Claude Monet
The Magician of Colour

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A Childhood at the Seaside

Claude Monet was born in Paris on 14 November 1840. When he was five years old, his family moved to Le Havre on the north coast of France. He grew up in this lovely seaside town with its constantly changing light and the flowing patterns made by the water.

The fishermen were his friends. The young Monet spent many hours on the beach watching them work in the harbour.
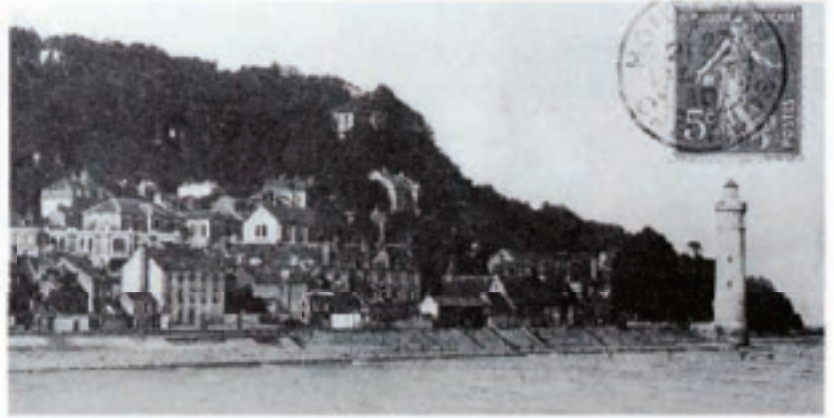

Hauling a Boat Ashore, Honfleur

Later, when he had grown up, Monet painted this picture of three fishermen hauling their boat in at dawn. The sun has not risen yet, but its golden glow has already made the sky yellow and the bands of cloud are violet and red. A lighthouse looms in the background. The morning light is reflected in the water.
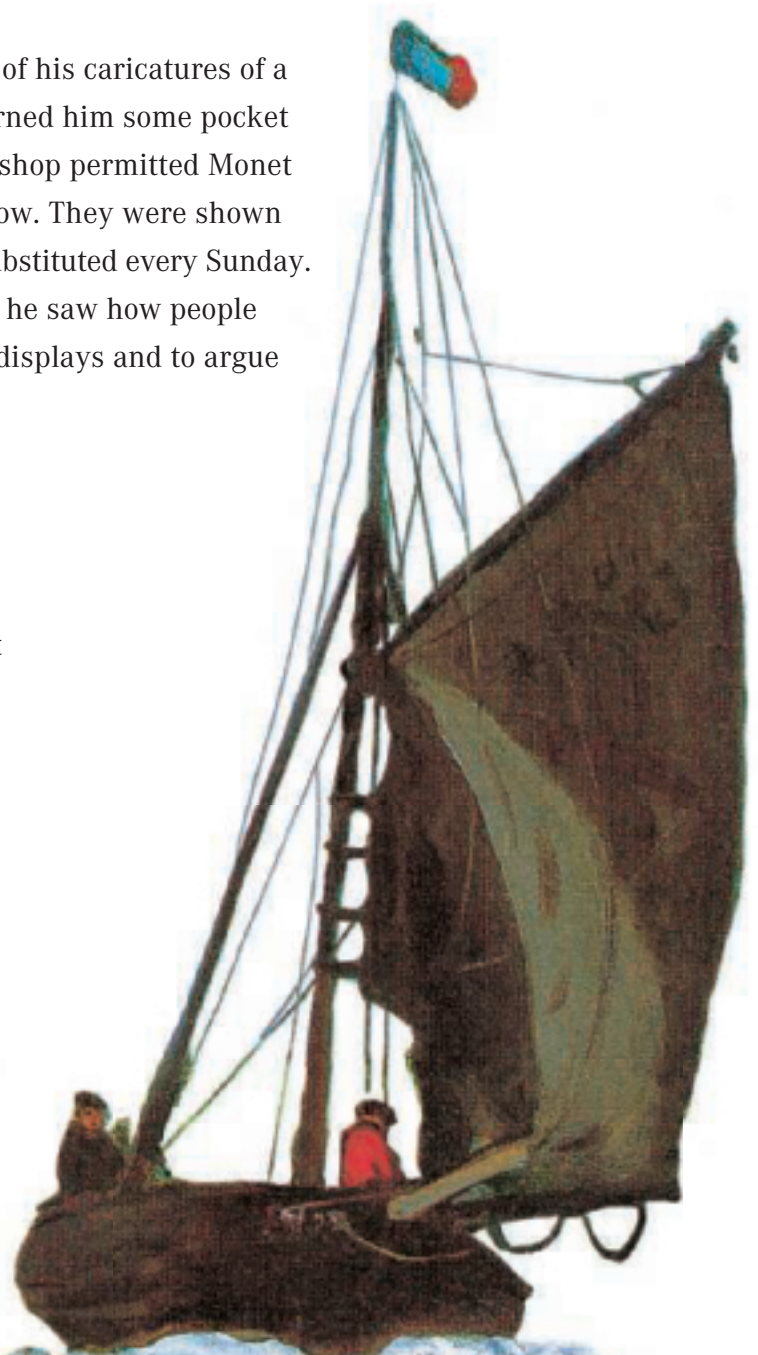
A caricature of a
man in a straw hat

A postcard showing
Honfleur near Le Havre

At about the time he started school, Monet began to draw the ships in the harbour and the many different types of people that arrived on them.

He was especially pleased when one of his caricatures of a fellow student or citizen of Le Havre earned him some pocket money. The owner of an artists' supply shop permitted Monet to display these caricatures in his window. They were shown in gold frames and new pictures were substituted every Sunday. Monet said later that he was filled with pride when he saw how people pressed their noses to the window to see his latest displays and to argue about how good the likenesses were.
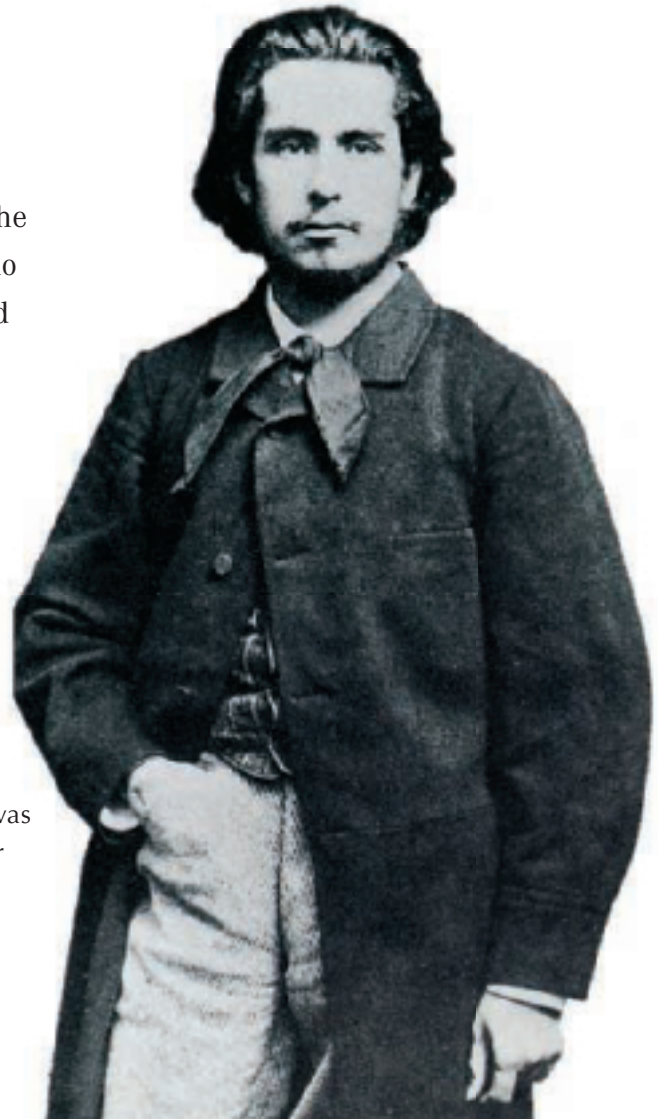
The famous landscape painter Eugène Boudin also saw and liked these drawings. He invited Monet to join him on the beach to paint. But Monet did not want to do this. It was unusual for an artist to paint pictures in the open air, and the people of Le Havre thought that Boudin was a bit of a fool. One day, however, Monet went along with him. What he learned that day was to remain with him through his entire life. Painting fascinated him so much that he decided to become a painter. His parents were not convinced. They wanted him to enter a respectable profession and earn a decent living.

Monet Becomes a Painter

Monet made up his mind. In 1860, at the age of twenty, he travelled to Paris and began to study at one of the inexpensive art schools. His father was pretty annoyed. Only Monet's aunt, Marie-Jeanne Lecadre, who had looked after him since the death of his mother three years earlier, encouraged him and gave him a bit of money. When after a year in Paris he was called up to do his military service, she paid for an exemption so that he could complete his studies. Presumably, she understood his love of painting so well because she herself liked to paint. Above all, she believed that he had talent and that he would, one day, be a famous painter — and in that she was absolutely right!

Monet's fellow students at art school reported that he always wore elegant clothes. Even when he had no money — and this was almost always the case — he would appear in a lace-trimmed shirt, wearing a hat and carrying a walking stick.

Monet when he was about twenty-four