

Institution: The University of Edinburgh
Unit of Assessment: 34 Art and Design: History Practice and Theory
Title of case study: Rethinking Monet: developing the concept for the most popular art exhibition ever held at Paris's Grand Palais
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>This project, which challenged both preconceptions about a renowned artist and also the character of a retrospective, resulted in the most visited art exhibition ever staged at the Grand Palais in Paris (913,064 visitors). At the request of the Musée d'Orsay and Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Professor Richard Thomson led the team organising <i>Monet, 1840-1926</i>. This was the first major retrospective of the work of Monet in Paris since 1980 and provided a model for mounting retrospectives. Building on research into the wider socio-historical impact of art, and its ability to stimulate debate, the radical display of Monet's paintings has made their scholarly interpretation more publicly accessible and is recorded in an exhibition catalogue that sold 83,000 copies.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Due, in part, to Claude Monet's productivity, most surveys of his work have been presented in chronological order. While this has furthered appreciation of the artist's output, it has done little to engage the viewing public with subtle continuities across Monet's oeuvre, particularly those that are not so much technical as conceptual (for example, his sense of introspection and nostalgia). On becoming President-Director of the Musée d'Orsay in March 2008, Guy Cogeval wanted to reignite public interest in the world's most famous Impressionist by encouraging visitors to view the fruits of the artist's sixty-year career in a fresh light. By organising <i>Monet, 1840-1926</i>, Paris' first major retrospective of the artist in thirty years, Cogeval also wished to reaffirm the city's position as the world's leading centre for the understanding and appreciation of Impressionist art and the calibre, in particular, of the Musée d'Orsay.</p> <p>Richard Thomson, Watson Gordon Professor of Fine Art at the University of Edinburgh (1996 – present) was approached in 2008 to develop the concept for the Monet retrospective on the strength of his reputation for bringing new dimensions to Impressionist exhibitions (five in the last decade alone, seen by a total of 2.5m visitors across seven world cities). In 2003, working with Michael Clarke at the National Galleries of Scotland, he curated <i>Monet: The Seine and the Sea, 1878-1883</i>, incorporating a dozen paintings by artists such as Corot and Courbet to demonstrate how Monet's work at that time was responsive to that of earlier painters.</p> <p>Thomson's concept for the 2010-11 retrospective hinged on his insight (see 3.1) that 1890 was a pivotal year for Monet, who had just turned fifty, had started to have press and commercial success, and had settled in Giverny embarking on painting in series.</p> <p>Leading an established team of three curators from the Musée d'Orsay – Sylvie Patin, Sylvie Patry and Anne Roquebert – Thomson selected 175 works and divided them into three main sections, the first called <i>Nature and Nation</i> (landscapes of France from 1865-1889); and the second a series of mini-retrospectives of figure paintings and portraits and still-life paintings. In these sections, Thomson's aim was to concentrate on previously dispersed images (bringing together over eighty French landscapes, for example) and, in the first section in particular, to encourage the predominantly French public to compare the France of today with that of over a century ago. This reflects Thomson's wider research interest in art's socio-historical importance and capacity to stimulate debate, in this case about national identity.</p>

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The final section of the exhibition was divided into three themes: series, interiority and decoration. While focussing on work after 1890, all three included some paintings from before that date, juxtaposed to suggest continuities across Monet's oeuvre. The interiority theme was particularly innovative, showing groups of paintings Monet made at Pourville, Vétheuil and London between 1896 and 1904 and juxtaposing them with canvases of the same motifs made years earlier. These evoked ideas of memory and nostalgia in the artist's work and encouraged the visitor to gauge the extent to which Monet was more than a painter of immediate effects.

3. References to the research

3.1 *Monet, 1840-1926*. Paris, Galeries Nationales, Grand Palais, 22 Sept 2010 - 24 Jan 2011. Catalogue (English edition) ISBN 978-2-7118-5761-6 published by Société Française Du Livre. (REF 2 Output Submitted) Texts by Richard Thomson:

'*Emotive naturalism, 1881-1891*', pp.33-47; '*A Retrospective*', pp.84-7; '*The Suburbs of Paris*', pp.118-24; '*Vétheuil, 1878-1881*', pp.156-61; '*Normandy in the 1880s*', pp.172-8; '*The Mediterranean, 1884 and 1888*', pp.192-8; '*Belle-Ile and the Creuse, 1886 and 1889*', pp.206-11; '*Interiority - memory - nostalgia*', pp.282-90.

3.2 '*Monet and Neptune's Sea: Bordighera, 1884. Antibes, 1888* in *Right under the Sun. Landscape in Provence from Classicism to Modernism, 1750-1920*, ed. Guy Cogeval and Marie-Paule Vial, Marseilles, Musée de la Vieille Charité/Montreal, Museum of Fine Arts, May 2005-January 2006, pp.114-25. ISBN 978-9053495223

3.3 *Monet. The Seine and the Sea 1878-1883*. Edinburgh, National Galleries of Scotland, 6 Aug - 26 Oct 2003. Catalogue (English edition) ISBN 978-1903278444 published by National Galleries of Scotland Texts by Richard Thomson: '*Introduction*', pp.11-13; '*Looking to Paint: Monet 1878-1883*', pp.15-35; Catalogue entries pp.52, 54, 56-7, 60, 64, 66-7, 68-9, 72, 74, 76, 79, 82-3, 87-8, 90-1, 92-3, 96-7, 100, 102, 104, 106, 108, 110, 112, 115, 116, 118, 120, 126, 128-9, 132-4, 136-8, 140-2, 144, 148-50, 152-4, 166.

3.4 Thomson, Richard, *Monet's Rouen Cathedrals: Anarchism, Gothic architecture and instantaneous photography*, in Thomson and Fowle (ed.) *Soil and Stone: Impressionism Urbanism Environment*, London, 2003, pp.153-69. ISBN 978-0754636854

4. Details of the impact

Thomson's challenge, in leading the *Monet 1840-1926* team, was to conceptualise, select and mount an exhibition which not only surveyed Monet's career comprehensively but provocatively challenged widely-held public preconceptions about both the artist and the character of a museum retrospective.

Brought into an established team at the Musée d'Orsay, he created a successful partnership with other colleagues at Orsay and the Réunion des Musées Nationaux, negotiating key loans and refining the initial selection made in October-November 2008. This coming together of experts from both academia and public museums was a key exercise in knowledge exchange, leading to more public access to the paintings and their international, scholarly interpretation (5.8).

Beyond his curatorial work, Thomson became involved in raising sponsorship for the exhibition, giving a presentation at the Hôtel Matignon to the financial services company, Natixis, on 14th December 2009. This resulted in sponsorship of €500k for the exhibition and a piece by François

Pérol, Director of Natixis, in the catalogue, commenting on the company's wish to be associated with the reassessment of the artist and on the show's 'surprising connections and unprecedented groupings' (5.6). Having collaborated with Guy Cogeval on choosing authors for the exhibition catalogue essays, Thomson wrote the account of the concept of the show in the catalogue, together with six section introductions (totalling about one third of the publication) and liaised with the production team. During the exhibition, 83,000 copies were sold (French, English and other languages) at €50 a copy (totalling €4.1m in sales) (5.1).

Prior to the exhibition's opening, Thomson and the team worked with the installation designer and the hanging team, as well as press and sponsorship staff, to ensure maximum public awareness of, and accessibility to, the works on display. At the opening on 22nd September 2010, his contribution to the press launch included radio and television interviews with France Inter, France Culture, France 5, Radio France Internationale, BBC News and Reuters TV (20th September 2010).

Running until 24th January 2011, *Monet, 1840-1926* was seen by a total of 913,064 people and was kept open continuously for the last four days. Thomson played a key role in delivering the most successful exhibition ever staged at the Grand Palais (with admissions totalling €10m based on a standard entry price of €12 and €8 for concessions) (5.1).

To supplement the exhibition, and give more access to contextual material and research, a programme of lectures and films was held in the Grand Palais. Collectively, these received 21,928 visitors, with 5,970 children attending workshops (5.1).

Calculations of the economic value of the Monet exhibition to Paris have been made using the formula provided by the Association of Independent Museums and its figures for London (there is no Réunion des Musées Nationaux equivalent): 100,000 visitors (overnight visit) at €57.13; 200,000 visitors (day visit) at €42.99; 600,000 visitors (local or half-day visit) €21.50; totalling €27,211,000. The *Balances of Tourism in Paris/Ile de France 2010* reported that, while tourism to the capital from western European countries had dropped by two percent since 2009 (due to the economic crisis), 'The success of exhibitions of renowned international artists such as Claude Monet' helped the situation (5.5).

To promote Monet to a younger demographic, Thomson edited the texts for *Monet Numérique* (Digital Monet), an interactive exhibition website, supported by the Conseil National de la Création Artistique (CCA). This website, www.monet2010.com, received two million hits during the four months of the show and remains an active online resource today.

As expected in the initial conceptualisation, which sought to engage historic art with contemporary debate, press and blogs across France responded to the exhibition in terms of national identity, nostalgia and the pressures of modernity: 'Nostalgia for a France of gardens, peaceful villages, and the slow pace of life without the car or the aeroplane' (*Sud Radio*); 'A luminous reflection of French identity...as it was a hundred a years ago' (*inventerre.canalblog.com*); 'The vanished happiness of a France which today has lost its identity' (*Mémorial del'Isère newspaper*).

Indeed, the exhibition was extremely well received in the French and international press, both for its accessibility – 'it met with a public success that is the opposite of elitism' (*Le Figaro*) – and for its presentation of both famous and unfamiliar works in an innovative but legible display. 'The (re) hanging [of these works] is suggestive, and demonstrates a remarkable work of elucidation and reinterpretation' (*Le Monde*) (5.3); {it is a} 'marvellously arranged exhibition', (John Berger, *Harper's*); 'Will there ever be a better Monet show, or one that successfully rethinks this successful

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rethink? Not in my lifetime' (*Sunday Times*) (5.4).

In an interview for the Annual Review of the Musée d'Orsay et de l'Orangerie 2010 (5.2), Guy Cogeval described how 'general astonishment at seeing well known works rehung, gave the Musee D'Orsay the feeling of having been given an entirely new life.'

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Copies of these web page sources are available at

<http://www.wiki.ed.ac.uk/display/REF2014REF3B/UoA+34>

(5.1) Official exhibition statistics from the Réunion des Musées Nationaux to corroborate visitor numbers etc. (available on request)

(5.2) The Annual Review of the Musée d'Orsay et de l'Orangerie 2010, Paris, 2011 (see page 10 for the interview about exhibition and its effects and pages 7 and 63 for photographs)

<http://tinyurl.com/klv8j9o>

(5.3) Review by Philippe Dagen in *Le Monde*, 22 September 2010 <http://tinyurl.com/m7tshja>

(5.4) Review by Waldemar Januszczak in *The Sunday Times*, 26 September 2010

<http://tinyurl.com/k84ddkm>

(5.5) Les bilans de l'activité touristique à Paris Île-de-France press release, 19 January 2011, to corroborate claims re: wider economic effects of exhibition <http://tinyurl.com/kedomu9>

(5.6) Monet, 1840-1926. Paris, Galeries Nationales, Grand Palais, 22 Sept 2010 - 24 Jan 2011. Catalogue (English edition) ISBN 978-2-7118-5761-6 published by Societe Francaise Du Livre

(5.7) The contact details for the Heads of Press and Publications at the Réunion des Musées Nationaux have been provided separately to corroborate claims re Thomson's role, numbers relating to exhibition.

(5.8) The contact details for the President- Director of the Musee D'Orsay have been provided separately to corroborate claims re Thomson's role, numbers relating to exhibition.