



## MONET/LICHTENSTEIN: ROUEN CATHEDRAL DIDACTIC

### **Claude Monet's Rouen Cathedrals**

Famous for his broken brushwork and dynamic colors, Claude Monet transformed the landscape genre into powerfully evocative studies that skillfully captured the essence of his subjects. Monet, considered the father of impressionism, approached painting as a meditation on the effects of light and color. He embarked in 1889 on "the series paintings," in which he made several works of identical subject matter but with varied times of day and seasons. From 1892 to 1894, Monet painted thirty views of the Rouen Cathedral from three or four different positions, all quite close to one another, reflecting different times of day. Of all his series, this one—which unifies Rouen and its cathedral through rapid brushstrokes and dissolution of line—required the most time to complete. In 1895 Monet insisted that twenty of these canvases be shown in the gallery of Paul Durand-Ruel (1831–1922). Fellow impressionist Camille Pissarro (1831–1903) remarked to his son about the exhibition: "Cézanne . . . agrees with me that this is the work of someone . . . pursuing the elusive nuance of effects that I do not see any other artist achieving . . . I would have so much liked you to see it as an ensemble, for I find it has a wonderful unity, the kind I have strived so hard to achieve." This series stands as the hallmark of the impressionists' revolutionary and unprecedented artistic movement. *Monet/Lichtenstein: Rouen Cathedrals* provides the singular opportunity to view Monet's Rouen Cathedrals reunited—from the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Musée D'Orsay, Paris. Two of the paintings, *Rouen Cathedral: The Portal, Morning Sun* and *Rouen Cathedral: The Portal and Tour Saint-Romain, Full Sun*, had never been seen publicly in the United States.

### **Roy Lichtenstein's Rouen Cathedral**

In 1968, more than six decades after Monet painted his *Rouen Cathedrals*, John Coplans (1920–2008) organized the landmark exhibition, *Serial*

*Imagery*, at the Pasadena Museum of Art (which later became the Norton Simon Museum of Art). He argued that Monet's series paintings invented the concept of "seriality": "A particular inter-relationship, rigorously consistent, of structure and syntax . . . . *Serial Imagery* is concerned not with the notion of masterpiece, but of process." During a meeting with Coplans to discuss the planning of the exhibition, Roy Lichtenstein saw photographs of Monet's *Rouen Cathedrals*, which inspired the young pop artist to create what he called "manufactured Monets." While Monet's repetition seemingly reaffirms the individuality and uniqueness of Rouen Cathedral, Lichtenstein's *Cathedrals*, broken into democratizing dots and binary color schemes, mechanize this subject matter. Lichtenstein's appropriation delved into the nature of repetition and seriality by taking an iconic image, by then cheapened by overexposure and popularity, and reinvesting it with renewed, ironic vigor and relevancy. Yet, for both artists, the subject is less important than the act of seeing, and it is precisely this obsession with sight that this exhibition's pairing investigates. Monet argued: "The motif is something secondary for me; what I want to render is what is between the motif and me." In comparison, Lichtenstein said: "My work isn't about form. It's about seeing." A visual narrative is constructed that unites the thematic concerns and visual strategies of these chronologically disparate artists; and the two works illustrate the connection between modernism and postmodernism.