

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

Rocks at Port Coton by Claude Monet



Title:	Rocks at Port-Coton, The Lion Rock, Belle-île
Maker:	Claude Monet (1840-1926)
Medium:	Oil on canvas
Date:	1886
Dimensions:	h. 65 x w. 81 cm
Museum No:	PD.27-1998
Gallery:	5

Key Dates for Monet

1840	Born in Paris
1845	Family moves to Le Havre
1858	Meets Eugène Boudin who encourages him to paint in open air
1859	Moves to study in Paris, meets Pissarro at Atelier Suisse
1862	Meets Dutch landscapist Johan Barthold Jonkind
1863	Meets Renoir, Sisley and Bazille
1867	His son Jean born to Camille Doncieux
1870	Marries Camille, visits England and meets dealer Durand-Rule
1871	Moves to Argenteuil and paints Seine, the town and his house and gardens – much visited by other artists
1874	First Impressionist exhibition in Paris (first of 8 in total)
1877	Paints over a dozen views of St-Lazar Station in Paris
1877	Camille dies
1880s	Several painting trips throughout decade to Normandy, Brittany and Mediterranean coasts to paint dramatic scenery in changing weather conditions.
1883	Settles at Giverny
1886	PAINTS THIS PAINTING, one of 39 completed in ten week stay on the Atlantic coast of Brittany
1890s	Begins series paintings including the <i>Poplars</i> , marries Alice Hoschedé
1900	Enlarges water lily pond in his garden
1908	Begins to suffer from cataracts on eye
1914	Builds studio for series of water lilies
1926	Dies at Giverny

During the 1880s, Monet began a series of painting trips to the coasts of Normandy, Brittany and the Mediterranean. Monet planned these trips to challenge him as a painter in his developing quest to investigate different natural features in changeable light and weather effects. There was also a pragmatic motive which was to enlarge the range and appeal of his paintings for prospective buyers. The sale of Impressionist pictures in the late 1870s had brought low prices. In addition, following the death of Camille, his first wife, Monet found himself as the head of a household which included Alice, the wife of collector Ernest Hoschedé and unofficially Monet's lover, and eight children. Monet needed to generate income, and even approached the Salon once more in 1880 in the hope of reaping financial benefit when one of his two submissions was accepted.

We have a description of him working on the Normandy coast in 1885:

'With water streaming under his cape, he painted the storm amid the swirl of the salt water. He had between his knees two or three canvases, which took their place on his easel one after another, each for a few minutes at a time. On the stormy sea different light effects appeared. The painter watched for each of these effects, a slave to the comings and goings of the light. Laying down his brush when the effect was gone, placing at his feet the unfinished canvas, ready to resume work upon the return of a vanished impression.'

He visited the Atlantic coast of Brittany in 1886, planning to stay for ten days and in reality staying for ten weeks in a hamlet just 500 metres from the sea. This is one of thirty-nine paintings completed during his stay, which averages out at four each week, many under bad weather conditions. He had his paints covered by a wax sheet and easel tethered to the cliff top using ropes and stones.

The rugged quality of the coast led him to abandon his usual 'soft tender tones' in favour of a darker palette to reflect this formidable natural landscape. For example, the rocks, which initially appeared to him to be black are represented in a range of browns, bottle greens, russets and mauves. Monet could see the commercial benefit of his new subject matter, which would

prevent him from being typecast as a painter of sunny Mediterranean pictures: 'one must not specialise in one chord alone,' he told his dealer Durand-Ruel.

In terms of its composition, this painting shows the influence of Japanese ukiyo-e (images of the floating world) woodblock prints on Monet's work, in particular those by Hokusai. An enthusiasm for all things Japanese came after the Universal Exposition of 1867, and many Japanese artefacts invaded the European market. Aspects of these prints that are thought to have influenced Monet are the bold unmodulated colour, the inventive compositions, relative flatness and the way that the subjects were drawn from everyday life. Certainly in 1890 his house in Giverny held a large collection of Japanese prints. In this particular painting the influence of the Japanese woodblock print can be seen in the striking nature of the composition with the dominant shape of the rocks on the left which align with the horizon, which is the only horizontal line dividing up the painting. It is also possible to divide up the painting into blocks of colour. However, within these "blocks" of colour such as the rocks discussed above, and also the sea, there are many other colours shown which reflect Monet's eye. Paul Cézanne said that Monet was 'only an eye, but, My God, what an eye!'