

## The Manneporte

I think it may have been the Met's second Monet painting of the great stone arch, *The Manneporte*, from 1886, that I saw first. The Met's other Monet *Manneporte*, from 1883, is less sunny, more storm-tossed, and I believe I discovered that one at a later date, after the magic had already been wrought.

I was wandering around the gallery room, observing the paintings up close, since most of them in those days were highly detailed, realistic images of people, domestic scenes, royal events, mounted soldiers, and the like. But close up, my first experience of an impressionist painting was only a messy abstraction, and I barely noted the pictorial aspect of the work. It was a jumble of colored, blotchy brush strokes, and didn't even register as a painting. At that point in my pre-teen years, having wandered the Met's galleries for many hours, I thought of paintings as being exclusively detailed realistic renderings of old-fashioned scenes: they were largely devoid of any emotional content that an 11-year-old would recognize. I wandered on past the Monet without much of a second glance, wondering why something so unreal would hang among the other paintings.

A few minutes later, some 50 feet away, nearing the entrance to this enormous gallery, I happened to turn and look back at the variety of framed canvases crowding the walls. All the paintings on the far side of the room were filled with dark, tiny details, too far away to discern, but among them was a blazing sunlit ultra-realistic picture of a stone arch in the ocean, the light glinting off the water as in a photograph. I was surprised, since I hadn't noticed anything like this image. I walked slowly toward the painting, trying unsuccessfully to recall having passed it a few minutes

before, and I was mildly troubled that I could have missed it, since it was already by far my favorite work in this austere gallery room full of stern, antique adults.

As I drew within 10-15 feet of the work, which is about two feet wide, it began to come apart. At about 4 feet, the photographic realism disintegrated into the ordered chaos of colored blotches of oil that I now remembered having ignored. Fascinated, I backed away and watched the brush strokes resolve again into a celebration of rock and sun and sea, as realistic as any of the other paintings in the room, but so much more alive, glowing with solidity and almost smelling of the salt water. For the next half hour, I moved slowly to and fro, trying to determine the exact distance at which the strokes morphed into a reality of shape and scene, trying to discover just when the image itself dissolved back into formless colors.

Somewhat later, days or months I don't recall, I found the other impressionists at the Met, and their successors. I wasn't too interested in their categorization, but their shared understanding of what lies beyond the canvas, of where the artist enters into the painting, captured me; Monet's sea-carved rock had changed my ability to experience art forever.