entirely satisfied with the paintings. So great was his concern with the this series that after the exhibition was over, “he saw a need to ‘re-individualize’ some of the canvases, retouching them so that they would stand better on their own” once they had been sold.\textsuperscript{70} Even after its Parisian premiere, Monet was still obsessed with perfecting his monumental series.\textsuperscript{71}

Despite the artist’s own insecurities about the quality and enduring power of his \textit{Cathedrals}, the exhibit was largely hailed as a critical success by reviewers and fellow painters alike. Camille Pissarro wrote breathlessly to his son Lucien, who was traveling during the exhibition dates, and urged him to return to Paris in order

\textsuperscript{68} Klein, “Dispersal of Modernist Series,” 126.
\textsuperscript{69} Seiberling, \textit{Monet’s Series}, 151-152.
\textsuperscript{70} Klein, “Dispersal of Modernist Series,” 125.
\textsuperscript{71} In fact, Seiberling notes that the artist held on to some of the \textit{Rouen Cathedral} canvases until after 1900, and that he continued to revisit and retouch the works even after the turn of the century. Seiberling, \textit{Monet’s Series}, 164.
to see the works together before they would lamentably be dispersed to various collectors. Clemenceau urged then president Félix Faure to purchase the entire lot of works immediately in the name of the French state, a call that went entirely unheard but which emphasized the importance the critic recognized in Monet’s landmark achievement. As previously mentioned, it was Clemenceau and Geffroy who most eloquently and loudly lauded Monet’s praises for the Cathedral works, but not all the critiques were unanimous. There was a school of critics who believed Monet had gone too far, that his “palette and brush should have been more reserved and subdued.” Some, like André Michel, even went so far as to condemn the extravagance and exaggerated surface textures, crying “M. Monet edifies his experiments, or rather, more precisely, he abandons himself to his ecstatic lyricism in these brilliant and arbitrary evocations.” Michel’s tone and word choice darkly suggest that the artist suffered some fit or loss of will, overpowered by the pleasure of paint and optical sensations (here we are reminded of Apter’s recent psychoanalytic analysis of Giverny’s gardens). But one thing is certain: whatever the opinions of the reviewers, the show was in fact a commercial success. “It is a well-remarked on aspect of the Monet legend,” Bernier writes, “that Durand-Ruel was astonished by the exorbitant prices the painter was demanding for each Cathedral canvas.” Even at the artist’s insisted sale point of 15,000 francs apiece,

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72 Pissarro, Monet’s Cathedral, 32.
73 Quoted in Charles F. Stuckey, Monet: A Retrospective, 180.
74 Camille Mauclair. Quoted in Pissarro, Monet’s Cathedral, 28.
75 Pissarro, Monet’s Cathedral, 28.
however, three of the *Rouen Cathedral* paintings were sold to a private collector even before they reached Durand-Ruel’s gallery walls.\textsuperscript{76}

After his project in Rouen, the artist would go on to paint multiple series (including works abroad such as views of the Thames and of Venice) but his final series of work was the extensive observation of his gardens at Giverny. The *Waterlilies* phase, painted from observations of the artist’s own water garden at Giverny (what Seiberling calls “his last motif”), is the only other of Monet’s series to rival the *Cathedrals* in their denseness of surface texture and heavy impasto.\textsuperscript{77}

Working himself half-blind in his fervor, the artist continued his investigations of surface, overall effect, and paintings outside of time and thus not compatible with the laws of the Impressionist instant. His concern for design and his tightened cropping would continue throughout the series, until the flowers themselves almost entirely disintegrated into daubs of paint whose granules of textured pigment are palpably and consciously left visible. These paintings, the terminal canvases of the artist’s long and prolific career, are an extension the new kind of imagery that Monet had first established with *Rouen Cathedral*.

**Materiality in Monet's *Cathedrals***

Each of Monet’s *Rouen Cathedral* canvases is a time capsule in itself. The slow build up of layer upon layer of thick impasto is testament to the many hours

\textsuperscript{76} Bernier, *Monument, Moment and Memory*, 45. As a point of comparison for the high prices demanded by the artist, the author notes that Monet had purchased the whole of his estate at Giverny only five years prior to the opening of the *Cathedrals* exhibition at a total price of 20,000 francs. Bernier, *Monument, Moment and Memory*, 46.

\textsuperscript{77} Seiberling, *Monet’s Series*, 217.
the artist spent with each painting. The surfaces are wrought; purposely built into a tactile topography of peaks and valleys (see Figure 12). This thick, encrusted texture is unique to the Rouen Cathedral paintings. No previous Monet series had involved such a heavy and repeated layering of strokes. During his numerous reworking sessions, Monet used heavy applications of paint to enhance aesthetic effects, employing white for harsh sunlight on the façade (Figure 15) and painterly dabs of washed complementary colors like blues and soft oranges when he wanted to veil the cathedral in mist (Figure 16-17). By adding touches of complementary colors, the artist was able to “heighten the descriptive and decorative capacities of pigment” while simultaneously achieving serial unity in their surface qualities.  

In the Rouen Cathedral series the physical presence of Monet’s paint is undeniable. The artist was, in fact, directly preoccupied with creating a granular, raised texture. Part of his preparation for the Cathedral series was to squeeze his colors onto blotting paper before applying them to the canvas in order to remove as much oil from the mixture as possible. This dryer, more putty-like paint not only created more saturated hues, it also allowed Monet’s brush to effectively sculpt with paint on his two-dimensional canvases. The result was a multiplicity of surfaces furrowed with irregular applications of paint. The purposeful and innumerable brushstrokes provide a record of Monet’s working process. With each application he increased the physical presence of his canvas, emphasizing and preserving both the solid weight of the paint and the cathedral itself.

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78 Charles F. Stuckey, “Monet’s Art,” 117.
79 Seiberling, Monet’s Series, 164.
The three *Cathedral* canvases housed in the Musée d’Orsay (Figures 18-20) demonstrate the intensely textural surface qualities of the series as a whole. Of these three works, the early morning canvas, *Harmonie blanche*, has the most coarse, raised surface. The view is not as directly frontal as many of the other *Cathedral* canvases, and the tower at the right of the façade (the *tour de Beurre*) is not visible. The left edge of the canvas shows small houses attached to the base of the tower at the left (the *tour Saint-Romain* or *tour d’Albane*) which have since been demolished. There are unusually large chunks of sky visible, both above the central nave’s portal and above the squat dwellings to the left of the *tour Saint-Romain*. To either side of the left tower, tiny, gray-blue V-shaped dashes represent early morning flocks of pigeons circling the building. The palette is an extremely washed, pastel one: warm tones of peaches and pinks illuminate the left tower as the sun rises over the facing rooftops. In contrast, the central tower is composed of deep lavenders and more vibrant blues, as it still remains in shadow awaiting the glow of the sun as it slowly crests over the row of buildings opposite. Despite Monet’s indistinct handling, the edges of the cathedral itself are clearly delineated against the creamy, beige background. The surface is noticeably built up with paint; particularly at the vertex of the angle where the *tour Saint-Romain* meets the central

80 The museum’s permanent collection includes five of the *Rouen Cathedral* canvases. During the drafting and completion of this paper, however, only three were on display in the Impressionist galleries, including *La Cathédrale du Rouen, La portail et la Tour d’Albane, soleil du matin* (also titled *Harmonie blanche*); *La Cathédrale du Rouen, Le portail soleil matinal* (also titled *Harmonie bleue*); and *La Cathédrale du Rouen, le portail temps gris* (also titled *Harmonie gris*).

81 Pissarro, *Monet’s Cathedral*, 19. In his lengthy analysis of Monet’s working process, Pissarro notes that the canvases with views of the houses then attached to the *tour Saint-Romain* were most likely executed at the Mauquit shop during Monet’s second trip in 1893. Since he was not allowed to use the Lévy location, the artist approximated his original viewpoint of the cathedral from just across the Rue Grand-Pont and “slightly further down to the right,” which would explain the angled cropping of the composition and the omission of the *tour de Beurre*.
tower. More of the building’s extensive sculptural details are visible above the central doorway; the doors are warm and clearly visible, with no real shadows to cloud them in the early morning light. There are also small touches of white across the cathedral’s surface, serving as highlights representing the sun’s direct morning rays bouncing off the ancient stone. The most striking feature of the canvas is Monet’s masterful execution of the golden light on the bluish façade in the first moments of dawn.

The second canvas hanging in the Orsay, *Harmonie bleue*, is slightly smaller than its fellows but is one of the most frequently reproduced, famous versions of Monet’s cathedral.\(^82\) This composition is essentially frontal, and includes a portion of the right tower, while the left edge of the painting bisects the left tower. The view of the sky is much more limited than in *Harmonie blanche*; only a glimpse of muddied gray-blue is framed between the towers at the top center edge of the canvas. The composition seems a bit more squat since the upper edge of the painting cuts off all three towers before their natural height. Like *Harmonie blanche*, this canvas is signed and dated 1894 (an indication that it was included in the Durand-Ruel opening).\(^83\) And in each painting, very little of the ground in front of the building can be seen; instead the form of the façade seems to rise up, as if it is

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\(^82\) It is here important to note that the *Rouen Cathedral* series has been both heavily and poorly reproduced since its debut. The variations in shading, palette, tone and overall color of the original canvases span an extraordinarily wide range, but this spread has been made larger throughout history as the same singular canvases have been reproduced with alarmingly different qualities. As an example I have included a small appendix (Appendix A) with four different reproductions of the only *Rouen Cathedral* canvas currently owned by the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rouen; each of these reproductions gives a vastly different impression of the painting’s actual, true color values.

\(^83\) Monet’s relative and informal dating has already been discussed, but the inconsistencies are made visible in *Harmonie blanche*, which is signed and dated at the lower left corner, and *Harmonie bleue*, where the signature and date are located instead at the lower right.
not rooted to the ground or as if its shimmering surface, rendered in the softest
touches of the brush, were a heat mirage with no real weight or substance. In
*Harmonie bleue*, greys, blues, and soft hues of purple dominate the palette. The
central portal and its halo of archivolts shimmer in a dull orange, like the
smoldering embers of a fire at the structure’s base. The central doorway, and in fact
the aisle portals to either side, are much less distinct than in *Harmonie blanche*,
instead hidden in shadow and left to dissolve into shallow caverns of oranges,
greens, blues, mauves, and purples. The touches of paint seem to melt the imposing
façade into a much less substantial form. The canvas has no real sense of depth. Its
surface is again built up into a textured presence, though not so dramatically as in
*Harmonie blanche*.

The final canvas on exhibition at the Paris museum, titled *Harmonie gris*,
shares its dimensions with *Harmonie blanche* and is also signed in the lower left
corner, but its composition and angle of vision are characteristics shared with
*Harmonie bleue*. There are once again no buildings or sky visible at the left edge of
the frame, and very little of the ground before the façade is included. The palette of
this particular canvas, however, like all the lighter grey pieces, reveals much more of
the sculptural ornamentation so characteristic of a Gothic cathedral than either
*Harmonie blanche* or *Harmonie bleue*. The nuances of the central portal and the

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84 As it is one of the most popularized of the Cathedral series, it is likely that this painting has been
hung vertically longer and more frequently than *Harmonie blanche*. This would explain the more
eroded surface texture, as Monet himself observed within his lifetime that gravity meant the
topographical surfaces of his paintings would diminish more quickly when they were hung than
when they were stored flat in boxes. In her *Reminiscences of Claude Monet*, author Lilla Cabot Perry
recalls Monet’s concern with the preservation of the texture of his layered paint. She remembers an
episode in his studio where Monet compared a *Rouen Cathedral* that had been stored in a box since
its execution and one that had been hung vertically for two or three years to show his “realiz[ation]
that his impasto would flatten with time.” Quoted in Seiberling, *Monet’s Series*, 164.
tracery are especially pronounced. The painter here employed hues of light greys, alternated with areas of darker greys mixed with tones of blues and purples. Even the cream tones of *Harmonie gris* are tinged with steely blues and cool violets and amethysts. All three portals are visible, mixtures of warm orange subdued by large summary strokes of blues. The suggestion of the crowning archivolts is extremely subtle. The rose window, a flat void behind the elongated central pediment, is made up of dappled purples, blues, mauves, and greys. The sky above the monument is diminished, but ominously clouded. This is the cathedral in bad weather, *en temps gris*, veiled by the moisture and threat of an impending storm. We know from his letters to Alice that Monet was often plagued by foul weather during his stays in Rouen; this canvas is evidence of his surrender to all manner of conditions during his fanatic commitment to the *Rouen Cathedral* project.\(^85\) It is most probably in deference to the fog that this canvas has much softer edges and contours, enhancing the ethereal effect that the building seems to dissipate into the mists. *Harmonie gris* has blurred edges as well as a less pronounced surface texture; it almost totally lacks the pronounced granular impact of *Harmonie blanche*.

After his frustration with the unpredictable changes in his traditional landscape motifs (like the *Grainstacks*) it follows that Monet elected to paint the cathedral, since its “motif was essentially uniform,” and thus it was not as vulnerable

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\(^{85}\) Pissarro, *Monet's Cathedral*, 17. Pissarro further elaborates based on one of the artist’s early letters to Durand-Ruel from his first trip (dated March 9\(^{th}\), 1892), deducing that “Monet is disturbed by the bad weather, and even proposes ‘to take advantage of it and to go and spend a day in Giverny.’ This seems to indicate that in this early stage of his series, Monet did not care to paint the cathedral under the effects of poor weather conditions.” These *temps gris* paintings, then, come from later in 1892 and from the second trip in 1893.
to change “of shape, texture, and local color.” A symbol of Gothic France, the cathedral provided an example of enduring French aesthetics. In the scholarship surrounding the *Rouen Cathedral* canvases, much has been made of Monet’s selection of a Gothic monument. Pissarro devotes an entire sub-section of his study of the *Cathedral* series to “The Significance of the Gothic.” The author cites his own famous artist-ancestor’s affinity for the Gothic, tracing Camille Pissarro’s interest in the subject through letters to his son Lucien and suggesting that Monet’s choice of motif evidences a parallel preoccupation with the religious style. For the scholar, the connection between Monet’s series and the Gothic lies in the idea that “for both the Gothic architect and the Impressionist painter, reality only stands as a pretext to express something else – something invisible. In the former case, it is the principles of creation – God and his word; in the latter, it is what makes reality visible, which itself remains invisible – the air or the enveloppe, and invisible filter of light.” It is of course true that the nooks and crannies provided by the Gothic façade provided an ideally varied surface for the artist’s experiments with light and local color. Monet’s primary interest in the cathedral, however, was this unique surface with its interplay of light and shadow across the stone. His interests were in the tangible aesthetics of the structure itself, rather than the abstract ‘invisible’ qualities it might help make manifest. Robert L. Herbert argues specifically against

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86 Seiberling, *Monet’s Series*, 137.
89 House advocates for a trend in the artist’s work, stemming from his “topographical prospection of the area [surrounding Giverny],” in which the light, local color, and atmosphere are more important than the subject matter; the trend will continue and be relevant to *Rouen Cathedral* also. House, “Monet in 1890,” 126.
reading any theological significance into Monet’s series, pointing out that “at the end of his life [Monet] left instructions opposing a Christian burial service.”

In his lengthy discussion of the motif as a non-religious subject, Herbert observes, “When the Cathedrals were exhibited in 1895, all critics recognized them as secular representations,” and he goes on to offer a more tenuous and generalized connection to the Gothic than that offered by Pissarro. Herbert points out the obvious elimination of mass and weight present in all Gothic architecture in the form of colored stained glass, or what he calls ‘colored light.’

Material substance was dematerialized, and series of stained glass windows were the most remarkable proofs of this. Monet’s series of paintings also dematerializes mass and substance, and in a decorative sequence, color-light replaced traditional chiaroscuro as the principle structure of art. God’s light has become nature’s light, and man has seized nature thanks to his own creativity, without the need for God.

It is an odd paradox indeed that Monet’s dense canvases, extreme in their painterliness and tactility, can be said to simultaneously ‘dematerialize substance and mass,’ but they do exactly that. The encrusted surfaces, so ostentatious in their wealth of paint, also delicately dissolve the imposing façade into so many tiny, laborious strokes that its monumentality is at once preserved and entirely undone.

The architectural motif was also a direct departure from his earlier landscape series and thus provided Monet with a much more solid and fixed form. By eliminating as many variables as possible and committing to one fixed view of the façade the artist established a more harmonized series from the outset. Unlike the Grainstacks or Poplars, an architectural façade meant a stable motif less likely to

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90 Herbert, “Decorative and Natural in Monet’s Cathedral,” 167.
91 Herbert, “Decorative and Natural in Monet’s Cathedral,” 171.
be altered by natural elements like wind or the passing of seasons. Its immense shape and surface were the ideal choice for an artist who meant to create a solid and lasting cycle of paintings. The compositional similarities and the fixed motif also meant that Monet could focus more precisely on his handling of paint.

It is precisely this focus on his medium, namely the materiality of the paint itself, which makes Monet’s *Rouen Cathedral* works so distinct from his earlier series projects. Monet was no longer laboring over the qualities of light or atmosphere, but the qualities of paint and its application. This preoccupation is what led him to thicken his paints, to consistently retouch and revisit the canvases, and ultimately to attempt the creation of a lasting and eternal image.\(^{92}\) By emphasizing the physicality of his layered paint, Monet called attention to the flat nature of the canvas support. This in turn highlights the work of the artist and the act of art-making itself. The cathedral allowed him to transition to a more permanent legacy.

The unprecedented richness of paint in the *Cathedral* works did not go unnoticed by contemporary critics in 1895. In fact, many of the more unfavorable reviews were critical of Monet’s emphasis on texture. As early as 1874 Monet’s application style had been described as a “sattering, rubbing, smearing, hurling, flinging, jabbing” of his paints.\(^ {93}\) By the time the *Cathedrals* were exhibited in 1895, reviewers like Mauclair and Michel criticized Monet for both his “lack of plasticity”

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\(^{92}\) Of course, in the mid-twentieth century Clement Greenberg would label this focus on the materials of painting ‘self-critical.’ In “Modernist Painting” of 1961, Greenberg wrote, “The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself- not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.” Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” 5. With the cathedral series, Monet anticipates this self-critical method by over fifty years.

that is to say, drawing and formal structure) and his devotion to the pleasure of color, as well as what they believed were his exaggerated and excessive surfaces, in the idea that the artist had gone ‘too far.’ But it is through his intense work up of the surface, and his explorations of the visual power and pleasure of color, that Monet provided his canvases with a visual structure, with the solid, built form of the motif. Pissarro observes this alternate method of visual structuring. He writes, “Claude Monet’s series of Rouen Cathedral, though revolving obsessively around precisely the same architectural motif, heightens our awareness of pictorial form and of chromatic richness, as the subject matter itself dissolves into a crusty, sensitively worked surface of paint.” It is the undeniable physicality and confrontational presence of the paint that enhances an understanding of Monet’s new methods and aims. Rather than obsess and distress over changes in effect, with his Rouen Cathedral project Monet painstakingly constructed the cathedral and its physically enduring presence on every canvas.

Clemenceau and Geffroy, Monet’s most vocal advocates in the wake of his 1895 show, championed this new type of imagery. In his analysis of these critics, Levine rhetorically wonders And what was the sensation that the critics had missed in Monet’s art? Permanence. They had seen in his paintings only impermanence, transience, the ephemeral effects. But in the paintings of Rouen Cathedral, Geffroy felt that all must agree, “c’est partout la réalité à la fois immutable et changeante.”

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96 Levine, *Monet and his Critics*, 179. “This is all reality, both immutable and changing,” (my translation).
And it was this early articulation on Geffroy’s part that highlights the contradictions contained within the Rouen Cathedral series. It has already been observed that Monet magically renders the unique shimmering form of the cathedral’s façade as if it were a disembodied face, hovering over the ground without any sense of gravity. This weightlessness – this mirage-like quality of the motif veiled in light and atmosphere, in its enveloppe – is counteracted by the opacity of the painted strokes; by what Pissarro referred to as the ‘crusty, sensitively worked surface of paint.’ Coupled with this paradox is yet another; that is the ‘changing and immutable’ observed by Geoffroy. This more abstract contradiction is not one of weight versus weightlessness, but rather centers on a question of pictorial time. How can the critic describe the canvases as both ‘changing and immutable?’ The answer lies within the evolution of Monet’s oeuvre and, more particularly, in his serial practice.

The ‘changing,’ to which Clemenceau also refers, is rooted in chromatic effects, and to an Impressionist tradition in which he instinctively views the Rouen Cathedral series. For the critic, the ideal hanging of the show would have been along chromatic designations, which grouped paintings of like palettes and factures together. This hypothetical reorganization prioritizes the differences in the lighting and the other ephemeral, changing qualities of the atmosphere surrounding the façade. His understanding of the series is dictated by the varying properties of the air between the painter’s window and the cathedral itself, and how Monet made these manifest on the façade. This analysis is in keeping with the traditional Impressionist landscape series of Monet’s earlier career, but it is no longer entirely appropriate for the innovations and evolutions inherent within the Rouen Cathedral
project. The new characteristic of immutability in the Cathedrals was further articulated in the response of Geffroy, who ordered his hypothetical hanging of the Cathedrals along chronological lines rather than chromatic criterion. This critical distinction addresses the issue central to this paper: Monet’s changing handling of pictorial time.

Although Geffroy would have attempted to illustrate a narrative of dawn to dusk in various weather conditions (much like Pissarro’s reconstruction of Monet’s work days in Rouen and subsequent labeling of his Rouen Cathedral plates), I would argue against such an ordering of the Cathedral works. The series is not distinct in its temporal relationships between the canvases; the crucial distinction to be made for these paintings is the treatment of time within each canvas independently.

In his analysis, Pissarro notes that “Monet’s paintings of the cathedral are about time,” but he goes on to offer a breakdown of exactly how much time is contained within each canvas on average. Establishing such precise evaluations of Monet’s treatment of time is ultimately impossible; just because the artist’s letters may document his work on nine canvases a day does not necessarily prove that he did them in sequential order or that he moved methodically and strictly from one to the next each hour (here it is prudent to remember Monet’s behavior while painting the Grainstacks, which was anything but methodical). Pissarro’s hypothesis is certainly possible, though not probable or provable fact. His assertion that “[the canvases] depict the mad race of hours, minutes, seconds – through light... [they] completely banished any narrative intention from his series,” is truer to the emerging qualities of Monet’s new pictorial treatment of time, although it stands in
direct opposition to what the author had just claimed, that the works represent a daily cycle of weather and light and their various effects on the façade. Pissarro finally goes on to say that “[the artist] reduced each painting to the representation of one particular slice of time – to the exclusion of what happened before or after.” I disagree with that last statement; if the series were meant to be a group of instantaneities through time (as the earlier landscape series were), there would undeniably be the kind of narrative construction advocated by Geffroy implied throughout the series, much as Pissarro carefully and methodically reconstructs Monet’s working practice as an hourly progression through the day. Furthermore, the paintings cannot function as ‘the representation of one particular slice of time’ – if they were to function this way, why did Monet not include the notations of time of day and weather conditions that were present in his earlier series? Finally, to imply that each painting exists independently ‘to the exclusion of what happened before or after’ undoes the function of the series. Why paint and exhibit them as a group? And why, as noted and acknowledged by Pissarro, would it then be necessary to view them as a group – as a unified and cohesive whole – which so many contemporaries (including Camille Pissarro) and, most importantly, Monet himself, stubbornly asserted to be essential to their understanding of the project as a whole?

Each *Rouen Cathedral* canvas stands for a different timeless moment of the cathedral’s existence. They do not constitute a narrative through seasons or hours of the day (as we might think of with the *Grainstacks* or *Poplars*); instead each functions as a frozen, independent, and generalized view of the façade. These are

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temporally independent of one another, and yet inextricably linked to one another through repetition and wrought surface textures. Although there are lapses in time implicit between each canvas, their exact chronological relationship to one another (and, indeed, to the cathedral itself) is impossible to determine. These are not specific moments. Despite the implied passage of time, the church structure itself remains unchanged. But it is not only the cathedral whose presence endures; it is, more importantly, Monet’s overwhelmingly painstaking applications of paint.

**The Nature of Time: Instantaneity versus Duration**

Monet’s long and arduous process of revisiting and retouching the *Rouen Cathedral* canvases completely deconstructs the theory that he was firmly committed to hasty *plein-air* painting throughout his career. His cathedral project shows that the amount of time it took him to complete each of these canvases was extensive, and could last years or even decades. Since the majority of this retouching took place in the Giverny studio, miles from Rouen Cathedral itself, Monet obviously no longer felt the need to always paint directly from a motif. Hamilton also hints at Monet’s abandonment of *plein-air* practice by suggesting that the artist may have used a photograph of the cathedral’s façade as a memory aide during the reworking of the canvas back in Giverny. The use of a photographic aide would confirm the artist’s shifting priorities: gone was the strict commitment

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99 Another product of his constant reworking is the artist’s inconsistent dating for his *Rouen Cathedral* works; some of the canvases are dated 1892, some are dated with a range reflecting their lengthy construction, such as 1892-94, and some are given a singular date that likely symbolizes Monet’s last adjustments to the individual piece or the addition of his signature before exhibition or sale (such as those dated 1894).

100 Hamilton, *Claude Monet’s Paintings*, 22-23.
to *plein-air* practice and the instant rendering of the ephemeral effects of light and its visual perception. In 1905, Monet himself stated: “Whether my *Cathedrals* or my *Londons* and other canvases are done after nature or not, that is no one’s regard and it has no importance. I know so many painters who paint after nature and make only horrible things... the result is all.”\(^{101}\) Divorced from Impressionism and instantaneity, Monet had shifted his focus entirely to his end product: the aesthetic qualities of his serial canvases. Their painfully self-conscious construction, both slow and methodical, parallels his new artistic interests. A more extended, drawn-out process allowed Monet to produce a more lasting imagery, one that would stand as a permanent testament to his artistic skill and intellect regardless of the passing of time.

It is significant that Monet did not intend the *Rouen Cathedral* paintings to be understood as a cyclical narrative. Time was certainly a powerful factor in his project, but it was not meant to establish a linear trajectory from one image to the next. *Rouen Cathedral* was the ideal motif to explore the possibility of creating timeless paintings. Traditional pastoral landscape subjects (like the *Grainstacks*) were perfectly suited to capturing a fleeting moment’s atmospheric qualities, but the fixed architectural façade was a more substantial choice of subject matter. In the *Cathedral* paintings, the structure’s eternal qualities are emphasized because the artist chose to eliminate as many specific identifying factors as possible. The individual sculptures are dissolved into strong, feathery strokes. The tight framing of the façade also eliminated any reference to the surrounding details of the town of

\(^{101}\) Quoted in Levine, “Monet’s Series,” 74-75.
Rouen. By moving closer and closer to his motif (the cropping of the cathedral façade is tighter than any of the *Grainstack* or *Poplar* canvases, and Monet would only get closer with the later *Waterlilies*), he allowed the building to overwhelm and fill the pictorial space. The entire canvas is devoid of any distinction between foreground and background. By focusing only on the detached façade Monet enhanced the concept that his paintings were not fixed to any exact place or time.

In his investigation of Monet's changing treatment of time in *Rouen Cathedral*, Knott proposes,

Monet was intrigued by a more enduring sense of time, and by the late 1880s and early 1890s he was exploring a more complex layering of the meaning of time in nature and in his work. Nowhere is this more evident than in his dramatic series of paintings of Rouen Cathedral... almost all agree that they mark a crucial turning point in his career, and many attempts have been made to define this new direction.\(^\text{102}\)

As previously discussed, time itself had always been an essential, defining characteristic of Monet's early work and of the Impressionist movement. An impression is instantaneous: one specific instant at one specific locale, and this hurried and momentary type of temporality is exactly what is not represented within *Rouen Cathedral*, be it the individual canvases or the series as a whole. As Knott observes, Monet's new interests in depicting time revolved around more extended, lengthened temporalities. The nature of this more enduring and open use of time is manifest over and over again throughout the planning and preparation of the series and exhibition and also within the works themselves. In every aspect of his *Rouen Cathedral* project, the artist quite deliberately wrestled with a prolonged and extended handling of time.

\(^\text{102}\) Knott, "Monet's Cathedrals," 171.
Time is, I will argue, the most central theme of Monet’s ambitious project, and certainly the element that most firmly differentiates this work from any other body of his series paintings or Impressionism at large. In his detailed analysis of the contemporary critical response to Rouen Cathedral’s debut, Bernier begins with the assertion: “It was important to paint the Cathedrals, and Monet’s critics saw why; it had to do with the convolutions of time.” Both Knott and Bernier make Monet’s treatment of time the focus of their interpretations of the Cathedral project; Knott argues that Monet’s paintings essentially dissolve time and become individual products of the artist’s own “spiritual” experiences, while Bernier instead reads the works in terms of Henri Bergson’s philosophies, ultimately concluding that in Rouen Cathedral the artist achieved “the pictorial equivalence of the temporal character of reality as duration rather than instantaneity,” and that this duration extends to elements of historical memory and narrative that can be read onto the Gothic monument itself. I believe there are important elements to each of these scholarly approaches to Rouen Cathedral, whose synthesis will suggest a new angle of interpretation, heavily indebted to the concept of Bergsonian duration and focused entirely on Monet’s new style of depicting time, independent of any religious symbolism or poetic readings of the works as documents for the artist’s own individualized psychological expression.

The first important evidence of Monet’s lengthening of time in the Rouen Cathedral project is, of course, the unprecedented amount of time he spent conceiving of and executing the canvases themselves. This has already been

103 Bernier, Monument, Moment and Memory, 48.
104 Knott, “Monet’s Cathedrals,” 173; Bernier, Monument, Moment and Memory, 14.
discussed to some degree, but its significance merits some additional discussion. As scholars like Seiberling and Pissarro have established, Monet’s campaigns in Rouen, where the artist directly confronted the cathedral façade, marked the longest period of execution yet in the artist’s career and spanned two trips to the city in successive years, each lasting about three months.\textsuperscript{105} For an artist who had largely built his mammoth reputation on the myth of strict \textit{plein-air} practice and a style of painting identified by its sketchy appearance – and therefore implied hasty execution – this kind of extended engagement with the motif clearly indicates a new working procedure. That the artist was so unsatisfied with his first trip to require a second adds another year onto the painting procedure itself, even before any studio repainting of the full formal series had begun. This shift in working practice, and the prolonged execution it meant for \textit{Rouen Cathedral}, is the first hint at the artist’s changing attitudes towards time. Monet himself – in letter after letter sent to Alice, Durand-Ruel, and artist friends – admitted his building frustration and anxiety as his painting trips lagged on and on. In a letter to Alice dated April 2, 1892, the artist writes, “It is killing, and for this matter I abandon everything, you, my garden…” and again he writes to her the following day, “I slept a night filled with nightmares: the Cathedral would crash on top of me, it would appear either blue or pink or yellow.”\textsuperscript{106} The weight of executing his vision was literally crushing the artist, both consciously and subconsciously. His obsession only built during the remainder of his trip in 1892 and again during his second 1893 visit. On March 9, 1893 Monet’s letter to Alice describes the artist’s reaction as he looked for the first time at works

\textsuperscript{105} Seiberling, \textit{Monet’s Series}, 134.
\textsuperscript{106} Pissarro, \textit{Monet’s Cathedral}, 18.
executed during the first painting campaign side by side with what he was working on during his second sojourn:

>This evening, I wanted to compare what I have done with my old canvases, which I am trying to keep out of sight in order not to fall into the same mistakes. Well! The result is that I am quite right to have been dissatisfied last year: it is horrible and what I am doing this time is just as bad, bad in a different way, that is all.

And to Geffroy on March 28 1893:

>the more I advance, the tougher it becomes for me to render what I feel; and I am thinking inside that anybody who says that he has finished a canvas is frightfully arrogant. Finishing means complete, perfect, I am working restlessly without progressing.

What these letters provide is an insight into the almost excruciating amount of labor and concentration Monet put into his *Rouen Cathedral* canvases during their on-site execution. While he was quite literally facing-off with the monumental façade in his cramped, makeshift studios, the artist was acutely aware of the ambitious nature of his new project. Seiberling notes, “the Cathedrals had assumed an importance which was greater than that of the paintings which he made at Giverny and other sites, and the problem which they presented had to be solved if his work was to progress.” Monet worried obsessively about whether or not he would be able to solve this problem and to realize what he wanted in the *Cathedrals*: his decisive break with instantaneous and therefore his portrayal of a new and more enduring sense of time.

The second phase of the *Rouen Cathedral* project that reinforces Monet’s lengthening of time inherent in the series is the prolonged studio reworking of the

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canvases. Levine deems this redoing, or re-vision, of the canvases in the Giverny studio the “final performance for which the work on the spot turns out to have been only so many rehearsals.”

Indeed Monet had completed some of his *plein-air* canvases in the studio before the *Cathedrals*, but these studio finishing sessions had been brief and aimed simply to bring the works up to a level of cohesive finish before exhibition or sale. With *Rouen Cathedral*, on the other hand, the process of repainting in the studio was characterized by both more prolonged periods of working and also a greater amount of new paint applications than any previous paintings in the artist’s career. When Monet returned to his Giverny studio after his final trip to Rouen, it was the first time the artist was able to view his vast collection of canvases together as an ensemble since such a feat would have been impossible in his cramped quarters in Rouen. Here, witnessing the overall effect of his varying renderings of the façade, the artist continued to paint individual canvases “in the presence of others, striving for visual unity at the level of surface treatment.” Knott notes “during this process of reworking, many of the paintings most likely lost some of the spontaneity of earlier works, but what they gained as a group and individually was an increased richness of surface and, for most viewers, a more timeless sense of mystery.” The densely compacted surface of the works, as previously discussed, built the façade of the cathedral as if Monet was sculpting its

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110 Levine, “Monet’s Series,” 74.
111 Seiberling, *Monet’s Series*, 151. In fact, Monet’s reworking was fraught with his issues of insecurities about the qualities of the work. Seiberling notes that the artist was growing more critical of his own work by this time, and was even known to be burning what he thought were substandard canvases.
form with paint on his two-dimensional canvas support. The laborious layering of strokes over stages of reworking lasted years, culminating in the intensive, concentrated period of studio repainting in Giverny after the 1892 trip and lasting until the Durand-Ruel show in 1895. Of this sustained period of repainting at Giverny, Bernier argues

What this extensive reworking away from or after the original “moment” of the motif does signal is that Monet was concerned with something other than a record of the visual phenomena of atmospheric and temporal effects; the paintings in their final form necessarily bear only a limited correspondence to the immediate physical conditions at the motif. The thick encrustation of paint is the central feature of these canvases – a dense build-up of shorter, smaller, and more layered brush marks than his plein-air subjects typically called for – when viewed at a distance less than that appropriate for some degree of illusionistic resolvability, bears little resemblance to any particular aspect of the subject the painter sees; rather, the pictures sustain a look which is the result of the conditions of their making.

Here Bernier agrees with Seiberling’s written interpretation on the effects of studio repainting; she also believes the final layers completed at Giverny created “altering effects, sometimes making it impossible to distinguish the time of day or weather effects under which [the canvas] was created.” As we shall see, this dispels the theory that the *Rouen Cathedral* paintings were meant to represent a sequence of times of day or narrative of changing weather effects, as some critics (including Pissarro) have historically argued.

In Bernier’s comprehensive discussion of the Giverny studio repainting, he discusses the effect the various ‘layers’ and ‘version’ of the cathedral on the individual canvases produce. Through careful visual analysis, he notes,

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In some canvases thick textural strokes of paint, built up layer upon layer over the canvas, are allowed to dry before other colors are superimposed on them, but where the prior layers are not obscured. In others, thinner opaque coats of surface color are dragged across the thickly encrusted coagulations of dried pigment underneath, filling the deep crevices in the underlying texture strokes. As a result of these methods, the pictures retain their earlier configurations, allowing a distinct but less emphatic reworking over them, so that the visual effect of the earlier stages is just as present to our awareness as the final surface marks. The insistent presence of earlier phases is fused with later stages, giving evidence of varying and sometimes inconsistent ways the subject could appear to the painter.\footnote{Bernier, \textit{Monument, Moment and Memory}, 43.}

What Bernier alludes to here is the simultaneous presence of Monet’s earliest ‘versions’ of the cathedral on each canvas, layered with the artist’s successive marks made over years of revision and without the looming, immediate presence of the cathedral itself. This simultaneity of layered cathedrals within each canvas directly relates to his later assertions that Monet is working in terms of Bergsonian duration; that the \textit{Rouen Cathedral} presented to us by the artist, both in each individual work and the entire ensemble, is not a momentary glimpse of the light and weather projected on the façade in a fleeting instant, but rather a collection of perceptions of the motif which exist cohesively in a time that is layered upon itself much like the artist’s own collection of brushstrokes.

The third and primary way time manifests itself in \textit{Rouen Cathedral} is in the pictorial time contained within the canvases themselves. As mentioned above, Bernier reads this time in terms of Bergson’s duration and in direct opposition to the instantaneity of Monet’s earlier Impressionist works. The application of \textit{la durée} is also explored by Hamilton in his 1956 paper “Cézanne, Bergson and the Image of Time,” in which the author makes clear distinctions between Impressionist time and
the duration he believes is embodied by Cézanne’s works (particularly in terms of their multiple perspectives). Despite the fact that Hamilton’s analysis focuses on a later Post-Impressionist painter, however, this distinction is highly relevant for articulating the differences between pictorial time in Monet’s own early canvases and the very different treatment of this element in *Rouen Cathedral*. According to Hamilton,

if we speak of a theory of Impressionism, we can describe it as predominantly positivistic in its interpretation of space and time... a typically Impressionist landscape, such as those produced by Monet... during the 1870’s and 1880’s is fundamentally a presentation of visual phenomena seen from a given position in space at a certain moment in time. Space is restricted to “the place here” and time to “the moment now” more drastically than in any previous school of painting.

He goes on to elaborate, but essentially his claim is that Impressionist time is extremely compacted. The pictorial temporality contained within each canvas is instantaneous, the classic fleeting moment that so defined the movement. Impressionist moments are visual splices of instants forever gone, captured in marks by highly skilled artists who render their immediate impression of optical effects. Hamilton argues that in Impressionist painting “the observer is outside time and space... Impressionist space is essentially timeless since it exists only in terms of the instant at which it is observed.” However, this argument is ultimately paradoxical – how can Impressionist images be “timeless” if they are in fact entirely rooted in time and fixed to the moment of their making? I would argue that the pictorial instantaneities of Impressionism, and therefore of Monet’s early serial

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works, are completely subject to the concrete elements of narrative time, where one instant may follow another but can also function independently and succinctly as its own discrete unit.

In 1956 Hamilton still categorized Rouen Cathedral as part of what he termed “later Impressionism.” While he admits that “any sense of continuity between the individual items or among the series as a whole must be contributed by the consciousness of the observer,” thus implying that these slices of time are not narratively connected, he also maintains that “each separate painting corresponds to a separate moment in time at a specific location in space.” But, as noted by both Bernier and Seiberling, the studio repainting and constant layering of strokes in the Cathedrals make it impossible to identify the effects of light and weather exactly enough to pinpoint them to real moments in the cycle of the day. And, more interestingly, Hamilton would change his reading of Monet’s Rouen Cathedral by 1959, when he delivered a lecture on the series titled simply “Claude Monet’s Paintings of Rouen Cathedral.” In this later work, Hamilton eloquently articulated the artist’s shifting perception of pictorial time in Rouen Cathedral:

The truth may be that for [Monet] the instant had come to count less as a chronological moment and more as an extended perceptual experience reaching more widely through time and more deeply, so to speak, into the psychological structure of life.

The scholar here identifies a clear shift in Monet’s treatment of time inherent in the Rouen Cathedral project, and it is a change that means the paintings can no longer be categorized simply as “later Impressionism.” Gone is the Impressionist instant. In

its place is a pictorial temporality much more in keeping with the scholar’s
discussion of Cézanne’s work, a discussion framed by the parameters of Bergson’s
theories on duration.

It is Bernier who directly applies Bergson’s theories on time to Monet’s
Cathedral works. As Hamilton tells us, “for Bergson reality itself was conceived as a
temporal or historical process... such time was understood as duration rather than
as a sequence of successive but separate moments. In duration reality is to be
understood as process, continuous becoming, enduring in time.”122 It is this kind of
temporality that manifests itself within the Cathedral series. What makes these
canvases so distinct from Impressionism, and so unlike any previous project in
Monet’s oeuvre, is that they do not arrest a singular moment of narrative time.
Instead, they function as the pictorial expression of Bergsonian duration. In his
analysis of duration in the Cathedrals, Bernier writes, “the successive and
interpenetrative states of consciousness merge into one another, each retaining
something of what has just passed and each giving intimation of what is to come – a
fusion of the past with the present and anticipated future.”123 This continuum of
temporality – a painted suspension of time past, present, and future – is visually
made plain in the layers of painting and repainting, where earlier strokes can be
seen layered underneath the over-painting. Monet is carefully constructing the
motif; laboriously, slowly, and methodically, he builds the form of the cathedral into
a timeless presence. The work’s tight cropping and confrontational physicality
emphasize the eternal presence of the façade as a hovering, shimmering emblem

123 Bernier, Monument, Moment and Memory, 58.
outside the specifics of place and time. With *Rouen Cathedral*, Monet successfully destroys his affiliations with the Impressionist moment, building his new meditations on time as duration upon the façade of the unchanging and enduring Gothic monument.

The most telling example of Monet’s conscious effort to eliminate his ties to Impressionist time is his summary treatment of a large clock that hung on the façade of the cathedral (Figure 21).¹²⁴ The timepiece was mounted above the central portal of the façade on the pointed tracery just below the rose window. Without the telling contemporary prints and photographs, this timepiece would be easy to miss entirely. Knott makes the clock the central focus of his thesis, arguing that by allowing the light to dissolve the form of time itself, the artist “helps us to transcend the specific world of reality and move towards that more mysterious realm of ‘spiritual adventure’ that he sought.”¹²⁵ In Knott’s analysis, the sketchy handling of the clock is simplified to the triumph of the *enveloppe*. The author believes the clock to be “a key feature in all of the paintings in the series,” and he argues that this central treatment of the clock as the focus signals the victory of light over time as a symbol of instantaneity. It is a difficult argument, however, because Knott builds his case on the idea that the clock is treated as crucial, particularly made prominent in the paintings during studio reworking. While it is true that in many of the canvases of the series, the clock is in fact the area most thickly layered with Monet’s heavy impasto, it is equally true that the artist’s treatment of the timepiece itself does not highlight its true form. The clock is minimized and its hands are indistinguishable.

Monet diminishes its face to a circular glow towards the center of the composition that could easily be mistaken for a circular window. Knott claims that the clock, in its thickly encrusted nature, is the central focus of the compositions; but if this were true and the artist had meant the clock to be so central, it would have been more easily identifiable within the structure of the paintings. I also disagree with Pissarro’s attempts to make the clock the focus of the paintings; he claims, “each painting is depicting the ‘right now,’ the hour that is marked on the clock – which, however, Monet chose to blur with paint.”

This choice was a conscious elimination by Monet, and it is unlikely that if each painting was meant, in fact, to represent a present and ephemeral slice of time, the artist would have chosen to eliminate the specificity that the clock’s hands could have provided.

Just as Monet’s imprecise treatment of the sculptural program at Rouen eliminates details of place and time, the subtle diminishing of the clock very deliberately ignores any reference to an exact moment. Alternatively, when Van Gogh painted his ominous The Night Café in 1888 (Figure 22) he included a clock, clearly and legibly placing his scene at exactly quarter past midnight. In Van Gogh’s image, the clock does in fact serve as an important descriptor of the late night hour. In contrast, Charles Stuckey points out that the timepiece Cézanne included in his Black Clock from 1870 (Figure 23) did not have hands because “had he [the artist] included the hands, they would have suggested contrary to the truth, that this picture was painted in a moment in reality.” Similarly, Monet’s clock not only loses its hands in his “crust of colors,” it also loses any identifying characteristics.

126 Pissarro, Monet’s Cathedral, 23.
127 Quoted in Knott, “Monet’s Cathedrals,” 177.
that would signal its presence as a clock at all; ultimately Monet “divorces each sequence of time from another in the series” by treating the clock in this way.\textsuperscript{128} The distinction to be made is that while Van Gogh’s moment is specific, the moments depicted by Cézanne and Monet are not, and the lack of hands and numerals on the Rouen clock are the evidence. If the artist’s intent had indeed been to document a narrative cycle of light throughout the day, the clock itself would have been instrumental in identifying the chronological order of the canvases. But Monet thwarts any attempt to establish such a chronology. His glazed clock is yet another marker of his abandonment of instantaneity. Even if a cycle of narrative time wasn’t central to the \textit{Cathedrals}, if the painter had meant to simply arrest one moment of Impressionist time – something he had long since mastered – the clock’s role in pinpointing this transitory instant would have still been pivotal. These canvases do not represent individually distinguishable moments, nor are they fleeting. They are the symbol of Monet’s break with instantaneous impressions and his movement towards the more enduring.

Pissarro goes on to reconcile his theory with the Gothic motif by noting “paradox of paradoxes, to make this experiment in instantaneous vision, Monet chooses to paint a cathedral whose secular existence guarantees a certain permanence.”\textsuperscript{129} The author dismisses this paradox by essentially diminishing the paintings to function as any of Monet’s other series had before. But when read in terms of duration and the artist’s meditations on time manifested by the absent clock, this ceases to be ‘paradoxical’ and instead becomes a crucial distinction.

\textsuperscript{128} Pissarro, \textit{Monet’s Cathedral}, 23.
\textsuperscript{129} Pissarro, \textit{Monet’s Cathedral}, 23.
separating the Cathedral series from the others in Monet’s oeuvre. The Rouen Cathedral paintings transcend a simplistic and exclusive reading of narrative time. Within these works, time is rendered without specificity and instead with a more broad, open, and encompassing function outside of the instant and within the realm of eternal imagery.

Finally, the element of time also factored into the viewing experience at the Durand-Ruel exhibition opening. With his Cathedrals, Monet transformed the practice of seeing from an instant to a more prolonged process. This revealed itself in the gallery as the viewers moved slowly between the separate canvases to view the series as a whole. Visiting the exhibit was an aesthetic experience in itself, and the meaning of the entire serial program could only be derived through the bodily movement between each painting. Knott acknowledges that many of the contemporary reviews of the Cathedrals opening in 1895 found the paintings to be “most disturbing when viewed at close range... a problem with the viewing of Impressionist paintings almost from the beginning... with the cathedral series Monet forced the issue by making the paintings virtually impossible to decipher, structurally, from normal viewing range.”\(^ {130} \) The materiality and textural qualities of the surfaces meant that illusionistic space, with attempts at reproducing a sense of three-dimensional depth, was deconstructed and entirely inaccessible “from normal viewing range... Monet in fact forced the viewer to back off some distance from the painting. At this distance the paintings could no longer be seen in terms of

\(^ {130} \) Knott, “Monet’s Cathedrals,” 175.
small details.”

This back-and-forth viewing process – where the details of the painting and its individual brushstrokes were best appreciated at close range, but the entire composition only resolved itself at a greater distance – meant a sort of oscillation and negotiation between the enlightened viewer and the *Rouen Cathedral* canvases.

This had also been true of the *Grainstacks* exhibition, but since the *Cathedral* show contained canvases of relatively uniform size and with much more topographical surfaces the bodily viewing of the paintings was further complicated. The phenomenological relationship between an informed viewer and the canvases necessitated movement not only between paintings, but also in front of each individual canvas. Since the materiality of the paint caused the façade to dissolve as the viewer moved closer and closer, a push and pull relationship was formed between its surface and the object depicted there (the cathedral). Inevitably a similar relationship developed between the viewer and Monet’s wrought surfaces as the body moved towards the canvas and then away in an attempt to resolve the feathered paint and the architectural form it represented. The viewing of the series was both mentally and physically complex, not the work of a hurried individual.

Bernier argues that the lengthened spectatorship demanded by these canvases is evidence of extended perception, and that lengthened viewing for the individual spectator was highly relevant to Monet’s project. In fact, this kind of visual push and pull experienced by the 1895 exhibition-goers paralleled the prolonged process of Monet’s own artistic production for the series, as well as the

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131 Knott, “Monet’s Cathedrals,” 175.
elongated time (duration) contained within the individual paintings themselves. The slow and methodical looking required by the paintings therefore mirrored both the length of time and energy that had gone into their artistic production, as well as the lasting presence Monet hoped his canvases would achieve within the history of art. In the presence of so many Cathedrals, critics like Clemenceau and Geffroy would have experienced a repeated confrontation with the shimmering façade; its presence in the gallery would have been unavoidable. By insisting that the series be shown together and emphasizing their unity and inter-relatedness, the artist was able to recreate his own lengthy battles with the inescapable form of the cathedral.

House asserts, “by their paint surfaces, and by the way in which they were exhibited, his new paintings set up a new sort of relationship with the spectator, and this was something wholly deliberate, as Monet sought ‘more serious qualities’ and that ‘one should live for longer with one of these pictures.’”132 With his Cathedrals, Monet had finally accomplished something that transcended his Impressionist roots. His earlier transitory and instant renderings were now replaced by a more enduring art. The series could not be rendered anachronistic by the passing of time since the physical presence of its paint was eternal. His laborious series satisfied his desire to create an art more lasting than Impressionism, one that would continue to have relevance and physical presence long after his own lifetime. The instant of creation and its circumstances no longer dictated the terms of Monet’s practice. It is through his extensive reworking, sculptural handling of the paint, and sketchy treatment of the cathedral that Monet makes his new statement about time. The shift from

instantaneity to the eternal meant greatest artistic freedom for the painter to focus on his materials, and ultimately allowed him to achieve his goal of creating a permanent legacy, embodied by the *Rouen Cathedral* canvases.

"More than a painter of mere sensations..."

Monet’s *Cathedrals* are unlike any previous work of his career and, in fact, unlike any other canvases in the history of art. They function as both the culmination of the artist’s meditations on pictorial time and as the effective termination of Impressionist instantaneity. The series also marks a new beginning; its realization ushered in a new type of imagery. The wrought surfaces of the canvases, as well as powerful critical descriptions such as Klein’s assessment of the series as both ‘constructive’ and ‘synthetic,’ characterize the *Rouen Cathedral* paintings as an anticipation of such modernist projects as Cézanne’s *Mont Saint-Victoire* series, and even hint at the language of Greenbergian criticism and appraisals of Abstract Expressionists, such as Jackson Pollock in the mid-twentieth century. In his 1895 review of the Durand-Ruel exhibit, Clemenceau appreciated this shift, calling the *Rouen Cathedral* series “a revolution, a new way of seeing, of feeling, of expressing... [they] marked an era in perception as well as in the expression of things.”

It was on the ‘expression,’ on the subjective psychology of seeing that Clemenceau and his contemporaries lingered when praising the canvases. Hamilton and Pissarro echo this emphasis on the artist’s interiority and the canvases as physical manifestations of the painter’s own feelings and sensations.

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While these characteristics can certainly be read onto the *Cathedral* paintings, they can also be seen in the *Grainstacks*, the *Poplars*, and even earlier Impressionist works that predate Monet’s preoccupation with serial imagery. The subjective nature of Impressionist vision could easily be categorized as just another element of instantaneity: the canvases as masterful realizations of one specific individual’s one specific sensations of light and weather in one specific place at one specific time. This is not the triumph of *Rouen Cathedral*; it is in fact precisely what these paintings defeated and so definitively left behind.

The victory within Monet’s *Cathedral* project, then, is not characterized by the emotional or spiritual qualities of the paintings. Instead, they represent the total destruction of the Impressionist moment, and Monet’s ability to evolve as an artist by treating time in a very different and significant way. With the *Rouen Cathedral* series, Monet’s focus changed from temporary to eternal. The rich tactility of the paint disintegrates the particular identifying details of his motif (the cathedral) and creates a series of images entirely outside of specific place and time. The progression towards *Rouen Cathedral* would not have been possible without the groundwork laid during Monet’s Impressionist career; the intense interest in qualities of atmosphere and light that led to serial studies on singular motifs, the tightening of the frame with each successive series, and the necessary lengthening of production and execution as the artist’s obsession with his process and the increasingly pronounced materiality of his paint – all of these factors contributed to shaping the achievement that was the *Cathedral* project. But ironically, the
evolution from Impressionism culminated in a distinct break with the movement through these paintings.

With so many canvases of instantaneities behind him, in *Rouen Cathedral* Monet successfully made the transition to a very different depiction of pictorial temporalities. Time in the *Cathedral* paintings is time in terms of duration: a time that is not instantaneous and compacted, but also not narrative. Bergson’s concept of *la durée* refers to time embodied as a built continuum containing the past, present, and implied future simultaneously. This elongated concept of time is the temporal reality that exists within the *Rouen Cathedral* paintings. The elongation of time is undeniable in these canvases, where a slower and more methodical type of painting and looking replaces the fleeting nature of Impressionism. Monet’s newly extended treatment of time is evidenced in all the stages of the series from its conception to its public debut. The prolonged, dual journeys to Rouen to paint the canvases directly from the motif marked the longest period of primary painting yet in Monet’s career and his most significant and extended interaction with a singular motif. The painting process, of course, continued for years in the studio back at his home in Giverny. By continuing to layer hundreds of strokes on his canvases, essentially building the form of the cathedral itself in a very physical way, the artist once again added to the timeframe for completing the painted surfaces. Lengthened time once again presents itself within the pictorial temporality of each of the canvases: they do not contain instants, but are instead less precise and more broad, sweeping interpretations of the motif itself and the element of time. Finally, the deliberate viewing process necessitated by the sheer physicality of the paint in the
Rouen Cathedral series meant another elongation of time, here in the experience of the spectator. What Monet very consciously accomplished in this, his most pivotal project, was the transition to the more lasting kind of image he had so desperately sought to produce. The evolution from instantaneity to eternity is the heart of his Rouen Cathedral series, and ultimately allowed the artist to forever stake his reputation as “more than a painter of mere sensations.” With his Cathedrals, Monet captured duration in visual terms and permanently fixed its presence both within the frames of his canvases and within the scope of the history of art making.

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Illustrations

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(Photo: Postcard sold in gift shop of Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen)
(Photo: Postcard sold in gift shop of Office of Tourism, Rouen)
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ABSTRACT

FROM INSTANTANEITIES TO THE ETERNAL:
SHIFTING PICTORAL TEMPORALITIES IN MONET’S ROUEN CATHEDRAL

by

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May 2014

Advisor: Dr. Jennifer Olmsted

Major: Art History

Degree: Master of Arts

This paper focuses on Monet’s *Rouen Cathedral* paintings, a set of canvases painted by the artist between February 1892 and May 1895. This series has traditionally been hailed as Monet’s greatest and most significant, but historical scholarship has addressed the series within an Impressionist framework. However, this paper argues instead that the *Cathedral* paintings no longer represented Monet as an Impressionist, but instead as an artist with entirely original and different goals for whom the nature of time had taken on new meaning. Where Monet began his endeavors in seriality with a feverish focus on the temporary and elusive – the *enveloppe* – in Rouen he worked and reworked the canvases, bringing them to a hand-wrought and over-worked surface unprecedented within his own work. For Monet, these paintings did not capture specific moments; they rendered an enduring and overwhelming presence entirely outside of time and place. The *Rouen Cathedral* series marks a distinct shift in Monet’s oeuvre. With these paintings, the artist left behind Impressionism and its focus on the fleeting qualities of atmosphere and light.
The *Rouen Cathedral* works were a declaration of his new grand ambition: to construct paintings that would endure through both their physicality and their timeless subject matter.
BIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Kaleigh Winchell is a native of Traverse City, Michigan. She began her college studies at Northwestern Michigan College where she earned an Associate of Science and Arts in 2007 before continuing her studies at the University of Michigan. In Ann Arbor, Kaleigh served as the co-Editor of the Helicon Review, the History of Art department’s student-edited annual journal, during the 2008 – 2009 academic year. She was also able to spend a semester studying abroad in Paris, France. She graduated with a Bachelor in Arts with Distinction and Honors in The History of Art in 2009.

After graduation, Kaleigh spent a year as a post-baccalaureate intern at Northwestern Michigan College. She functioned as a teaching assistant in the Fine Arts department for courses in Art History. Additionally, she completed work for the Dennos Museum Center on campus, including research for the institution’s artist files, docent training, collection cataloging, as well as assistance with exhibition layout, installation, and changeovers.

During the summer months, Kaleigh has been the Gallery and Presentations Coordinator for the Visual Arts department at Interlochen Arts Camp since 2012.

Kaleigh completed her Master coursework at Wayne State University. She served as the Graduate Teaching Assistant in Art History for the 2011 – 2012 and 2012 – 2013 academic years, and was also awarded the Albert L. and Alice W. Steinbach Scholarship for an archival research trip to Paris, France in 2013. This thesis fulfills her requirements for graduation in May 2014, earning her a Master of Arts in Art History.