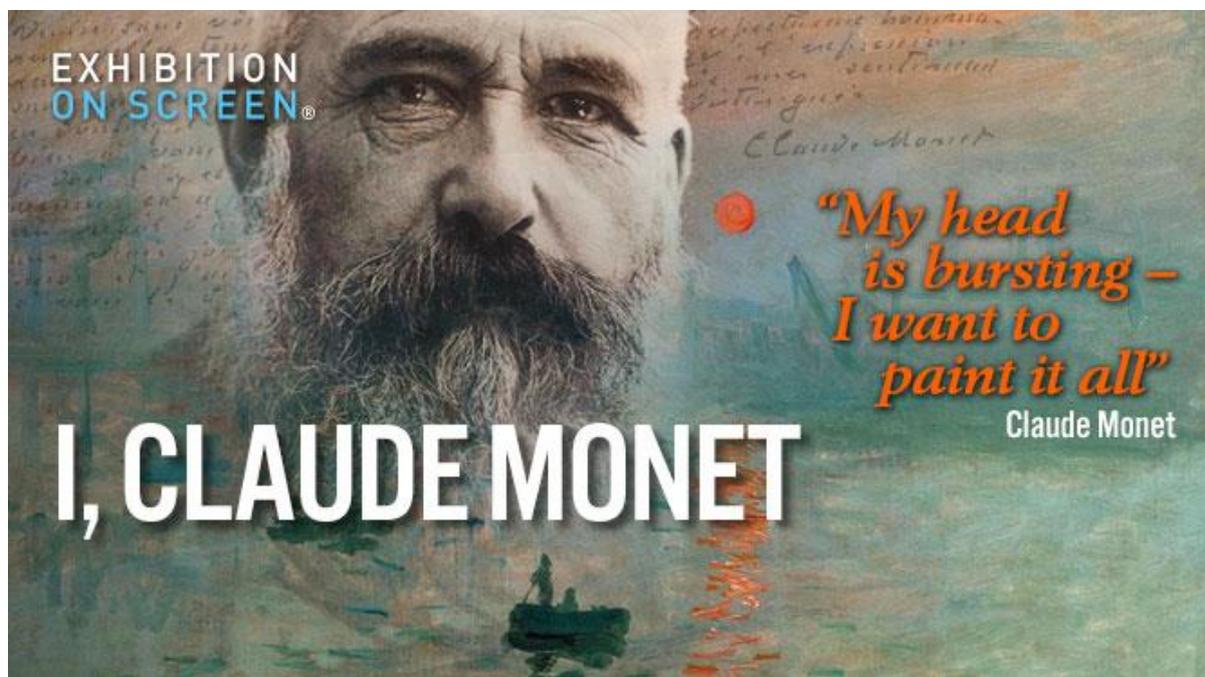


I Claude Monet



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Production cinematography and direction by Phil Grabsky. Narrator: Henry Goodman. Original Music by Stephen Boysted. Edited by David Austin. Cinematic length: 87 minutes. Production Company: Seventh Art Productions. Cinematic release: 14th February 2017: DVD and download release 2018. Rating 95%.

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Written Without Prejudice



Monet in 1871 Wikimedia

Review

It would seem that nothing new could be initiated into the world of documentaries but producer/director/cinematography Phil Grabsky did it! Instead of the omniscient narrator presenting us with the images and then telling us what the images and opinions mean we have only one voice – that of Monet. Narrator Henry Goodman does the voice of Monet through the whole show. All dialogue originates from his letters and diaries. These start in his teenage years in the 1850s and continue in chronological order until September 1926, when he discussed working on his water lily murals in the last months of his life. This may be the director's chosen method, but it may also to an extent a necessity because there might be little primary source material. Monet disliked interviews, publicity and celebrity. The images are usually of his art. A few old photographs, stills of his writings, portraits of Monet by other artists and brief shots of his preserved house and garden are sometimes used. Even so, most of the film's images are of his paintings and the landscapes that inspired them.



Impression Sunrise 1872



Woman with a Parasol 1886

They are frequently merged then one goes into a lap dissolve. A delightfully whimsical touch is when one of Monet's seascapes briefly "comes alive" as film makes his white caped waves move for a few seconds. This interposing of preserved settings and original paintings works cleverly; we are not told that his art is more representational than most assume, we are shown and must make our own conclusions. For a documentary film maker to do this is rare and welcome.

By presenting this monolithic documentary structure it would automatically seem that Monet's words and images would be a perfect match, his words explain the pictures. Explanations, philosophy, anecdotes and described techniques would match the presented images. Exactly the opposite happens.

For those who know even a few of Monet's paintings we would expect the same feelings of serenity, optimism, joy in life, sensuality and peace which his paintings give to exist in the man. In his art as depicted here there is no war or poverty. There are no slums or suffering. One vivid sketch picture in this documentary does show suffering, depicting his dying wife.

London, Houses of Parliament. The Sun Shining Through the Fog. Musee d'Orsay



A few others focus on parts of London in gray fogs or are gray seascapes in which he depicts choppy weather or developing storms. Almost all the others

justify the comments of himself and others that his art was a search for light and he depicted its effects. This frequently gives his art a sense of optimism, sensuality and beauty so strong that it is as if he painted yesterday and nothing has ever worried anyone in the world.

As *I, Claude Monet* reveals through his own vexed, anxious and sometimes mournful words, the artist was anything but carefree. During the early part of his career he was desperately poor, sometimes being turned out of even modest rural accommodation. When his first wife was sick he could not pay for medicines or doctors, she died soon after. Even after prosperity came in the 1880s his writings reveal dislike at what his dealers were doing with his paintings, weariness with his workload and later vexation with local officials.

Amazingly as the film shows through his own words, he sometimes considered creating those serene paintings a tiresome task, almost a burden. He wrote of working at fourteen of them at once. His way of describing them and his creative acts comes close to a factory manager wearily describing productivity problems or a chore. Other writings are literally sunnier and closer to what we expect, describing his search for light and how to depict it.

Water Lilies and the Japanese Bridge 1897-1899

Princeton University Art Museum



By the 1890s he was wealthy enough to own a large rural property and to reshape it. He had enough money to create a large garden and to divert a stream into it, part of which he made into a pond with a Japanese footbridge over it.



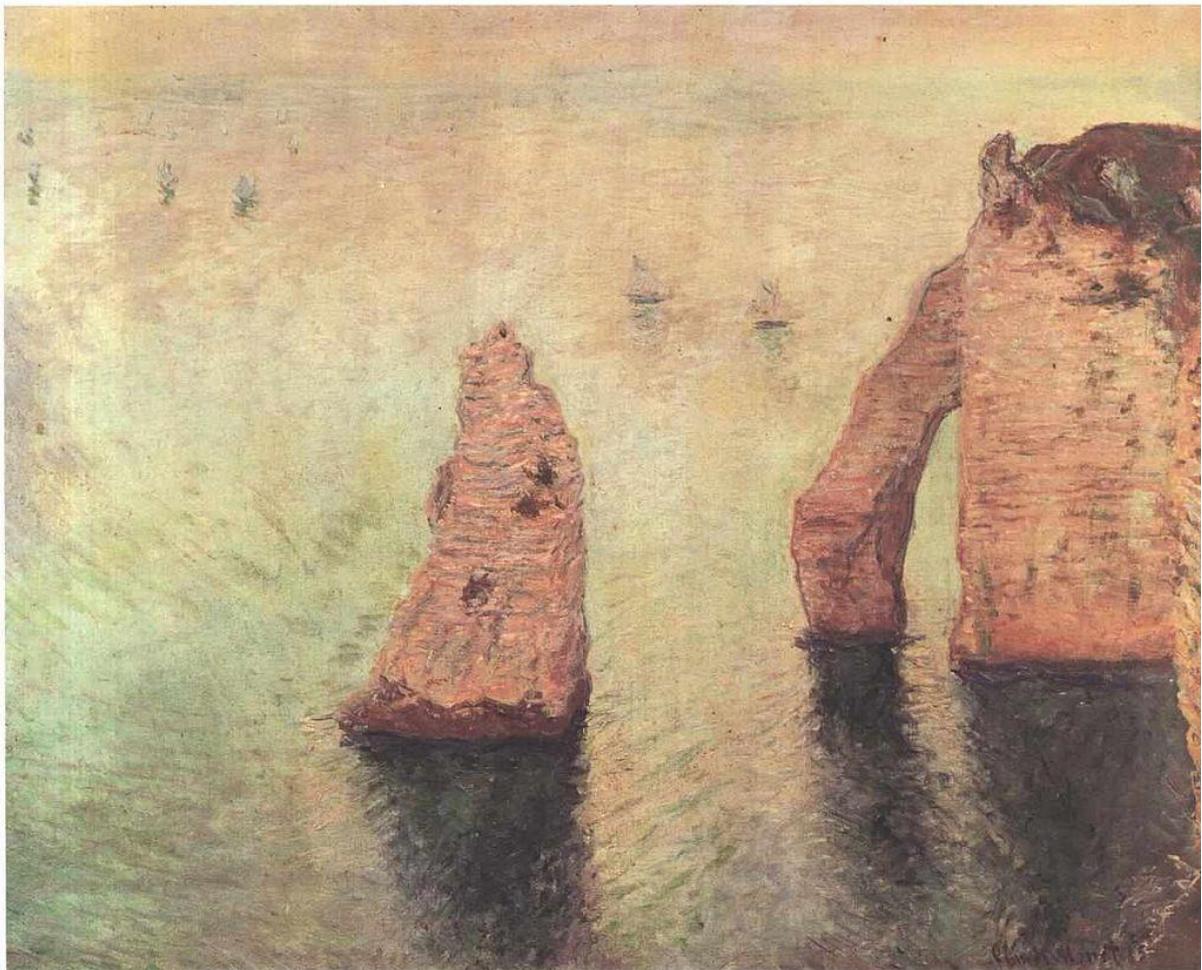
Water Lilies c.1915 Neue Pinakothek

The garden, the stream, the pond and the bridge became the focus of much of his work in the last thirty years of his life and Monet may have had some years of contentment, but misery never left him alone for long. In 1911 his second wife died, followed by his eldest son less than three years later. During the First World War he defiantly and courageously refused to evacuate as German armies approached. Soon after the war's end he experienced the greatest tragedy an artist can survive: glaucoma. Despite worsening eyesight he continued painting. Then in July 1925 operations restored his sight and he resumed work, but in late 1926 cancer struck and ended his life soon after he turned eighty-six. Despite fame money and an ultimately successful career, there were almost

continual and very good reasons for the sadness his words reveal – and his art does not.

Was the joy in his art an escape from the frequent misery in his life?

I, Claude Monet ends with the views of his water lily murals in a museum and exuberance and wonder are the immediate response. The whole film creates those responses and audiences loved it to the extent that public clamouring got a cinematic rerelease a year after its premiere. The public deserved it, so does the film and so does Monet.



*Sailboat Behind the Needle at Etretat. New Year's Day
1885.*

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