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THE CARICATURES OF CLAUDE MONET

CLAUDE MONET spent part of his youth in Le Havre. For many years his admirers found in his work elements which could have been expressed only by a native of the place; even in the physical man they thought they saw some reflection of the people of the town and its life. His broad shoulders, his straight nose, the deep accent of his voice, seemed to stamp him as the descendant of some line of Norman sailors. For them, perhaps, the great seaport existed, not in the close provincial life of its shopkeepers and bankers, but in the interpretations he had shown them of its broad spaces of sea and sky and rough cliffs which he had filled and covered with light and air. The soil of Normandy had given birth to Poussin, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Flaubert, and de Maupassant; it was not surprising that another great artist had come from it. But in a conversation with Hugues Le Roux in 1889, Monet dispelled what had become almost a legend. He had been born in Paris on November 14, 1840 (which was also Rodin's birthday) and his mother's parents were originally from Lyons. While very young he had been taken to live in Le Havre, had grown up there, and remained faithful all his life to his early impressions of that sea by which he had spent so many days. Perhaps what he remembered of the busy commercial city was not unlike the memories most artists have of provincial towns from which they have come, and for a long time any statement of his life there among its people seemed never to have been admitted in the summary of his work.

It is now known that Monet, during the early years spent in Le Havre, really began his career as an artist by a series of caricatures depicting some of its inhabitants. What the motives that lay behind this were, we do not know, but from time to time these drawings were displayed in the windows of a stationer's shop where also pictures were framed and artists' supplies sold. When Mr. Carter H. Harrison gave to the Art Institute an unusual and

interesting group of French drawings by nineteenth and twentieth century artists, there were among them ten of these caricatures.¹ That any of them was ever published is uncertain. In a letter to Mr. Harrison, H. I. Cottereau, from whom he obtained the drawings in 1927-28, states that Monet had been approached by Carjata, a publisher of caricatures, to make drawings of this kind which he wished to issue. However, Gustave Geffroy,² Monet's friend and biographer, who was the first to write of his early life in Le Havre, makes no mention of their publication but he does tell us that they were a most important stepping stone in the artist's development. Seeing the caricatures in the stationer's window, the painter Boudin became interested in the young artist and asked to meet him, and

¹ Rufus Crontelli, $5\frac{1}{8} \times 3\frac{3}{8}$ inches (13 x 8.5 cm.). Jules Didier, $24\frac{1}{4} \times 16\frac{3}{4}$ inches (61.7 x 43 cm.). Gifts of Carter H. Harrison.

² *Claude Monet, sa vie, son temps, son œuvre.* (Paris 1922).



CARICATURE OF RUFUS CRONTINELLI, PENCIL DRAWING BY MONET.

it was in the shop that they were introduced. It was Boudin who first encouraged Monet to paint and from that time on he never attempted any form of satirical or popular art.

The meeting with Boudin took place in 1856, so the caricatures were produced when Monet was only fifteen or sixteen years old and they show a remarkable talent for human observation and a taste for mild satire. Even the distorted heads and diminished bodies, a common device which had found its best use in the hands of Agostino Carracci, do not violate a certain respect and good humor for the subjects. At first they may seem amusing because they strike us as a little old-fashioned and are examples of a style of humorous illustration which was to develop for fifty years and spread even as far as America where we find such types, far from home, doing duty in the illustrations for books as popular as Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*. So they have a certain admirable honesty and are in the best popular tradition. Among the work of their time they look towards the great in any influences we try to find. The sketch of the centaur in the drawing of Jules Didier, Banker, is one reflection of Daumier's *Histoire Ancienne* series. It gives a clue to the basic influence of Daumier who, at this period, issued many lithographs of political personages with large heads against his better judgment on the specific request of his publisher, Philipon. The arrangement and disposition on the paper of a few give the suggestion that Monet might have developed into one of the brilliant French poster designers: the unoccupied spaces in some of the drawings make them like the trial proof of a lithograph where letters will appear in a later state. But their most interesting quality as we see them more and more is the realistic portraits they give of these businesslike citizens whose names mean so little now, who had their own small circle of importance, forgotten except in these drawings, which themselves were not resurrected for more than seventy years.



CARICATURE OF JULES DIDIER, BANKER, CHARCOAL DRAWING ON GRAY PAPER BY MONET.

They show us the little world of Le Havre as Monet knew it, just as the paintings which followed his association with Boudin show us the wonders of the sea, sky, and cliffs which surrounded it. And, promising as these caricatures are from the hand of one so young, we can hardly blame the artist for the final choice of material which later gave his name its identity and was the prompter of its expression. We look for something like these characters in his painting and never find them again; even in the portrait of the cook, Paul, we find none of this kind of humor.

It was a wide gap that was crossed between these drawings and the view of Sainte-Adresse, painted eleven years later, and even a far greater journey from there to the Nymphéas of his last years, but the caricatures, aside from the merits they have within themselves, are valuable as a document in this life which dedicated its loyalty to forms subtle yet permanent and had, at an early time, dispensed so briefly with such a large class of humanity.

HUGH EDWARDS