

The Avant-Garde and the Sea

by Gail Leggio

“Manet and the Sea,” originating at the Art Institute of Chicago, approaches the avant-garde art scene in nineteenth-century France from an unusual angle, focusing on a specific genre, marine painting. The organizers acknowledge the role of different nationalities—the American James McNeill Whistler (1834–1902), the Dutchman Johan Barthold Jongkind (1819–91)—and widen their scope beyond the expected Impressionists to include Gustave Courbet (1819–77) and Eugène Boudin (1824–98). Although not known primarily as a marine painter, Édouard Manet (1832–83) is an intriguing choice as catalyst for the exhibition, epitomizing the complex crosscurrents of his milieu. A daring innovator who was part of the Impressionists’ circle but never formally exhibited with them, Manet was a keen student of the old masters, as demonstrated by last year’s knockout “Manet/Velázquez” exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Manet’s subdued Spanish palette distinguishes him from many of his more chromatically extroverted contemporaries.

The nineteenth-century behemoth excluded—probably wisely—from the present 100-work exhibition is, of course, the Englishman J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851), arguably the greatest marine painter of all time. The slice of art history under the microscope here could be characterized as largely post-Romantic. The few Romantic artists tangentially considered are all French, and all helped shape contemporary notions of what constitutes a seascape. The sea as a pictorial subject opens a wide range of possibilities: subgenres run the gamut from history paintings entailing nationalistic promotion through depictions of naval battles or trade prowess, to seascapes in which human business is eliminated or subordinated to natural forces, from seaside resort images that document the leisure activities of the bourgeoisie, to formal experiments verging on abstraction and *symboliste* allegories.

The essays in the excellent exhibition catalogue fill out the background to Manet and company’s ambitious projects.¹ The one historically crucial work not in the exhibition² is Théodore Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa* (1919), which caused a sensation by turning the epic-scale history painting into a vehicle for topical political commentary. The 1816 shipwreck is dramatized to expose a callous abuse of power by the French navy, which cost over 100 lives. Manet followed Géricault’s lead in tackling a contemporary subject for his first sea painting, the linchpin of this show, *The Battle of the U.S.S. “Kearsarge” and the C.S.S. “Alabama”* (1864).³ The painting records the confrontation, off the coast of Cherbourg in the English Channel, between the Confederate wooden commerce raider and the victorious Union ironclad on June 19, 1864. Although Manet was in Paris at the time and did not witness this important Civil War



Édouard Manet, *The Battle of the U.S.S. "Kearsarge" and the C.S.S. "Alabama,"* 1864

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battle, he was able to construct his own version from detailed press accounts. While Géricault's full-blown pictorial rhetoric is fueled by righteous indignation, Manet considers the action from the more detached point of view of a modernist. Géricault places us in direct contact with the suffering of the human figures, foregrounded amid the turbulent waves. Manet puts the action on the horizon, where the "Alabama" sinks; clouds of smoke obscure the form of the successful "Kearsarge." A pilot boat, moving diagonally through the choppy, almost inky water to rescue stranded sailors clinging to a spar, is more prominent than the ostensible subject. Manet's daring compositional strategy gives over much of the canvas to the dark blue-green, black-

shadowed expanse of waves. The horizon line is high, and the sky a mottled mass of smoke and cloud.

But Manet had other models, besides Géricault. Contemporary critics saw affinities with Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), whose *Christ on the Sea of Galilee* (1854) is included in this exhibition. Above all, there is the example set by seventeenth-century Dutch painters such as Willem van de Velde (1633–1707) and Ludolf Backhuysen (1631–1708), whose *Dutch Vessels on a Stormy Sea* (1690) Manet would have encountered at the Louvre.⁴ Until the nineteenth century Dutch artists had set the gold standard for marine painting, reflecting the fact that the Netherlands' economic fate was tied to the sea. One of the Dutch paintings in this exhibition, van de Velde's *An English Ship in Action with Barbary Corsairs* (1680), exemplifies the old master approach: the drama takes center stage, details such as the complicated rigging are deftly observed, and the dark smoke of conflict contrasts with nature's blue sky. A number of French artists followed this tradition well into the nineteenth century, but the official marine would be eclipsed by the fervor of the Romantics—who saw the sea as a mysterious force⁵—and by the formal experiments of the modernists.

France has never been a seafaring nation, in the way of England or the Netherlands, but attitudes were changing by the mid-nineteenth century. Seaside resorts were becoming accessible by rail from Paris, and Manet like many others spent time at coastal towns—Boulogne, Arachon, Berck—with family and friends. In addition, as a teenager, Manet had sailed from Le Havre to Rio de Janeiro and back. Thirty-three out of Manet's forty sea paintings, along with works on paper, lie at the heart of this exhibition, encapsulating contemporary preoccupations. *Steamboat Leaving Boulogne* (1864), for example, is based on observations made during a stay at the seaside. In Manet's daring composition the little steamboat, chugging out dirty smoke, cuts a diagonal course through the more elegant sailboats, rendered as cursory strokes of black paint. The almost-weightless sea is a flat color field of streaky blue-green. Such works had a strong impact on contemporaries such as Whistler and Claude Monet (1840–1926).

You can see Manet's influence in Monet's dramatic *The Green Wave* (c. 1866–67), with its bold paint handling and dark palette, very different from the shimmering chromaticism usually associated with Monet. Here, swelling, dark-emerald waves are shadowed in black, their cresting foam indistinguishable from slathers of white paint. Sails are sketched-in triangles of stormy grey. The high horizon line is reminiscent of Japanese prints, a craze at the time. But Monet was influenced by another French artist as well. The three-dimensionality and sense of movement make Monet's wave painting seem like one by Courbet. The Realist Courbet, born in a mountainous region but enamored of the sea, intuitively responds to the physicality of water. In *The Wave* (c. 1871) the whole world is reduced to a lowering grey sky and that epic surge—glassy green in the light, black in the cavern of the swell, with bristly white paint artic-

ulating the crashing surf. With Courbet's 1869 *The Wave* the sky boils with brownish clouds, while the sea is a Dionysian tumult of heavily dragged paint. Courbet's depictions of primal grotto pools are equally visceral and seductive.⁶ The Surrealist Joan Miró testified to the continuing force of Courbet's seascapes, commenting on *Stormy Sea* at the Louvre: "One feels physically drawn to it, as by an undertow. It is fatal. Even if this painting had been behind our backs, we would have felt it."⁷

Manet may not be the most compelling sea painter of his era, but his always intelligent and often superb work is varied and inventive, making for fruitful comparisons with a host of other artists. The marine genre offered a cluster of locales to be explored—the sea itself, the harbor and the beach. During an 1868 sojourn in Boulogne, Manet found many pictorial opportunities. Some watercolors of sea and light are almost abstract, but more often he focused on shore activities. His efforts are well documented by two sketchbooks, one only recently rediscovered, that help us reconstruct how the artist arrived at his final compositions (most of which were finished in the studio). Two oils showing the harbor—*Jetty and Belvedere at Boulogne* and *Jetty at Boulogne* (both 1868)—emphasize structural elements; the black jetty cuts the canvas



Eugène Boudin, *A Coastal Scene with Fishing Boats in Normandy*, c. 1853–57

BOB P. HABOLDT, PARIS AND NEW YORK



Berthe Morisot, *The Harbor at Lorient*, 1869 NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, D.C.

along a horizontal line, with masts providing vertical punctuation. *The Beach at Boulogne* (1868) has a pseudo-naïve charm, with a well-dressed holiday crowd deployed across the sand and a sprinkling of boats—both steam and sail—dotting the serene, rather domesticated-looking sea. Using the 1868 (Whatman) sketchbook and x-radiography, art historians have uncovered how much care actually went into this apparently casual scene. In the summer of 1873 Manet and family vacationed at Berck, a fishing community about thirty miles south of Boulogne, which had already become too overrun with tourists for some tastes. *On the Beach—Suzanne and Eugène Manet at Berck* (1873) is dominated by the fashionably dressed figures of Manet's wife and brother in the foreground, but it was painted—if not quite finished—on the spot; there are traces of sand in the paint.

The new genre of the society beach scene was largely invented by Eugène Boudin, who, unlike Manet, participated in the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874 and made a career depicting the fashionable crowds that fueled the seaside tourism phenomenon. Boudin learned about light and *plein air* painting from Barbizon artists Camille Corot and Charles Daubigny and exchanged ideas with modernists Courbet and Monet, all of whom frequented an artists' colony at Honfleur. With his low horizon lines and naturalistically observed groups of figures, Boudin seems a less radical painter than Manet. Boudin is much more interested in the social panorama, and he maintains the illusion of spatial recession. But his paint handling is loose and vivacious, with real modernist dash. He is a wonderful painter in his own right and an essential figure in this survey. The wide-screen *Beach at Trouville* (1863) is a signature

work; you can almost hear the wind snapping the flags and rustling the petticoats of ladies gathered, with the more soberly clad gentlemen, children, and a couple of dogs, to watch the regatta. Boudin is equally adept at depicting those who make their living from the sea, as in *A Coastal Scene with Fishing Boats in Normandy* (c. 1853–57), with its silhouetted figures and luminous, painterly expanse of sea and sky, translated into sweeping brushstrokes in shades of lavender and pale yellow.

Another underrated artist included in this exhibition is Johan Barthold Jongkind, a Dutch émigré who was a pioneer in modernist representations of the sea. Monet, who painted alongside the Dutch artist, claimed that “Jongkind, along with Corot, is at the origin of what one called Impressionism.”⁸ Like his Dutch predecessors, Jongkind was drawn to the commercial activity of harbors; like the Barbizon painters, he often worked *en plein air*. Two works here reveal his way with richly impastoed paint, especially in capturing the luminosity of a cloud-filled sky: the almost featureless *Seacoast at Saint-Adresse* (1862), with its tiny horizon-line boats and foreground horses blending into a shadowy coulisse of beach, and *Port of Honfleur at Evening* (1863). *Port of Honfleur* has a sky as radiant as any of Monet’s, grey-green clouds blooming with rose and gold highlights, all reflected in the rippling water; the tracery of ships’ rigging acts like the leading in a stained-glass window to shape the light.

The close relationships among the members of avant-garde circles provide illuminating insights into the period. Berthe Morisot (1841–95) met Édouard Manet in 1868 and married his brother, Eugène, in 1874. She exhibited with the Impressionists and encouraged her brother-in-law to use fractured color. The Manet and Morisot families vacationed together, and Morisot’s waterside images are among the most appealing works in this exhibition. The bright sunniness of her depictions of water, sky and harbor derives from a devotion to the color white, just as Manet’s paintings reveal his devotion to black, which Velázquez called the queen of colors. Morisot was an adventurous painter. She sometimes worked on a boat, despite the difficulties, gaining a water-level vantage point. She was a rapid and accomplished watercolorist, and her loose, improvisational style carried over into her oils, which critics often faulted for a lack of finish. From the beginning, however, her skills as a colorist were never in doubt. Morisot’s *Harbor at Nice* (1882) has the kind of free-spirited dash we associate with John Singer Sargent’s watercolors. With the sky whittled down to a tiny wedge, white resort buildings dotting a green hill, and pleasure craft sketched in along the shore, Morisot has filled less than half her vertical canvas. Everything else is water, or more accurately wonderfully uninhibited brushstrokes that convey the movement of water. Blue sky and white clouds are observed obliquely, reflected in the restless water, broken up into shimmering pastel tones. In a horizontal close-up of a boat near the shore, *The Harbor of Nice* (1882), the warm brown of the wooden sailboat casts paint-squiggle reflections

in the blue and white abstraction that nevertheless functions as a perfectly convincing depiction of the harbor. This is a natural-born painter cutting loose. Even in an earlier work from around the time she met Manet, we can see a personal vision. *The Harbor at Lorient* (1869) plays with convention. The composition is shaped by a strong curved wall functioning like a traditional coulisse, where a fashionably dressed young woman sits, her dress and parasol a bravura display of white. Boats and buildings are pushed back to the horizon. While the paint handling is still fairly subdued here, you can already see Morisot's personality in the luminous exchange between water and sky.

Another interesting relationship spotlighted by this exhibition involves the cosmopolitan American Whistler. Whistler knew Manet well by 1863, and their distinct but complementary roles in the avant-garde made for a lively exchange of ideas over two decades. Whistler's first seascape, *Blue and Silver: The Blue Wave* (1862), not in this exhibition, shows the influence of his friend Courbet, but thick paint and naturalism did not constitute a direction the American wanted to explore. Japanese prints—with their simplified forms, muted color schemes and flattened pictorial space—provided a more sympathetic model. Manet's seascapes, Richard Dormont suggests in the catalogue, would have been equally stimulating, with their high point of view and apparently casual placement of incidents. Manet's *The Battle of the U.S.S. "Kearsarge" and the C.S.S. "Alabama"* and related paintings may have inspired Whistler to try the ploy of modernizing history painting.⁹

Whistler found his contemporary history subject at Valparaíso on the coast of Chile, where the Spanish fleet was bombarding the city into ruins. But Whistler seems even less interested in straight reportage than Manet. Again, the event provided a pretext for formal experimentation. The title of a painting not in the current show, *The Morning after the Revolution, Valparaíso* (1866), refers explicitly to the events, but even there the artist does not seem particularly focused on whatever is happening on the wharf and in the harbor. Figures and ships are less distinct still in the vertical-format *Valparaíso Harbor* (1866), where the wide grey-brown jetty leads the eye back into the slate-blue water, abruptly cut off with a straight horizontal by a brownish hillside, topped by a striated sky. The strong, simple shapes and essentially two-color palette make this a modern, Japanese-inspired image. The masterpiece of this Chilean suite is *Crepuscle in Flesh Color and Green, Valparaíso* (1866), a horizontal oil with a more illusionistic sense of space; the flotilla of ships recedes convincingly across the harbor. The title announces that mood will be more important than action. This *Crepuscle*, depicting twilight, like the more celebrated *Nocturnes*, works in a half light that blurs forms. Whistler found his own way of dragging paint across the surface of the canvas, giving weight to the greenish water already shadowed by the approaching dusk. Avoiding anything as garish as a conventional sunset, Whistler stretches banks of subtly colored clouds across a sky lighted by streaks of white paint. There are other Whistlers here that show

Manet's influence more directly, notably *Trouville (Grey and Green, the Silver Sea)* (1865), with its casually placed shorthand sailboats, but *Crepuscle in Flesh and Green* illustrates how one great artist can help another find his own style.

"Manet and the Sea" was co-organized by Joseph J. Rishel of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Douglas W. Druick of the Art Institute of Chicago. The exhibition travels to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, February 15–May 30, 2004, and the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, June 18–September 26, 2004.

NOTES

1. Juliet Wilson-Barrau and David Degener, with contributions by Lloyd DeWitt, Richard Dormont, Douglas W. Druick, Gloria Groom, John Leighton, Joseph J. Rishel, Bill Scott, Ann Temkin, and John Zarobell, *Manet and the Sea* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2003).
2. The fragile painting does not travel from the Louvre. A full-scale copy has been touring with an excellent 2003 exhibition, "Crossing the Channel: British and French Painting in the Age of Romanticism."
3. The germ of this exhibition was the Metropolitan's small show "Manet and the American Civil War: The Battle of the 'Kearsarge' and the 'Alabama'" (June 3–August 17, 2003).
4. Lloyd DeWitt, "Manet and the Dutch Marine Tradition," in *Manet and the Sea*.
5. The catalogue includes a discussion of literary giant Victor Hugo's powerful, idiosyncratic brown-ink-and-wash drawings, well worth exploring on their own.
6. In fall 2003, Salander-O'Reilly Galleries in New York City mounted a fine 28-work Courbet exhibition, including some remarkable seascapes.
7. Cited, *Manet and the Sea*, p. 161.
8. Cited, *Manet and the Sea*, p. 173.
9. *Manet and the Sea*, pp. 189–92.

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