

SUBJECT AS A SECONDARY MATTER:
THE CREUSE VALLEY, GRAINSTACKS AND POPLARS SERIES
BY CLAUDE MONET

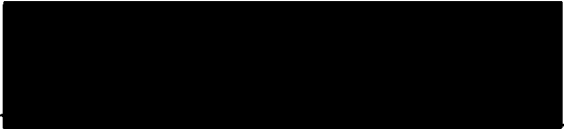
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Claude Monet was a highly successful painter of the Impressionist movement. He created a large number of series works that revolutionized the ideas of series and landscape paintings in general. Three of the earliest, the Creuse Valley, the Grainstacks, and the Poplars series, served as defining factors for Monet's series and his use of atmosphere as the true subject. The idea of atmosphere as the true subject of Monet's series works and the ways he translated atmosphere into a group of paintings is the focus of this paper. I looked at numerous texts about Monet's career and his series works, and then spent numerous hours examining reproductions of the various works in each series. Through this analysis of the paintings, I was able to come up with my own conclusions that Monet was constantly redefining his definition of atmosphere and presenting it in different ways throughout his series.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"To me, the subject is a secondary matter; what I wish to render is what is between the subject and myself." Claude Monet 1889

These words, uttered by one of the most extraordinary artists of the late 19th century, pinpoint the creativity of Claude Monet (b.1840, d. 1926). Monet created masterpieces which affected the art world and the art market intensely, and he introduced new trends in technique, subject matter and exhibition style. His most remarkable addition to the art world was his creation of series paintings of one single subject which followed the changes caused by light, atmosphere, season, and weather. This focus on one subject was not a new idea. However, what some scholars feel Monet contributed to the idea of series was the introduction of atmosphere as the main subject and the idea of the series as a cohesive whole which functioned best when viewed together.

One can see these contributions of a new atmosphere and a cohesive whole when looking at earlier series artists, and then by looking at three of

Monet's early series, the Creuse Valley series of the 1880s, the Grainstacks and the Poplar series of the 1890s. These three series are preliminary steps that Monet took to create his definition of atmosphere and how atmosphere works within multiple canvases. He then used the ideas that he clarified in these series in nearly all of his subsequent paintings. It is Monet's definition of atmosphere as identified in these first three series that I will examine in this paper.

Background on Monet

It is important to look at the life of Monet because it assists in understanding the evolution of the series paintings. His training and early experiences were critical factors in the development of his painting and the production of his series.

Oscar Claude Monet was born to Claude Adolphe and Louise-Justine Aubrée Monet in 1840, and was the second and last son in the lower middle class family.¹ In 1845, the Monet family moved to Le Havre, a port town in the north of France. It was as a teenager in Le Havre that Monet found his niche in the art world by starting his career in art as a caricaturist. These caricatures helped him develop a local reputation as a talented artist, and the exposure they gained him won him the praise of a local French landscape painter, Eugene Boudin.² It took some convincing, but Monet finally agreed to accompany Boudin in his out-of-doors painting trips. Monet was hesitant to work with Boudin because he did not like the older artist's painting style; in fact, Monet once said, "his paintings inspired me with an intense aversion, and without knowing the man, I hated him."³ But once Monet began studying Boudin's "plein-air" technique, painting directly in nature, he knew that he had found his destiny; he felt as if "a veil had been torn away."⁴

Monet decided to further his studies of art, and to pursue it as a true career, so in 1859, he left Le Havre to study in Paris. He entered the Académie

Suisse in 1860, where he received formal instruction. Unfortunately, his artistic training took an extended break when he was sent to Algeria with the military in 1861. However, this loss of artistic training was only temporary because within a year, he caught typhoid and was sent back to Le Havre to recover.⁵ He did gain valuable experience in Algeria, as he later explains, “the impressions of light and of color that I received there only became clear later; but the germ of my future research was there.”⁶

After he had completely recovered from the typhoid, Monet returned to Paris in order to study formally once more. This time he studied under the direction of Charles Gleyre, who was interested in preserving and teaching the ideals of antiquity. Although Monet did not gain very much from this style of formal training, since he had already decided to become an outdoor landscape painter, he did acquire valuable friendships, most notably, those of Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Alfred Sisley, and Frédéric Bazille⁷, who would later play important roles in the formation of Impressionism. After Gleyre’s studio closed, Monet spent some time traveling, painting and preparing his first works to be submitted to the Salon. The Salon, which had been called “the largest and most prestigious shop-window in France” was a government-sponsored exhibition of works created by various artists. It was the goal of most artists to make it into a Salon exhibition because it gave relatively unknown artists enormous exposure. In fact, in the 1860s, the audiences grew to 400,000 for one exhibition alone. This exposure allowed for the artists to find more buyers for their works.⁸

Monet was very interested in becoming part of this Salon tradition, so he submitted two seascapes in 1865 that were both well received.⁹ Over the next few years, he continued creating and submitting works to the Salon, only to be rejected more often than accepted. Out of eight paintings submitted from 1866 to 1874, only three were accepted by the Salon.¹⁰ It took almost six years before Monet would once again see his work in an exhibition. This time, it was in an exhibition organized with the specific intention of countering the formal Salon. Monet, Camille Pissarro, Renoir, Sisley, Edgar Degas, and Berthe Morisot were the principal organizers and central group of artists in the first 'Anonymous Society of Artist-painters, Sculptors, Engravers, etc.' Exhibition in April of 1874.¹¹ The goal of the Society was to hold an exhibition that could be entered by any artist, with no jury to approve or reject the works. It was held two weeks before the Salon opened to lessen the competition and increase the event's exposure. The response to the exhibit was mild, but supportive. Most of the 3,500 attendees agreed with magazine writer Léon de Lora that 'their efforts deserve to be encouraged.'¹² In fact, it was one of Monet's paintings in this exhibit, Impression, Sunrise, that gained the group the title of 'Impressionists'. The title explained very well the style with which each artist was painting; they were not creating "a landscape, but the sensation produced by a landscape," as one reviewer described.¹³ The relative success of this first exhibition allowed for seven more exhibits over the next twelve years, and helped boost the reputation of the artists, especially Monet.¹⁴

Over the next years of his life, though, his financial situation was unstable. After the first exhibition, Monet returned to Argenteuil where he had been living with his wife and son. He continued to paint there, while also traveling back to Paris to paint Parisian scenes.¹⁵ Then in the 1880s, Monet moved his family to Vétheuil, where they shared a household with the Hoschedé family, who were family friends and who, before suffering a financial collapse, had been prominent art buyers. Unfortunately after this collapse, Ernest Hoschedé abandoned his wife and five children and fled to Belgium. Their financial and marital problems, along with Monet's new financial instability and his wife falling ill, forced the families to move in together to lessen their burdens. These times proved difficult for Monet, especially when his wife died in 1879.¹⁶

It was not until 1882 that Monet finally got back on his feet with the seventh "Impressionist" exhibition. His work was well received and many paintings were purchased. This finally led to an established 'fortune' and the ability to explore and paint new regions of France.¹⁷ He settled in Giverny in 1883, where he would spend his later life painting. Meanwhile, Monet began working with new subjects and landscapes, and in the late 1880s, he began his period of series works.¹⁸ These series continued through the 1890s, most famously with the Grainstacks, the Poplars, the Rouen Cathedral, Mornings on the Seine, and then works from his garden at Giverny. The Grainstacks and Poplars series will be discussed later, as will the Creuse Valley series from the 1880s. The late 1890s and early 1900s show Monet focusing on his garden

at Giverny. In 1926, the man who helped establish a new painting style and helped define an era died, leaving the world with only his paintings.

NOTES

¹ Carla Rachman. Monet (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1997), 15.

² Ibid., 18-19.

³ Paul Hayes Tucker. Claude Monet: Life and Art (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 11.

⁴ Rachman, 27.

⁵ Ibid., 31-34.

⁶ "Les impressions de lumière et de couleur que je reçus là-bas ne devaient que plus tard se classer; mais le germe de mes recherches futures y était." Soko Phay-Vakalis. Monet: Les Carnet de l'art (Paris: Éditions du Chêne, 1998), 19. The verb 'se classer' is difficult to translate directly, but its intent is to say that Monet did not realize how Algeria had affected him until later, after his return to France.

⁷ Rachman, 39.

⁸ Ibid., 40-43.

⁹ Ibid., 46.

¹⁰ Ibid., 53, 336.

¹¹ Ibid., 105.

¹² Ibid., 105-107.

¹³ Ibid., 108-109.

¹⁴ Ibid., 108.

¹⁵ Ibid., 113-118.

¹⁶ Ibid., 132, 136.

¹⁷ Ibid., 166, 169.

¹⁸ Ibid., 180, 203.

CHAPTER 2

EARLY SERIES ARTISTS

The Beginning of Series Works

Monet's work in series began rather slowly and subtly in the 1860s. He moved into working in series with a gradual shift rather than an obvious change, making it difficult to identify a specific group of paintings as Monet's first series works.¹ We can, however, pinpoint Monet's decisions to begin working in series and examine why he shifted his painting process. In order to do this, we must first look at the ideas behind series works, and look at who else was working on them prior to Monet.

We can define a series as a loose term referring to "any group of studies or paintings either seen together or of related themes."² Monet never defined this term specifically and it appears that his meaning for series shifted as his career progressed. Because the term we have is rather vague, we can call many various groups of paintings a series, and we thus have many artists before Monet who can be considered series artists. John House, in his book on Monet, looks at Rembrandt's self portraits and J.M.W. Turner's variations on Norham Castle as examples of early series, although it does not seem

either artist would have.³ Grace Sieberling, in her dissertation on Monet's Series, cites John Constable's studies as a series, but here too, the artist did not even consider them to be finished works. Instead, he saw them as studies or as a part of the artistic process.⁴

For another Monet scholar, Paul Hayes Tucker, there are no early comparisons to Monet's works. He argues that "no other painter up until then had ever conceived of painting a large number of pictures that concentrated on the same subject...[earlier groups] were always more varied in terms of their sites and subjects than Monet's."⁵ There is no question that Monet created a dynamic and original way of producing series paintings, but it does seem that types of series works existed prior to Monet. With the help of Sieberling, we can arrange these early works into three obvious categories of paintings: times of day, the four seasons, and places.

Starting with an examination of times of day series, one can look to Claude Lorrain, a native French painter working in Rome for most of his life. Claude, as he is called, was born in 1600 or 1602/3 and was an incredibly successful painter during his lifetime.⁶ He moved to Rome in 1627 and from there, he created landscape paintings that were sold throughout Italy and his native France.⁷ His landscapes focused on a variety of subjects, from religious to mythological to pastoral, but they were all connected by Claude's innovative use of light to render nature.

It is this concern with light that connects Claude to Monet; they both used light as one of the main subjects of their works. Claude did this in all of

his works, but especially in his works of classical seaports, a subject that would be taken up in the 18th century by Claude- Joseph Vernet and discussed later. Claude Lorrain created 14 paintings of seaports during his lifetime.⁸ These works can be seen as a series in the similarities between the places, but also because of the concentration on times of day that were presented in each painting.

With his seaports, Claude was interested in portraying a mythic place that was saturated by natural light. His seaports were an exploration into the effects produced on various ports during different times of day. He painted ports seen in brilliant, white sunrises and ports soaked in warm sunsets. Often, the time of day and the position of the sun became the focal point of the work. Whatever activity was taking place in the foreground or middleground became secondary to the sunset or sunrise. One way he accomplished this was by including the body of the sun in the painting, which was new to landscapes; previously, the source of light was outside of the painting, not in a prominent position as Claude depicted it.⁹

Two great examples of the effects of the inclusion of the sun are Claude's *Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba* from 1648 and *Seaport with the Debarkation of Cleopatra* from 1643 (figs. 1a and 1b). Each title lets us know that the seaport is the main subject, and the historical activity is the secondary subject. But, from the paintings themselves, we can see that the main subject becomes the atmosphere which is primarily an effect of light and time of day as defined by the surrounding, colored air. Later, for

Monet, atmosphere will become something more complex. He will create atmosphere in his paintings through a combination of light, color and brushstroke. He will also create atmosphere by merging it with his motif, leading to an image saturated throughout by an ambient, colored presence. This use of atmosphere in terms of Monet's works is the definition that will be used throughout this paper.

Returning to Claude's use of atmosphere, we can look at *Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba* (figure 1a) which presents a sunrise where the port is soaked in a bright, clear light that makes the scene come alive. But just what is that scene? We know from the title that this is the embarkation of the Queen of Sheba, but where is she? Who are the men around her? Where is this place that she is leaving and where is she going? Which ship is she leaving on? There are numerous questions that are not answered in the painting because these are not the main subject for Claude. Instead, his subjects are the atmospheric and natural effects on the port, people and activities, as caused by the sun and the sunset.

In *Seaport with the Debarkation of Cleopatra* (figure 1b), we can ask all of the same questions, and we still get no answers. Again, Claude is interested in showing us a sunset and the effects of the warm golden tones that permeate the scene. He uses the natural light to saturate the scene and define the time of day. Here, the light plays the most important role in creating the surrounding atmosphere. We can look at these two works, along with his other seaports, as a series interested in studying the effects of

different times of day on similar subjects. The fact that the ports he portrays often appear to be very different, mythic places makes this much less of a series than Monet's later works.

Another contemporary French painter who portrayed mythic places was Nicolas Poussin. Poussin was also interested in the idea of series, but his series focused on the four seasons, as opposed to the times of day. Poussin (c. 1594-1665) was similar to Claude Lorrain in that he was born in France yet moved to Rome later in life to live and work.¹⁰ Also like Claude, he was popular in Italy and France, entertaining commissions from patrons in both places.¹¹ In 1664, he accepted a commission from Armand-Jean, Duc de Richelieu for a series of Four Seasons. Poussin took the rather traditional subject and transformed it into a very original set of compositions.

The four paintings are titled *Spring*, *Summer*, *Autumn*, and *Winter*, yet they also have alternate titles, respectively *The Garden of Eden*, *Ruth and Boaz*, *The Promised Land*, and *The Deluge* (figures 2a-2d). Each of these works presents the same glorified landscape seen from different vantage points and seen in these various times of year. Each painting reflects its respective season through the activity by the people in the work and the appearance of the landscape.

Poussin uses common elements to link the scenes, even while the activity and topography serve to separate them. For example, the two most obvious links are the trees flanking the left and right sides and the distant mountain. This is an interesting preceding series in that the landscape is

often the same, but the subject is different in each one, whereas Monet's series focused on the same subject.

The last early series artist to be examined is Claude Joseph Vernet (1714-1789), another French artist who created a linked series of differing subjects. Vernet, like Claude and Poussin, was also a fairly successful painter during his own lifetime.¹² Also like Claude, he was a landscape painter, though he spent quite a bit of time painting the actual Ports of France. He was commissioned by the French crown to create a series of paintings of the Ports of France in 1753.¹³ Unlike Claude's classicized seaport paintings, Vernet's were truthful, modern depictions of the ports as they were in the 1750s. The series of modern ports was very important because it was meant to display the power and gracious nature of the King of France, Louis XV, along with the beauty of the country and its military power.¹⁴

Vernet tackled the commission by traveling to the different ports of France to paint them from nature. There were 24 original ports to be included in the series, but due to the artistic constraints stemming from the King's involvement, and the fact that Vernet never got paid in full, Vernet abandoned the series with only 15 works completed. They are large scale landscapes depicting whatever was best about each port, including "the might of its military...the wealth of its fisheries and agriculture, the prosperity of its trade," among other things.¹⁵ The series is described as a group of modern images with a "theatrical emotionalism."¹⁶ They are very detailed and show a deep interest in depicting true and accurate nature.¹⁷

One of the greatest attributes of this cycle of works is Vernet's emphasis on place. He very accurately depicted the different ports in a manner which glorified the location and the activity. He did an excellent job of differentiating between the sites and making each port individualized. However, there are aspects of some ports that are reflected in other ports, and bring about connections between the paintings. As one author said, "his meaning is often not complete in a single canvas, but needs a series of several linked paintings to disclose itself fully."¹⁸

One thing that Vernet did not consider in his ports is the effects of different times of day. We have seen that this was a major consideration for both Claude and Poussin, yet it is almost completely ignored by Vernet. Vernet, instead, lets the various activities and attributes make references between the different canvases, providing links. These linked paintings of similar subjects provide a distinctly French model for Monet's exploration of series.

All three of these preceding artists, who experimented with series works, provide an interesting comparison to Monet in the varied use of landscapes as subjects. They also provide links to the French tradition that Monet was learning from and altering. The similarities in their use of light and color to Monet's use of light and color are evident in the exploration of atmosphere. Yet, Monet finds ways to refine and revitalize these explorations in his series.

Monet's Contributions to Series

By looking at these other artists, we can see the direct connections to Monet's 19th century series works, but we can also see how Monet differed in his representation of series. It is with this new spin that Monet helped create the legacy of series.

One way that Monet was different from the earlier series artists was in his use of a 'plein-air' style of painting, as he was actually painting out in the atmosphere that he was attempting to capture. Both Claude and Poussin painted mythic scenes while in their studios. This created a large difference in how the motifs responded to the light the artist used. For Monet, the motifs responded naturally, while for these other artists, the motifs responded to an artificial light.

An idea used by the earlier series artists that Monet expanded upon was the idea of connections between the works in a series. Claude, Poussin, and Vernet were all interested in making connections, that came as a result of the motifs, between their various paintings. The cycles of times of day, seasons and places were all pre-established by nature or the subject matter. The artists succeeded in connecting the multiple canvases through their use of color and light, much like Monet did.

Monet, though, created series of motifs that were only connected by the atmosphere that he constructed within them. He linked the multiple canvases through this atmosphere that could be regarded on a continuous

level, where the spectator was waiting to see the next effect, not the next motif. Monet took this idea of connections between the series works to a new level when he began showing the works all together in one exhibition, something that these earlier series artists had not done.

The impact of Monet adding new ideas to what a series is, a cohesive unit of paintings that works together to produce new effects upon the viewer and subject through atmosphere, shifted all series works that followed him. Many 'modern' artists have spent time studying Monet's series in order to create their own works. One author discusses Monet's series as "an impetus for the later evolution of seriality as a standard mode of presenting many styles of art," looking at Mark Rothko, Andy Warhol, and Donald Judd as successors to Monet's series style.¹⁹ It seems that artists following Monet have been interested in creating a similar effect of taking the viewer away from the motif of a work and asking him/her to analyze the relationship of what they see in each successive work. This is something that had been explored by Claude, Poussin, and Vernet, among others, but that was brought to a new capacity by Monet, allowing him to set the stage for the series of the 20th century.²⁰

Monet's Early Series Attempts

Monet did not usher in a revolutionary way of presenting series with one set of paintings, nor did he do it within a specific year or set of years. Instead, as was mentioned, Monet began working in series in a very gradual manner.²¹ There are many possible influences to explain why he shifted into series works. One possible influence stems from a trend in the middle 19th century to move away from single and static representations in landscape painting.²² Another influence can be seen in the advent of photography and the increased interest in printmaking. Both of these media allowed for multiple images of the same scene to be reproduced easily, thereby influencing Monet to create similar ideas in painting.²³ Later in his career, rumors spread that the series production was economically inspired. Both Degas and Pissarro are cited as criticizing Monet for his commercial enterprises.²⁴

Grace Sieberling saw the Barbizon school as an influence for Monet's series. According to Sieberling, the paintings of the Barbizon school "stood most directly behind Monet's interest in showing real landscape modified by changes of light and atmosphere," and in showing "specific sites under different atmospheric conditions."²⁵ Monet very well could have gained some of his interest in showing the same subject under different light and weather conditions from this school of painters, thereby showing a direct connection to the ideas of series explored before Monet.

These, along with other ideas, may have played a role in Monet's desire to create linked images in a series format. We do, however, know that it was not until the 1870s that Monet himself adopted the term series for his works. He did so while describing a new group of paintings depicting scenes from Argenteuil and then used it repeatedly in later letters.²⁶ These scenes from Argenteuil are the first group where we can see Monet intentionally exploring similar motifs and scenes.²⁷

One subject that Monet focused on while in Argenteuil was the main bridge in the city. He explored the bridge from different angles and views, and during various times of day, producing an assortment of scenes with each painting. Very often, there were boats present in the foreground water beneath the bridge, emphasizing the activity beneath the bridge as opposed to emphasizing the actual bridge. The main difference between these similar scenes and the related series works of his later career is that Monet was painting a variety of other works at the same time. He was not interested in focusing on one subject, but instead, on painting what he saw in his outdoor endeavors and this happened to include a multitude of subjects.²⁸ This separates the works from Argenteuil from the later series where he dedicated himself to one motif and saw it through an entire cycle.

Monet continued to explore the idea of related themes in the 1870s with a set of paintings of the Gare St. Lazare. Here, the works present more of a series-like quality, mainly in the ways they are deliberately inter-related, but they still do not match up to the series connections we see in the 1880s and

1890s.²⁹ Again, Monet is focused on various vantage points and angles in his attempt to depict the train station. As with Argenteuil, we do not see the same emphasis that Monet places on his series of the 1880s and 1890s.

The work of the 1880s proves to be a turning point for Monet's art. As Sieberling noted, "he had achieved many of the goals implicit in his earlier researches," leaving the 1880s open to new research and experiments.³⁰ It was during this time that Monet discovered the Creuse Valley and began an exploration in new subject matter and new compositions.

NOTES

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- ¹ Grace Sieberling. Monet's Series (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1981), 43.
- ² John House. Monet: Nature into Art (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 193.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Sieberling, 24.
- ⁵ Tucker, Life and Art, 139.
- ⁶ Margaretha Rossholm Lagerlöf. Ideal Landscape: Annibale Carracci, Nicolas Poussin, and Claude Lorrain (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 73.
- ⁷ Ibid., 73-75.
- ⁸ David Cordingley. "Claude Lorrain and the Southern Seaport Tradition," Apollo 169, 1976, 208.
- ⁹ Ibid., 213.
- ¹⁰ Rossholm Lagerlöf, 53.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 54-58.
- ¹² Edward Lucie-Smith. "A Real Abstractionist," Art and Artists 11 (1976-77) : 31.
- ¹³ Philip Conisbee. "Book Review: Joseph Vernet 1714-1789: Les Ports de France," Burlington Magazine, October 1995, 694. I was not able to locate a copy of the book that Conisbee reviews in this article, but from this review, it would appear to be a good resource on these paintings.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Lucie-Smith, 35.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 31.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 32.
- ¹⁹ Charles Stuckey. Claude Monet 1840-1926 (Chicago: Thames and Hudson & The Art Institute of Chicago, 1995), 9.
- ²⁰ Unfortunately, it is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the direct influences that Monet had on 20th century artists.
- ²¹ Tucker, Life and Art, 43.

²² Sieberling, 29.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Steven Levine, "Monet's Series: Repetition, Obsession," October 37, Summer 1986, 73.

²⁵ Sieberling, 25.

²⁶ House, 193.

²⁷ Sieberling, 45.

²⁸ Ibid., 45-47.

²⁹ Ibid., 47-49.

³⁰ Ibid., 49.

CHAPTER 3

THE VALLEY OF THE CREUSE SERIES

Monet traveled to the Creuse Valley in 1889 with some friends, and stayed there from March to mid-May, painting all the while.¹ He encountered many difficulties with the changing landscape patterns due to adverse weather conditions, but he still managed to complete 24 canvases.² Of those 24, twelve focus on the exact same area, the spot where the two Creuse Rivers converge. Ten of those twelve works come from the same vantage point, making these ten paintings Monet's first notable series.³ Of these ten, I have been able to locate six that I will discuss, figures 3-8.

The images of the Creuse Valley show Monet responding to the beauty and power of a specific place. He painted a place that is identifiable and understood, and the only parts of the scene that change are the shifting clouds and flowing river. The paintings that I found show an identical composition, as we can see from figures 3-8. By looking at figure 3, *Valley of the Creuse (Sunlight effect)*, we see that Monet places the viewer in front of a large hill in the left foreground, which forms the left bank of the calmly flowing Creuse River beside it. Monet also presents the right bank of the river and behind it, the distant hills.

With little variance in this basic composition, Monet explored the possibilities of the Creuse Valley by using variables such as light, color, and brushstroke. Through the use of these variables, Monet was able to begin creating scenes that were dependent on the atmosphere, or the unseen, ambient space that saturates the Creuse Valley compositions. This emphasis on atmosphere is something that will become very important to the later Grainstacks and Poplars series, but here, Monet was just beginning to explore the possibilities. We can see this exploration by looking at three of the Creuse Valley series, *Valley of the Creuse (Sunlight effect)*, *Valley of the Creuse (Evening effect)* , and *Valley of the Creuse, Gray Day* (figs. 3, 6, and 7).

In looking at these variables to define Monet's exploration, I will be using reproductions of the works as found in various books. One of the difficulties inherent with using reproductions and not the original works is that I will not have an accurate sense of the exact colors used by Monet. The books, however, do allow for a basic idea of the parameters for the colors that Monet was working with, so the interpretations that I make should be fairly accurate.

Monet creates variety within this series by altering the relationships among light, color, and brushstroke. In figure 7, *Valley of the Creuse, Gray Day*, Monet used short, quick brushstrokes to define the hills to the left and right sides of the river, while the river itself is composed of long strokes in the foreground, and shorter strokes as it flows back. These first two hills on the left and right sides of the river are large, massive objects that dominate

the foreground. The back hills, on the other hand, are much less clearly delineated, giving them less density than the foreground hills. This difference in density and brushstroke serves to clarify the separation between the two foreground hills and the distant hills. We also see a distinct separation between the sky and the back hills in Monet's dramatic shift in color from deep blue to stark white.

In figure 3, *Valley of the Creuse, Sunlight effect*, we see a similar use of short, choppy strokes for the foreground hills, but there is more definition to the rocky features of these hills than we see in *Valley of the Creuse, Gray Day* (fig. 7). Even though these hills are painted more true to their natural state, Monet portrayed them with the same amount of density and mass as they have in figure 7. The remote hills are drawn with long strokes, as in figure 7, yet Monet used more colors and outlines to emphasize the specifics of these background hills, giving them more definition than in figure 7. This increased definition gives the background hills more mass than they retain in the previous figure, but they still have much less mass than the foreground hills. The division between these three sets of hills is more outlined than in figure 7, yet the colors of the outlines seem to blend all of the hills together, so they are not truly separated. The division between the sky and these hills is clearly emphasized with a moderate color change and an outline of the hills. Again, the representation of the river is very similar to figure 7.

The variable of light is very important to this series. The light in each work serves to highlight or downplay the compositional factors that are

defined by the colors and strokes. In *Valley of the Creuse, Gray Day* (fig. 7), the dimmed light dissolves the separation between the right bank and the distant hills, while shadows emphasize the separation between the left bank and the background hills. The light also emphasizes the white of the clouds which helps to separate the sky from the background hills. In *Valley of the Creuse, Sunlight effect* (fig. 3), the light functions to brighten the entire scene. The light is brilliant and warm, not sharp or shadowed as in figure 7. In this work, light serves to connect the compositional elements, whereas in the previous work, the light emphasizes the distinct compositional areas.

As alluded to, both of these paintings owe much of their compositional definition to the colors used. The element of light is highly connected to the color. For example, the use of a different color represents an outline, yet the use of that color is dependent on the light that illuminates the outline. This can be seen in figure 3 where Monet uses a very bright palette to emphasize the sunlight. The pink, blue and green colors are used in varying shades to describe outlines, yet these outlines are hazy as the colors respond to the light. In the rocky features of the left foreground hill, the dark green, brown, and purple under the light purple and pink shades are representative of the shadows caused by the light.

In figure 7, the colors are much darker and cooler to emphasize the diffused light. Monet uses red, dark blue, orange and green to differentiate between the different levels of light allowed into the scene. Where there are bright orange spots, at the bottom of the left foreground hill and the upper

part of the right foreground hill it is evident that there is some direct sun hitting these areas that is not present for the rest of the composition. The background hills are done almost entirely in dark blue and green, making the hills undefined and expressing their distance from the foreground hills. In this work, Monet uses a dark brown to outline the left and right foreground hills and separate them from the back. In both of these works, we see the use of colors, coupled with the variations of light, changing the compositional factors of each painted scene.

In this preliminary series, Monet was searching for the elements that hold a group of paintings together. He began his search by focusing on a single compositional motif, the convergence of the Creuse Valley, and shifted the variables of light, color, and brushstroke within each one. Through an examination of the possibilities inherent in this motif, Monet continued his exploration of the element of atmosphere, the ambiance of the setting that penetrates each aspect. With the Creuse Valley, he brought the atmospheric element to a new level by looking at the atmosphere in relation to a series. He examined how the atmosphere could be related between works, through light, color, stroke, and identical composition, and how changes in these factors produce changes in the atmosphere.

The Creuse Valley series was a successful exploration into how to create a series based on atmosphere, but Monet was not finished exploring. He was very close to discovering what he would later achieve in the

Grainstacks series as will be discussed later, and the best example of this link between the two series can be seen in figure 6.

Figure 6, *Valley of the Creuse (Evening effect)*, presents the most extreme case in the Creuse Valley series of variance in brushstroke and definition. In this work, Monet uses very long and powerful strokes to define the composition. He separates the elements of the composition with color, more than with brushstroke as he does in *Valley of the Creuse, Gray Day* (fig. 7). Here, the river is composed of very long strokes of white, dark blue, and light blue that seem to merge into the hill of the right bank. The right and left foreground hills, are large masses with less visual weight than in figures 3 and 7, but similar levels of density. The background hills have no definition whatsoever as they are composed of sweeping brushstrokes of gray. This use of one color for the background hills serves to separate the three hill areas very clearly. However, the gray is so close to the creamy gray of the sky that it serves to bring these two elements closer together and consequently define them less. The rest of the painting is done in dark shades of red, blue and purple, with bright pink as a highlighting factor between the hills. This work is related most closely with the later Grainstacks series in that they both allow the brushstrokes to become less and less important, while the color and light take a much more active role in defining the atmosphere. To see these connections more fully, we must look at the works of the Grainstacks series.

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¹ Rachman, 203.

² Ibid.

³ Paul Hayes Tucker. Monet in the 90s: The Series Paintings (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts & Yale University Press, 1989), 41.

CHAPTER 4

THE GRAINSTACKS: A SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCE

The exploration of atmosphere in the Creuse Valley series is continued by Monet in the Grainstacks series of 1890-91.¹ In Monet's search for the perfect series, he began exploring the idea of the atmosphere (permeating light and air) as the main subject, as he wrote in a letter to a friend; "I see that one has to work a lot in order to express what I am looking for: 'instantaneity,' above all the atmosphere (l'enveloppe), the same light diffused everywhere...I am more and more determined to render what I experience."²

In the translation of Monet's letter, the word 'l'enveloppe' can be interpreted in different ways. Some scholars translate it to 'atmosphere', while others translate it directly to 'envelope', using it in a conceptual manner.³ In either translation, it seems that Monet was striving to incorporate the area surrounding the physical subject with that subject. Again, as in the Creuse Valley series, he depicted the light and air that permeate the entire composition. In order to understand this, we must look at the works exhibited in the original show.

Monet began working on the Grainstacks series in the late summer or early fall of 1890 and he continued to work on them through 1891.⁴ The

Grainstacks that served as the inspiration for this series were found virtually in Monet's backyard; they were located in a neighbor's field behind Monet's house in Giverny.⁵ He discussed this new series in a letter to a friend: "I'm grinding away, struggling stubbornly with a series of different effects [stacks]."⁶ As author Carla Rachman points out, it is interesting to note that Monet first described this new series as depicting different 'effects', and only describes the physical subject, 'stacks', in parentheses.⁷ This makes his search for depicting the atmosphere as the main subject obvious as his primary goal with this series.

What is not obvious is whether or not he set out from the beginning to paint a series. Most scholars agree that he did not start painting the Grainstacks with the intention of working in series.⁸ What is clear is that after beginning work on the Grainstacks, he could not finish one painting before the climate would change and force him to start another. He has been famously quoted as describing the painting process for the Grainstacks in this way:

When I started (to paint) I was like the others; I believed that all one needed were two canvases, one for overcast weather and one for sunshine. I was painting the stacks which had struck me as they made a magnificent group...one day I saw that the light had altered and so I said to my stepdaughter, 'Please go and fetch me another canvas from the house.' She brought it, but a little later it had changed again; [I needed] another and then yet another. I worked on each one only as long as the effect held, and there you are. It's not very hard to follow.⁹

The quote portrays a very nice story and gave 20th century 'art connoisseurs' something to contemplate and enjoy, yet it seems highly unlikely that this

was how the series was conceived. We know from earlier series, including the Creuse Valley, that Monet had worked on multiple canvases at once before, so this was not a revelation for the Grainstacks.¹⁰ It does seem, however, from the letter quoted above, that he realized the need for multiple canvases almost right after beginning work on the Grainstacks. The ever-changing landscape inspired him to paint multiple canvases, and he may have been inspired to form those canvases into a unified whole after beginning work on them.

In fact, it did not take long before Monet began to see the individual works in terms of a cohesive unity and began creating them with a distinct serial grouping in mind. In fact, in a letter to his friend and art dealer, Paul Durand-Ruel on December 5, 1890, Monet discussed the works as a group which he was reluctant to sell separately and which he wanted to keep together until he had finished.¹¹ We have at least 30 canvases showing Grainstacks, but at the first exhibition in May 1891, Monet only showed 15 of these works.¹²

The exhibition in 1891 was a novel and risky undertaking by Monet and Durand-Ruel. They set out to have a one-man show of one subject, Monet's Grainstacks. This entire concept was revolutionary as one-artist exhibitions were very uncommon, and one-theme or subject exhibitions were virtually unheard of.¹³ Monet was setting a new precedent with this show, yet there was no guarantee that he would be successful. Luckily for him and Durand-Ruel, the show was a huge success.

The ability to take a chance and hold such a novel exhibition may have come from Monet's tremendous popularity and his financial stability.

Monet's work had been selling consistently and gathering good prices, which gave him the financial footing to do something as experimental as this exhibition. It also gave Durand-Ruel enough confidence in him to agree to the exhibition.¹⁴ However, even with this stability and confidence behind him, Monet seemed to be a little afraid of what to expect. This is evidenced in his addition of several other, non-Grainstacks works to the exhibition.

In this May 1891 exhibition, Monet also included two studies of figures out of doors and four poppy and rye field works that he had completed before beginning on the Grainstacks.¹⁵ There are no sources on why Monet included these other works, but it seems that he was afraid of the reaction he would receive from showing one sole subject, the Grainstacks. We know from a famous discussion with W.G.C. Byvanck that Monet himself only felt one of the Grainstacks was successful, and some of the others were "not bad."¹⁶

In order to determine the effect that these extra paintings had on the experience of the Grainstacks, we need to know how the exhibit was arranged. Unfortunately, we know very little about the arrangement or the hanging of the works. It does seem, though, that even with the inclusion of these other works, the power and precedence set by showing the Grainstacks all together in one room was still profound, as we can see from the large volume of glowing reviews and letters from contemporary artists, such as Pissarro, and art critics.¹⁷

Monet's goal in exhibiting all fifteen paintings together in one show was to emphasize the unity and coherence of the works. In the famous discussion with Byvanck mentioned above, Monet told him that the individual canvases 'only acquire their value by the comparison and succession of the entire series.'¹⁸ Many authors and reviewers have remarked on this homogeneity of the works and the ways that the individual paintings work with each other.¹⁹ Monet succeeded in creating a group of paintings that are best seen when seen together. In order to understand how this is possible, it is necessary to look at each of the fifteen works that Monet exhibited in 1891.

The first exhibition of the Grainstacks in 1891 was accompanied by a catalogue detailing the works included.²⁰ Yet, even with this record, it has proved incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to determine which 15 works of the surviving 30 Grainstacks were included in the original exhibition. The catalogue lists the names of the works included, but some of them are so general that they could apply to a number of the surviving works, and many of the paintings have been renamed since the original exhibition. The canvases, as they appeared in the original catalogue can be listed as such: *Grainstacks (End of Summer)*, *Grainstacks (End of Summer)*, *Grainstacks (Last Rays of the Sun)*, *Grainstack (Sun in the Mist)*, *Grainstack (Sunset)*, *Grainstacks (Snow Effect, Gray Weather)*, *Grainstacks (Snow Effect, Sun)*, *Grainstack (Snow Effect)*, *Grainstack (Snow Effect, Cloudy Weather)*, *Grainstack (Sunset, Winter)*, *Grainstack (Winter)*, *Grainstack (End of the Day)*,

*Grainstacks (Sunset, Snow Effect), Grainstack (Winter Evening, Misty Weather), Grainstack (Snow Effect, Sun).*²¹

From examining this list, we can see how difficult the attribution of the original paintings is due to the similarity of many of these titles. Many scholars have made their own identifications about the original works. I will use the group that Daniel Wildenstein identified, which consists of thirteen attributions. The final two paintings are identified by Richard Brettell in an article, yet there are some disputes about some of the attributions. I have combined these two scholars' attributions along with a few by John House to come up with the group that I will analyze.

Now that the original fifteen works that I am using have been determined, at least for the purposes of this paper, we can look at the entire series as a whole, and the works on an individual level. It is important to note that my conclusions would most likely be revised when comparing all 30 of the works, but that is not within the scope of this paper.

In looking at all 15 works, we can see Monet shifting seasons and views, yet keeping the same underlying theme of the atmosphere and environment as the true subject. We can also see him working in sub-groups of Grainstacks that are composed of similar compositions. Those groups comprise paintings of summer scenes, sunlight/sunset scenes, and snow scenes. Much like in the Creuse Valley series, my discussion will be hampered by the use of reproductions as opposed to the original works. The

colors that I will discuss should be fairly accurate though, as they are again within the basic parameters that Monet set with his color schemes.

The smallest of this group is the summer group. There are only two works in this sub-grouping, both titled *Grainstacks (End of Summer)* (figures 9 and 10), yet they still merit their own category. They are completely different from the other 13 works in that they show more of a realistic and defined view of the grainstacks and the surrounding field, leading to two possibilities. Either these were some of the first works in the exploration of this series, or they were simply subjected to the nature of summer light, which happens to be very clear, bright, and defining.

The composition for both *Grainstacks (End of Summer)* (figs. 9 and 10) works is very similar. It consists of the field where the grainstacks rest, the trees in the distance and a suggestion of distant buildings. Each work shows two grainstacks, a large one on the right and a smaller one to the left. The viewing angle is slightly different between the works; we see figure 9 from a direct standpoint while the viewer is angled to the left in figure 10. In both, the background trees and hills are lightly painted and look misty to emphasize their distance from the foreground grainstacks. Also in both, nearly the entire painting is done in short, choppy strokes to emphasize the presence of light and differentiate between the numerous colors.

This presence of light can be seen throughout both works. Each work uses light to place emphasis on the important elements of the composition, the grainstacks. In figure 9, the shadowed side of the grainstacks is presented,

letting the viewer know that the sun is off to the right of the canvas.

Conversely in figure 10, the illuminated side of the grainstacks is presented because the sun is to the far left of the canvas. The background in each work is hazy and ambiguous as it is reflected in indirect light. The largest area of difference between these two works is in the depiction of shadows. In figure 9, there are large areas of shadow and light in the foreground field, as the light hits the grainstacks from behind and is deflected into patterns on the field. On the other hand, we do not see nearly as many shadows in figure 10 as the sunlight hits most of the foreground in full.

To achieve these various effects of light, Monet uses multiple colors and varies the color palette between these two works. Figure 9 has more shades of yellow, pink, and light blue, while figure 10 has more orange, pink and purple shades. Both figures have fairly orange grainstacks and deep and light green background trees. The numbers of colors are more numerous in figure 9 as Monet is working with more areas of shadows and light due to the sun behind the grainstacks. The lack of colors in the foreground field of figure 10 comes as a result of the more direct light. Since the light comes from the left and hits the front of the grainstacks in this work, the field is more illuminated and calls for brighter orange and pink shades. This field also has fewer shadowed areas so there is not a need for as many colors to represent it. In both figures, Monet uses pink and orange, and light green in figure 10, to represent the sunlit areas, while he uses cool blue and green to show the shadows.

A large difference between the colors in the two works lies in the background hills and the sky. In figure 9, the distant hills are a mixture of colors, while the background hills of figure 10 are done in light purple. In each case, the colors work to underline the ambiguous state of these hills. The treatment of the sky in relation to these background hills is also different in each work. In figure 9, the sky is painted in crisp yellow and white, marking a noticeable shift between hills and sky, whereas in figure 10, there is a much more gradual shift from the hills into the sky, as both are painted in blue and purple.

These similarities work to produce a combined atmospheric effect. As was previously discussed, the atmosphere that Monet was striving to depict was the infusion of light and air into a scene and an object. With these preliminary works, we see Monet starting to reach this point, but the realism of the colors and the background setting offer a different atmospheric perspective than the next group of works. In these summer scenes, we have a clear, crisp atmosphere whereas the next works are more hazy and indefinite.

This next sub-group of sunlight/sunset scenes, shows six paintings that exhibit similar connections seen in the summer scenes. With these six paintings, *Grainstacks (Last Rays of the Sun)*, *Grainstacks (Sun in the Mist)*, *Grainstack (Sunset)*, *Grainstack (Sunset, Winter)*, *Grainstack (Thaw, Sunset)*, and *Grainstack (Sunlight)* (figs. 11-13, 19, 21, and 23), we see some of the most dramatic works of the series. All of these paintings are comprised only one grainstack, except for *Grainstacks (Last Rays of the Sun)* (fig. 11) which shows

two, making the compositions fundamentally different from the summer scenes.

Three of these compositions, *Grainstack (Sun in the Mist)*, *Grainstack (Sunset, Winter)*, and *Grainstack (Thaw, Sunset)* (figs. 12, 19, and 21) show the single grainstack in either the center of the field or slightly to the left on the canvas. They are presented frontally and have nearly indiscernible backgrounds. The other three in this sub-group, *Grainstacks (Last Rays of the Sun)*, *Grainstack (Sunset)*, and *Grainstack (Sunlight)* (figs. 11, 13, and 23) are unique in their presentation of the grainstacks. They all show a grainstack that Monet has cut off at some point. In figure 11, Monet cut off the left side of the grainstack, and in ending the canvas there, he also cut off the sun from our view. In figure 13, we see the right side of the grainstack cut off, just the opposite of figure 11. Figure 23 is even more drastic; here, Monet cut off the very top of the stack. In these three, like the previous three, the background is left unclear and undefined. From these compositions, and through the use of short, quick brushstrokes that allow for numerous colors, we see that Monet is focusing directly on the grainstacks. Another way he does this is through his use of light, just as he did in the summer scenes.

The light in these six paintings is completely different from the light in the previous two paintings. Here, most of the canvases are seen in a warm glow, presumably in either sunrise or sunset. It is easier to understand the intricacies of light and color in these six works by closely examining two of the six paintings, specifically *Grainstack (Sun in the Mist)* and *Grainstack*

(*Thaw, Sunset*) (figs. 12 and 21). In both of these, the light is indirect; it never illuminates the grainstacks head on, but instead comes from the side or from an unknown angle. In both of these, the light serves to illuminate the grainstacks almost as if from within and give them the sensation that they are on fire as they absorb the light. This outward radiation of light is especially evident in figure 12 with the brightly defined outline of the grainstack setting the grainstack off from the rest of the setting. We see a similar outline in figure 21, but it is much darker, almost indicating the containment of the interior fire to the grainstack itself, with less of an impact on the surrounding landscape.

Although the effects of the light are similar in both of these paintings, the methods used to reach those effects are different. The main difference we see in depicting the light in these two works is Monet's use of color. In *Grainstack (Thaw, Sunset)* (fig. 21), we see Monet using a wide variety of colors. The grainstack is a deep orange with red and brown highlights, while the surrounding field is speckled with pink, red, white, brown, and blue. Monet used these numerous colors to reflect the setting sun hitting the parts of the field that are snow-covered and the parts that have thawed. The distant landscape is painted in deep green with light purple highlights, while the sky shines with bright yellow and a pale blue.

In contrast, in *Grainstack (Sun in the Mist)* (fig. 12), the colors fall within a small range of orange, pink, and red, with some light blue used in the field. The grainstack is a pink-orange with blue highlights. The

background is a hazy pink, while the sky blazes in bright orange. In this work, the color serves to spread the sunlight throughout the entire scene. The grainstack in the middle seems to radiate light outward towards the rest of the landscape.

This importance of natural light, as represented by color and brushstroke, is key to the atmosphere present in these six paintings. For these six paintings, more so than in the two summer scenes, we see a large emphasis on the idea of the light and color mixing with the physical object and transforming it. Here, the light transforms these grainstacks into balls of fire, giving them a major presence amidst the amorphous scene. The sense of atmosphere finally takes a hold of the grainstack with this sub-group. The grainstack and the atmosphere become one; atmosphere does not surround the grainstack, but it enters each grainstack and emanates from it into the surrounding scene.

The snow scenes of the Grainstacks series are also very successful in portraying this element of atmosphere. *Grainstacks (Winter)*, *Grainstacks (Snow Effect, Sunlight)*, *Grainstack (Snow Effect, Morning)*, *Grainstack (Snow Effect, Overcast Day)*, *Grainstack, Grainstacks (Sunset, Snow Effect)*, and *Grainstack (Snow Effect, Sun)* (figs. 14, 16-18, 20, 22, and 25) are all examples of this snow group. Two of the best examples from this sub-group are *Grainstacks (Snow Effect, Sunlight)* (fig. 16) and *Grainstack (Snow Effect, Morning)* (fig. 17). These are good representations of the sub-group because figure 16 has two grainstacks, while figure 17 has only one, showing the

differences in composition that Monet used in this sub-group. In figure 16, Monet placed a large grainstack in the front and a small grainstack behind and to the left, while in figure 17, he placed the individual grainstack on the left of the canvas, as he did with the single compositions in the sunlight/sunset group. These differences in placement and composition allow for the snow sub-group to explore numerous combinations and effects.

These varying effects and combinations are both marked by the same short, quick strokes seen in the rest of the Grainstacks series already mentioned. Yet, in these two paintings, we see Monet using longer, looser strokes to depict the areas of haze and mist that are more prevalent in this sub-group than in the previous groups. *Grainstack (Snow Effect, Morning)* (fig. 17) has more short strokes in the foreground field, the grainstack, and the background hills, while *Grainstacks (Snow Effect, Sunlight)* (fig. 16) only has short strokes in the grainstacks themselves. The rest of the scene is composed of these long, loose strokes. The background of figure 16 is highly obscured by these longer strokes, yet houses at the edge of the field are still visible. These houses are presented in an almost concealed state as their presence is diminished by the natural light and atmosphere. We see similar houses in figure 17 that are also obscured by the natural light, but they are slightly more defined than the houses in figure 16. The background representation is also shrouded in this painting, but the shorter strokes define the surroundings more than they do in figure 16. A possible reason for the difference in the

background representations between these two works is the variance in light Monet was using.

The light used in both of these works is warm and permeates the entire scene, yet it exhibits differing effects on each motif. In *Grainstacks (Snow Effect, Sunlight)* (fig. 16), the light comes from behind and to the left of the grainstacks. The light glows throughout the entire landscape and almost completely washes out the background. As a result of the placement of the light, there are large shadow areas in front of the grainstacks, which account for the only defined portions of the entire field. The light works in completely different ways in *Grainstack (Snow Effect, Morning)* (fig. 17). Here, the light, which comes in from the same side as in figure 16, illuminates and clarifies the setting. The light casts a shadow in front of the grainstack, and it brightens up the background and surrounding field. Both works have bright light, but in figure 16, the light is so bright that it washes out the scene, whereas the brightness of the light in figure 17 works to clarify the scene. Each work has a soft presentation to the light, something that can mostly be attributed to the colors.

The soft light comes from the warm colors that Monet painted with in these two works. In *Grainstacks (Snow Effect, Sunlight)* (fig. 16), he uses cream and yellow for the sky and field, light blue for the shadows, and deep orange with light blue highlights for the grainstacks. In *Grainstack (Snow Effect, Morning)* (fig. 17), the colors are more varied. The field is mostly white with blue and yellow highlights, the shadow on the field is light blue, the

background hills are the same light blue, the grainstack is deep orange with light yellow to accent, and the sky is white. These color differences allowed Monet to play with the different effects of light and allowed him to render the grainstacks differently. Ultimately, this affects the atmosphere of the scene as the atmosphere in figure 16 appears to infuse the grainstacks from all sides, whereas the atmosphere in figure 17 seems to start within the grainstack itself. What we see in figure 17 is the grainstack in the process of emanating that atmosphere outward to the rest of the scene.

Through these two works, we see that Monet was experimenting with the idea of atmosphere within the same sub-group, as well as within the entire series. There is another work of the snow group that examines these differences in atmosphere. *Grainstacks (Sunset, Snow Effect)* (fig. 22) shows a sunset in a snow scene, making it difficult to place in just one category. I placed it in the snow category because it shares more of the snow elements, with the strong whites, lighter palette, and an emphasis on covering the background in a white haze. The sky opens up to a bright orange sunset, making a very dynamic contrast between the white, hazy surroundings. This blazing sky connects well to the sunlight/sunset sub-group and the drastic use of sunlight to illustrate a scene. It also underlines Monet's varying use of atmosphere. Here, the grainstacks are completely embedded in the atmosphere; they exude it and they absorb it. This work can be seen as the culmination of the series in its use of atmosphere to define and obscure the scene.

In imagining viewing all of the Grainstacks together at one time, the viewer can get a sense of the importance that the atmosphere plays in these works. Each work takes something from another work, and gives something to a different work. This can be anything from a specific effect of sunlight to a color scheme for representing shadows. In this way, the viewer sees how the atmosphere shifts and changes within each individual painting. Monet's true success with this series is actually a stark contradiction. He succeeds in individualizing each painting through composition, color and light, yet he also manages to make each painting part of a whole group by consistently obscuring the background, focusing on the grainstack itself, and capturing the atmosphere that enters and surrounds each aspect of the grainstacks.

Monet managed to create elements within his Grainstacks that connected yet individualized the paintings, while he focused on a somewhat insignificant motif, yet succeeding in producing a very significant outcome. Nevertheless, the success of this series had not assured him that this was the perfect series. He was interested in creating another series, where, once again, he would link a series of images together, but this time with even more of an emphasis on the atmosphere. He decided to take up this challenge with another subject taken directly from nature, the poplar tree.

NOTES

¹ There is heavy debate on what to call these works. There are three possible names: Grainstacks, Haystacks and Wheatstacks. The French term, 'meule' can be interpreted in any of the three ways. For the remainder of the paper, I will use Grainstacks as that is the term used most in my research.

² Andrew Forge, Monet (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1995), 45.

³ For instance, Forge translates this into atmosphere, while Rachman translates it into envelope.

⁴ House, 197-199.

⁵ Tucker, Life and Art, 139-140.

⁶ Rachman, 244.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 243.

⁹ Ibid., 252.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ House, 199.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Rachman, 252.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Richard Brettell, "Monet's Haystacks Reconsidered," The Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies, Fall 1984, 9.

¹⁶ Sieberling, 99.

¹⁷ Tucker, Monet in the 90s, 100 and Rachman, 252-253.

¹⁸ House, 201.

¹⁹ Ibid., 200.

²⁰ Brettell, 7 and Tucker, Monet in the 90s, 77.

²¹ Brettell, 7.

CHAPTER 5

THE POPLARS SERIES: A TRANSITION

Once he reached the Poplars series, Monet had almost completely eliminated the sense of place in his paintings and fully embraced the atmospheric qualities of nature. The subject had now become a physical object in total combination with the light and atmosphere. In the Poplars series, the physical areas where the poplars are located are virtually unidentifiable. Monet used varied vantage points that underscored the atmosphere of the poplars themselves, and not the place where they grew. This idea helped Monet to explore the connections between atmosphere and the poplars, marking the progression between Monet's series of the 1880s and those of the 1890s. This series serves as a transition between the ideas Monet discovered in the Grainstacks series and those he would discover in later series such as the Rouen Cathedral series.

We can see how Monet's ideas of atmosphere changed and were in transition with each series he worked on. He was still working to define what atmosphere meant to his works, and how he would portray that atmosphere. Here in the Poplars series, we see Monet working on different levels than he did in the Creuse Valley or Grainstacks series. With the Poplars, Monet was

trying to portray the poplars individuality, their linear qualities and the idea of the paintings working together as a whole. By looking at the various Poplars paintings, we can see the broad ideas Monet was working with (figures 26-29). As we saw with the Grainstacks, Monet was interested in creating a series that worked together, not that repeated the same place, atmosphere, or scene over and over. The exhibition of the Poplars series makes this evident; Monet showed all 15 works together, on their own and without any other works to cause distractions.ⁱ

We know that, with the Poplars series, Monet was interested in creating “linked statements, fifteen paintings derived individually from nature but merged towards a unity through a process of comparison and cross-reference.”ⁱⁱ It seems as though Monet was interested in forming works which completed each other, not just complemented each other.ⁱⁱⁱ This idea for a group of works whose atmosphere allowed them to work together as a whole was something that he discovered in the Creuse Valley, but did not pursue to this extent with the paintings he created there. The atmospheric link was something that he explored with the Grainstacks series, however, and the link soon became a common element in most of his series of the 1890s, including the Rouen Cathedral series, the Mornings on the Seine series, and the Japanese Bridge series from his garden at Giverny. Here, in the Poplars series, we see this connection brought to light most fully and most effectively.

In mentioning these later series, it is important to note that in each of these later series, the ideas that Monet had discovered in the earlier series were more completely developed and refined. One of the best examples of the fully developed ideas of atmosphere dominating a scene is in the Rouen Cathedral series. Here, Monet very nearly eliminated the physical subject of the cathedral for the atmosphere that he experienced. This is one of Monet's most successful series in that it explores the connections between subject, object, and atmosphere in great depth. Unfortunately, there is not time within this paper to fully discuss the Rouen Cathedral series, but a discussion of the Rouen Cathedral series would be pertinent in a paper discussing Monet's later series.

By examining the Poplars series, one can see how Monet achieved the idea of merging the paintings together. He achieved them by creating paintings of varying compositions, sizes, and colors, and then by creating an atmosphere that flowed throughout all of the paintings in a similar manner. Work began on the series in the late spring or summer of 1891 and continued until the exhibition in March of 1892.^{iv} We know from the way Monet worked on these paintings that he had a series in mind from the very outset.^v Very few sources make a claim as to how many Poplars paintings survive today, and none were found that attempted to identify the original 15 of the 1892 exhibit. However, Carla Rachman does claim that Monet created 24 Poplars in all.^{vi} For the purposes of this paper, I will look briefly at the differences between this series and the preceding series in an attempt to

understand the ever-changing definition of atmosphere that Monet created within his subjects.

In looking at the various scenes, there seem to be patterns for the compositions, as there were in the Grainstacks series. We know that Monet painted most of the Poplars series while sitting in a flat-bottomed boat that he fixed to hold his canvases, creating interesting angles for the viewer and numerous possibilities for the compositions.^{vii} The various compositions underline the fact that Monet was eliminating the importance of place or composition and asserting the importance of the atmosphere that flowed throughout each work.

These works take on a new meaning of series and atmosphere through their execution. In nearly all of these works, the trees span the entire canvas, indicating the importance they have to the composition. In all of the works in the series, Monet focused the visual emphasis on the trees themselves, and paid little attention to the details of the rest of the landscape. The trees are tall, lanky, delicate objects. The trunks are skinny, thin lines that are presented linearly. Monet focused on the leaves that grow sparsely on the trunks and profusely at the tops. He painted them in short, thick strokes, and he articulated the individual branches at the tops of the trees to give a sense of where the leaves rest. Monet gave little or no indication of the surrounding landscape, shifting all attention onto the trees themselves.

These elements that place importance on the trees themselves work together with the light and color to produce the sense of atmosphere that is so

critical to Monet's series. In these works, Monet used a wide range of colors to produce different effects with the light. He used bright colors to highlight direct sun, and he used cooler, darker shades to indicate masked sunlight. These variances between light and color work to create numerous effects of atmosphere. This is something that Monet worked with in the Grainstacks series, but that he refined with these works. The works are very clear and direct in their composition. The atmosphere appears to flow up through the trees and define the setting, melting the surrounding spaces into this atmosphere. The wide spaces of open sky and air that are normally associated with their own atmosphere become associated with the atmosphere from the trees instead. In the Grainstacks series, we saw both the grainstacks and the surroundings creating the atmosphere that infused the paintings. Here, with the Poplars, we see only the poplars themselves creating the atmosphere for the rest of the scene to respond to. Even though the trees themselves create this atmosphere, the elements of sky and air are so interrelated with the trees that there are no differentiations between them, so that the atmosphere encompasses the entire scene.

The presentation of such completely different compositions, colors, and atmosphere may seem contradictory to Monet's desire to create a sense of completion throughout all the works, this "linked statement" that was mentioned earlier. However, Monet did manage to create a linked statement, as the multiple views lead to a sense of knowing every variation of the trees in relation to the atmosphere that they produce. In order to completely

understand how prevalent the atmosphere is in the motif, we have to see each variation; the best way to do this is to experience the Poplars together. In experiencing them together, we can realize the power and the pervasiveness of the atmosphere that embraces the entire scene.

NOTES

ⁱ Rachman, 260.

ⁱⁱ Joel Isaacson. Observation and Reflection: Claude Monet (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1978), 41.

ⁱⁱⁱ Paul Hayes Tucker, in his essay for the catalogue of the Monet in the 90's exhibition, asserted that Monet was painting the Poplars series out a sense of nationalism. Tucker discussed the 1890s as a time when France "was attempting to ... reestablish its once-firm hold on cultural production in the world." (108) They were in a battle with other European nations to regain their cultural preeminence and they responded by embracing and encouraging the decorative arts, as opposed to didactic arts. (123 & Rachman 237) Tucker contends that Monet's goals with the Poplars series were to "assert the French qualities of his art and to appeal to deep-rooted beliefs about his nation and its character." (109) Monet achieved these goals and responded to the newly increased French nationalistic desire by portraying the "tree of liberty," as the poplar was designated during the French Revolution. (108) According to Tucker, Monet created the Poplars series in response to these changes in the French art world.

Other authors have analyzed the political state of France at the time of Monet's paintings, but I have not found another author who claims that Monet was painting the Poplars out of a nationalistic sense. France's desire for decorative arts has been acknowledged by numerous scholars, but it seems to me that Tucker's interpretations of the Poplars series move too far into conjecturing about motives that cannot be understood without asking the artist. By looking at the Poplars series on an analytic level, new ideas about the possibility of Monet's intentions arise. The assertions made in this paper are my own ideas about Monet's creation of the series made by looking at numerous paintings of the series.

^{iv} Isaacson, 112.

^v Rachman, 254.

^{vi} Ibid., 242.

^{vii} Sieberling, 113.

CHAPTER 6

EVALUATION

Claude Monet is arguably one of the best landscape painters of all time. With the stroke of a brush, or a dab of color, he could manipulate a scene and depict a specific time of day or year. One of his greatest contributions to the art world was his work on series. He often spent months, if not years, working on depicting one image, over and over again. His series works changed over the years and his focus for those works also changed. A great example of this shift can be seen in the progression of the Creuse Valley series of the 1880s, to the Grainstacks series of the 1890s, in comparison to the Poplar series of the 1890s. Monet managed to move from a place defining the atmosphere to the subject becoming the atmosphere. He shifted from using the same vantage point to using varied vantage points. He changed his ideas of the series as a whole and moved towards creating a series that works together to create an overall effect.

But does all of this come together and “render ... what is between the subject and myself?” Does Monet succeed? I believe that these factors work together to portray a new subject. He focused on the subject (the convergence of two rivers, grainstacks, poplars) to project this area in the middle, that area being the atmosphere. My first assumption about this quote was that Monet

was striving to paint the emotions connected with a specific place surrounding a subject, but after reviewing the Creuse Valley, Grainstacks, and Poplars series, it seems to me that he was attempting to paint the atmosphere, something that was continually redefined, regardless of the motif. He realized that he would have to create multiple images of the scene in order to let the viewer know that the motif was indeed the atmosphere, and not simply a physical object defined by atmosphere. In so doing, he found a way to connect all of the images by referring to different aspects of the atmosphere in each one. In looking at these three series, it becomes clear that his method of linking the paintings together became the same as his subject, the atmosphere. Monet created images that focused and relied on the atmosphere to serve as the subject and the link for the viewer and the artist, making this his greatest contribution to the idea of series, and to 19th and 20th century painting.

Figure 1a.







Figure 2b.



Figure 2c.



Figure 2d.

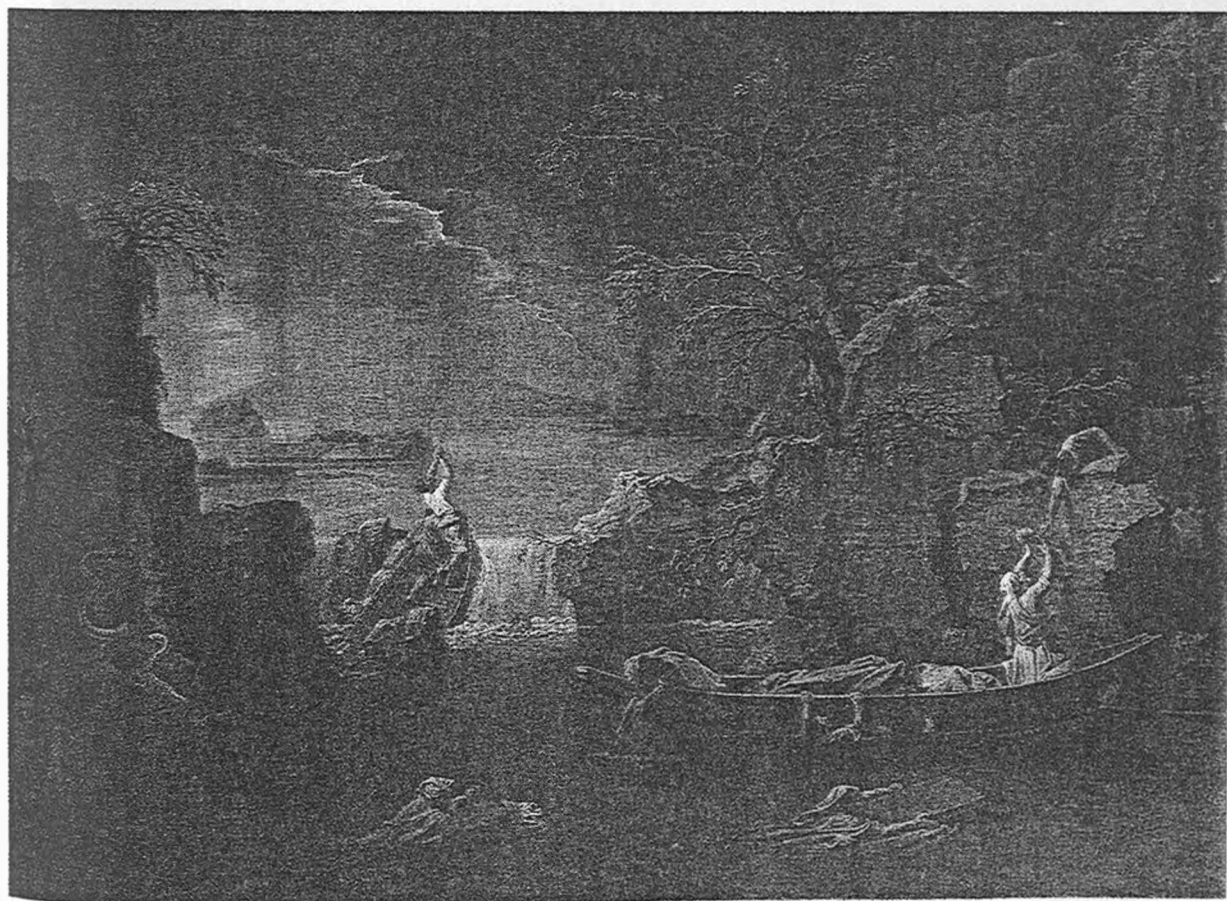
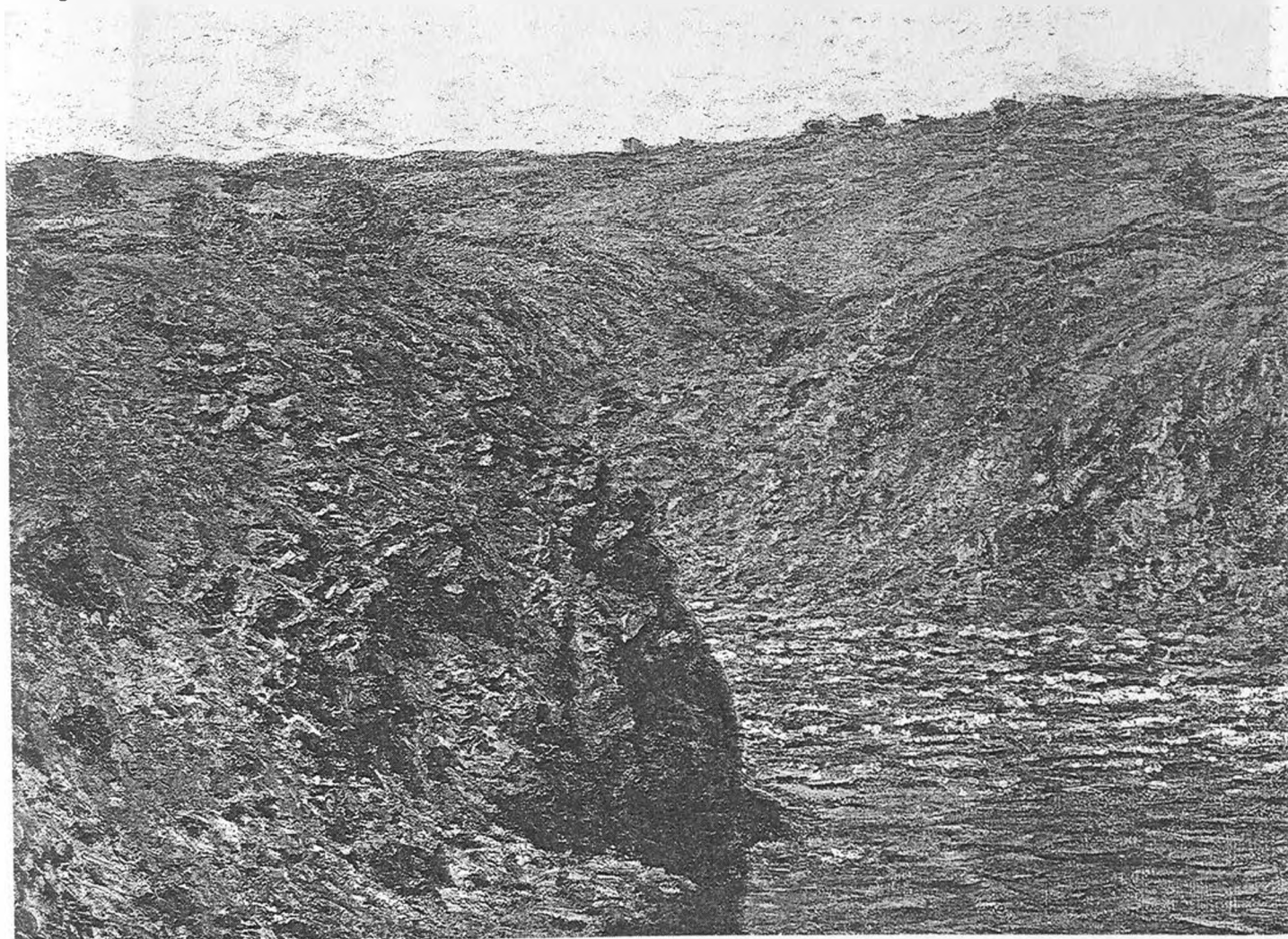


Figure 3.



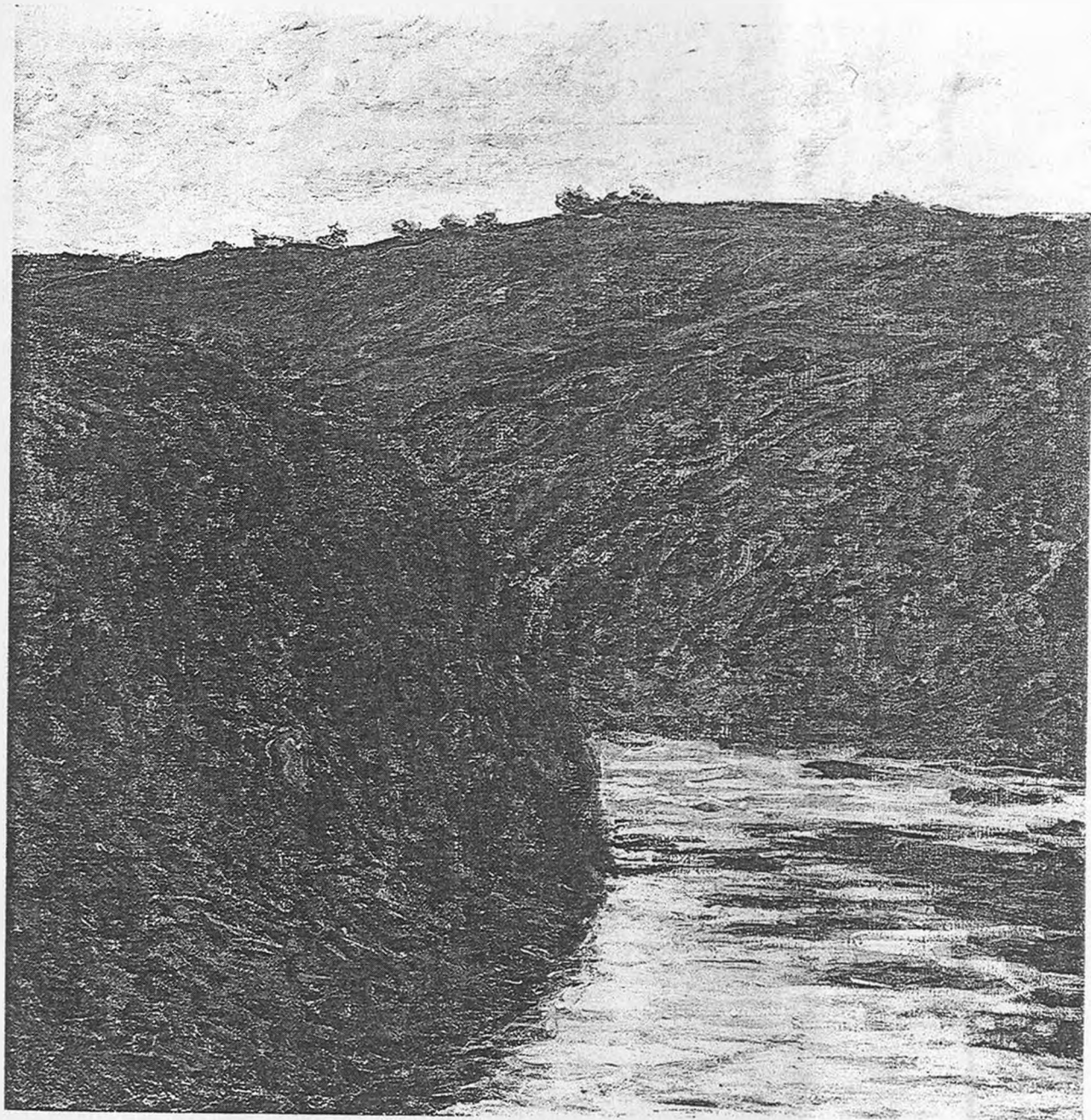
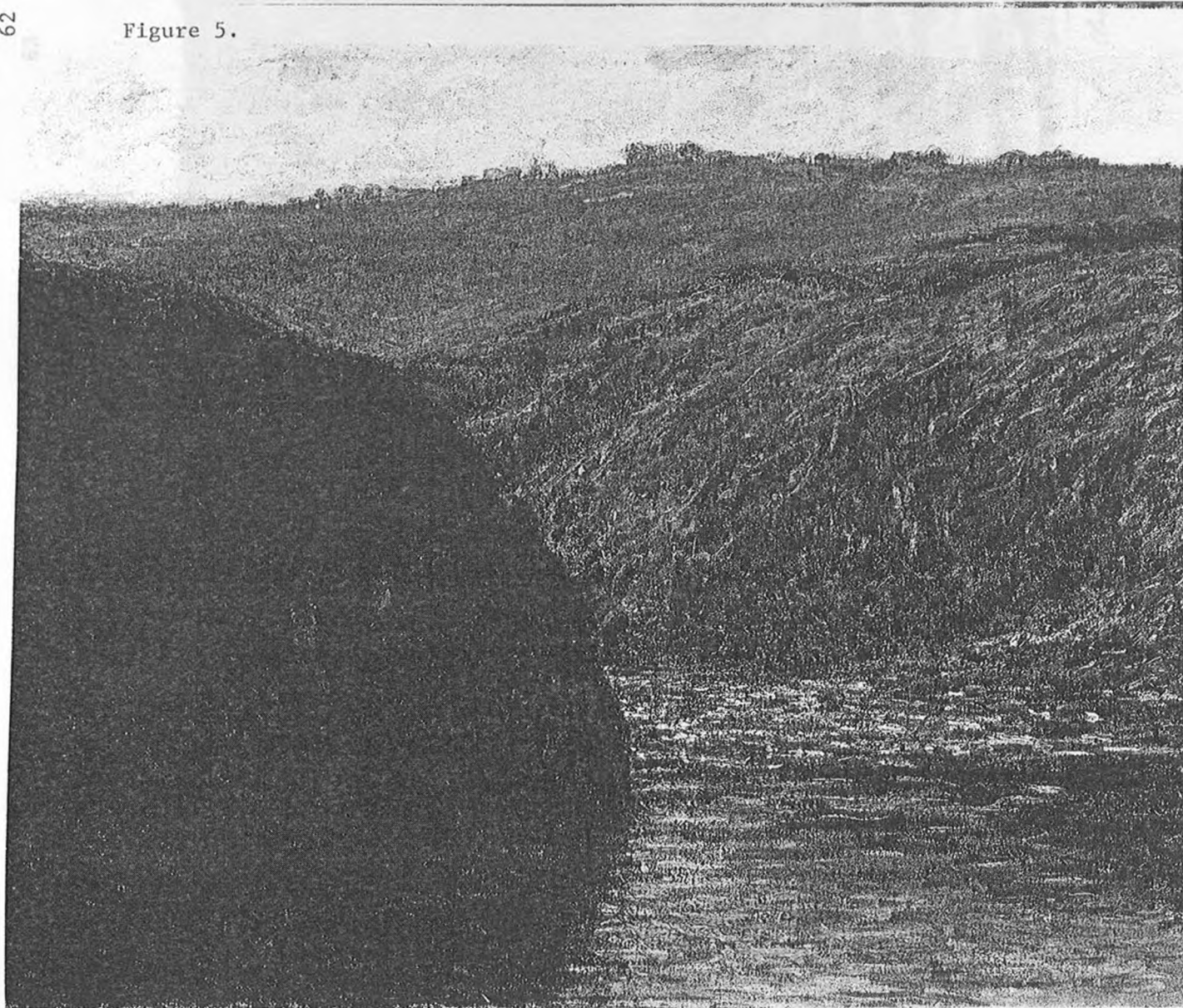


Figure 5.



156 Claude Monet,
Valley of the Creuse.
(*Afternoon Sun*), 1889,
73 × 92, W.1223,
Private Collection.

Figure 6.

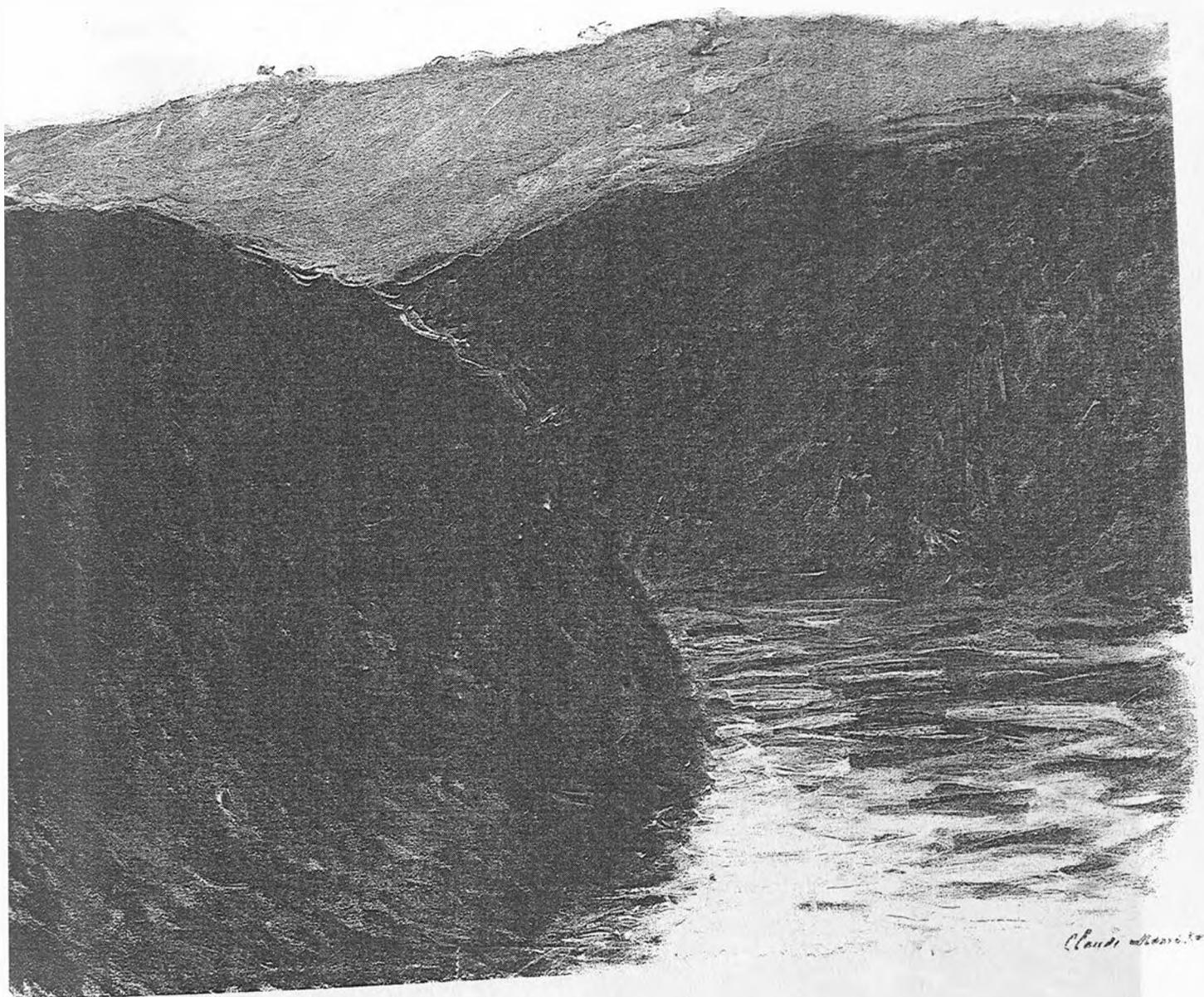


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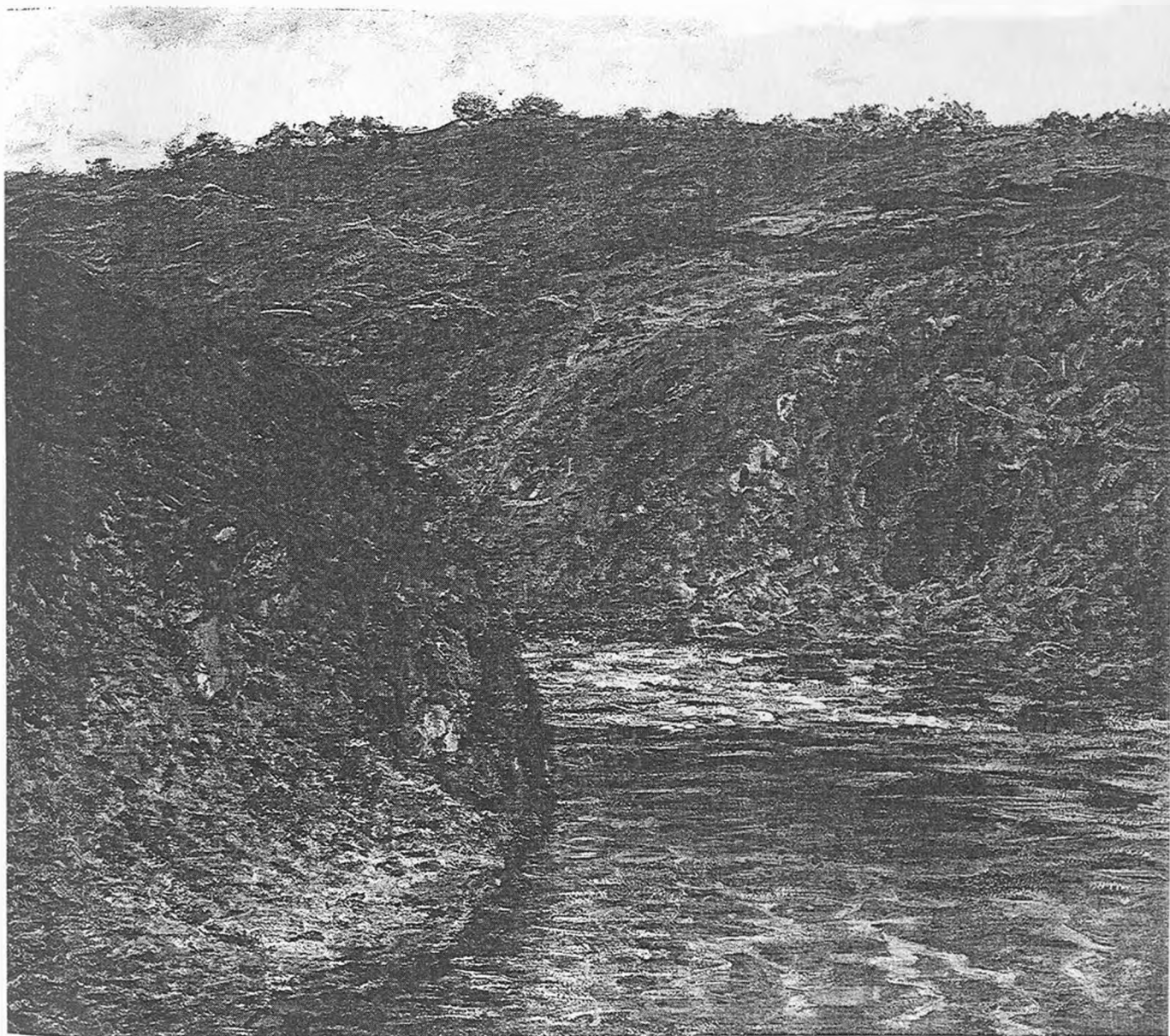


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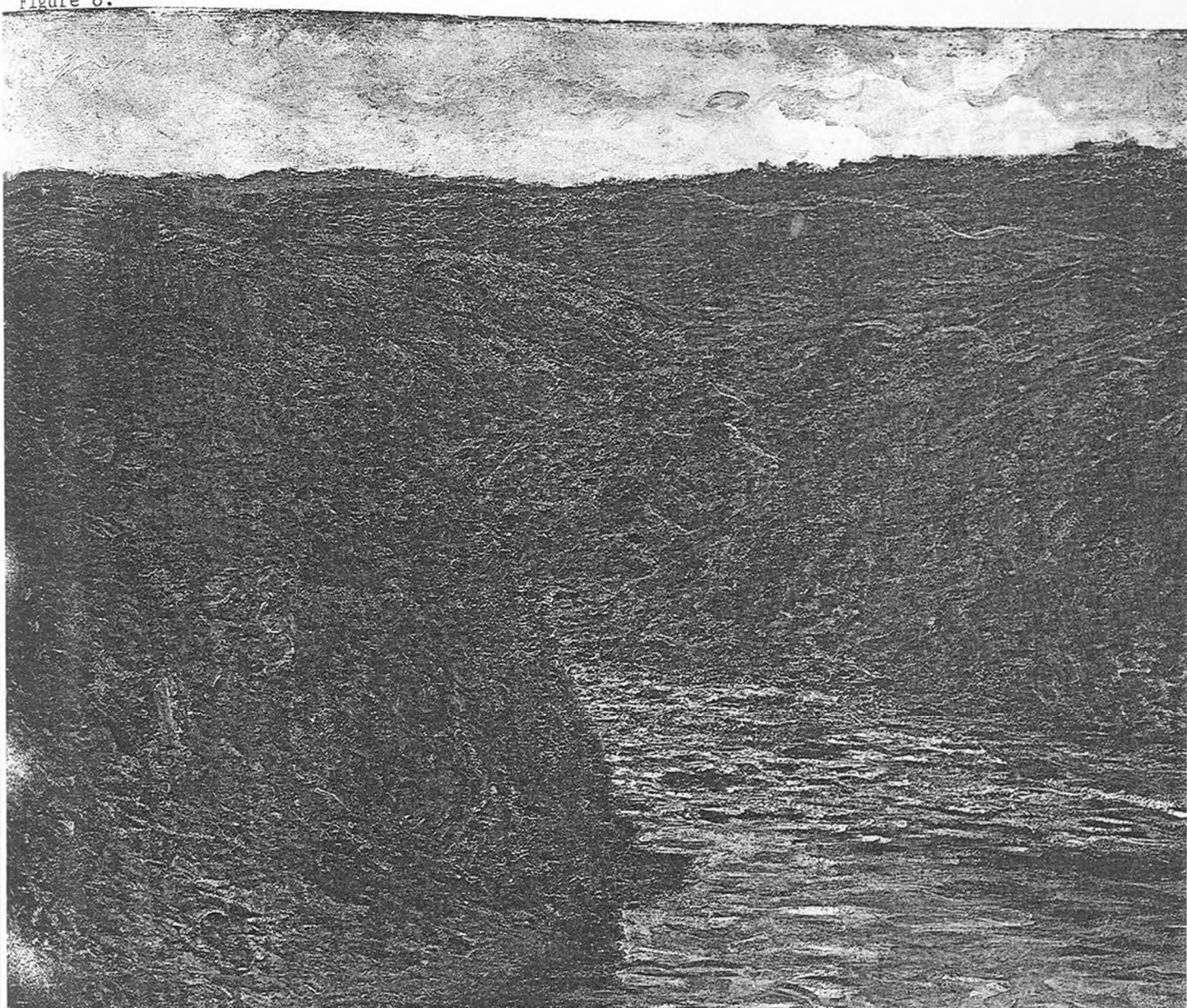
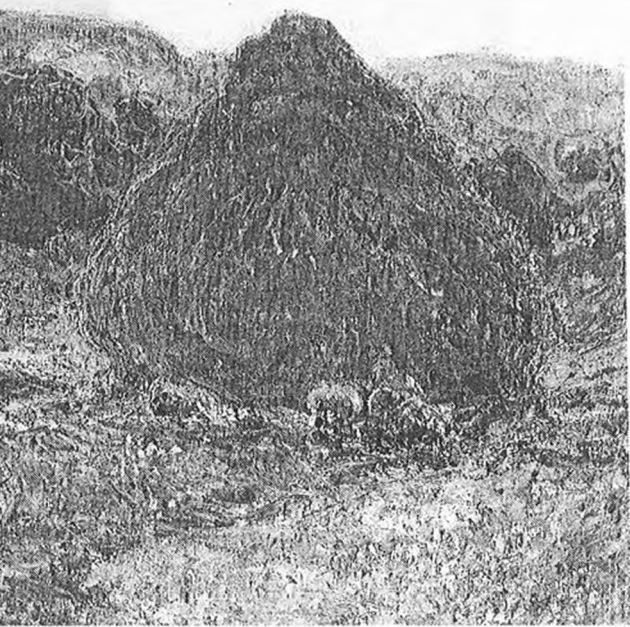


Figure 9.





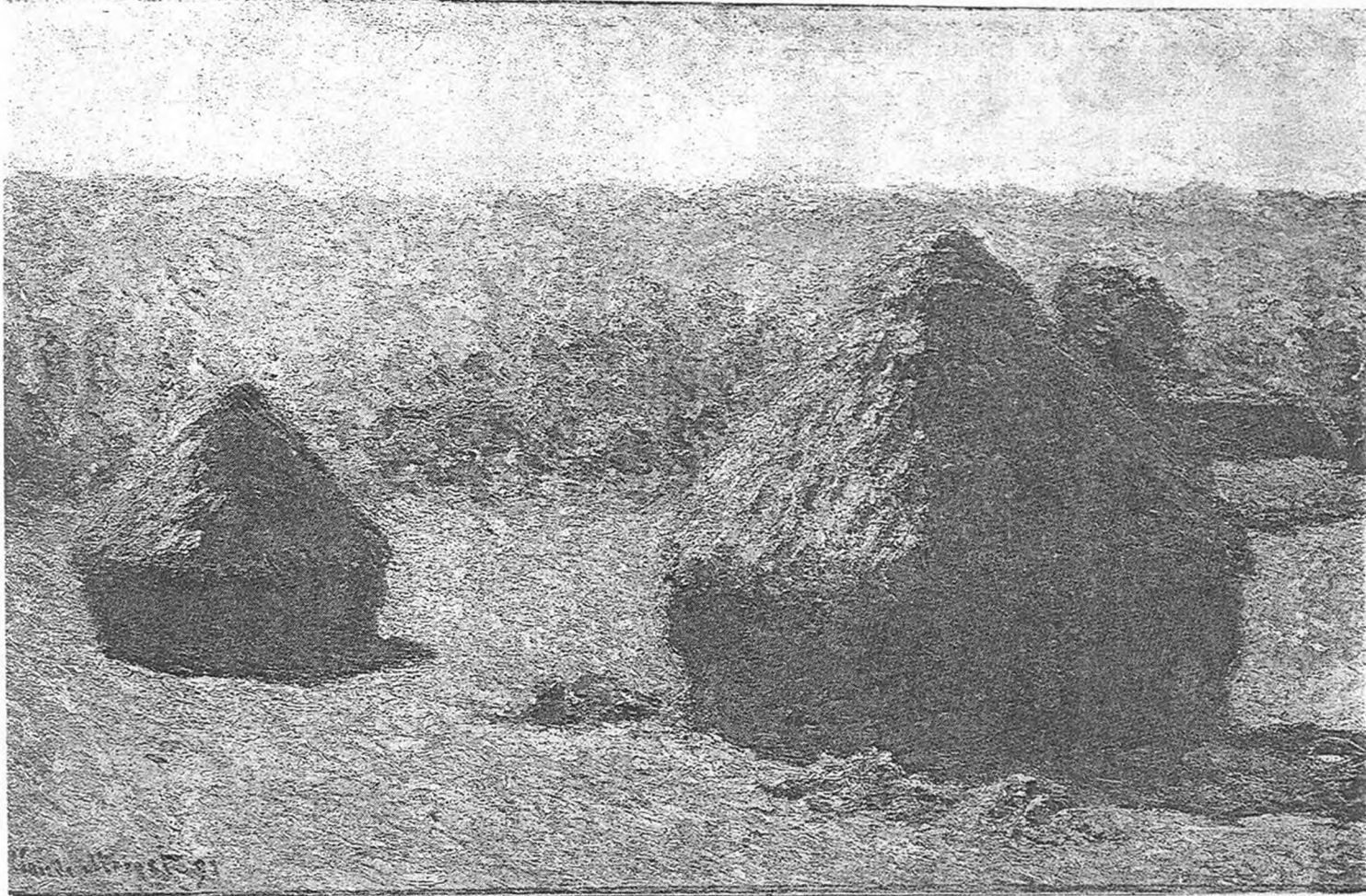


Figure 11.



Figure 12.

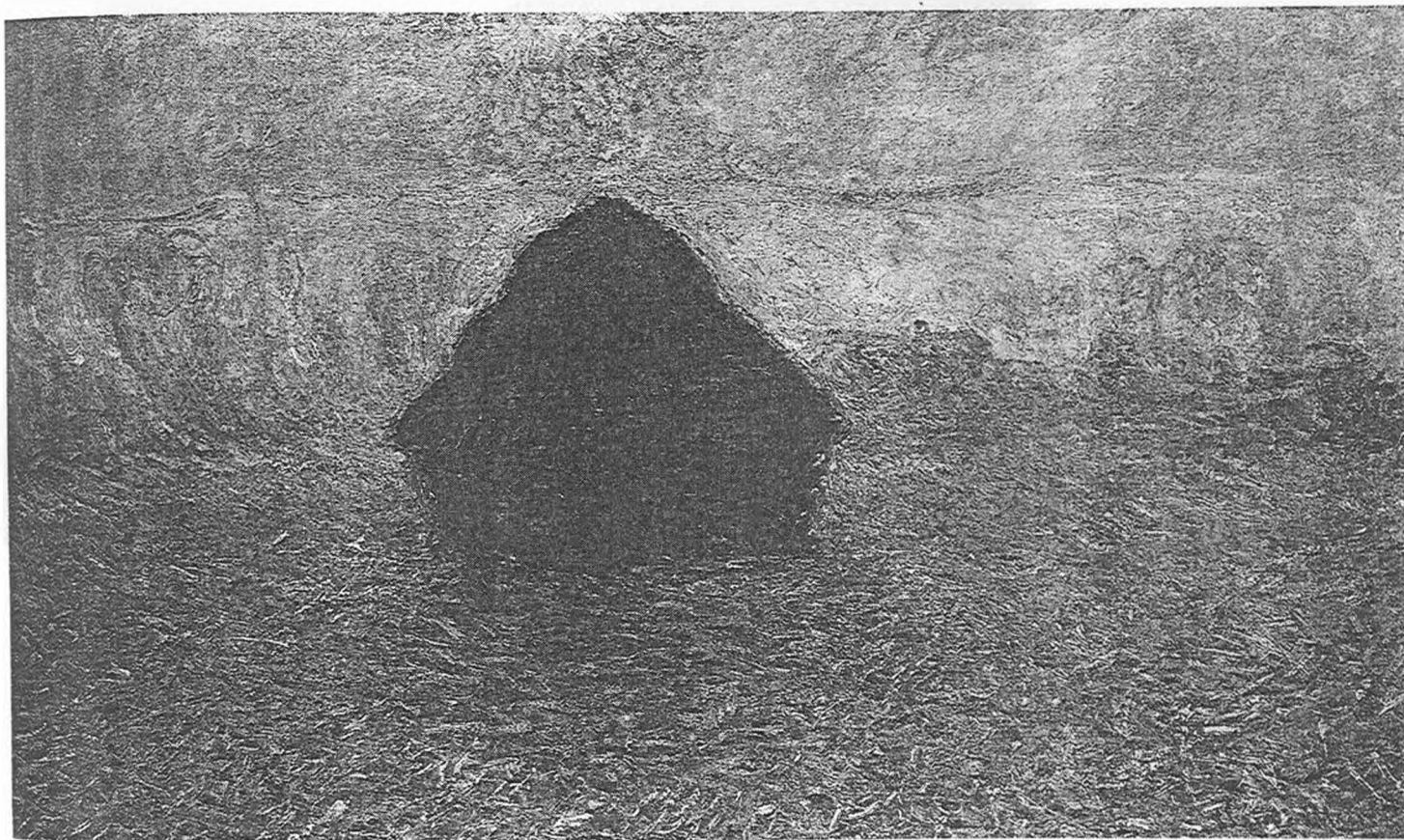
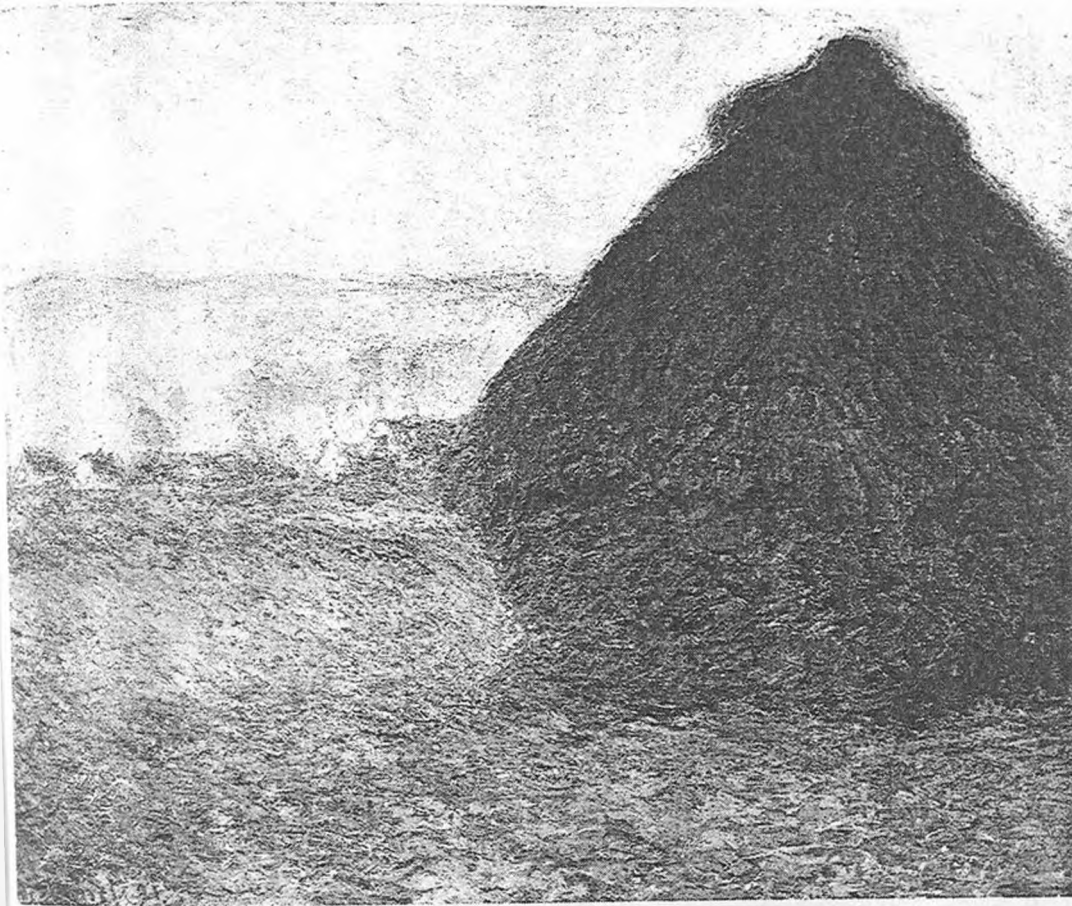


Figure 13.



162 Claude Monet.
Wheatstack, (Sunset).
1890-91, 73.3 × 92.7.
W.1289, Courtesy of
Museum of Fine Arts,
Boston, Juliana Cheney
Edwards Collection.

Figure 14.

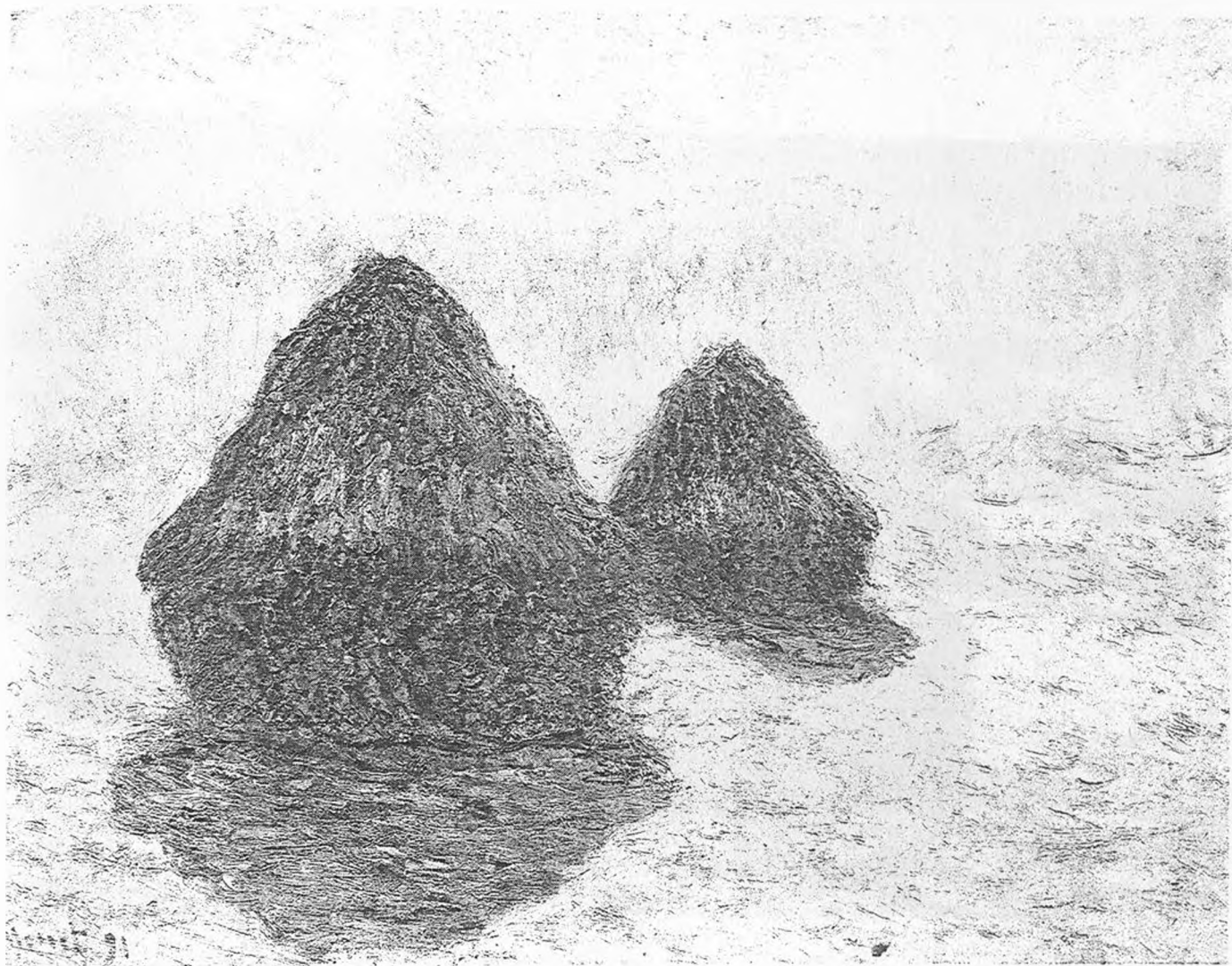


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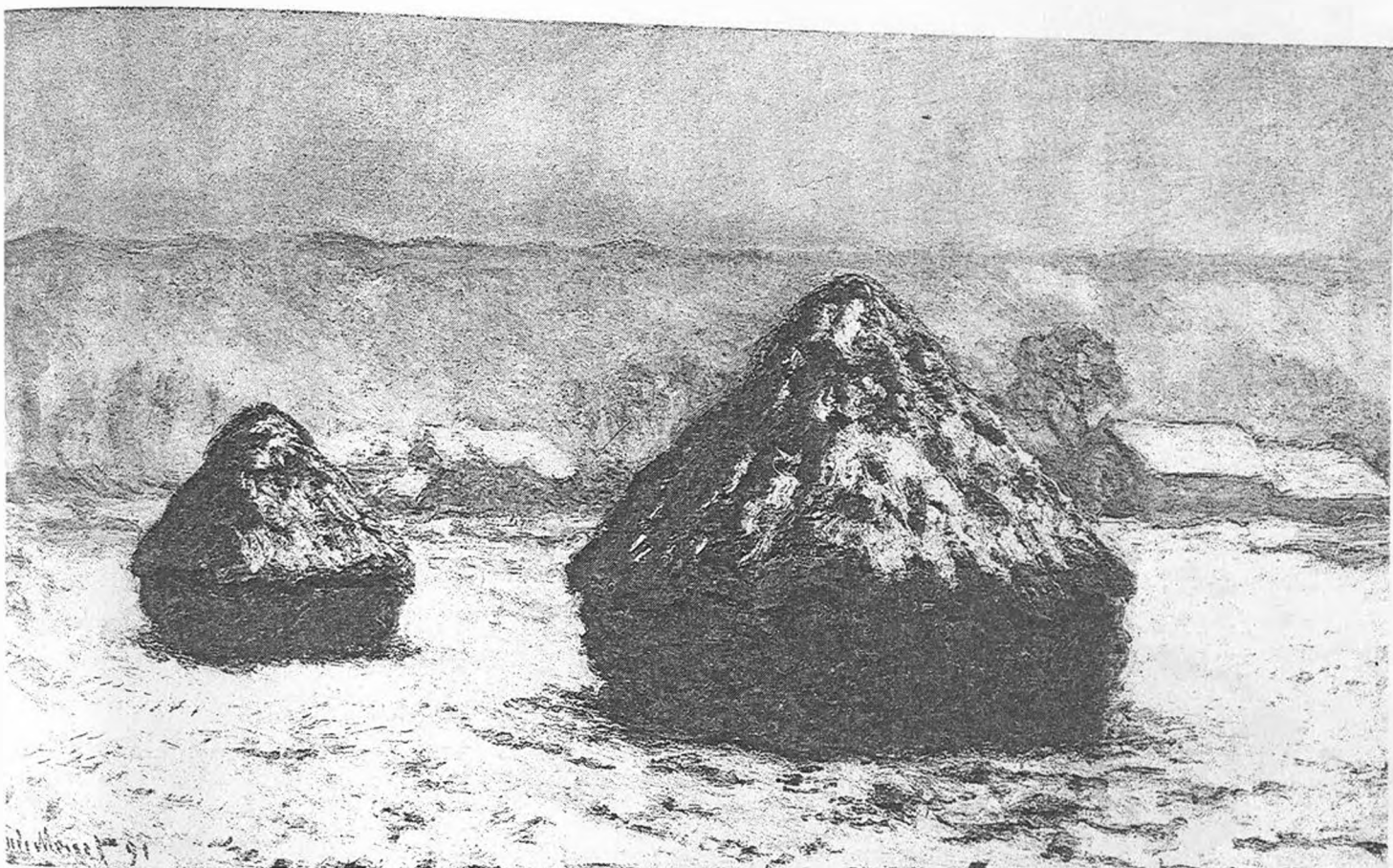


Figure 16.

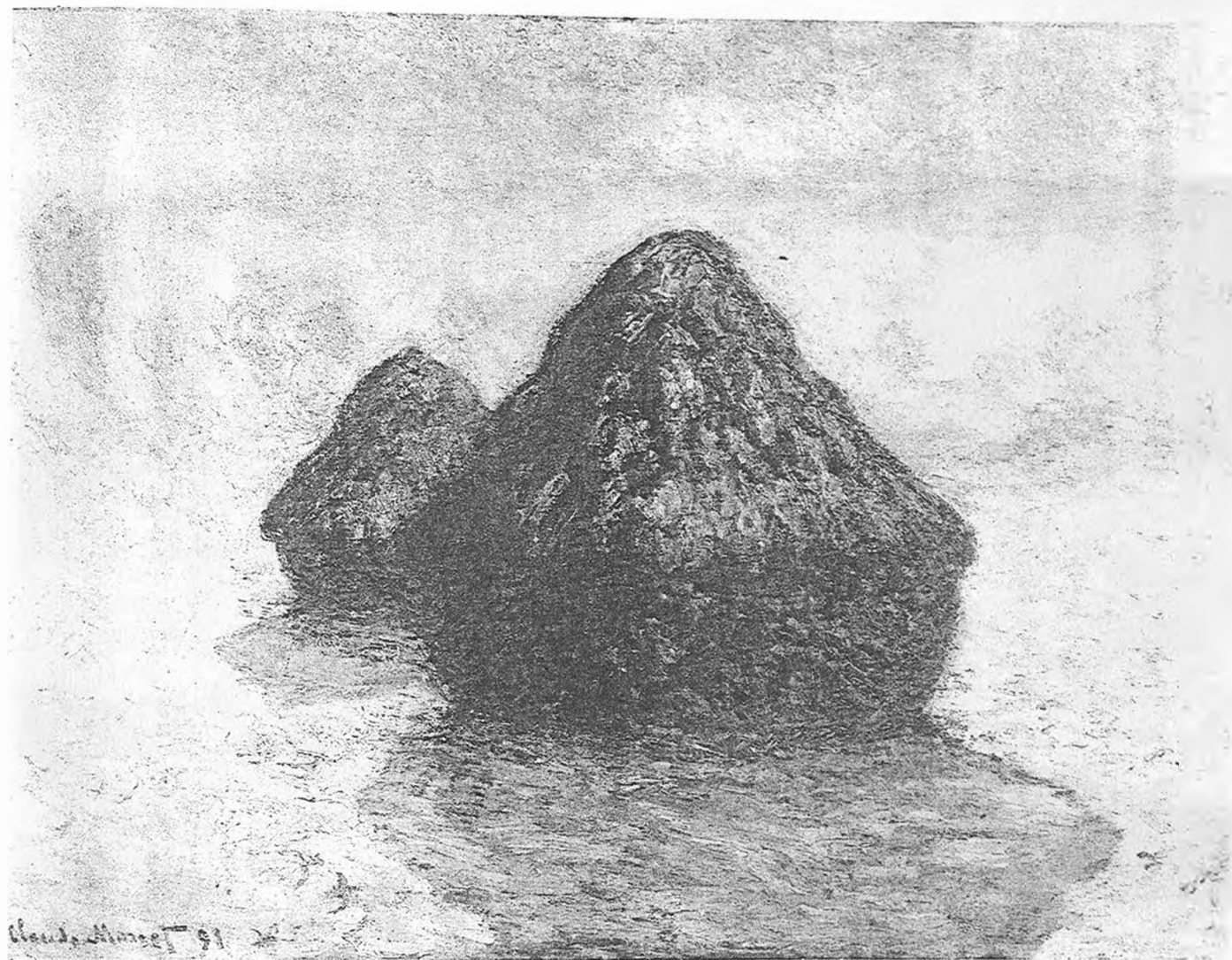


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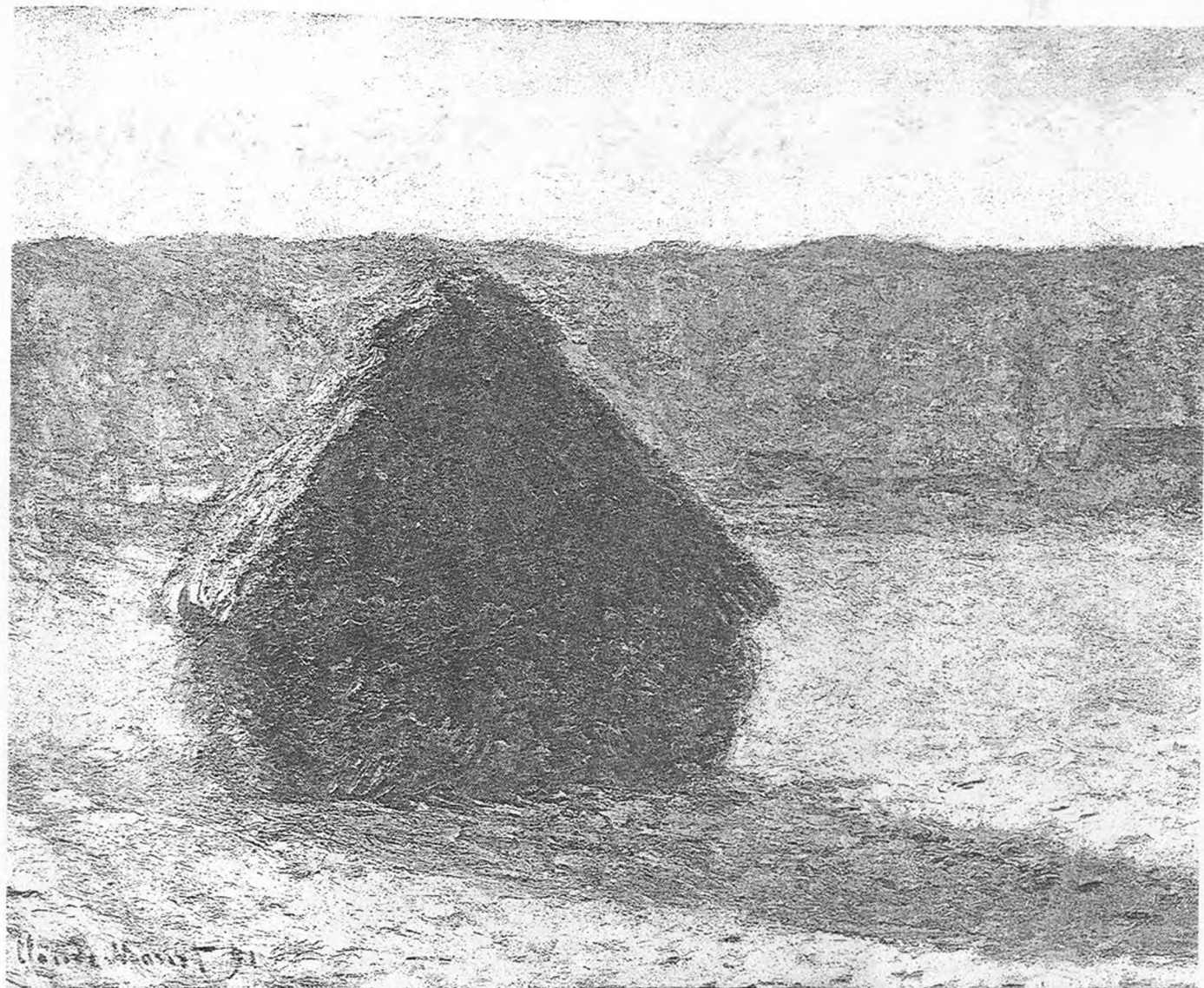


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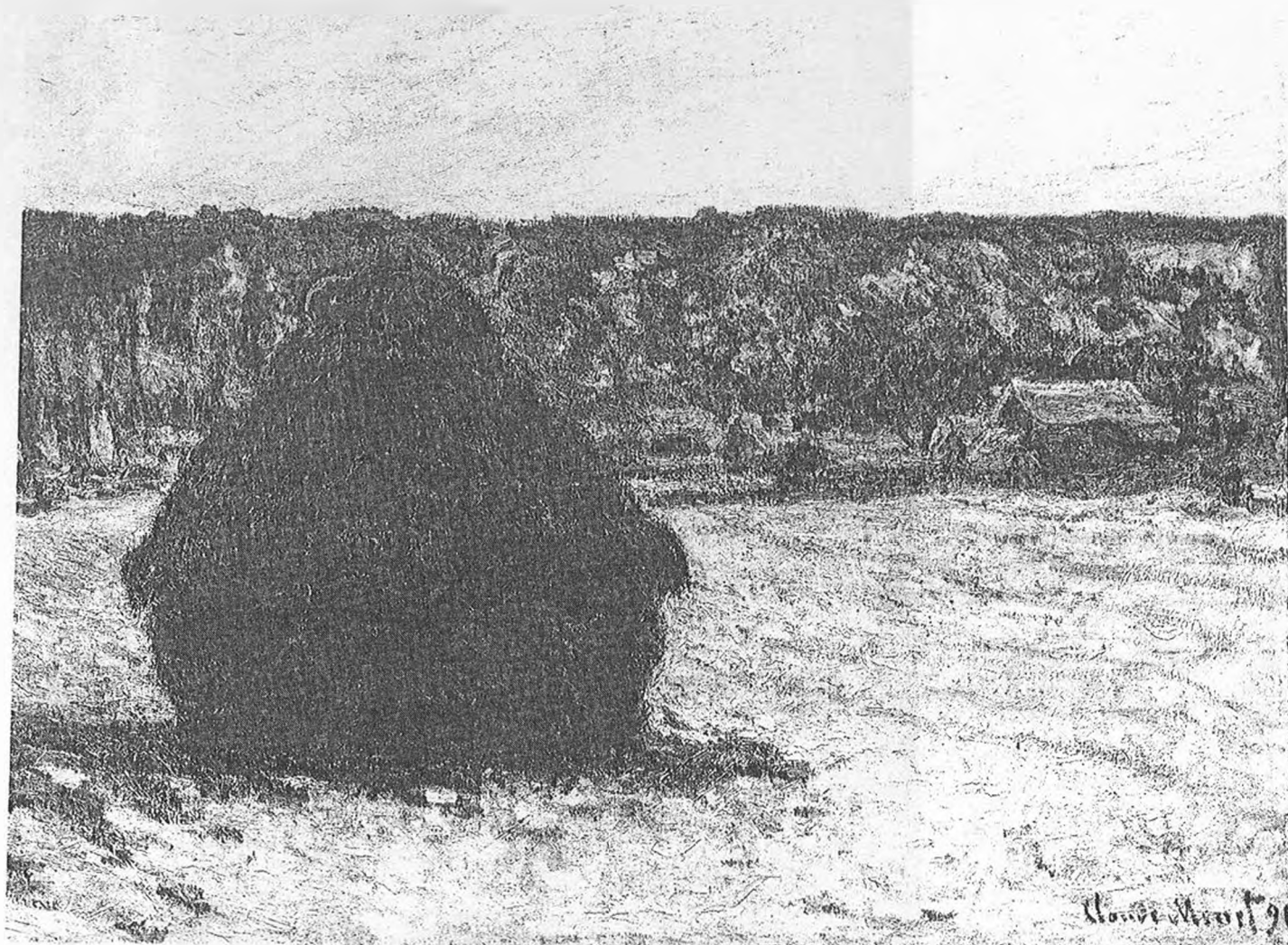


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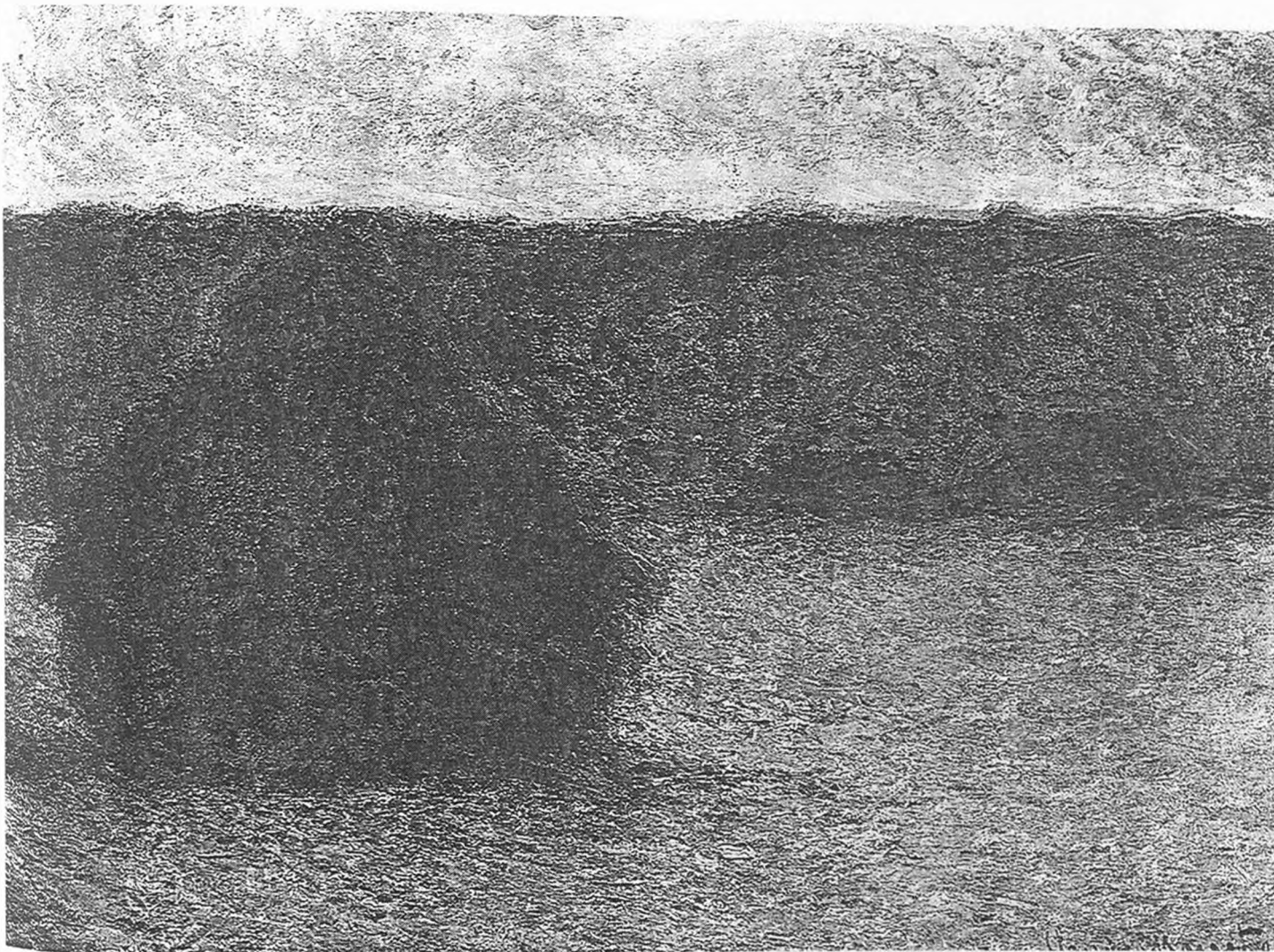


Figure 20.





Figure 21.

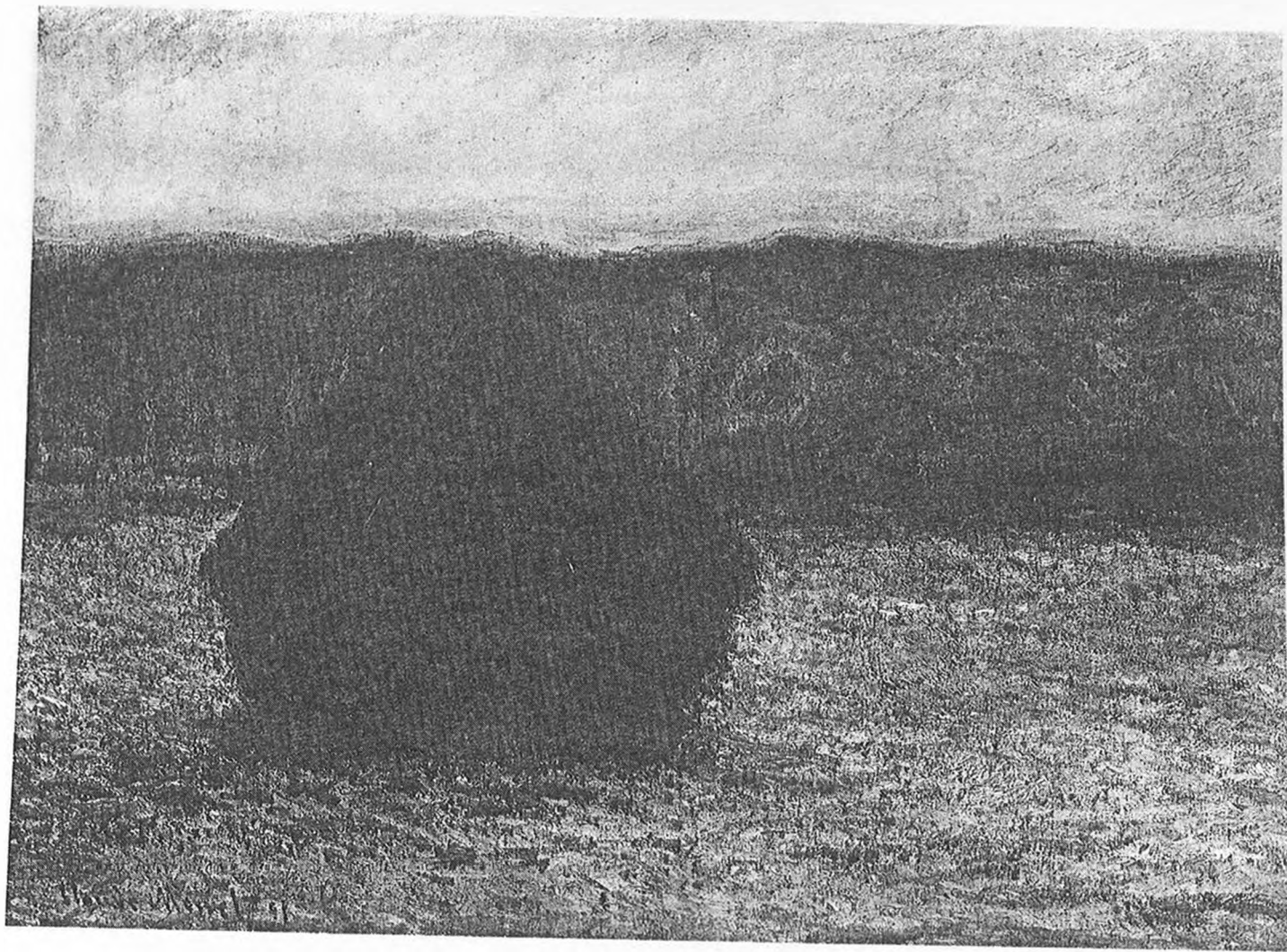


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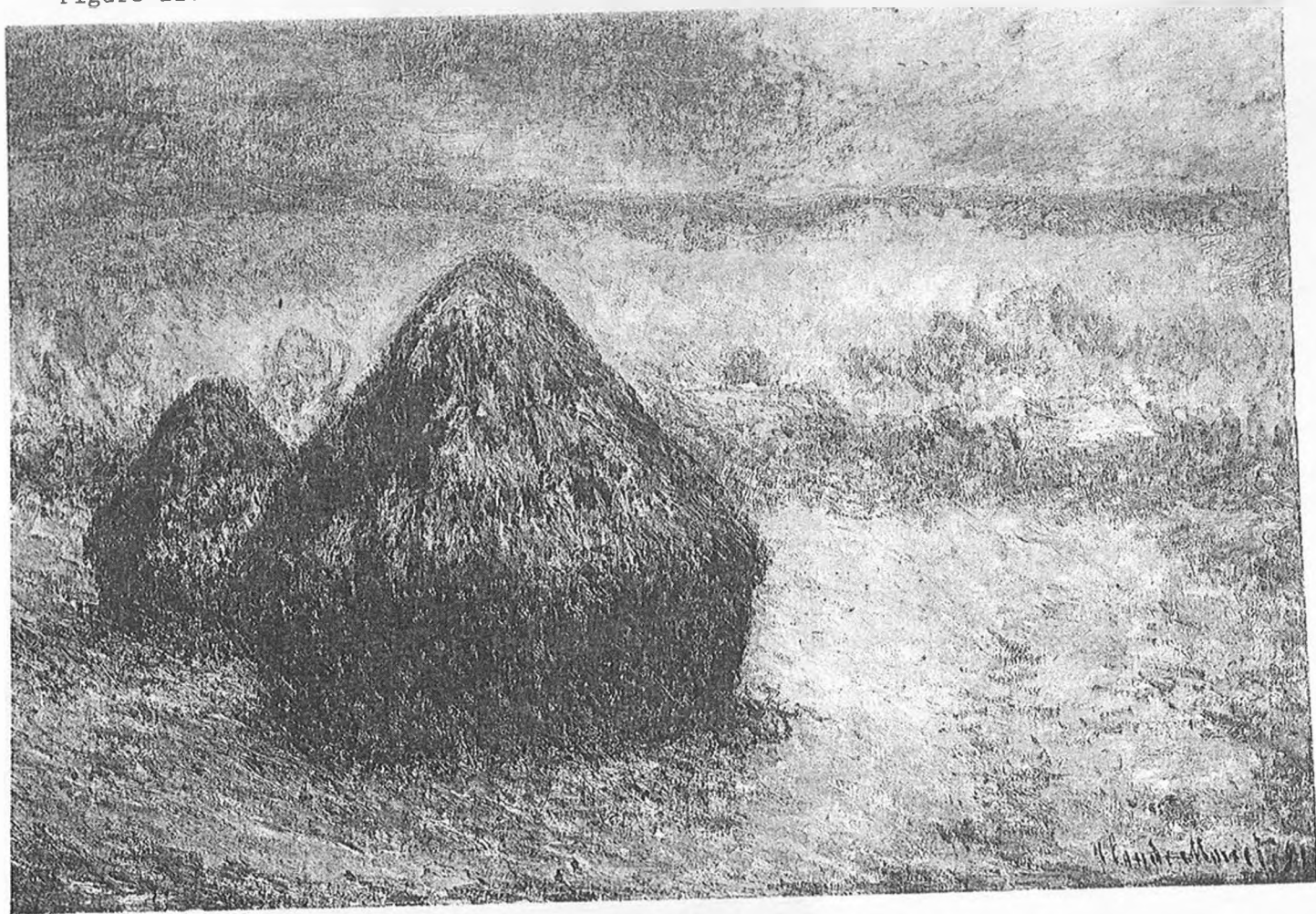


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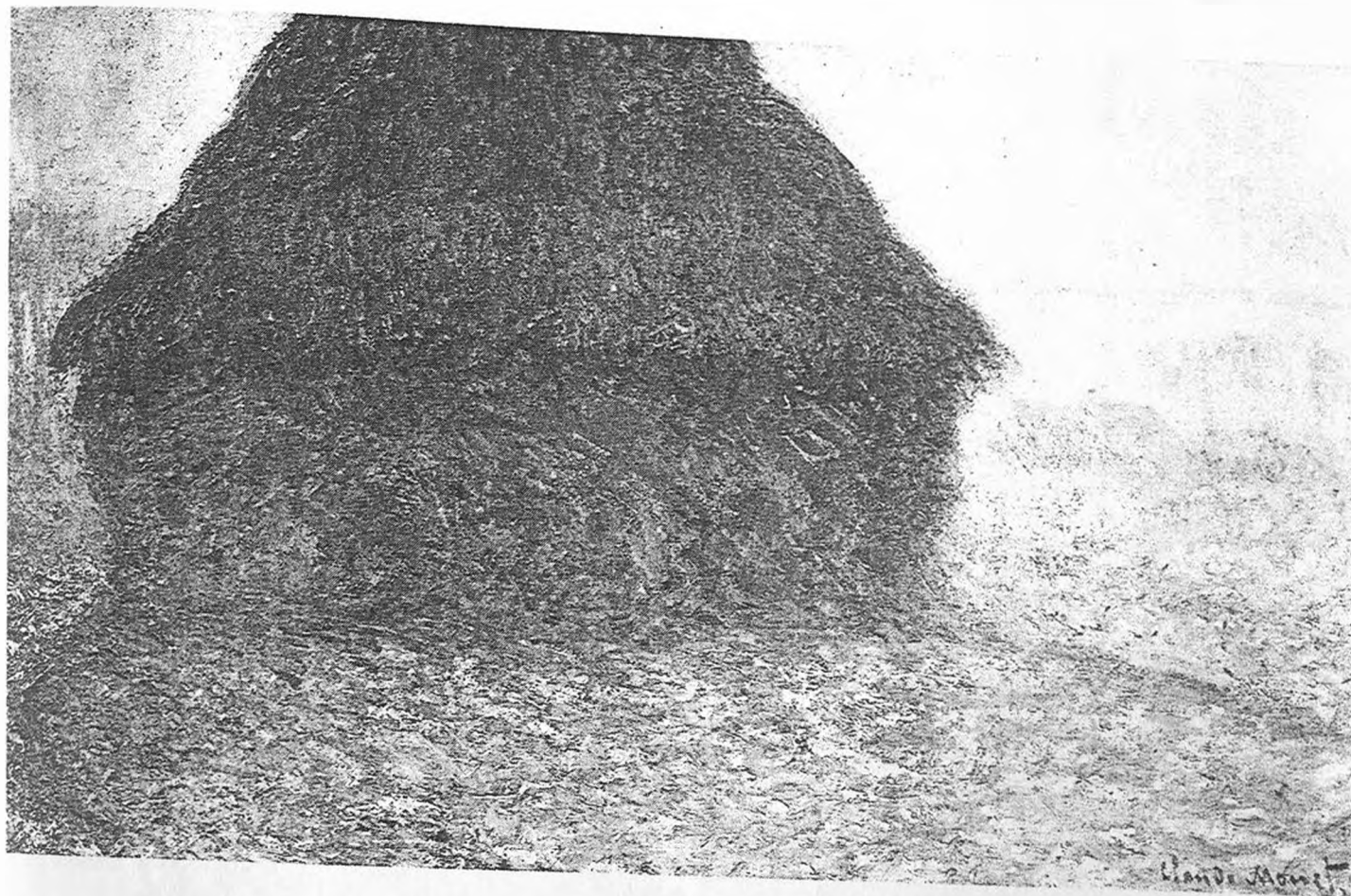


Figure 24.

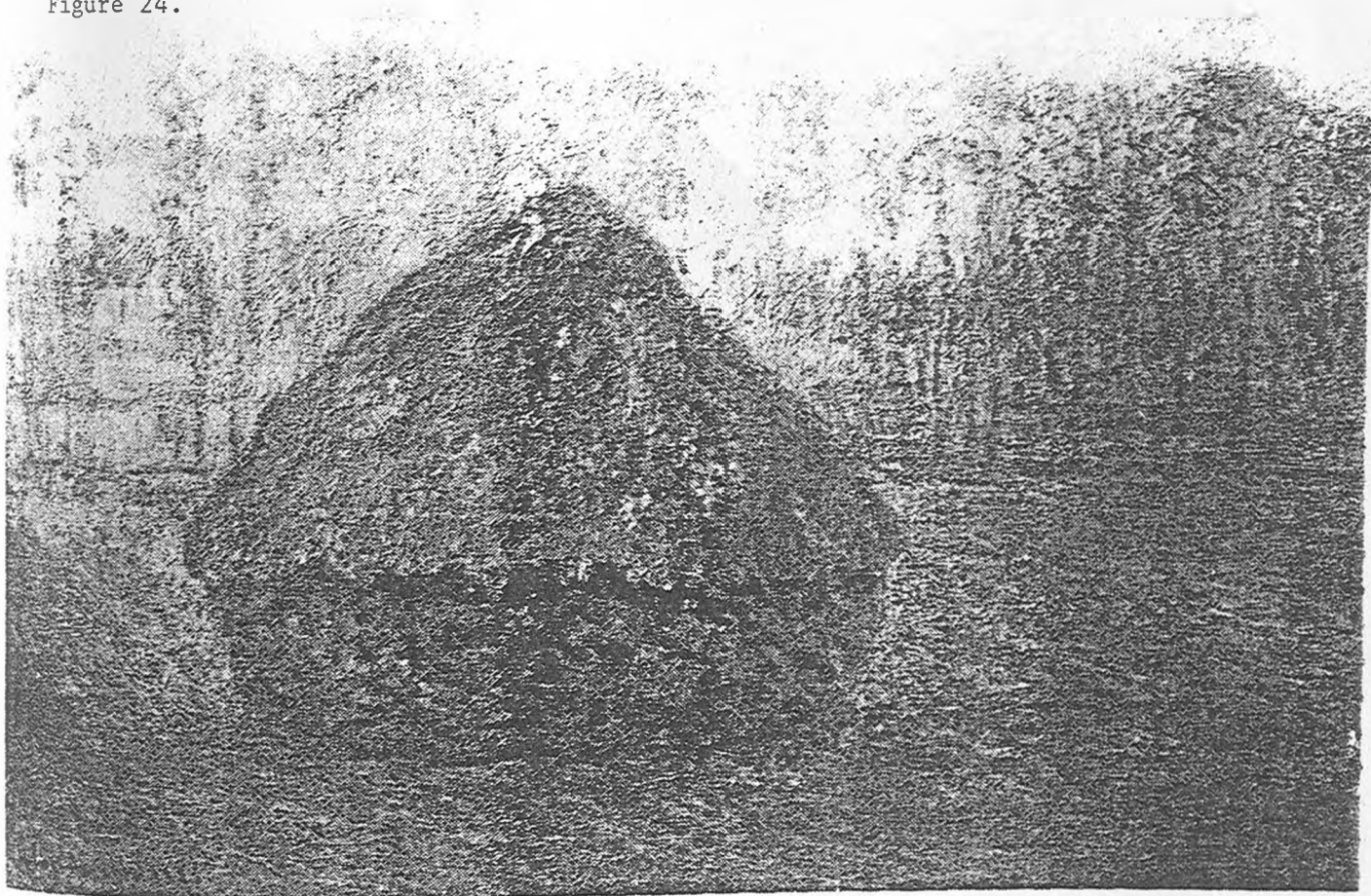


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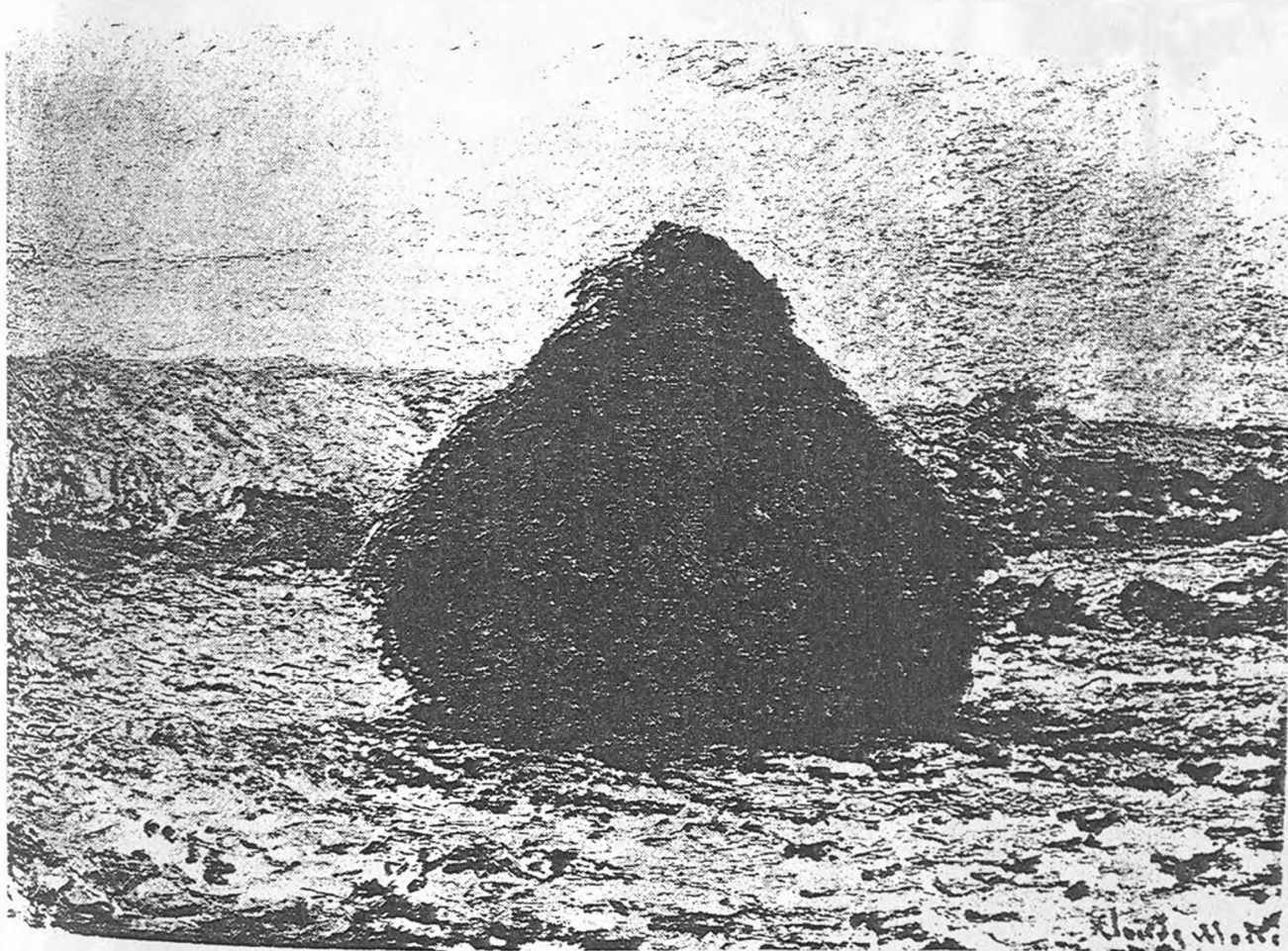


Figure 26

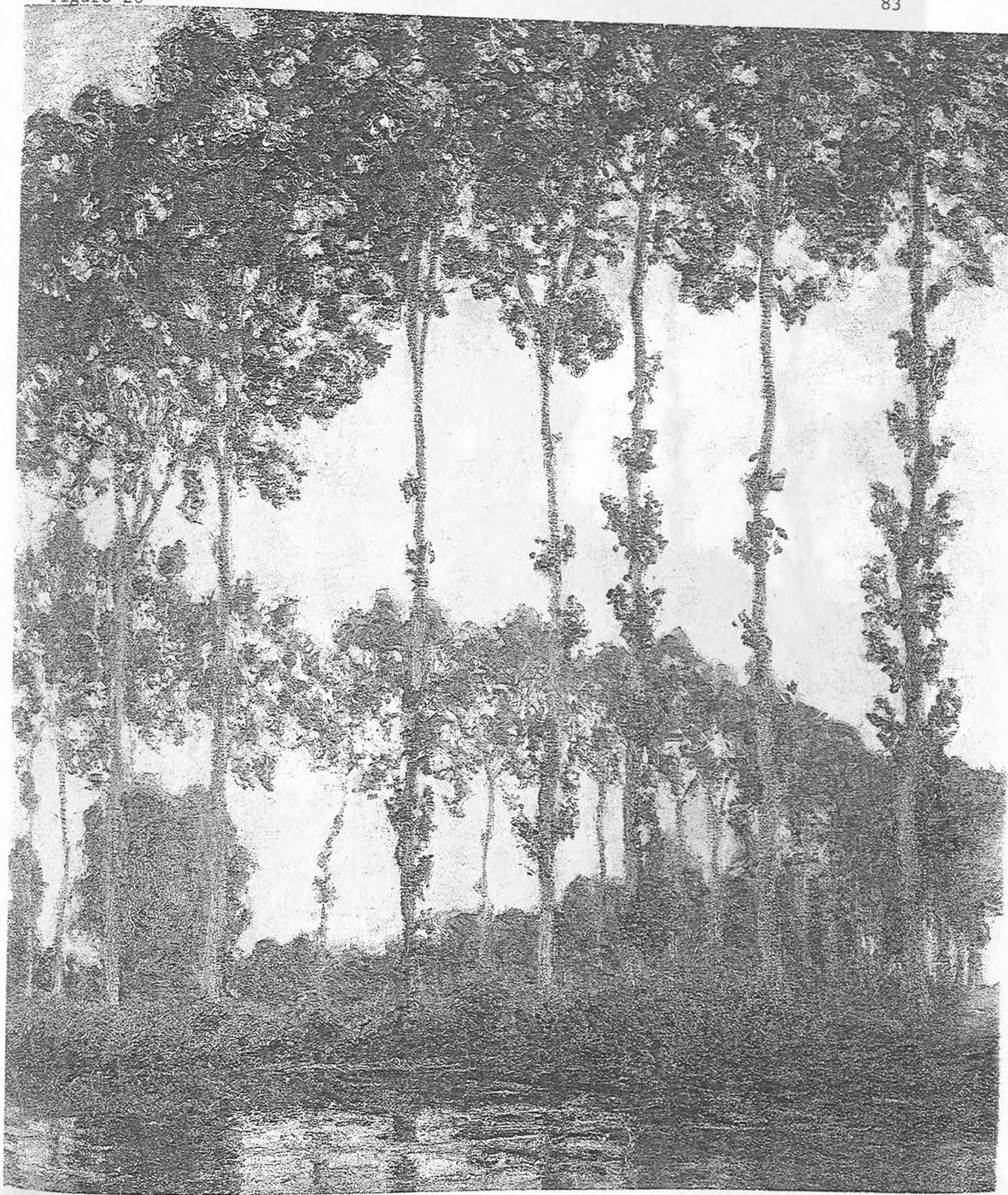
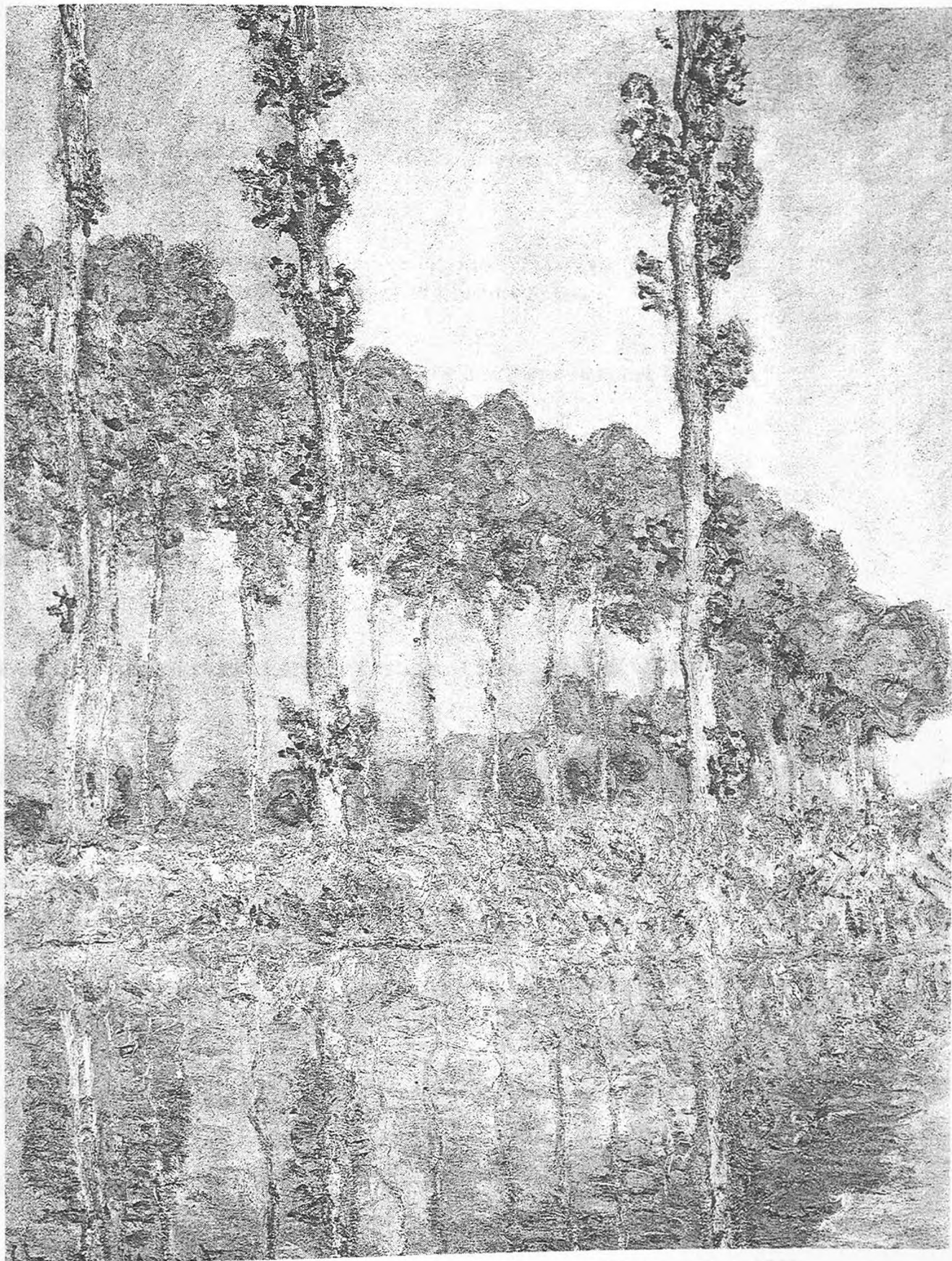


Figure 27.



Figure 28.





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