

WALL TEXTS

MONET ON THE NORMANDY COAST. THE DISCOVERY OF ÉTRETAT

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Exhibition Annex

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The little Norman town of Étretat lies nestled among the high chalk cliffs lining the English Channel. Flanked by spectacular rock formations, it evolved over the course of the nineteenth century from a remote fishing village to a popular bathing resort and a meeting place for artists. In the approximately one hundred years from Romanticism to Classical Modernism, the artistic perspective on this striking coastal landscape underwent all manner of development and change.

Painters like Gustave Courbet and Henri Matisse as well as writers such as Alphonse Karr and Guy de Maupassant contributed substantially to shaping the image of Étretat. Impressionist Claude Monet's sojourns there between 1864 and 1886 mark a heyday in the town's history. All these artists' many works erect a monument to its unique beauty and have fed the creation of the myth surrounding it. Along with mass tourism, the accompanying process of popularization in the media is meanwhile proving to pose a threat to the natural wonder of the coastal landscape at Étretat.

Featuring 170 works, the exhibition seeks to convey an understanding of the enthusiasm sparked by Étretat while also providing insights into the related drawbacks.

Monet in Normandy

Claude Monet's oeuvre bears the mark of his deep connection to Normandy. He spent his childhood there and developed his impressionist painting style at the various places in the region where he lived and worked. He was particularly fascinated by the rugged coastline, the sea, wind and waves. Between 1864 and 1886, he was especially drawn to painting on the so-called Alabaster Coast between Le Havre and Dieppe in northern Normandy: in places like Fécamp, Pourville and

Varengeville. He carried out a large proportion of his works, however, in Étretat. Accounting for some eighty of his paintings and pastels, the fishing village plays a prominent role in Monet's lifework. Especially the dramatic cliff formations—the natural arches Porte d'Amont, Porte d'Aval and Manneporte—captivated his imagination. He studied them in different lights and weather conditions, experimenting with an early form of serial production in the process—a mode of working that would later prove groundbreaking for his painting oeuvre. Monet's paintings are perhaps the most well-known depictions of Étretat. But they would not have been conceivable without the great numbers of artists who had begun discovering Étretat for themselves as far back as the early nineteenth century.

Étretat's Path to Art

An absence of roads, the life-threatening sea and a bay with no harbour long accounted for Étretat's near-complete isolation. It was only through the influence of the Enlightenment that, in the eighteenth century, scientists in disciplines such as geology and oceanography developed an interest in describing and analyzing this region of the Atlantic. Romanticist painters and writers soon likewise discovered the fascination of the wild coast. What is more, a theory introduced by the English philosopher Edmund Burke was gaining ever more currency: human beings must overcome their fear of natural forces in order to experience the sublime. People began to seek out the thrill and awe of an encounter with the sea and the coast.

The depiction of Étretat by Alexandre Jean Noël dating from as early as 1786, however, served to advertise the town's short-lived oyster farming industry. It was not until the 1820s that artists began to settle in the town. Among the pioneers were the marine painter Eugène Isabey, who produced mood-charged watercolours of striking motifs for later use as starting points for paintings. Johann Wilhelm Schirmer from Germany was another early example. Based on the direct observation of the natural environment, his precise oil studies introduced the practice of open-air painting to the training of landscape painters at the Düsseldorf academy. In the same period, the first literary descriptions and illustrated travel guides were published, spreading Étretat's fame beyond regional borders.

Courbet's Stay in Étretat

The commercial success of Gustave Courbet's "sea landscapes" began in 1865. In the late summer of 1869, it was what gave rise to his stay in Étretat, meanwhile a fashionable bathing resort. He took up quarters in a studio situated right on the beach. In mid-September, he witnessed a tornado that befell the coast of the English Channel. This event would be the point of departure for some twenty paintings of two

motifs: *The Cliffs after the Storm* and *The Wave*. In his striking depictions of nature, Courbet went without narrative or representational elements—or human beings. Rather than striving for the best possible imitation of reality, he deliberately constructed an artistic reality. He distorted the pictorial space with changes of perspective or subjected the landscape to rigorous geometrization. In several areas, he applied the oil paint to the canvas in crusty ridges with a scraper-like palette knife. The water, sky and rocks seem to consist of dense matter. At the Paris Salon of 1870, Courbet celebrated unparalleled success with his large-scale versions of both motifs. Later artists, including Claude Monet, would measure themselves against Courbet's works.

Étretat as a Motif for Pioneers of Photography

Amateur photographers of the aristocracy and the upper middle class began pointing their lenses at Étretat as far back as the 1850s. The wealthy holidaymakers made extremely creative use of the new imaging technique. The first photo series on Étretat dates from 1853 and was probably the work of the trained chemist Alphonse Davanne. He returned ten years later and carried out another series whose large scale prints are distinguished by their technical perfection. The amateur photographer Paul Gaillard, on the other hand, experimented with shortened exposure times to capture the movements of the waves and the beachgoers. Both Davanne and Gaillard were among the founding members of the *Société française de photographie* established in 1854 and thought to be the world's first photographic society.

Comparisons bear witness to the reciprocal influence between photography and painting. Photography, for instance, had an impact on the work of the painter Camille Corot, who was interested in the technique. In the case of Anselm Feuerbach, a photo probably even served as a direct model for the painting on view here. Conversely, to this day photographers have continued to take inspiration from paintings of Étretat. Whereas with his monumental shot of a wave, Balthasar Burkhard was following in the footsteps of Gustave Courbet, Elger Esser makes reference to Johann Wilhelm Schirmer.

Elger Esser in the Footsteps of Maupassant and Flaubert

In the year 2000, the photo artist Elger Esser produced a series of large scale prints that enter into dialogue with nineteenth-century works to revisit the myth of Étretat. Using a large-format camera, he captured precisely the spots the writer Guy de Maupassant described in a letter of 1877 at the request of his friend Gustave Flaubert.

The two authors were among the chief exponents of literary realism. At the time, Flaubert was in search of an impressive setting for his novel *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. It was to be a really existing place that would spark the two titular characters' enthusiasm for geology. In response, Maupassant delivered a minutely detailed description of the stretch of coast between Cap d'Antifer and Étretat, which he supplemented with numerous sketches.

Esser's work pays tribute to the literary and artistic exploration of Étretat. He deliberately avoided taking photos documenting present-day sites. On the contrary, his scenes can be read as visualizations of memories and longings. By shading them with sepia, for example, he lent them the appearance of faded postcards of long-gone times. He also made sure that his motifs were devoid of humans: like Gustave Courbet before him, he deliberately excluded the tourists.

The Clashing of Different Worlds.

Fishing Village, Artists' Retreat Seaside Resort

When the first artists arrived in Étretat, it was still a simple village with thatched roofs whose population lived from fishing. Eugène Le Poittevin, the first painter to settle here for any length of time, was on familiar terms with the fishermen and depicted their daily life in romanticizing scenes. Yet he would also witness early beach tourism, which he portrayed with as much benevolence as amusement. His paintings were frequently exhibited at the Paris Salon and contributed to making Étretat known to the city dwellers.

Owing to its proximity to Paris, the growing rail network and doctors' recommendations to bathe in the sea, the Norman coast evolved into a popular travel destination around 1850. The aristocracy and wealthy upper middle class spent their summer months there, far from the "harmful effluvia" of the city. A bathhouse, second homes, hotels, a casino and, later, tennis courts and golf courses sprang up in Étretat as well. At the same time, the beach was divided up between the tourists and the fishermen, reducing the working space of the latter—a development that did not go unprotested. This led not only to changes in the village's outer appearance but also to new professions for its inhabitants: fishermen became bathing attendants; women found jobs cleaning rooms and doing laundry in hotels. Artists played a decisive role in popularizing the seaside resort but also contributed to the rapid disappearance of the local population's traditional way of life.

Writers, Painters, Collectors

Not only painters, but also writers played a decisive role in the bathing resort's success. Whereas in the area of painting Eugène Le Poittevin is considered an early patron of the village, in literature it was the novelist Alphonse Karr. Starting in the 1830s, his widely circulating works called broad public attention to Étretat. The local way of life was also an inspiration for Guy de Maupassant, who had grown up here. In the 1880s he chose the village as a setting for short stories and his first novel, *A Life (Une vie)*.

Certain Étretat motifs were adopted in journalistic reports and travel guides as well as art and literature: the laundresses kneeling on the beach in groups to perform their arduous task, the hard lives of the fishermen exposed to the primal forces of the sea, and local legends. In 1908, Maurice Leblanc created a fabled new figure for Étretat in his gentleman thief Arsène Lupin. But the artists themselves also became trademarks of the place. In 1904, for instance, Étretat lauded itself as the "beach of the artists and writers". And indeed, a network of artists and art lovers took shape here, far from Paris. François Stumpf, Jean-Baptiste Faure and other collectors hosted artists like Camille Corot and Claude Monet in their Étretat homes. During his 1872 visit, however, Corot did not paint views of the cliffs but the family of his patron Stumpf and the picturesque inland countryside.

Artistic Approaches to the Motif

Seen from the beach of Étretat, the Porte d'Aval offers a view much appreciated by artists. But what exactly accounts for this artistic interest? In his gouaches and watercolours, Eugène Delacroix was concerned with the subtle interrelationships between rocks, sky and sea in terms of light and colour. With her characteristic pen hatching, the Swiss artist Sophie Schaeppi focussed in her sketchbook on the layers of partly shaded stone. Freedom of artistic perspective also subjected the forms and structures of the other cliffs around Étretat to various interpretations, even to the point of fantastical distortions. The writer and draughtsman Victor Hugo, for example, associated the cliffs with the architecture of a mystical past and sometimes with plant or animal forms. The colourful pastels of Claude Monet, for their part, translate the structures of the rock formations' striking sediment layers into those of the clouds.

Monet and Étretat

Claude Monet sojourned in Étretat at least six times between 1864 and 1886. In the winter of 1868/69, he rented a house for his family there and devoted himself to the large-scale interior *Le Déjeuner (The Luncheon)*. He also began to take an interest in the distinct topography of his surroundings and the rock formations that had meanwhile become their trademark. In the hope that painting these motifs would

prove to be a commercially successful venture, he returned to Étretat several times in the early 1880s. He scheduled his stays primarily in the off-season to ensure he would be able to work undisturbed by beach goers. He also consistently excluded testimonies to tourism such as the casino, the hotels and the bathing cabins from his scenes. For the most part, he painted out of doors in front of the motif, sometimes even risking his safety to capture the most striking new views of the cliffs on canvas. In bad weather, he stayed indoors and painted what he saw through the window of his room at the Hôtel Blanquet, which was located directly on the beach. During his sojourns in Étretat, Monet tended to work on several paintings in parallel to record differing weather and light effects. The village and its cliffs are therefore closely associated with the form of serial production that would become a hallmark of his painting and provide decisive impulses to modern art.

Monet's Impact

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, motifs of Étretat had a firm place in exhibitions and galleries in France. The site's increasing popularity among well-situated tourists created a large market that lured ever more artists there as well. "One of the most remarkable things about Étretat is undeniably the great numbers of painters who brandish their brushes on the beach in the mornings to capture the sea and the cliffs", a journalist wrote in 1885.

Among those painters was Eugène Boudin, who had previously focused on the glamorous seaside resorts of Deauville and Trouville. In Étretat, however, he devoted himself from 1887 onwards to scenes of the village folk's everyday life. As a result, he depicted aspects of the site Monet had omitted from his unpeopled compositions. A concentration on the sublime cliff landscape also distinguishes the work of many other artists who followed Monet to Étretat. Their paintings differ in style, ranging from the impressionistically form-dissolving work of Émile Schuffenecker and precise depictions of nature by Paul Leroy to Jean Francis Auburtin's large-scale watercolours and gouaches that take their cue from Japanese colour woodblock prints.

Étretat in the Early 20th Century

Artistic interest in Étretat waned around 1900, although the site continued to lure countless tourists and several painters as well. The Swiss artist Félix Vallotton spent his honeymoon there in 1899 and took photographs of beach life that would serve him as bases for paintings. Henri Matisse went to Étretat twice in the summer of 1920 and produced more than forty paintings along with numerous drawings. A large proportion of those works were exhibited at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune in Paris the

same year. Their avid reception by collectors bears witness to the continued popularity of motifs of Étretat with the public. In deliberate response to the paintings of Courbet and Monet, Matisse devoted himself to depicting the cliffs, the fishing boats on the beach and marine animals. As in the works of those predecessors, human beings are scarce in his scenes, which accordingly emit the aura of an abandoned world.