

# Monet's 'Impressionism' birth dated by Texas State's 'Celestial Sleuth'

3 September 2014, by Jayme Blaschke



Claude Monet, Impression, Sunrise (W263)

The Impressionist movement of the late 19th century takes its name from French artist Claude Monet's moody, dreamlike painting Impression, Soleil Levant (Impression, Sunrise). Now, Texas State University astronomer and physics professor Donald Olson has applied his distinctive brand of celestial sleuthing to Monet's masterpiece, uncovering new details about the painting's origins and resolving some long-standing controversies over what the canvas depicts and when it was painted.

Olson's findings are published by the Musée Marmottan Monet of Paris, France, in Monet's Impression Sunrise: The Biography of a Painting, the catalog of the museum's major Monet exhibition running Sept. 18, 2014 to Jan. 18, 2015.

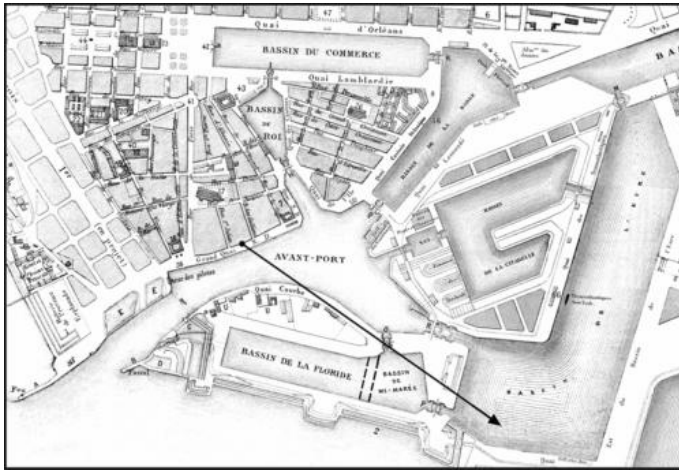
Based on Olson's research, the curators of the exhibition conclude, as the most probable date, that Monet painted Impression, Soleil Levant from his hotel room in Le Havre, France, on Nov. 13, 1872 at 7:35 a.m. local mean time.

## A room with a view

"For several other Monet paintings from Le Havre, we can be certain that the artist depicted the topography of the port accurately," Olson said. "Impression, Soleil Levant likewise appears to be an accurate representation of a sparkling glitter path extending across the waters of the harbor, beneath a solar disk seen through the mist accompanying a late fall or winter sunrise."

Monet dated his signature with a "72" on the painting, but some subsequent catalogs dismiss that number and date the painting to 1873, assuming that Monet had worked in Le Havre during the spring of that year. The hazy nature of the image further confused the issue, with various sources disagreeing regarding the season of the year depicted and the direction of Monet's view. Several influential art historians even insisted that the canvas depicted a sunset, not a sunrise. Monet himself helped to resolve some of the uncertainty in an interview from 1898:

"I had submitted something done in Le Havre, from my window, the sun in the mist and a few masts of ships in the foreground ... They asked me the title for the catalog; it could not really pass for a view of Le Havre, so I replied: 'Put Impression.' From that came 'Impressionism,' and the jokes proliferated."



True north is at the top of this map showing Le Havre harbor in the decade of the 1870s. The dot indicates the position of Hôtel de l'Amirauté on the Grand Quai, and the arrow points in the direction of the low Sun seen in Impression, Sunrise. Quai Courbé, with its distinctive semi-circular shape, projects into the outer harbor (avant-port) from the south. For a period of about three or four hours near the time of high tide [pleine mer], the tide-gates [écluses] (labelled H-R) were open and sailing ships could enter or exit the various tidal docks (bassins) of the port. Credit: Collection of Donald Olson

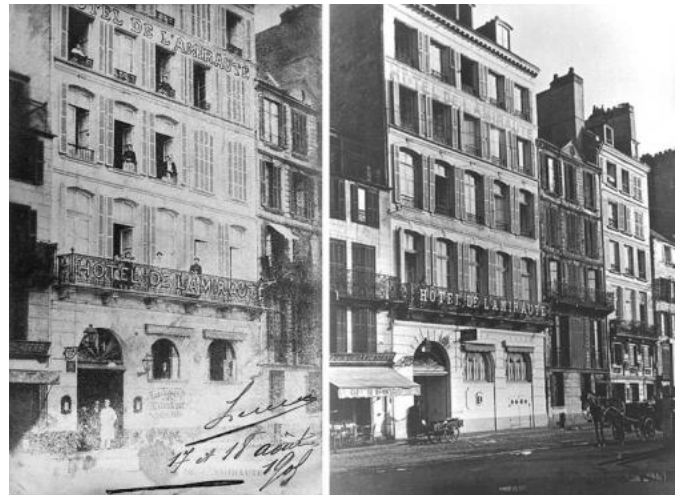
Olson began his work by consulting 19th-century maps and collecting more than 400 vintage photographs of Le Havre. One especially clear and detailed photograph made it possible to identify the precise hotel room from which Monet worked. Olson confirmed the view from the room to the southeast matched that of the painting and subsequently calculated the sun's position over the harbor—roughly 20 to 30 minutes after sunrise. To further narrow the possible dates, Olson then looked at the tides. Since the large sailing ships could only enter and exit the shallow outer harbor during a few hours near the time of high tide, he used computer algorithms to calculate the tides of that era. The result was 19 possible dates in late January and mid-November of 1872 and 1873 when the sun and tides corresponded with the painting.

**What's the weather like?**

Weather reports were the next clue in Olson's

detective work.

"Meteorological observations allow us to reject some of the proposed dates, because of the bad weather common on the Normandy coast during the late fall and winter months," Olson explained. "Weather archives also can identify some dates when the sky conditions match the appearance in Impression, Soleil Levant."



These 19th-century photographs show the Hôtel de l'Amirauté with the hotel name prominent on the façade. The distinctive architectural features allow us to recognize the hotel in wide-angle photographs of the Grand Quai taken from across the harbor. Credit: Collection of Donald Olson

Six dates remained after eliminating those with stormy, rainy or windy weather and heavy seas. To narrow the field even further, Olson examined the smoke columns rising over the harbor on the left side of the painting. The smoke appears to be blowing to the right, which would indicate a wind from the east. Two remaining dates record an east wind: Nov. 13, 1872 and Jan. 25, 1873.

An essay by art historian Géraldine Lefebvre in the exhibition catalog gives reasons for preferring the year 1872—matching the original date "72" painted by Monet next to his signature on the canvas—and the combined analysis points to Nov. 13, 1872 as the definitive date when Monet created Impression,

Soleil Levant.

"It is pretty clear that Monet started from observations from his hotel window during this visit to Le Havre, but then he showed his artistic genius by expressing emotional content that goes beyond literal depictions," Olson said. "Knowing the details of the harbor scene in this painting only increases our admiration of the artist's skill in depicting this sunrise."

Provided by Texas State University

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