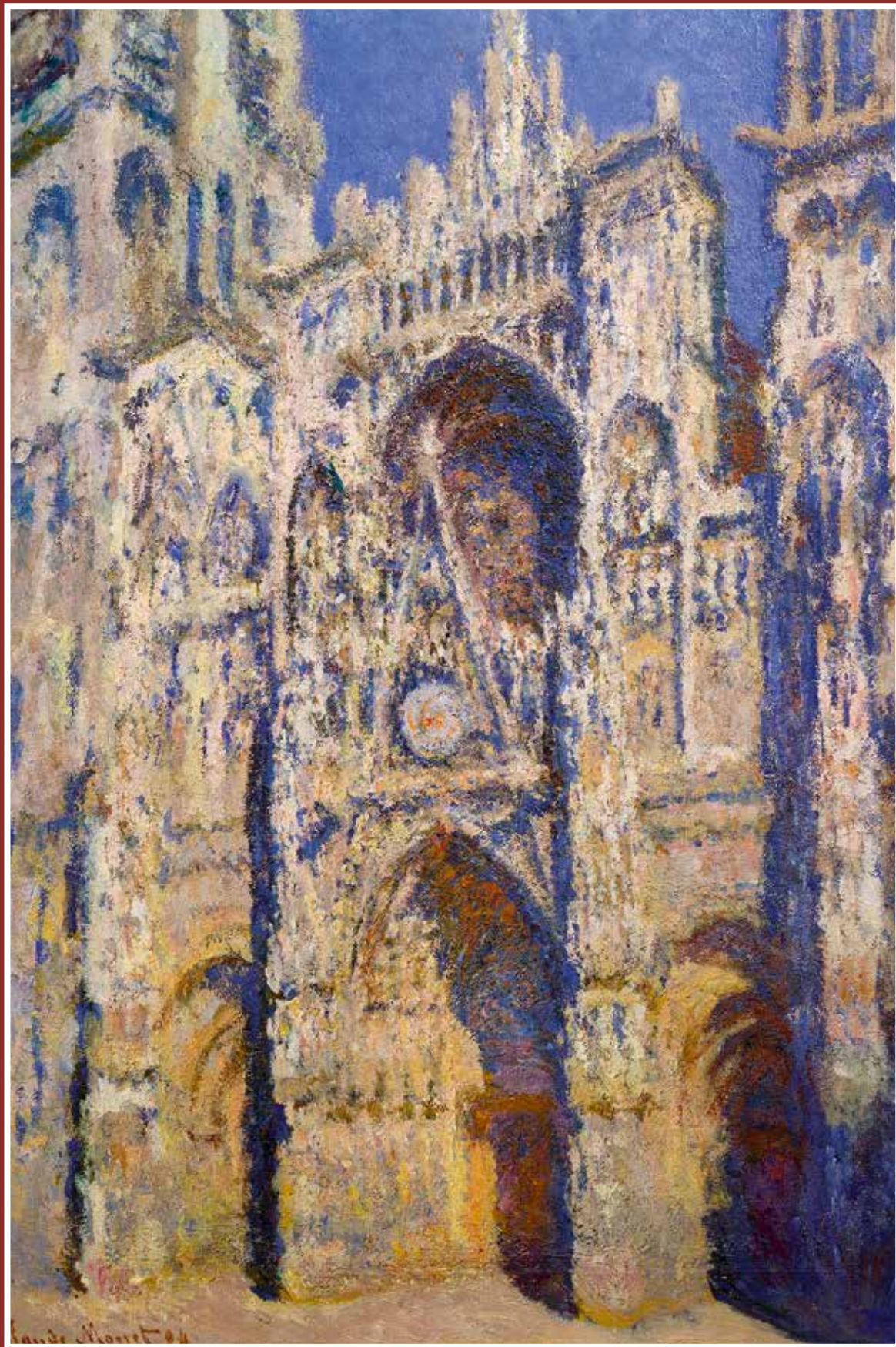


FOLLOWING MONET



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Located in northern France, Normandy has played muse to many impressionist painters including Claude Monet. His painting of the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Rouen highlights his love for the place.

KIRK FISHER/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO/INDIA PICTURE

IN NORMANDY

ENCHANTED BY THE LIGHT THAT ILLUMINATES MONET'S PAINTINGS OF THE HISTORIC FRENCH REGION, A WRITER TRACES THE ARTIST'S MUSE

BY SATHYA SARAN

There is something about the light in Normandy that inspires so many artists to come here to “capture the light” on their canvases. It bursts upon the senses, making colours overwhelmingly vibrant, and also outlining every exquisite detail. I first caught a glimpse of that light while walking through an exhibition of paintings inspired by Normandy coast. Two years of wishing hard to see it for myself and here I am, with a photographer, driving from Paris. We trace the points on the map that were made famous by a once unknown, daring group of impressionist painters who found inspiration outdoors rather than inside closed studio rooms.

Of all these artists—Renoir, Pissarro, Sisley—I have decided that Claude Monet will be my focus thanks to the photographs I have seen of Giverny, his home of 43 years. His renditions of water lilies and Japanese bridge painted there have ensured Monet's name finds resonance with many readers.

Giverny is a sleepy town shaded by huge trees. Despite the autumnal weather, bees buzz around a few smiling flowers. We pass through a small gate that says “Tours,” and it is like entering a magical world.

When Monet came to Giverny in 1883, the quiet of the town and the country house with its large rooms and rough exterior caught his fancy. But it was the expanse of garden that the house offered that must have made him decide that he would make the place his own. It must have felt like a sanctuary after the constant struggle with rejection he had to face in his career. It was here that Monet found his anchor, while the railroad easily took him to Paris and back, where he would go to visit exhibitions and hobnob with fellow artists.

Monet lived in Giverny for the rest of his life and, over the years, enlarged the original house and set about creating the garden that would be his refuge, and his inspiration with the ever-shifting play of light and the passing seasons. In an amazing synchronisation of art and life, his reflective work endeavoured to capture the magic of the place, just as the place eventually became inextricable from his work.

Facing Page: The beach town of Deauville (top left), is filled with seaside resorts and villas for the elite; In the late 19th century, Monet set up base in the sleepy town of Giverny. Every nook and corner of his country home (bottom) of 43 years was planned in great detail, including his studio (top right), where reproductions of some of the artist's favourite works are on display.

Monet planned the garden down to the last detail, using trees and flowers to create geometry through vertical and diagonal lines and squares of colour. He orchestrated changing patterns of light and shade through each hour of the day. The Fondation Claude Monet, which manages the property, recreated the garden to closely resemble the one planned by the artist, down to the flowers in the arches and bowers. As we walk up to the house, the burst of flower and foliage makes it hard to focus on the building. The garden is a mix of asters and cosmos, dahlias and sunflowers. Hollyhocks nod in the breeze, and busy Lizzies form lacy patterns in the sunlight. Roses blush red from within their thicket of dark green. A gust of wind carries their scent, or a whiff of unseemly lavender.

It is overwhelming, but I wonder how it must look when spring fills the space with an even headier bouquet. Monet's many renditions of his garden over the period he lived here helped the Fondation recreate it exactly, putting in the right flowers at the right places in every season. In sharp contrast to the garden, Monet's house seems quiet, contained. Each room offers a different mood. Visitors walking through are quiet, as if they are in a sacred spot. Perhaps it is Monet's almost palpable presence in the carefully planned rooms that makes us all walk quietly, so as not to intrude.

The rooms that capture my imagination are the studio, the artist's bedroom and the dining room. Sunshine streams into the large studio from the garden-facing windows, and dust floats in the shafts of afternoon light. Reproductions of some of the artist's favourite works hang here, placed exactly as he had placed the originals. This is where Monet worked during his early years at Giverny, at times peacefully, at times wielding his brush with creative urgency. The studio was later replaced by a new one, where Monet worked bathed in light that poured in from the ceiling.

The dining room is a study in sunshine yellow. I imagine the children tip-toeing silently, as records state with the only sound at mealtimes “of cutlery scraping the plates” in deference to their father's immersion in his work. A glaze of paint lights up every piece of furniture. Friends of the artist and his family must have spent some memorable moments here, partaking of meals that Monet planned and orchestrated from a kitchen that still gleams with a line of copper vessels.



THOUGH HE PAINTED THE RIVER AT ROUEN, MONET WAS MORE ENTRANCED BY THE CHALK CLIFFS AT ÉTRETAT AND THE WAY LIGHT PLAYED ON THE WATER THERE

IXEFRA/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES (BEACH); ITPX/PRISMA/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (SITTING ROOM); CLEMENT PHILIPPE/ARTERRA PICTURE LIBRARY/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (HOUSE)



ESSENTIALS

Normandy, a region in northern France, lies 220 km/2.5 hr west of Paris, and is accessible by the Eurostar rail. Monet's home is open between March and November from 9.30 a.m.-6 p.m. (check fondation-monet.com for dates; entry for adults €9.50/₹765, children aged 7-18 €5.50/₹442, under 7 free.)



It is in the bedroom that I glimpse the other Monet: a Spartan soul who retired for the night to a minimalist bed. The room has just two pieces of wooden furniture and the work of his closest friends, surrounding him like angels around his head. In time, Monet's increased prosperity allowed him to buy the piece of land across the road. Here, he recreated the scenes he had seen in his collection of Japanese paintings, bought with a connoisseur's eye, since they first captured his attention during his youth.

Entering the Water Garden, I feel like Alice entering Wonderland. Cypress trees bend narcissistically to catch their reflection in the still water; the lilies, some white and some pink, and the large, round floating leaves—how exactly they mimic the paintings that I have seen in museums, books, and on souvenirs! I walk over the Japanese bridge that Monet painted over 50 times, trying to capture it from far and up close, catching new aspects and angles as he explored abstraction as an expression.

I would love to tarry here, watching the changing light on the garden and pool, but it's time to head to another of Monet's favourite haunts: the town of Rouen. The river Sienne winds its way through picturesque bends, and quaint houses with wooden beams give the town a medieval look. Rouen's

A cobbled pedestrian centre with medieval half-timbered houses dominate Rouen. Facing Page: Among Monet's more famous paintings are the chalk cliffs at Étretat (bottom left), where erosions have created stunning arches, making the landscape (top) a popular day trip from Rouen; Monet found the company of other impressionists in the shipping village of Honfleur (bottom right).

pride, the Notre-Dame Cathedral, dominates the town square. The cathedral was one of Monet's favourite themes. He painted the asymmetrical building from different angles through the year. Fog, rain, and sun changed the surface of his canvas as he struggled to capture the essence of the building rather than the particularities of its physical form. We try to visit the room, in what was once a dressmaker's shop, where Monet sat to paint, but it is locked.

Though he painted the river at Rouen, Monet was more entranced by the chalk cliffs at Étretat and the way light played on the water there. The cliffs, with huge rocks hollowed by the wind, are a photographer's delight. We spend an hour walking along the promenade and drive up to a viewpoint before heading to the shipping village of Honfleur, where sailors built a wooden church that still defies the elements. At Honfleur, Monet found himself in the company of other painters, all trying to find new ways of expressing themselves, the precursors of the avant garde impressionist movement.

We drive on to the twin towns of Trouville and Deauville, seaside resorts for the rich and famous. A walk down the villa-lined beach gives us a glimpse of the life that visiting impressionists, Monet included, witnessed and painted when rich clientele showed interest in and bought their work.

Normandy makes me wish I could paint, but I content myself with taking photos to "capture the light" instead. A few days later, when I come face-to-face with a large canvas of Monet's garden at London's Tate Modern Gallery, I feel the Normandy light fill my eyes again. ☀