

## Monet and the victorian fogs

### Soraya Khan

School of Geography, Earth & Environmental Sciences, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

Over the last few decades there has been an ever increasing interest in the relationship between meteorology/climatology and how they can be portrayed artistically through a variety of media. During the second half of the twentieth century, many studies contemplated the use of art as a kind of proxy data for past meteorology, air pollution and climate (Lamb 1967; Neuberger 1970; Brimblecombe and Ogden 1977 cited Baker and Thornes 2006).

In 2006, Baker and Thornes conducted a study primarily focussing on Monet's paintings of the Houses of Parliament from his London Series. Therefore, the solar positions have already been determined for these paintings. However, the solar positions for the remaining Charing Cross Bridge and Waterloo Bridge paintings of the London Series still need to be derived, which will thus be the main drive for this particular study.

Claude Monet was a pioneering force for Impressionism in the nineteenth century, and after only visiting London a couple of times, fell in love with the city and its atmosphere. For Monet, it was the London fogs and the 'atmosphere' that they cast over Westminster that he tried to encapsulate in his famous 'London Series' (1899-1905).

Claude Monet first visited London in 1870-1, when he attempted to avoid conscription during the Franco-Prussian war. During this stay Monet was more than likely living on the outskirts of the city due to a lack of funds (Taylor, 1995). However, when Monet returned to London in 1899, he was more affluent, and thus could afford to travel and lodge in luxury. Nothing made this more apparent than Monet's stay at the Savoy Hotel, which was then regarded as one of the most luxurious hotels in the world (Taylor, 1995).

The view from Monet's position on the sixth floor of the Savoy Hotel, had Waterloo Bridge to the left, downstream, and Charing Cross Bridge to the right, upstream. In the distance behind Charing Cross Bridge, the Houses of Parliament were visible. For all of these vistas the River Thames was an integral part of the view between Monet at the Savoy and the respective bridges.

When Monet returned to London in 1900, his original viewing position on the sixth floor was moved to the suite below on the fifth floor. This alteration was made as per Princess Louise's request to use the rooms on the sixth floor to treat officers returning from the Boer War (Wildenstein 1974-85 cited Seiberling 1988).

Monet visited London again at the end of January 1901; however towards the end of his stay in London, he became ill and so was unable to continue with work on his Series. This was to be the last time that Monet visited London, choosing to persist with his paintings from the comfort of his studio in Giverny.

The aim of this study is to determine whether Monet's paintings contain any quantitative information that can be verified and thus used to assess their value as potential observational records. In some respect this study will carry on from the Baker and Thornes report of 2006 with regards to the Charing Cross Bridge and Waterloo Bridge paintings of Monet's London Series. Content, geometric and meteorological analysis of each painting will help to determine the accuracy of Monet's depiction of the fogs at the turn of the twentieth century.

Another important aspect of this analysis is to ascertain the role that the River Thames plays in Monet's London Series. On some of the clearer days the expanse of water between Charing Cross Bridge and Westminster Bridge was visible and was included in Monet's scenes. One particular painting of Charing Cross Bridge, 'Charing Cross Bridge, reflets sur la Tamise', depicts the area of the Thames between Westminster Bridge and Lambeth Bridge as well. This painting is displayed below (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Charing Cross Bridge, reflets sur la Tamise. GUARDIAN UNLIMITED, 2006. *The Guardian* [online] Available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/monet> [Accessed 2 August 2006]

The inclusion of the River Thames in Monet's 'London Series' can be used to help ascertain the period in which each scene was started. The river depths were recorded by the Thames Conservancy Board throughout the nineteenth century, so the minimum and maximum water levels for the Thames can be determined. The river levels will affect how much of the bridges are visible, and thus the height scale depicted in each individual painting.

The position of the sun is established using a derived internal scale, and thus the dates and times of when Monet painted each scene can be ascertained. Therefore, knowing the levels of the river is a key factor as far as dating Monet's London Series is concerned. Once these paintings have been dated, the meteorological conditions that they portray can then be compared to the available meteorological data and Monet's pictorial accuracy will ultimately be determined.

## References

- Baker, J. & Thornes, J. E., 2006, "Solar Position within Monet's Houses of Parliament", *Proc. of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences*, 462 (2076), 3775-3788
- Brimblecome, P. & Ogden, C., 1977, "Air pollution in art and literature", *Weather*, 32, 285-291
- Lamb, H. H., 1967, "Britain's changing climate", *Geographical Journal*, 33, 445-466
- Neuberger, H., 1970, "Climate in art", *Weather*, 25, 46-56
- Seiberling, G., 1988, *Monet in London*, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia
- Taylor, J. R., 1995, *Claude Monet: Impressions of France – From Le Havre to Giverny*, Collins and Brown, London
- Wildenstein, D., 1974-1985, *Claude Monet: biographie et catalogue raisonné 1840-1926*