

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

Poplars by Claude Monet



Title:	Poplars
Maker:	Claude Monet (1840-1926)
Medium:	Oil on canvas
Date:	1891
Dimensions:	h. 89 x w. 92 cm
Museum No:	PD.9-1966
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-Ruel
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
1890s	Begins series paintings including the Poplars, marries Alice Hoschedé
1891	PAINTS THIS VERSION OF THE POPLARS (one of 23) from his boat studio on the Epte
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

The Poplars Series

In *The Shock of the New* by Robert Hughes, the author explains very clearly how Monet's vision evolved in the late 1880s:

'By 1880, Monet was expressing his qualms about Impressionism as a movement, and how easy it was for second-rate artists to work up a bag of Impressionist tricks. He wanted to deepen the game, to show the deeper transactions between eye and mind. This Monet chose to do, starting in 1888, by painting the same motif over and over again, in series'.

His initial subject for a series of paintings was *Grainstacks*, painted in 1890. By painting not one but a series of canvases of the same subject, Monet was able to move from one fleeting effect of the light on the surface of the grainstacks, at different times of day and in different weathers. He was not tempted to go on altering or overworking an individual canvas, because the others were lined up waiting their turn. The point of the series was the huge variety of light effects that could be seen by focusing on one single motif.

In the *Poplars* series, painted during 1891 just two kilometres upstream of his home at Giverny, we have evidence of how obsessed he was with capturing change where he felt the effect of one intensity of light lasted only seven minutes, or 'until the sunlight left a certain leaf, when he took out the next canvas and worked on that' (Paul Hoschede, stepson).

Monet told Rene Guimpel: 'The trees were at Limay near Giverny' and that one day he saw them marked with red paint: 'They're going to be auctioned off and felled' he told himself, 'and it will be the saw mill nearby that will buy them.' He hurried round to the owner to ask what price he was going to pay for them. 'Go higher,' he said to the timber merchant, 'I'll pay the difference, but let me have time to paint them.'

Monet painted 23 versions of the *Poplars* from different viewpoints, 15 of which were exhibited in Durand-Ruel's gallery in February 1892. The trees were painted in spring, summer and autumn, mostly from a boat, and this is one of only two seen from the marsh. Monet had previously painted on the River Seine from a rowing boat with a little canopied studio (painted by Manet in

1874). It is thought he used this, or another boat on the River Epte, to paint the majority of his Poplars series in 1891. He could travel along the water armed with canvases and paints, ready to moor the boat whenever a particular view, or in this case light, caught his interest. This reveals Monet's obsession with catching the effects of light and also varying vantage points on a particular subject. This is very different to the landscape practice of other artists such as Gainsborough, who was known in the previous century for setting up model landscapes in his studio using stones and broccoli in imitation of rocks and trees.

The choice of poplar trees as his motif is no accident. The tree would have been recognised as a typical and much-loved part of the rural landscape from its worth as a cash crop to its popularity in lining roads and providing a wind barrier. The tree also held a symbolic significance for the French because the poplar had been chosen as the 'tree of liberty' during the French Revolution, perhaps because of the derivation of the name from the Latin *populus*, which means both 'people' and 'popular'.

Monet chose his vantage point carefully in order to achieve the most decorative effect from the line of trees. The trunks of the trees make a grid running the full height of the canvas, and by including the crowns of the nearer trees he creates a continuous zig-zag of trees receding back into the painting. His low viewpoint enables Monet to achieve a marked contrast with the details of the trees shown up against the sky.

The idea of painting the same motif over and over again may well have been inspired by Japanese woodblock prints, which were widely circulated among the artists in Paris. 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.