



Claude Monet 1903

Monet's Waterloo Bridge: Vision and Process

NANCY NORWOOD



Fig. 2. *Charing Cross Bridge, London*, 1901, $25\frac{5}{8} \times 36\frac{5}{16}$ inches. Art Institute of Chicago, Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection

NANCY NORWOOD is Curator of European Art at the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, a position she has held for 18 years. She earned a B.A. in Russian, and an M.A. in Art History from the University of Texas, Austin, and continued her doctoral studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

Her responsibilities include the stewardship, installation, and interpretation of the museum's encyclopedic collections of ancient, Asian, and European art. Norwood has managed exhibitions from the permanent collection that include European Impressionism, Northern Renaissance prints, Japanese woodcuts, and Indian miniature paintings. Her interest in art conservation led to the development of this exhibition project *Monet's Waterloo Bridge: Vision and Process*.

OPPOSITE

Fig. 1. *Waterloo Bridge*, 1903 (Denver), cat. 2, detail

Monet's London, at least the part where he lived and painted over the course of three stays from 1899 to 1901, was very much a modern city. The three structures he painted—Waterloo Bridge, Charing Cross Bridge, and the Houses of Parliament (figs. 1–3)—as well as the hotel and hospital from which he painted them, were all built in the nineteenth century and were listed as notable landmarks in contemporary tourist guides to the city.¹ The building boom along and across the Thames during the century before Monet's sojourns there had transformed that area of London. Waterloo Bridge, which opened in 1817 to great fanfare, was designed by John Rennie, at enormous cost, as a private toll bridge. The 1905 Baedeker's guide to London described it as "one of the finest bridges in the world . . . it commands an admirable view of the west part of London between Westminster and St. Paul's."² Charing Cross Bridge was also recommended to the visitor, though the most laudatory comments were reserved for the Houses of Parliament, which were erected in the neo-Gothic style in 1840 to replace those that burned in 1834. Monet chose as his base the first luxury hotel in London, the Savoy, which had only been completed in 1889; he painted his views of the Waterloo and Charing Cross Bridges from his rooms there. In the late afternoons, he painted the Houses of Parliament from the balcony of St. Thomas Hospital, which was built from 1868 to 1871.³

The decision to paint structures along the Thames was not unique to Monet; nineteenth-century artists had early on discovered a wealth of subject matter in London's buildings, bridges, and the environment itself. As Jennifer Hardin has noted, the Thames was arguably the Western world's most depicted river in the nineteenth century.⁴ Its new bridges and nearby buildings—along with increasingly vibrant commercial activity, sights, and sounds—provided rich subject matter for innumerable artists, some of whom, like the American James Abbott McNeil Whistler and the British painter Joseph Mallord William Turner, directly inspired Monet's own work. Turner's atmospheric *The Thames above Waterloo Bridge* of the early 1830s (fig. 4) depicts the impact of smoke and smog on the light and colors of the fog-bound river, while Whistler's sixteen etchings comprising *The Thames Set* depict various aspects