

## Mont St Michel by Charles Bentley: painted in 1854

Welcome to this guide in which I'll be inviting you to explore this painting for a few minutes.

The setting is a sandy causeway leading to a large cathedral-like building positioned on a tiny island called Mont St Michel in Normandy, France.

Taking a look at the painting first of all to get the feel of it, how would you describe the scene to yourself? You might find it gloomy, dramatic, exotic, exciting, beautiful, or something else.

Let's take a closer look now at the details of the painting and perhaps see why it's struck you in the way it has.

What probably draws your eye first of all is the majestic shape of the building on the rock. It's a complicated looking building, with turrets, arches, many rooftops, and lots of windows of various shapes and sizes. It's built of stone of several colours, some looking reddish, some more honey-coloured. The rooftops are different colours too. Does this suggest that the building could have been added to at different times? It looks a very costly creation. Would you say it's elegant? Do you like it? What era is this building would you say? It has almost a fairytale look to it, balanced right on top of its rock, and the painter has suggested to us that it's almost grown out of this rock by using similar colours on the walls and the rock face. It doesn't have battlements, but it's described as a fortified monastery, so we know it was a kind of multi-purpose building that both protected its occupants and celebrated their beliefs.

Letting your eye travel further down the rock, you might be able to see other buildings huddling in the shadows. These look higgledy piggledy in their arrangement, and they're not painted as clearly as the larger building. Right at the bottom of the rock on the left there's a collection of buildings that are grey in colour and could be houses, or maybe a fortified entry point of some kind. The position is very exposed to the sea. The waves lap right up to the buildings – imagine what it would be like in the midst of a storm.

This grand monastery was begun as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century. It was a site of pilgrimage and was built on a rock that's accessible only at low tide. In this painting we can see people making their way across the sandy causeway whilst the tide allows them access. Soon the monastery will be cut off again, encircled by sea. The figures and their horses trail away towards the rock and almost appear to be walking into the waves. Does this give the painting a sense of urgency or danger, do you think?

The sky is another dominant feature of the painting. It's dramatically dark, threatening a storm, or perhaps showing us that one has just passed. The clouds seem to boil up behind the sunlit building, and darkness encroaches from the right hand side of the painting. Wind whips the clothes of the fisherman towards the front of the picture, and the waves crash on the sands. But if we look up and to the left of the picture, it's a different place. The sky is bright here, and out to sea small boats bob on the water in a peaceful way. It's a painting of two halves, the one dark, the other light, the one threatening violent weather, the other offering a calmer outlook. Where do you find that *you* most like to look? Do you enjoy the stormy danger on the right, or the breezy scene to the left?

What's the effect of the contrast, for you? It's been suggested that the painter is symbolizing the spiritual significance of the monastery by illuminating it amidst a storm, making it appear like a vision emerging from the sea and clouds. Do *you* agree with this?

Let's make our experience of the painting a bit more vivid now by imagining ourselves stepping onto that beach. Perhaps we're now standing near the water's edge and feeling the wind beat at our hair and clothes, the salt spray in our face, the boom of the surf in our ears.

How do you feel? Is it exhilarating or disquieting for you? Do you like the wild weather, or are you anxious to get to the safety of the monastery?

Turn back now and look at the monastery. What if I told you that at the time this picture was created, this is no longer a monastery but is in fact a notorious prison?

It's been a prison for the last 63 years. What do you feel now, standing on the beach and looking up at those towering stone walls?

Do you think the painter intended to set this scene back in the time of the monastery? Or is he showing us the reality of the bleak prison? Does it make you wonder whether the stormy weather is intended to reflect the theme of crime and punishment rather than the spiritual significance of the monastery?

You may notice that there are many people travelling across to Mont St Michel in this picture. Why so many? Of course, everyone with business to conduct on the island would have to wait for the tide, in order to cross the sands. But are we also perhaps seeing a more symbolic journey taking place? Some viewers have found in this picture a suggestion of the journey of souls walking towards their destiny, caught between the dark and the light, with the fisherman, who could be a Christian symbol, watching them pass by. What do *you* think?

We've come to the end of this audio guide now, although you're welcome to spend more time looking at the painting on your own.

Next, you might like reflecting on what you most enjoyed about this brief activity so scroll down to **Wrap up your painting** to have a go at this.