

Claude Monet

*The Cathedral of Rouen series*



**Fig. 1** Claude Monet, *The Cathedral of Rouen, Sunrise*, 1893. Oil on canvas, 106x73 cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay.



**Fig. 2** Claude Monet, *The Cathedral of Rouen at Mid-Day*, 1893. Oil on canvas, 100x65 cm. Moscow, Puškin Museum.

During the winter of 1892-93 Monet carried out **about fifty canvases of the Cathedral of Rouen**, painted from his second-floor hotel room facing the church's main façade. Through this series of works the artist studied **the variation of colours caused by the ever-changing conditions of natural light** during the course of the day. On each canvas Monet painted the same subject but changed the view of it, in keeping with the change in natural light using prevalence of white, gray, light blue and golden pink. By so doing the artist overturned the principles that had been the basis of his previous works. His earlier pieces owed their dynamic quality to the real mobility of the subjects depicted and to the complexity of things in their landscape (see his flowing water, banks of fog, trains, crowds and moving figures); by contrast the Cathedral works emphasise that the movement is generated by the appearance – in its colours, light, and atmosphere – while the object remains stable.

**Light on Architecture**

The Cathedral's façade fills every canvas but is only partially seen, thus creating a new form of composition, **a chance cutting** in which we can clearly see an influence of the recently commercialised technology of **photography**. The slightly **diagonal arrangement**, moreover, indicates the spatial depth between viewer and building.

The series' **dominant theme is light** as it strikes the Gothic façade, reflecting and dispersing over thousands of sculpted reliefs; light mixes with colours, achieving a tactile quality and even seems to originate from them. Even the architectural form, which has been brought to the painting surface and thereby denied any usual relationship with a background, seems to dissolve in Monet's light. Overlapping touches of pure colour erase the profiles, blur the details, transforming the Cathedral's refined sculptural ornamentation into pure

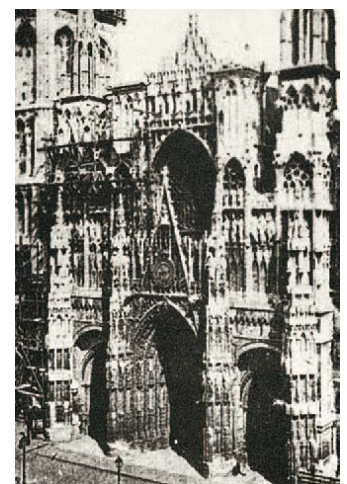
pictorial matter. The façade's sparkling quality is highlighted by the contrast between the prevalent areas in light and the parts in shade. The latter are not rendered by using black but rather by overlapping complementary colours, from light blue to ochre, from dark blue to burnt Siena).

**The Dissolving Form**

Our perception of the form in each Cathedral painting varies according to the atmospheric quality, meaning the weather conditions and the presence of light. This results in a group of artworks in which no two images of the same subject are ever identical. By breaking traditional ways of working Monet invites the viewer to **think not about stability but rather about what changes architecture carries within itself**.

Monet's artistic biography is emblematic of one of the explorations carried out by Impressionists. From the representation of movement, **from pinning down the unique character of the fleeting second**, it evolves into the desire to **capture change, the constant flow**.

Although the initial givens of the subject are still recognizable, the perceptive dissolution of the forms leads Monet's investigation to the limits of the abstraction process. In this way the subject's variation becomes an affirmation of **the relativity** of our relationship to reality and, therefore, to our consciousness of it.



**Fig. 3** The façade of the Cathedral in a photograph taken around the period in which Monet was working in Rouen.