

French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945

The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, Editor



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Claude Monet, *Mill at Limetz*, 1888

Artist	Claude Monet, French, 1840–1926
Title	<i>Mill at Limetz</i>
Object Date	1888
Alternate and Variant Titles	<i>Moulin de Limetz; Moulin de Limetz sur l'Epte; le vieux moulin</i>
Medium	Oil on canvas
Dimensions (Unframed)	36 3/4 x 29 in. (93.4 x 73.7 cm)
Signature	Signed and dated lower right: Claude Monet 88
Credit Line	Former collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, D38-1986. At the time of publication, this painting was a partial bequest from Ethel B. Atha to the museum, where it was intermittently exhibited from 1986 to 2024.

doi: 10.37764/78973.5.630

Catalogue Entry

Citation

Chicago:

Glynnis Napier Stevenson, "Claude Monet, *Mill at Limetz*, 1888," catalogue entry in *French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945: The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, ed. Aimee Marcereau DeGalan (Kansas City: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.37764/78973.5.630.5407>.

MLA:

Stevenson, Glynnis Napier "Claude Monet, *Mill at Limetz*, 1888," catalogue entry. *French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945: The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, edited by Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2022. doi: 10.37764/78973.5.630.5407.

In 1888, Claude Monet painted two views—the Nelson-Atkins painting and another work in private hands (Fig.

1)—of the picturesque grain mill at Limetz-Ville, a small village on the River Epte located just over a mile from his home in Giverny.¹ He was scarcely the first Parisian to be charmed by these quiet agrarian towns—by the mid-nineteenth century, steamboat tours down the River Seine from Rouen to Paris were frequent and popular. These tours emphasized the quaintness and simplicity of the villages along the river.² Interest in the region's landmarks is further evidenced by late-nineteenth-century postcards of Limetz-Ville (Fig. 2), which are largely dedicated to views of the Epte and the titular mill of Monet's pictures. Monet was less interested in representing the architecture of the mill and the sweeping road leading up to it than he was in rendering a sparkling reflection of the mill in the Epte, overlaid with an immense willow tree. However, he was not the first artist to tackle this subject matter.

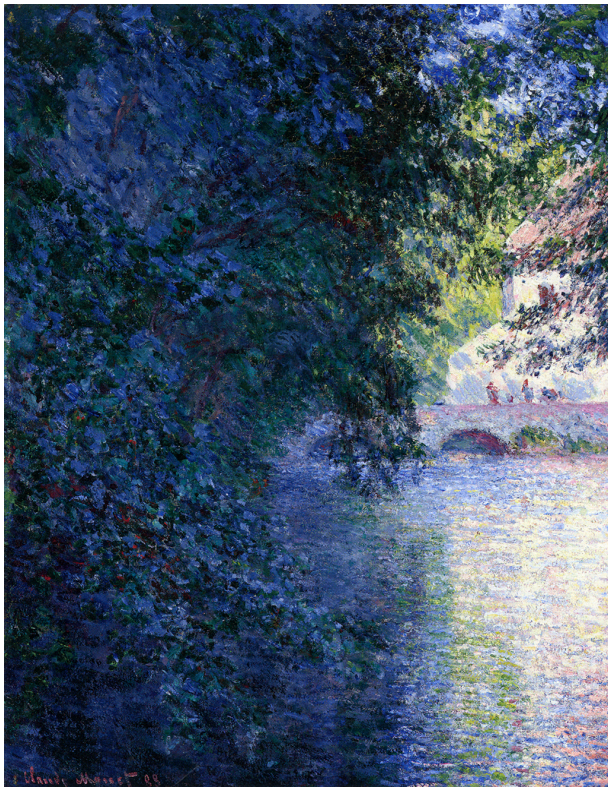


Fig. 1. Claude Monet, *Mill at Limetz*, 1888, oil on canvas, 35 2/5 x 28 3/10 in. (89.9 x 71.9 cm), private collection

In the spring of 1887, a group of seven young North American artists moved into a house together in Giverny.³ A few months after arriving in Giverny, one of these seven roommates, the Canadian painter William Blair Bruce (1859–1906), began his large canvas *The Bridge at Limetz* (Fig. 3).⁴ William Gerds writes of this significant moment: “In future years, the three mills in Giverny, as well as those in neighboring villages, would become an important theme for the colonists, especially for Theodore Robinson (1852–1896), as they recognized their significance for the economy of the region; but in 1887 this was an unusual thematic choice.”⁵ Bruce’s work inaugurated a steady stream of paintings dedicated to the mills around Giverny, including Monet’s paintings of the same mill. I focus here on four paintings of the Limetz-Villez mill: Monet’s two *Mill at Limetz* pictures, John Leslie Breck’s (1859–1899) *Mill Stream, Limetz*, and the forerunner of the mill-painting boom, Bruce’s *The Bridge at Limetz*. The evolution of approaches to painting the Limetz-Villez mill attests to a friendly competition of ideas among the artists living in Giverny. The Giverny artists’ colony has been written about in depth as a whole; thus, to narrow this discussion, I have

chosen to focus on the aforementioned paintings by Bruce, Breck, and Monet, as well as one of Robinson’s three 1892 paintings of a different mill, in the town center of Giverny, which were the logical endpoint of the project initiated by Bruce. Rather than presenting Giverny as a loose orbit of lesser-known artists with a master at its center, the timeline of the mill paintings speaks to a fertile and multidirectional transfer of ideas among the artists in the village in the late 1880s and early 1890s.

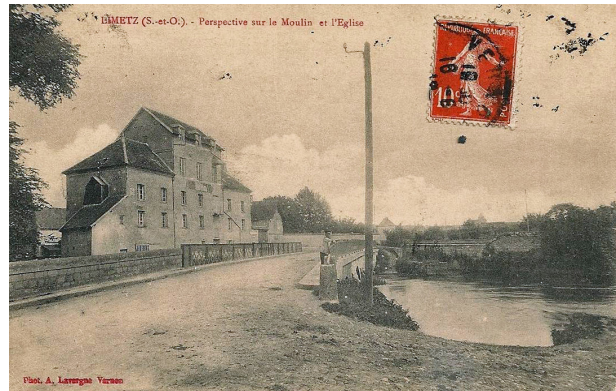


Fig. 2. Unknown photographer, *Limetz (S.-et-O.) – Perspective sur le Moulin et l'Eglise*, ca. 1900, Geneanet.org cartes postales



Fig. 3. William Blair Bruce (Canadian, 1859–1906), *The Bridge at Limetz*, 1887, oil on canvas, 29 x 36 1/2 in. (73.7 x 92.7 cm), private collection, repr. in William H. Gerds, *Monet's Giverny: An Impressionist Colony* (New York: Abbeville, 1993), 95

On June 24, 1887, Bruce penned a letter to his mother back home in Hamilton, Ontario:

My dear mother, I have unconsciously let the time slip by without giving you a word of the new settlement which we have formed here in this most beautiful part of

*France, the river Seine running by almost at our door.
The village is far, far ahead of Barbizon in every respect.*⁶

Over the course of the next few months, Bruce completed *The Bridge at Limetz*, which is a combination of landscape and genre scene. He wrote to his future wife, Swedish sculptor Carolina Benedicks (1856–1935), that he was “afraid of mechanically finishing a thing that I would prefer to leave in parts quite ‘ébauché.’”⁷ Bruce had studied at Paris’s Académie Julian under William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905) and Tony Robert-Fleury (1837–1911) and had enjoyed some success at the Salon with his genre scenes.⁸ Upon arriving in Giverny, Bruce took the suggestion of his friend Robinson and lightened up his palette.

In *The Bridge at Limetz*, the mill is blanched in the strong summer sunshine. It appears whitewashed in more ways than one; not only does the light bleach out cracks and dirt in the building’s surface, but the men laboring to lift grain into the mill appear to do so without difficulty. In the middle ground, a man on the bridge stops to speak with a washerwoman sitting on the banks of the Epte. The result is an image of rustic harmony and simplicity rendered in bright whites, blues, and greens. As Bruce scholar Joan Murray notes,

*Bruce’s aims seem similar to those of the Impressionists: to represent the appearance of the world out of doors as it is affected by light, reflection, and atmosphere, and to convey the sharpness and freshness of the initial sensation. However, his academic training was always apparent in his thought and subject matter. He always analyzed **what** rather than **how** he saw.*⁹

Bruce’s letters also display his interest in the “what”; when discussing the picture with his loved ones, he notes trudging a mile a day from Giverny to Limetz-Ville and leaving his canvas with the mill owner at the close of each painting session.¹⁰ While Bruce certainly had aesthetic interests, as evidenced by his major tonal shift after his arrival in Giverny, the topography and anecdotal details of life in rural France take the lead in his canvases.

A year later, Monet emphasized the “how” over the “what” in his two *Mill at Limetz* canvases. Both pictures relegate the mill to a supporting role; it is only nominally the subject of the paintings. The setting provided the artist with an idyllic backdrop for his primary interests in light, color, and reflection. Bruce’s picture hints at nature, but the river flowing under the bridge and the trees are framing elements for human activity. He drew heavily upon photographic precedents, and his

composition strongly resembles that seen in postcards. Monet, in contrast, wandered farther down the Epte from Bruce’s position at one end of the bridge, positioning himself on the riverbank itself, with a willow tree partially obstructing his view of the mill. In both Monet paintings, the willow tree dominates our view. The mill and bridge of the Nelson-Atkins picture are a sparkling blend of yellow, violet-blue, and pink pigments, while the mill in the private collection version is even less modeled and dissolves into a yellow-green blur. Gone are the village inhabitants hard at work and the backdrop of farm fields in favor of two color studies concerned more with atmospheric effects than anecdotes. Monet chose not to alter his composition between the two versions, nor did he alter their size. The paintings thus welcome contemplation as a pair, despite not having shared wall space since the 1889 exhibition of works by Monet and the sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) at Galerie Georges Petit, Paris.¹¹ It is unclear which version Monet painted first, but we can imagine him working on these canvases at the same time and puzzling out how to render the wall of foliage in both pictures. Monet’s approaches to the willow tree are early manifestations of his passion for seriality, more fully expressed in his *Haystack* (1890–1891), *Poplars on the Epte* (1891), and *Rouen Cathedral* (1892–1894) paintings. Without changing his position, Monet gives the viewer two drastically different atmospheres by capturing the light effects as they fall on the scene. This is most apparent in the treatment of foliage, which appears as a dark, solid wall of mossy green leaves in the privately owned version and is transformed by highlights in the Nelson-Atkins picture into a much lighter bower. The contrast between pink mill and green willow is much clearer in the Nelson-Atkins painting, which also gives the viewer more of a sense of depth.



Fig. 4. John Leslie Breck (American, 1859–1899), *Mill Stream, Limetz*, ca. 1888–1890, oil on canvas, 18 x 22 in. (45.7 x 55.9 cm), private collection; repr. in William H. Gerds, *Monet's Giverny: An Impressionist Colony* (New York: Abbeville, 1993), 96.

The least well known of the works discussed here is Breck's *Mill Stream, Limetz* (Fig. 4), dated between 1888 and 1890, which shows intimate knowledge of Monet's two canvases of the same subject. Breck routinely chose the same motifs as Monet, as can be seen in his own *Grainstacks* series of fifteen paintings from the autumn of 1891.¹² Unlike Bruce, with whom Monet had no known personal relationship, Breck was a close friend of the Monet-Hoschedé family and a regular dinner guest (Fig. 5). Breck painted a portrait of Monet's stepdaughter, Suzanne Hoschedé-Monet (1888; Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC) and was in love with another stepdaughter, Blanche. Not keen on an American suitor for his daughters, Monet broke off his relationship with Breck, who returned home to Boston in 1890. Breck certainly could have seen Monet's paintings of the mill at the latter's large atelier in Giverny or at the 1889 exhibition at Galerie Georges Petit. In either case, Breck's take on the Limetz-Ville mill is explicitly "Monet-*esque*." Breck chose to orient his canvas horizontally rather than vertically, but in composition and palette, the pictures bear striking similarities. Breck, too, asks his viewer to peer at the mill through the willow tree and composes his building out of a blend of yellow, pink, and violet-blue tones.



Fig. 5. John Leslie Breck (seated bottom left), Claude Monet (second from right, standing), and the Monet-Hoschedé family, ca. 1887–1890, photograph, courtesy of Brown Corbin Fine Art, Milton, MA



Fig. 6. Theodore Robinson (American, 1852–1896), *Road by the Mill*, 1892, oil on canvas, 20 x 25 in. (50.8 x 63.5 cm), Cincinnati Art Museum; Gift of Alfred T. and Eugenia I. Goshorn

There is no evidence that Monet ever gave his opinion on this specific work, although we know he often gave younger artists advice. Of Robinson's 1892 *Road by the Mill* (Fig. 6), Monet opined that there were "some undecided tones in the 'moulin' [mill] around the figure and values rather equal."¹³ Perhaps Robinson took these words to heart, since he continued to work on his mill pictures and made each one significantly different. Interestingly, Robinson opted to paint not the Limetz-Ville mill, but one more centrally located in Giverny itself. At this same time, Robinson penned a glowing article on Monet for *The Century*, in which he stated without hesitation: "It is not perhaps too soon to prophesy that in the same manner as the influence of

Corot and Barbizon painters the influence of M. Claude Monet on the landscape art of the future will be strongly felt. Imitation can go but a little way, and is always without value."¹⁴ It is evident that Robinson was, at best, wary of comparisons to Monet and, at worst, dismissive of rote imitation of any kind. This explains his choice of a separate mill for his explorations of this popular motif. After this point, many North American artists would continue to make the pilgrimage to Giverny, but the tight-knit group of seven artists who shared the same house in 1887 moved on from the small village and its limited group of motifs.

The mills in and around Giverny and Limetz-Villez guaranteed that artists in the region were never lacking for subject matter. The number of takes on this motif speaks to the centrality of the mills to life in the area. North American artists were enthralled by the opportunity to capture the topography of this region that was so new to them. While they did not abandon their academic adherence to composition and narrative, Bruce, Breck, Robinson, and their peers did adopt the high-keyed tones and more gestural brushwork generally associated with Impressionism. Monet had lived in Giverny since 1883, and so his two mill paintings approach the subject matter in a less touristic fashion. In his canvases, the natural beauty of Limetz-Villez predominates over the structure of its landmarks. All four depictions of the Limetz-Villez mill, and Robinson's works featuring the mills of Giverny, are evidence of a friendly competition of ideas and approaches to painting. Monet was intimately aware of the motifs popular among the younger generation, especially by 1888, when he struck up a friendship with Robinson. The artists' colony at Giverny should, therefore, be understood less as a hub-and-spoke entity, with a master at the center, than as a constellation of creatives of varying levels of skill who reveled in the opportunity to render familiar scenes in their own style.

Glynnis Napier Stevenson
April 2019

Notes

1. The River Epte is a tributary of the River Seine, flowing through both Giverny and Limetz-Villez.

2. An 1836 steamboat tour guidebook highlighted both Giverny and Limetz-Villez for their small populations (396 and 864, respectively) and dependence on agriculture. Most importantly, the guidebook notes that "the River Epte turns two mills" in the area. The inclusion of the local mills in the short descriptions in a tourist guidebook speaks to their dominance of the landscape. Saint-Edme, *Itinéraire des bateaux à vapeur de Paris à Rouen: avec une description statistique, historique et anecdotique des bords de la Seine; suivi d'un Guide du voyageur* (Paris: E. Bourdin, 1836), 84.
3. The artist's colony at Giverny is well researched and documented. John Leslie Breck, William Blair Bruce, Theodore Robinson, Willard Metcalf, Louis Ritter, Theodore Wendel, and Theodore Earl Butler initially lived together in Giverny. For a fuller account, see William H. Gerdtz, *Monet's Giverny: An Impressionist Colony* (New York: Abbeville, 1993); Susan Behrends Frank, *American Impressionists: Painters of Light and the Modern Landscape*, exh. cat. (New York: Rizzoli, 2007); and Sona Johnston, *In Monet's Light: Theodore Robinson at Giverny*, exh. cat. (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 2004).
4. From Bruce's extensive correspondence with the Swedish sculptor Caroline Benedicks, whom he would later marry, we know that the painter began *The Bridge at Limetz* around July 17, 1887. Cited in William H. Gerdtz, "'The most beautiful country that I have ever visited': William Blair Bruce in Giverny," in Tobi Bruce, ed., *Into the Light: The Paintings of William Blair Bruce (1859–1906)*, exh. cat. (Hamilton, ON: Art Gallery of Hamilton, 2014), 119.
5. Gerdtz, "'The most beautiful country that I have ever visited'," in Bruce, ed., *Into the Light*, 119.
6. Joan Murray, ed., *Letters Home: 1859–1906; The Letters of William Blair Bruce* (Moonbeam, ON: Penumbra, 1982), 123.
7. William Blair Bruce to Caroline Benedicks, August 10, 1887. Cited in Gerdtz, "'The most beautiful country that I have ever visited'," Bruce, ed., *Into the Light*, 117.
8. See, for example, *Temps passé* of 1884 (Owens Art Gallery, Mount Allison University, Sackville, NB).
9. Murray, *Letters Home*, 15. Emphasis original.

10. Gerdt, "'The most beautiful country that I have ever visited'," in Bruce, ed., *Into the Light*, 119.
11. The two mill paintings had numbers 119 and 122 in the exhibition. *Claude Monet; A. Rodin*, exh. cat. (Paris: Galerie Georges Petit, 1889), 41, reprinted in Theodore Reff, ed., *Modern Art in Paris: Two-Hundred Catalogues of the Major Exhibitions Reproduced in Facsimile in Forty-Seven Volumes*, vol. 34, *Miscellaneous Group Exhibitions* (New York: Garland, 1981).
12. This series has been explored in depth for its relationship to Monet's series in Rolf H. Krauss, "Claude Monet, John Leslie Breck und die Getreideschober, oder das Prinzip Serie und die Photographie," *Kritische Berichte* 33 (2005): 77–91.
13. Monet commented on Robinson's painting around September 15, 1892. Robinson worked on smaller mill canvases into November and used photographs of the mill to further his project back home in New York. Monet criticism cited in Gerdt, *Monet's Giverny*, 93–94.
14. Theodore Robinson, "Claude Monet," *The Century* 44 (September 1892): 701.

Purchased from the artist by Durand-Ruel et Cie, Paris, stock no. 1073, as *Moulin de Limetz sur l'Epte*, July 20, 1891–June 9, 1902 [1];

Purchased from Durand-Ruel et Cie, Paris, by Lucien Sauphar (1856–1935), Paris, 1902–August 23, 1935;

Purchased from his posthumous sale, *Succession de M^r Lucien Sauphar: Tableaux modernes par Boudin, Guillaumin, Jongkind, Laprade, Lebourg, Lépine, Marquet, Odilon Redon, Dunoyer de Segonzac; Œuvres importantes de Claude Monet et de Sisley; Objets de Vitrine, Sculptures, Pendules, Bronzes, Sièges et Meubles du XVIII^e Siècle, estampillés de Nogaret, H. Jacob, Brizard, Hansen, Héricourt, etc.; Collection de Verrerie Ancienne art Arabe, Venise, Allemagne, etc., Paravents en Laque de Coromandel; Importants Bijoux Collier, Bagues, Broche, Bracelets, Sautoirs*, Galerie Jean Charpentier, Paris, March 17, 1936, no. 26, as *Le vieux moulin*, by Durand-Ruel, Paris, for Durand-Ruel, New York, stock no. 5305, in half-share with Knoedler and Co., New York, stock no. A1658, as *Le vieux moulin*, 1936–October 25, 1941 [2];

Purchased from Knoedler and Company, New York, by Joseph Samuel (1898–1970) and Ethel Bonita (née Shufflebotham, 1899–1986) Atha, Shawnee Mission, KS, 1941–July 6, 1986 [3];

Partial bequest of Ethel B. Atha to The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, 1986.

Documentation

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MLA:

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Provenance

Notes

[1] See email from Paul-Louis Durand-Ruel and Flavie Durand-Ruel, Durand-Ruel et Cie, Paris, to Nicole Myers, NAMA, January 11, 2016, NAMA curatorial file.

[2] The painting was registered in Durand-Ruel, Paris, stock book as Deposit 15840 from Durand-Ruel, New York. It was transferred from Durand-Ruel, Paris, to Durand-Ruel, New York, in May 1936. Durand-Ruel sold their half-share to Knoedler on November 19, 1941. See email from Paul-Louis Durand-Ruel and Flavie Durand-Ruel, Durand-Ruel et Cie, Paris, to Nicole Myers, NAMA, January 11, 2016, NAMA curatorial file. Knoedler purchased a half-share of the painting, on April 13, 1936, no. A1658, as *Le vieux moulin*. See "Knoedler Book 8, April 13, 1936–October 25, 1941, Page 154, Row 3, Stock No. A1658," The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, Dealer Stock Books, as *Le vieux moulin*.

[3] Durand-Ruel sold their half-share to Knoedler on November 19, 1941. See email from Paul-Louis Durand-Ruel and Flavie Durand-Ruel, Durand-Ruel et Cie, Paris, to Nicole Myers, NAMA, January 11, 2016, NAMA

curatorial file. See "Knoedler Book 8, April 13, 1936–October 25, 1941, Page 154, Row 3, Stock No. A1658," The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, Dealer Stock Books, as *Le vieux moulin*.

Related Works

Claude Monet, *Moulin sur l'Epte (Mill on the Epte)*, 1888, oil on canvas, 35.4 x 28.3 in (90 x 72 cm), private collection, United States.

Exhibitions

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