ART AND OCCUPATION

Claude Monet

Les charbonniers also called Les déchargeurs de charbon
[The Coalmen, also called Men Unloading Coal] c. 1875

On a dull grey winter’s morning against the background of a smoke-filled sky, scores of men are hard at work unloading coal barges on a dark, still Seine. We see a procession of workers, empty baskets on their shoulders, file mechanically, like a human conveyor belt, down perilously narrow wooden gangplanks to the waiting barges, which are laden with coal from the mines of Northern France and Belgium. The coal was transported from Belgium and Northern France via the Saint-Quentin Canal which was some 90 km long and connected the Oise, the Somme and the Escaut rivers. It was completed in 1810 and opened by Napoleon [1]. Other men in the barges’ holds fill the baskets, which the charbonniers (coalmen) haul onto their shoulders and retrace their
steps along the planks to the quayside where they empty their loads into waiting carts. The gangplanks bend with the weight and you can almost hear the wood creaking under the strain. This is hard, dirty, labour-intensive work (a typical 300 tonne barge might take a week to unload). The bridge in the foreground is the road bridge at Asnières, and the Clichy Bridge can just be made out in the grey haze of the background. Horses and carts cross the Asnières Bridge to reach the men unloading the coal from the barges, which supply the nearby factories whose smoking chimneys we can see in the distance. A few pedestrians are also crossing the bridge and one man has stopped to observe the charbonniers at work. This is not a Seurat Sunday stroll in the park or a Renoir regatta.

The style of this painting is somewhat Japanesque and a balletic representation of work. There is a clear analogy with the Japanese prints that Monet collected [2]. Monet seldom depicted images of workers and although he was anxious to show all aspects of modern life, he was not for example, like Seurat, concerned with making political commentary. So this urban landscape is not meant to be a social criticism but merely an illustration of an everyday occurrence in an increasingly industrialized city. Nevertheless, with his muted tones, depersonalized figures and overarching bridges Monet gives the composition a sombre, serious atmosphere, which accentuates the workers’ bleak plight [3].

Monet was born in the Ninth Arrondissement, Paris in 1840 the second son of a wholesale grocer. His family moved to Le Havre in 1845. By the time he was 15, he was already a competent draftsman (a sketchbook from 1857 still survives) and a year later, he began painting en plein air. During his military service in Africa with the First Regiment of African Light Cavalry, he contracted typhoid and was shipped home. Later he moved to Argenteuil on the banks of the Seine, a short train ride (11 km north west) from Paris and enrolled at the academy of Charles Gleyre where he met Renoir, Pissarro and Sisley. In 1871 after spells in London and Holland, he returned to Argenteuil with his new wife Camille and stayed there for 6 years. The location offered a wide range of subject matter and became an important source of inspiration for Monet and his fellow impressionists, who immortalized its river views, bridges, streets and gardens [4]. It was here in 1873 that Monet painted ‘Impression: Sunrise’, which prompted one of its reviewers to use the label ‘Impressionism’ [5] and by the time he settled in Giverny (80 km northwest of Paris) in 1883 he was generally regarded as the leader of the Impressionist School. He bought a house in this village in 1890 and started work on creating a water garden, which was to feature strongly in his painting during the last quarter of his life [6].

Monet was diagnosed with bilateral cataracts (probably age-related nuclear sclerosis) in 1912 and his sight worsened over the next 10 years. He was finally persuaded to undergo surgery in 1923 when his acuity was 20/200 in the better eye. He regained acceptable reading vision and returned to painting with great vigour. Much has been written about Monet’s failing vision and the extent to which it affected his painting. Marmor [7] gives a particularly good account. Three years after his cataract surgery, Monet died at Giverny aged 86.

Monet’s depiction of charbonniers on the Seine at Asnières defies all concepts of modern risk management. In contrast to the laborious way coal was unloaded in 19th century Paris, a modern-day coal terminal such as that at Port Kembla in New South Wales, Australia can handle bulk carrying ships up to 166 000 tonnes [8]. The average cargo size is 65 000 tonnes. The coal berth at Port Kembla has two mechanical ship loaders capable of handling 6 600 tonnes/h. The ship loaders are rail mounted and have hatch coverage of 235 m when both loaders are operating. The stockyard is 100 m wide and 1 km long and can accommodate 850 000 tonnes of coal. Coal is recovered from receival bins through under-bin belt feeders designed to operate at 4300 tons/h. This massive mechanization is accompanied by a strong commitment to health and safety, which in 2007/2008 resulted in zero ‘Recordable Injuries’ [9].

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References
2. 76. Bamboo Yards, Kyobashi Bridge (12th Month, 1857) in 100 views of Edo by Hokusai and Hiroshige.