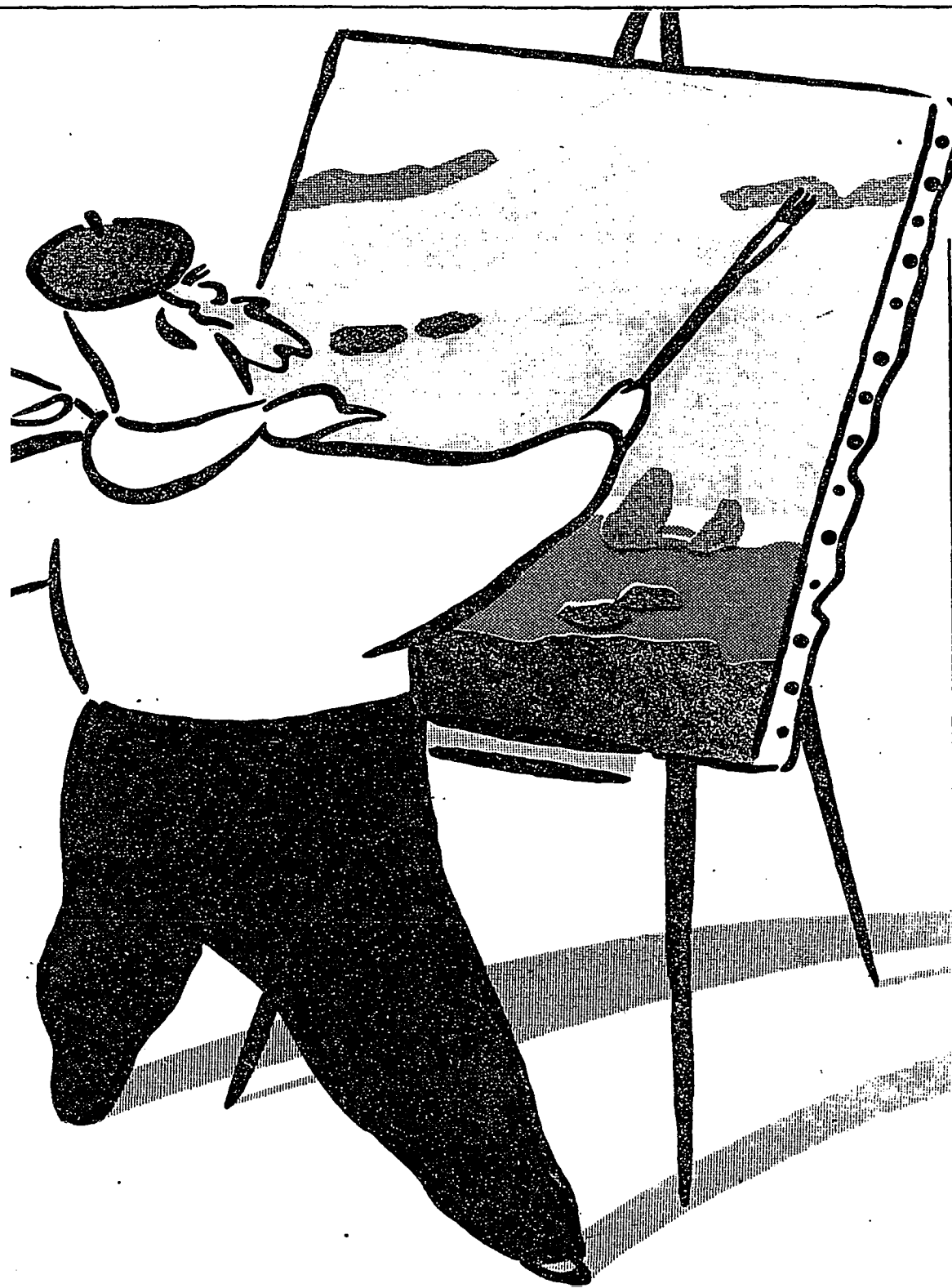


In the Footsteps of the Impressionists: Impressionists

By Michael Dobbs Washington Post Foreign Service
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PILGRIMAGES



In the Footsteps of the Impressionists

By Michael Dobbs
Washington Post Foreign Service

Sailboats on the Seine, carefree conversations over food-laden tables—these sparkling images from “The Luncheon of the Boating Party” by Pierre Auguste Renoir were splashed across my mental canvas as I searched for the Impressionists’ village of Chatou.

But my journey was down dreary highways lined by offices and factories and across a four-lane steel bridge to an island in the middle of the Seine. The “island of the Impressionists,” as it has been christened by the Chatou town council, contains an experimental power station, a sports club and all that remains of the now-defunct Fournaise Hotel, a favorite gathering place for Renoir and his friends.

Once a nautical club for weekend pleasure-seekers from Paris, the Fournaise Hotel is now deserted. The last few years have seen spasmodic attempts by local art lovers to restore the building, but the site itself has lost its soul. The wrought-iron balcony is recognizable enough for anyone who has seen Renoir’s celebrated painting at the Phillips Collection (or currently in the exhibit, “The New Painting, Impres-

sionism 1874-1886” at the National Gallery of Art), but the long, leisurely luncheons that once took place there seem to belong to a vanished era. Who, after all, would want to eat lunch on the bank of a polluted river opposite an electricity grid?

A pilgrimage in the footsteps of the French Impressionists can give rise to mixed emotions. To discover the places associated with a great artistic movement can be nostalgic and exciting, but also strangely melancholic. It is a little like revisiting scenes from your childhood: You are surprised and a little saddened to find out how much has changed in places you remembered as idyllic and unchanging.

Of course, not all the Impressionist sites have changed as much as Chatou. The farther you go from the ever-expanding metropolis of Paris, the more likely you are to find real-life replicas of familiar paintings. The fascination lies in placing these precursors of modern art in their social and historical context, to discover how much of their world has vanished and how much has managed to survive.

The obvious place to begin a journey
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in pursuit of the Impressionists are the Paris museums where much of their best work is collected: the Jeu de Paume and the Marmottan. Here you can fill your head with the wonderful images produced by such masters as Vincent van Gogh, Claude Monet, Paul Cézanne, Édouard Manet and Alfred Sisley before heading off in search of their 20th-century real-life counterparts.

Formerly a royal racket court in the Tuileries gardens, the light-filled Jeu de Paume is already well-known to American tourists, who flood the museum. (From early 1987, the entire collection will be transferred to the more spacious Musée d'Orsay on the Left Bank.)

Apart from the paintings made familiar by millions of reproduc-

tions, there are some interesting group portraits of the leading Impressionists at their Paris studio in Batignolles (since reconstructed in the Montmartre museum). I was struck by their intense, almost messianic expressions—almost reminiscent of members of a religious or revolutionary sect determined to challenge existing conventions.

Unlike the Jeu de Paume, the Marmottan in the 16th arrondissement of Paris is off the regular tourist beat. Yet it boasts perhaps the most superb collection of paintings by Monet anywhere in the world—including a marvelous series of waterlilies painted at his home in Giverny where he spent half his life. Also interesting are copies of letters in which the artist complains incessantly of financial

difficulties.

There are enough Impressionist sites in and around Paris to keep you occupied for at least a week. Living in Paris, we took the opportunity to make several fascinating weekend excursions.

Our first outing was southward, toward the forest of Fontainebleau. Here are to be found the origins of Impressionism in the "back-to-nature" movement of painters like Jean-François Millet, Théodore Rousseau and Gustave Courbet. Turning their backs on the Paris salons after the 1848 revolution, the pre-Impressionists strove to capture the beauty of nature and the simplicity of rural life by painting in the open air.

It was at Fontainebleau that I discovered that sites associated with the Impressionists tend to come in three distinct categories. There are old village inns that have scarcely changed since the days of Monet and van Gogh. There are establishments whose new owners

are cashing in on the Impressionist craze. And finally, there are places now submerged beneath highways, power stations and other debris of modern civilization.

By chance, the first place we wandered into happened to belong to the "miraculously unchanged" category: the Cheval Blanc (White Horse Inn) at Chailly-en-Bière, the last village before the forest on the road from Paris. Monet, Renoir and Sisley all stayed here in the early 1860s. The Jeu de Paume even has a picture of Monet by his friend Frédéric Bazille that shows the young artist convalescing at the Cheval Blanc from an injury to his right leg.

Entering the inn with our art history books under our arms, we immediately felt like unwelcome visitors from another planet. A group of villagers who looked as if they might have walked out of a Millet painting were swinging back glasses of pastis at the bar. No, we were informed gravely, it would not be possible to take a peak at the celebrated sketches in the dining

room next door. Sunday lunch, that most important of French institutions, was under way.

After protracted negotiations with a waitress, we eventually secured admittance to the dining room on the understanding that we would stay for the obligatory three-course meal for 55 francs (roughly \$7) a head. In between such dishes as snails and *boeuf bourguignon*, we sneaked admiring glances at the pre-Impressionist paintings that adorn the walls.

A quite different reception was waiting for us in Barbizon, which gave its name to the school of painters that reveled in the discovery of nature. Now a popular spot for weekend outings from Paris, Barbizon is all geared up to receive tourists. You can see the former studios of Millet and Rousseau (now both museums) and the Ganne Inn, where dozens of painters stayed, which has been turned into a salesroom for the would-be successors of the Impressionists.

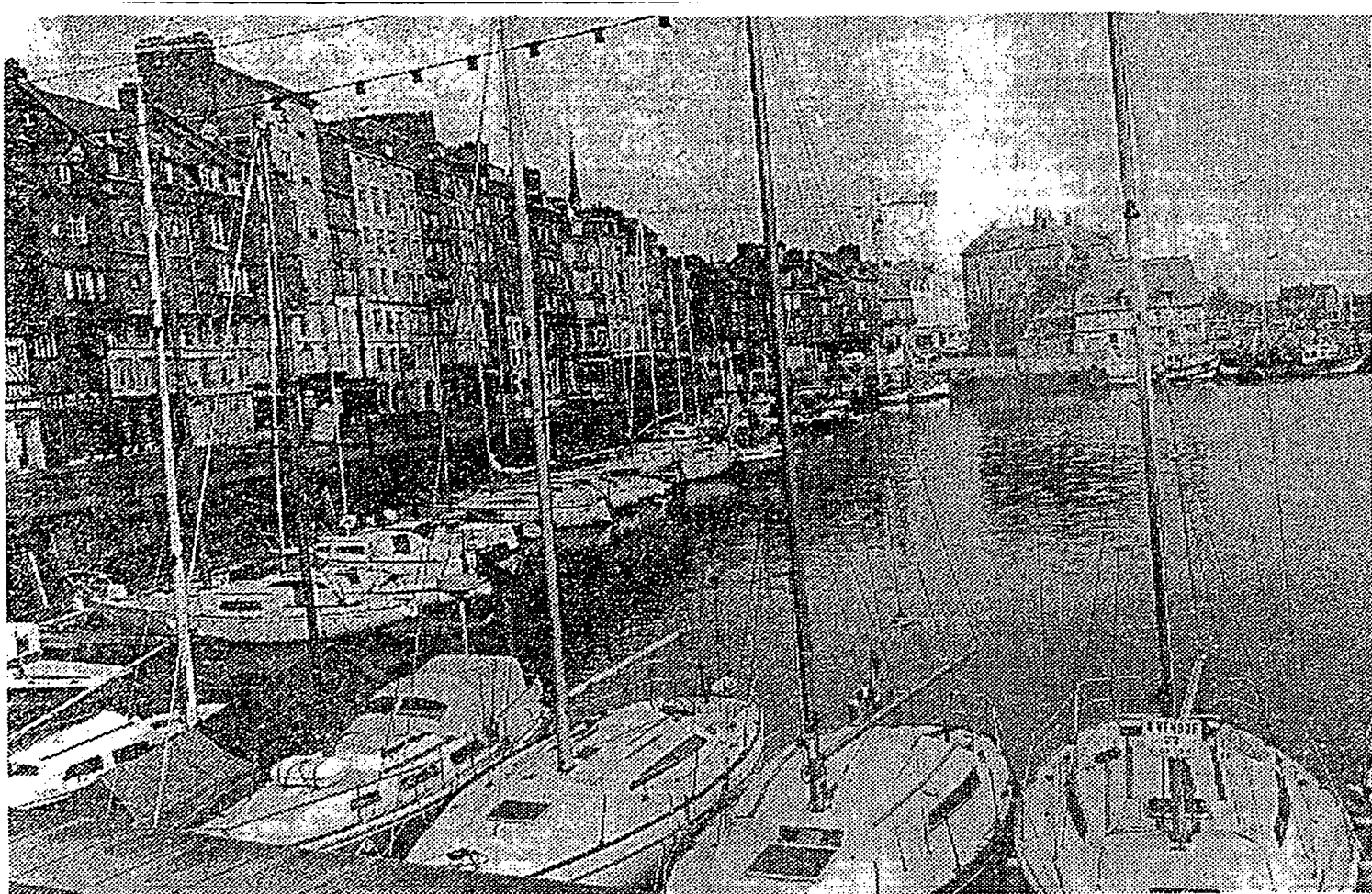
What I found most intriguing about the Ganne Inn were the

panels erected by the innkeeper to separate the locals from the artists. The villagers, it seems, had about as much in common with these strangers from the city as their descendants have with modern-day tourists. The panels are decorated with paintings of bucolic country life by Rousseau and his disciples.

From Barbizon, you can stroll into the forest, just like the precursors of Impressionism who were captivated by the idea of "attaining the sublime through exact truth," to quote Rousseau. Carrying picnic lunches packed by Père Ganne, they set up their easels in the shadows of the trees and white rocks of the forest. By returning to nature, they were consciously rebelling against the constraints of Romantic art.

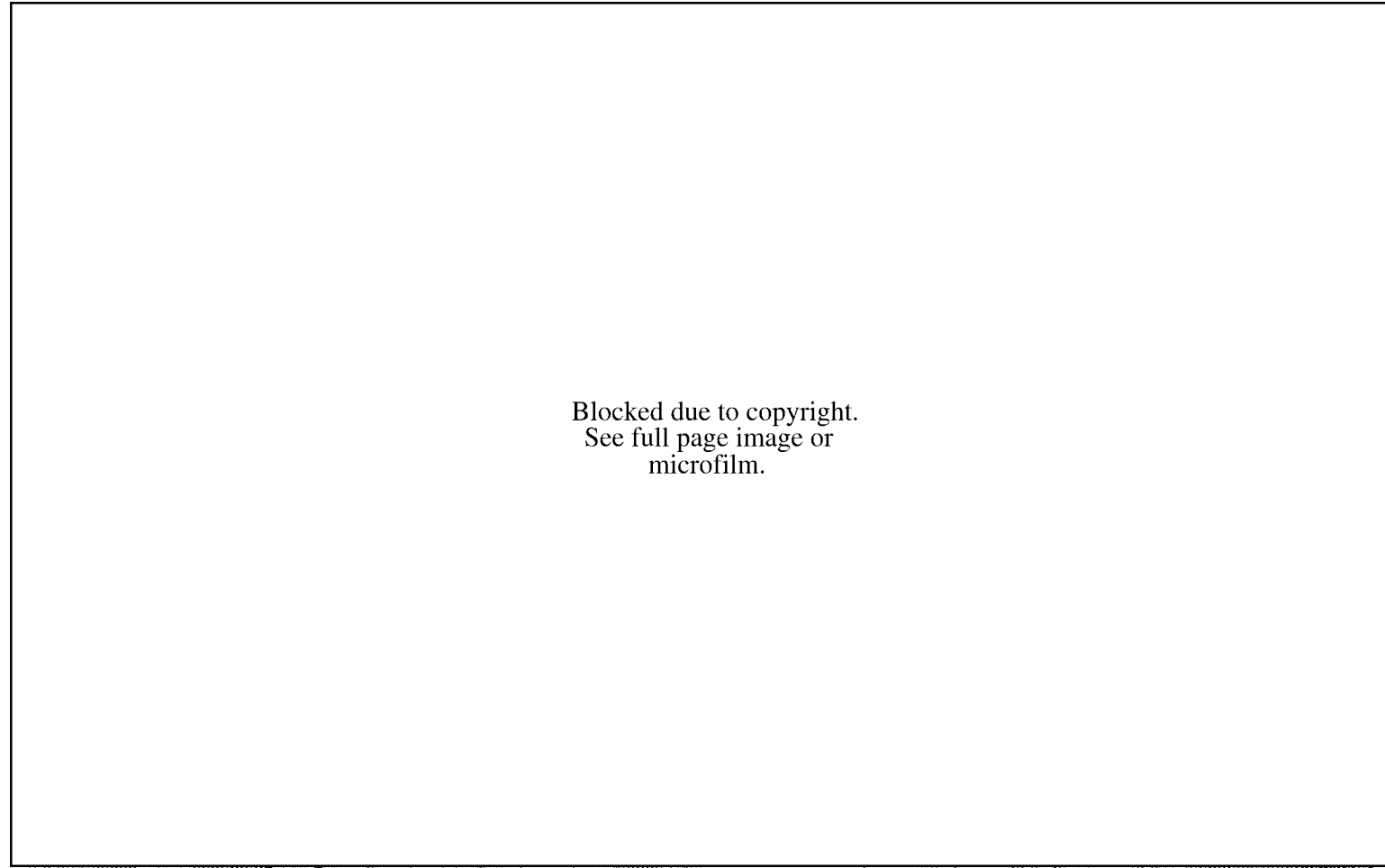
Impressionism proper was born along the banks of the river Seine, which snakes west in wide bends from Paris to the delightful fishing village of Honfleur on the Normandy coast. It was in this watery

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Honfleur as it appears today

BY MICHAEL DOBBS—THE WASHINGTON POST



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NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

Claude Monet's "The Beach at Sainte-Adresse," 1867, a detail

Impressionists

IMPRESSIONISTS, From E9

landscape, with its changing moods and shifting seasons, that painters began the systematic study of the effects of light.

In Honfleur, we stayed at the Saint-Simeon farm, the gathering place of painters like Monet, Eugène Boudin and the Dutchman Johan Barthold Jonkind. Jongkind. If you book long enough ahead of time, you can stay in the room where Monet himself is said to have lodged, and which the painters turned into a studio. Boasting a glorious view over the Seine estuary, it has been decorated with Impressionist motifs.

In dramatic contrast to the inn at Chailly, the Saint-Simeon farm belongs to the "Impressionism as tourist attraction" category. When Monet stayed here in the 1860s, it was a cheap inn. Today a room comes complete with "his" and "her" bathrobes, an impressive array of scented soaps and a hefty price tag—\$180 a night for two people.

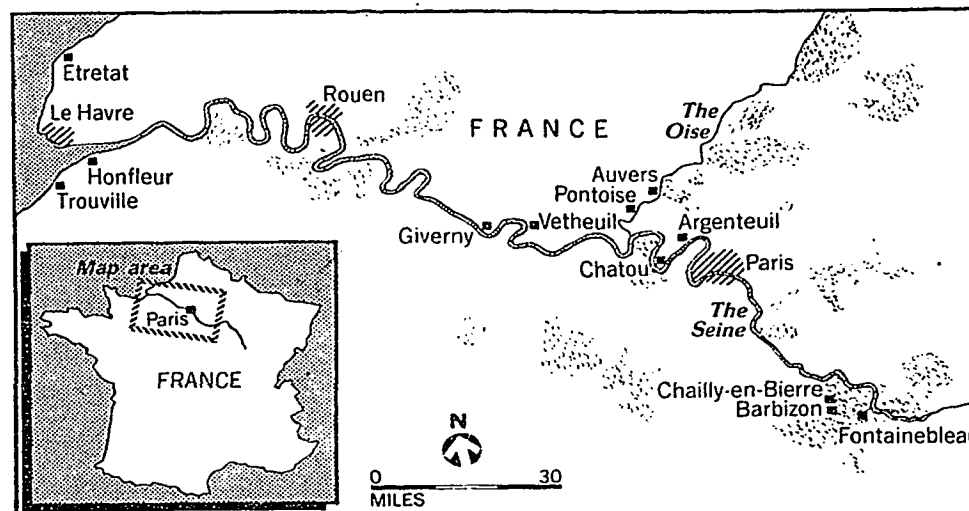
The unique atmosphere at the farm had already disappeared by 1903, when a disappointed visitor, Pablo Picasso, wrote that there was "nothing left" of its "glorious past." As a symbolic gesture to the ghosts of the Impressionists, who used to have their meals on benches in the

apple orchard, I showed up for dinner at the one-star restaurant in jeans and an open-neck shirt. The couple in evening dress at the next table looked at me as if I were a dangerous Bohemian.

From Honfleur (there are several reasonably priced hotels around the charming little port), splendid excursions can be made along the coast. For different reasons, both Trouville and Etretat held a lifelong fascination for the Impressionists. With its wide beaches, Trouville was—and still is—a fashionable resort for the leisured classes. The cliffs at Etretat are a symbol of the enduring ruggedness of nature.

It was at Argenteuil, much farther up the Seine on the outskirts of Paris, that I had the strongest sensation of Paradise lost never to be regained. To get the full effect, I strongly recommend you prepare for your visit by reading, or at least skimming, "Monet at Argenteuil" by Paul Hayes Tucker (published by Yale University Press). Through pictures and maps, this fascinating book captures the spirit of the small riverside town where the Impressionist movement came into full bloom.

To visit Argenteuil after reading Tucker's book is like taking a trip in



BY CLARICE BORIO—THE WASHINGTON POST

a time machine that deposits you, disoriented, into the next century. Most of the street names have been changed. Once-peaceful squares have been choked by anonymous apartment buildings and office complexes. The promenade beneath the tall trees along the Seine, along which elegant ladies once walked with their parasols and long dresses while admiring the sailboats on the river, is now a noisy six-lane highway.

For a while, you pinch yourself and wonder whether you are in the right place. Then you notice that the Seine itself is recognizably the same river, if rather more polluted than you recall. The road and rail bridges have been reconstructed, but their positions and rough outlines are identical. So too is the railroad station, although it looks

nothing like the rustic siding captured on a Monet canvas in the Marmottan museum.

Copying the Impressionists, I traveled to Argenteuil from the Gare St. Lazare, the Paris train station that figured in a series of celebrated Monet studies. The trip takes about 15 minutes, only a little less time than it took 100 years ago. These days, however, you go not by steam train, but by an electric commuter train that connects the capital with its sprawling suburbs.

Once in Argenteuil, with the help of an old map in Tucker's book, I began looking for the Boulevard Saint-Denis where Monet lived from 1871 to 1878. Opposite the train station, it has now been rechristened Karl Marx Street by

the town's Communist-run council. There is a plaque commemorating a visit to No. 27 by the father of world communism in 1882—but no mention at all of the fathers of modern painting.

Monet's stay in Argenteuil was symbolic, in a way, of the entire Impressionist movement. When he came to this little town on the Seine, he was a firm believer in the myth of progress. There is a harmony in his early paintings between the chimney stacks of the town's new factories belching smoke and nature in the form of trees pointing toward the clouds and the sparkling river. Tucker's book demonstrates convincingly that, by the time Monet left Argenteuil six years later, his vision of a balance between man and nature had been upset.

The Impressionists provide an excellent illustration of the principle that the simple act of observation changes the nature of the thing being observed. Where the painters wandered in search of "modern" subject matter, so too did vast numbers of other people, from simple pleasure-seekers to budding industrialists. The French landscape was never the same again.

After Argenteuil, it seemed natural to visit Giverny, the little Normandy village to which Monet escaped for the last half of his life. Today, thanks to the generosity of the Versailles Foundation, the painter's house and garden have

been turned into a very popular museum attracting about 200,000 visitors a year.

Monet's great-grandson, Jean-Marie Toulgouat, says the best time to visit the gardens is toward the end of May, when the irises and wisteria on the Japanese bridge are in full flower, or mid-September, when the roses and nasturtiums are in bloom. For the waterlilies, you should come on a sunny day in July or August. Whatever you do, Toulgouat advises, try to avoid weekends, when the place is packed.

Beautiful as it is, even Giverny has changed considerably since Monet's time. A busy road runs through the bottom of the garden (it is skillfully concealed thanks to an underpass donated by Walter Annenberg, but you can hear the trucks trundling past) in place of the 19th-century single-line railway, which has been ripped up. The fields of haystacks that Monet used to paint have been turned over to new homes. There are even fewer poppies these days because of the heavy use of fertilizers and chemicals.

Toulgouat, a painter and resident of Giverny himself, notes that the garden has also changed despite the effort that has gone into recreating it precisely as it was. Monet allowed the flowers and plants to grow luxuriantly, without fixed borders. In his pictures, you can sometimes scarcely make out the house.

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IMPRESSIONISTS, From E10

Today, the presentation is stricter, neater, more in the French tradition, but also less imaginative.

"It used to be a painter's garden. Now it's almost a petit-bourgeois garden—and Monet was anything but a petit bourgeois," Toulgouat said.

A visit to Giverny can be combined with a trip to Rouen, the old Norman capital, to see the cathedral and the port, which were also favorite subjects of the Impressionists. Sadly, much of the old town was destroyed during the last war, but there is still plenty to see, including the Museum of Fine Arts, which has some interesting Monet and Sisley paintings.

On the way back to Paris, we stopped off at Vetheuil, a beautiful little village on the Seine where Monet stayed briefly after leaving Argenteuil. The best view of the village, and the one that Monet painted, is from the opposite bank, a marvelous spot for a picnic in the summer. There are also magnificent walks along the hills above the river.

Our final trip was to Pontoise (where Camille Pissarro spent much of his life) and Auvers-sur-Oise, which have managed to retain much of their personality despite the encroachment of Paris. At Auvers, we admired the 13th-century church painted by van Gogh in 1890 just before he committed suicide. The painting, which now hangs in the Jeu de Paume, is testimony to the struggle between faith and madness that occupied the last days of his life.

Both van Gogh and his brother Theo are buried in the local cemetery. The Ravoux Inn, the painter's last home, has scarcely changed—but, perhaps inevitably, it is now called La Maison de van Gogh.

Wandering around France in the

footsteps of the Impressionists, I tried to analyze the reasons for their enduring popularity, particularly in the United States, where the Impressionist craze is just getting its second wind.

The most obvious reason, of course, is that artists like Monet, Cézanne and van Gogh produced paintings that are both easy on the eye and easy to understand. Concentrating on the beauty of nature and the changing properties of light, their art has an immediacy and a freshness that are enormously appealing—particularly if you compare it with the heavy Romanticism that preceded it.

Claire Joyes, an art historian married to Toulgouat, points out that Impressionist paintings formed part of the first American collections. The first Impressionist exhibition in the United States took place in New York exactly a century ago. It was partly by selling his paintings in America that Monet managed to pay for his house in Giverny.

There is something to all these explanations. But there is, I feel, another reason. The Impressionists had an innocent, almost naive belief in progress. Their paintings express a harmonious view of man's relationship to nature at a time of extraordinarily rapid change. Such optimism about the future has gone out of fashion in Europe, the birthplace of the world's first industrial revolution, where people tend to be more impressed by the obvious contradictions between esthetic beauty and industrial advance.

To follow in the footsteps of the Impressionists is to gain an insight into the world they lived in and a revolutionary spirit that to me, an Englishman, seems best described as American.

Michael Dobbs is The Washington Post's correspondent based in Paris.