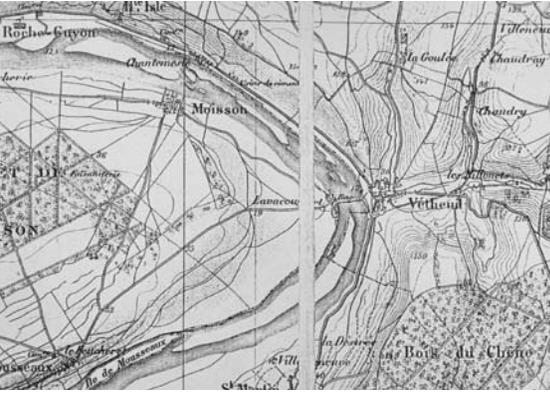


Making Art in A Cold Climate



This map of Vétheuil from c. 1900 shows the towns of Lavacourt and Vétheuil situated across the river from one another at a picturesque bend in the Seine. Monet's property extended down to the river on the Vétheuil side and he kept a boat that served as a floating studio; this allowed him to paint from either bank of the river, as well as from the islands that run parallel to the banks.

Though an acknowledged leader of the Impressionist group of painters, Monet fell on hard times in 1878 and moved in August of that year to Vétheuil, a small town along the Seine downriver from Paris, along with his ailing wife, Camille, and his two young sons. One of Monet's principal friends and patrons, Ernest Hoschedé, was also in straitened circumstances and moved, with his own wife and children, into the artist's house on the north side of Vétheuil's riverbank, spurring gossip among the residents of this quiet town.



ABOVE Bend of the Seine, Oise Valley, circa 1900. This photo shows the wooded islands of the Seine and the town of Lavacourt in the distance, opposite Vétheuil on the near bank. Though the river served as a major conduit for goods heading to Paris from the coast, Monet "edited" out the barges and other evidence of commercial traffic in his paintings, preferring to portray the region as rural and agrarian.

RIGHT *Camille Monet on her deathbed* (*Camille Monet sur son lit de mort*), 1879 (Musée d'Orsay, Paris). This painting, created just moments after Camille's death, remains one of Monet's most poignant works; he kept it throughout his life.



Exacerbating the artist's financial difficulties was the declining health of his wife. Camille suffered for over a year after arriving at Vétheuil, and died from what is believed to be uterine cancer in September of 1879. By that time, Hoschedé had moved back to Paris in an effort to consolidate his finances and get out of debt, thus leaving Monet living at Vétheuil with Hoschedé's wife Alice and the combined Monet-Hoschedé children.



Paris, *The Break-up of the Ice on the Seine*, January 3, 1880, wood engraving, 1880. The month-long cold spell finally broke on January 3, 1880. As the thaw began and floodwaters rose, large ice floes developed, and piled up against any obstacle in their path. The accumulated ice and debris crashed into bridges with thunderous blows and caused extensive damage. Crowds gathered on the banks and bridges of the Seine to watch as boats, damaged washing establishments, and other flotsam surged downstream towards Vétheuil.

Monet found it difficult to pay for canvas and paints and frequently wrote to friends and patrons, asking them to lend him money so that he could keep working. When he could afford to paint, he stayed close to home, depicting views along the river at Vétheuil, and still lifes when the weather turned bad during the fall of 1879. His finances were so dire that when Camille died, he begged a friend in Paris to redeem a necklace of Camille's from a pawnshop so that she could be buried with it. The winter of 1879-1880 brought further crisis for Monet. It saw some of the coldest weather on record, not only in France, but also across Europe from Madrid to St. Petersburg. After weeks of below-freezing temperatures, the Seine froze over completely and record snowfalls made travel in Paris

nearly impossible. Added to the loss of Camille and his precarious finances, this protracted cold left Monet despairing that conditions would ever improve.

During the first days of January 1880, there was a rapid warming, creating a debacle—or dramatic thaw—of the river, resulting in catastrophic damage as large chunks of ice streamed downriver and water inundated the countryside. Monet began painting immediately, creating images of the ice floes that ranged from somber to ethereal. Many of these canvases were worked on until the late winter, resulting in a group of views that anticipated the serial approach that would become the hallmark of Monet's style beginning in the 1880s.

Though the three years Monet lived at Vétheuil were marked by tragedy and difficulty, ultimately it was during this period that he found a new approach to painting.



The Ice Floes (Les Glaçons), 1880 (Musée d'Orsay, Paris). This large painting was created in the studio some months after the debacle; it presents a strong contrast to UMMA's somber view.

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All photographs from A. Dixon, C. McNamara, and C. Stukeey, *Monet at Vétheuil. The Turning Point* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1998).

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