The Politics of Landscape: Claude Monet and his Water Lilies

It was at the ripe age of seventy-three that Claude Monet (1840-1926) took on the task of painting the mural-sized panels that came to be known as his water lily compositions. These works, which he referred to as *grandes décorations*, encompassed all of Monet’s artistic activity, governing the remaining years of his life. According to Simon Kelly, curator of Modern and Contemporary art at the Saint Louis Art Museum, “Monet’s late, large-scale water-lily compositions…are often seen as the culminating moment not only of his career but of the Impressionist project as a whole.”¹

For most of the twentieth century, from about the year 1915 until his death in 1926, Monet focused on the production of these large canvases, painting and reworking them over the course of several years. Today, forty-one panels exist.² In a little less than a decade, he painted multiple variations of the water lily theme, never deviating from this chosen subject matter.

…You must know I’m entirely absorbed in my work. These landscapes of water and reflections have become an obsession. They are quite beyond the powers of an old man, and yet I want to succeed in rendering what I perceive.³

In 1883, having already spent many years away from Paris, Monet moved to the small Norman village of Giverny. A few years later, Monet bought additional plots of land and began transforming the surrounding landscape into the picturesque, if not idealized, garden depicted in his paintings. “This garden setting may well signify ‘nature’, but it was not a purely natural site. Monet lavished an extraordinary amount of time and money on the upkeep and eventual

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² There are currently 41 extant examples of water lily canvases. It is well-known that Monet destroyed several of his panels in frustration, burning them in legendary bonfires. Ibid, 15.
expansion of the pond and surrounding grounds, ultimately employing six gardeners.”\textsuperscript{4} Knowing the effort exerted by Monet to model the environs of Giverny to his liking contradicts the apparent ease with which he painted his water lily scenes. The supposed naturalism, what seemed to be the effortless beauty of the landscape, was a human construction rather than a natural phenomenon. Yet, despite the reworking of the expansive Giverny gardens, we see no forced compositions or theatrical displays in Monet’s paintings. Rather, we see Monet use nature as a vehicle for giving the immaterial a physical outlet.

At the center of the Giverny landscape was the artificial water lily pond. “For the last three decades of his life, Monet focused almost exclusively on his water garden, particularly the water lilies…producing approximately 250 surviving views of the pond.”\textsuperscript{5} After adding a substantial amount of new land to his property in 1893, Monet obtained permission from local authorities to partially divert the waters from a nearby stream, supplying water to his pond and meddling with the local landscape, about which the townspeople were not altogether pleased. Monet then ordered water lilies, a species not native to France, to be planted into the pond.\textsuperscript{6} It was in the water landscapes of Giverny and its environs that Monet found the “ideal” landscape motifs to which he had always been drawn. Painting in the Impressionist style, despite the emergence of new radical avant-garde trends—Fauvism, Cubism, and Surrealism—Monet focused on this particular aesthetic vision, producing his landscapes against the backdrop of a complicated and tumultuous time in French history.

I contend that Claude Monet’s water lilies are mirrors of his most enduring and ardent desire—to become the representative of French painting. Moreover, the aspiration to become the

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{4} Ann Temkin and Nora Lawrence, \textit{Claude Monet: Water Lilies} (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 5. \hfill
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid. \hfill
\textsuperscript{6} Monet was thought to have first seen water lilies at the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris at the display of Joseph Bory Latour-Marliac, a famed 19\textsuperscript{th} century horticulturist. Monet established a close relationship with Latour-Marliac, from whom he ordered several kinds of exotic water lily breeds for his pond in Giverny. Zafran, 14.}
most recognized and revered of French painters guided Monet throughout the conception, painting, and selling of the water lilies. In his water lilies, Monet not only overturned the established visual and stylistic conventions of nineteenth century landscape, but also managed to integrate his deeply held sentiments about nationalism, his earlier rejection by the academy, and his legacy as France’s leading painter. More than in his earlier works, the water lilies reflect Monet’s desire to establish Impressionism as the national style. His water lilies are not just artistic masterpieces—they operate on a deeper level, beyond their apparent subject matter, working themselves into Monet’s deeply personal, but highly informed, response to fin-de-siècle France.

For half a century after his death, Monet’s specialization and focus on landscapes disqualified him, perhaps unfairly, from true artistic consideration. After years of subsequent generations turning a blind eye to Monet, in the 1950s, a generation of artists rediscovered and embraced Monet’s work. To have artists look back and reconsider Monet’s work revolutionary gave him a new amount of credibility, unforeseen by him during his lifetime. And yet, it remains questionable for many whether or not Monet was successful in achieving his goal of becoming the foremost exponent of French painting. It is Monet’s success or failure in this endeavor that I seek to explore throughout this paper. I will do so by examining three fundamental aspects of his water lily-themed work—the stylistic features of the paintings; the nationalistic elements inherent in his late work; and, the problems of artistic legacy that arose upon their conception and completion.

Transformation of an Aesthetic Vision—Monet and 19th Century Landscape

“I was tempted to use the theme of the Nymphéas for the decoration of a salon: carried along the walls, its unity enfolding all the panels, it was to produce the illusion of an endless whole, a
Until his death, Monet steadfastly remained an Impressionist. In his later work, Monet turned away from depicting the modern, industrial subject matter and focused purely on landscape motifs. Of his later works, Monet’s water lilies are the most obvious example of his rift with the conventions of the nineteenth century landscape. In his development of new visual forms of expression, Monet overturned and subverted established nineteenth-century conventions, not only by rejecting traditional artistic values, but also by establishing a completely different visual and stylistic language. At the turn of the twentieth century, Monet stood on “no-man’s land”—simultaneously rejecting the tropes of traditional landscape painting while refusing to embrace the emergent artistic trends that were gaining international attention.

Most of the subjects that Monet chose to paint in the 1900s were images of the French countryside, specifically the surrounding gardens of his home in Giverny. It was not his choice of subject matter that was unique, for prior to this many of his paintings had focused on rural motifs, as did the paintings of his predecessors and contemporaries, like Gustave Courbet and Camille Pissarro, respectively. Beginning in the 1820s, many of France’s leading landscape painters made regular excursions to the Forest of Fontainebleau. These artists, who came to be known as the Barbizon school, had veered away from the theatricality and staged nature of Romantic landscapes and are credited today with the establishment of pictorial naturalism in France. Although by the time Monet became a painter, the French countryside and rural life was

accepted subject matter, it was through Monet’s treatment of these overriding themes that he challenged artistic conventions and transformed the accepted aesthetic vision. With his water lilies, Monet did not position himself as the contemporary viewer of a rural landscape, nor did he impose that limiting or constraining position on any viewer. Instead, his paintings have an immersive effect, enveloping the viewer and removing him or her from the demands of time and space into a deeper, more spiritual realm.

It is not, as I have previously stated, the subject matter that absorbs the viewer into this otherworldly quality, but rather Monet’s innovative treatment of form and space. According to Simon Kelly, “[Monet] developed a very different concept by removing the horizon line from his images and placing the spectator in a low rather than an elevated vantage point, thereby enhancing the immersive effect.”

Despite the fact that Monet was very aware of past artistic trends, the water lilies are a demonstration of the innovative nature of his paintings. Monet combined the Impressionist touch—visibility of the brushstroke, openness of the composition, emphasis on light and effects of time, movement as an element of perception and experience—with an increasingly innovative treatment of the composition. His awareness of traditional landscape conventions functioned not as a limiting agent, but as the foundation from which to deviate and evolve. Monet’s water lilies are landscapes that are far from displaying the naturalism, even realism, characteristic of landscape painting of the time. Monet’s water lily paintings are horizonless landscapes, in which embodying a sense of immediacy and projecting subjective sensations through the use of quick brushstrokes and luminous color took precedence above accurately depicting nature.

10 Kelly, 29
By the time Monet was painting his water lilies, the now-Old Masters, such as Eugène Delacroix and Jean-Auguste Ingres, had receded into the confines of the past, and along with them, the strict compositional and stylistic conventions that dictated the nature of their art. As Denis Rouart stated in *Claude Monet: Historical and Critical Study*:

Much has been made of both Ingres and Delacroix as precursors of modern art. The fact remains that both were staunchly orthodox exponents of an art conceived and executed in the image of the Old Masters, in accordance with the canons of the “classical” schools of Renaissance painting…

The new school of French landscape painting that had arisen in the mid-nineteenth century could not have been a more obvious deviation from the staged and emotionally overpowering Romantic style. Not only did it stray from stylistic conventions, but it also undermined the authority of the French Salon, which strictly endorsed the classical artistic canon. Claiming the goals of this new school of painting as his own, Monet rejected the old artistic conventions of academic art and advocated for a style where the natural world provided for new pictorial possibilities.

Impressionist painters no longer adapted the landscape to religious themes or mythological figures, but allowed it to play the leading role in their canvases. Although their predecessors, the Realists, had themselves deviated from academic styles of painting by choosing to depict real places, rather than idealize nature, it was the Impressionists who truly embodied this innovative fervor. According to Rouart, “Courbet was the champion of realism in its most positive form…[but] Courbet innovated only in his choice of subjects. In the matter of purely

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12 Rouart, 16
pictorial expression, his technique and formal language constituted a throw-back to old-fashioned methods.”  

Although Monet, like the other Impressionists, concentrated solely on the spontaneous depiction of nature, ignoring the usual rules that had dictated past compositions and focusing on the liminality of the pictorial space, he took these ideas and created artworks beyond the conceivable notions of landscape painting at the time. To further illustrate the innovative style and composition of Monet’s paintings, particularly those done in the latter part of his life, I shall use the *Agapanthus* triptych (Fig. 1), a large-scale, three-paneled water lily composition, reunited at the Saint Louis Art Museum for the first time since 1980.  

In the principal essay for the *Agapanthus* catalogue, Simon Kelly states:  

As with so many of Monet’s water lily paintings, the triptych is compositionally distinguished by the absence of a horizon line, prohibiting a sense of spatial recession and increasing the impression of flatness. For many critics, this aspect represented Monet’s greatest radicalism. Roger Marx for example saw the eradication of any reference to spatial markers such as a riverbank as definitively fracturing all links to previous landscape schools.”

The *Agapanthus* triptych is just one of Monet’s forty remaining *grandes decorations*. Monet’s obvious deviation from nineteenth century landscape resides in his treatment of space in the composition. In the earliest stages of creation, Monet had painted several agapanthus plants on both sides of the pond. Archival data shows that in subsequent compositions, Monet had reworked the painting to included only two agapanthus plants on a riverbank, at the far left of the left panel and several clumps of water lilies to the lower-right of the right panel. The agapanthus

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13 Rouart, 18-19  
14 Claude Monet, *Agapanthus*, c. 1915-26; oil on canvas; refer to appendix for image.  
plant functioned as a spatial marker against the open expanse of the water, grounding the viewer in space.

After a series of revisions, Monet’s finished painting completely eliminates the agapanthus plant after which the work is named. Covering the agapanthus plant of the left panel is perhaps the most noticeable alteration. “…the plant had originally served as a repoussoir, situating the spectator on the riverbank. Its removal emphatically flattened the pictorial space, increasing the viewer’s disorientation.”17 In ridding himself of the agapanthus at the edge of the painting, Monet eliminated the traditional conception of space rooted in linear perspective and fully departed from his original, more naturalistic vision. The evolution of Monet’s triptych, from defined to undefined, from naturalistic to abstract, from the material to the spiritual, shows the widening rift between Monet’s aesthetic vision and the landscapes that preceded him.

Did his deviations from traditional landscape painting at the beginning of the twentieth-century establish him as an avant-garde painter to the likes of Picasso and Matisse? This question is difficult to answer with such strict terms as “yes” or “no.” On the one hand, regardless of the artistic innovations Monet undertook during his late paintings, he never sought to deviate from the Impressionist technique he had endorsed for so long. It would be erroneous, in my opinion, to still consider him an avant-garde painter in the early twentieth century. Despite the obvious evolution of his work, Monet never sought to move beyond the stylistic qualities of Impressionism. To consider him avant-garde in the era of World War I would overstate the radical nature of the Impressionist technique he had spent years refining. On the other hand, it could be said that Monet subtly incorporated the modern aesthetic, through the use of chromatically abstract pictorial language and the dissolution of the form, towards the end of

17 Ibid, 41
his career. Although some branches of popular scholarly discourse attribute the stylistic changes of his late works to nothing more than a visual handicap, in my opinion, the radical use of space and the reinterpretation of perspective was completely intentional. In short, I maintain that Monet deliberately incorporated aspects of the modern aesthetic, but always within the confines of Impressionistic technique. He did not deviate from Impressionism, but he did take it to its furthest extent.

From the outset of his career, Monet had set out to develop new forms of visual expression. He did so in the last years of his life, not by depicting contemporary subjects rooted in modernity, but by demonstrating a unique sensitivity to nature. Yet, Monet was still able to rework the traditional aesthetic expression in the 1890s only because he was attuned to conditions of contemporary society. He selected a subject that resonated with the public for whom he was painting, rendering it in ways that acknowledged established norms for French painting, while simultaneously pushing beyond those rules into new artistic territory. It was not only his artistic instinct, but also his political awareness that is important to remember, for it attests “to his complex personality and suggests the multiple dimensions that his art possessed.”

**Monet and Nationalism**

“I should be a bit ashamed to think about little investigations into forms and colors while so many people suffer and die for us.”

- Claude Monet, 1914

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18 Sagner-Düchting, 96.
19 “Consultation with a doctor revealed that Monet was legally blind in one eye and had only ten percent of his vision in the other. In 1923, he underwent an ultimately successful operation to remove the cataracts, although his recuperation occupied much of 1924…We can only speculate about the degree to which these alterations [of the *Agapanthus* triptych]—particularly an increased lack of definition—may have been due to Monet’s vision problems.” Ibid, 40.
21 Monet to Gustave Geffroy, 1914, in Kelly, 27
None of Monet’s water lily paintings overtly depict themes of nationalism or patriotism. There is no Lady Liberty rising from disaster or French flags raised in triumph—there are just water lilies. Nonetheless, it was through these water lilies that Monet most deeply expressed his love for his native country. Although some scholars deny any expressions of nationalistic sentiment in Monet’s water lily painting, others, including friend and confidant Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, saw them as “expressions of the national spirit commemorating the peace following World War I.”

The obvious lack of historical narrative in Monet’s work makes it difficult to discern nationalistic themes. In Monet’s Water Lilies: An Artist’s Obsession, contributor James Rubin questions how paintings “so ostensibly lacking in historical content could appeal to a major military and political leader and be regarded as so profoundly French? So isolated from Paris, and yet so well connected; so far from the art of his times, yet so near to the hard of his times—these are at once the conflicts and resolutions to be found in Monet’s world.”

Monet’s canvases function within a dialogue of connection and separation that creates a dynamic tension between the French countryside and Parisian life—two different parts of the same whole.

The conception and execution of Monet’s water lilies at the start of the twentieth century coincided with tumultuous times in French politics and warfare, producing his paintings against the backdrop of the Franco-Prussian War. The idea that his work was preceded and followed by war truly manifests in his work. When one merely looks at the subject matter of his work, it may never occur to anyone to think of him as disconcerted by the war raging just miles from his home in Giverny. Not one of his water lily paintings betrays the horror and devastation of war, of which Monet, contrary to what his art might reveal, was very much aware. On August 26, 1916,

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22 Zafran, 30.
23 Ibid.
Monet stated, “Despite all the anguish and anxiety of this war, I have so focused on my work (a very important Decoration) that I am literally haunted by what I have done.” Although his formal and aesthetic experimentation, which during this time occupied much of his time, might seem to some as self-absorbed and detached, Monet continually expressed feelings of guilt and remorse about being so absorbed in his work during a time of war. As James H. Rubin noted in his chapter Near to Far: Monet’s World of Water Lilies,

It was precisely this insecure and terrifying contemporary world that Monet submerged beneath the surface of his lily pond. It was his ability to do effectively that gave his work the power to survive and become an emblem of an ostensibly timeless and stable French culture, despite the initial military humiliation and human loss of World War I. This effectiveness depended not on negation, however, but on substitution. One might speak of explosions of color in some of his more daring and dazzling works, but the result is not the violence of devastation but rather the paroxysms of aesthetics.

It seems that for Monet, his artwork was his way of fighting, of resisting. Too old to fight in the war, painting may have been his way of contributing to the national cause. During World War I and the post-war years, he was continually and inexhaustibly at work on his grandes décorations. This time of productivity functioned as Monet’s “refuge from the outside world and his expression of its values.” It was in the paintings themselves, the “revivifying power of nature in the face of destruction and barbarism” that makes Monet’s paintings nationalistic. Monet’s water lily compositions can be seen as carrying a patriotic meaning because, not only was Impressionism coming to be known as a French style, but also because they were meant to remind the French people of the beauty of their country and of the peace that was still attainable, despite years of loss and devastation. His paintings were not meant to be

24 Kelly, 28
25 Zafran, 47
26 Idid, 47.
27 Kelly, 27
representatives of an “apolitical no-risk sphere,” rather they were meant to be spiritually engaging and reassuring to a public who no longer strictly adhered to traditional religious and political institutions. For Monet, his water lily paintings were a celebration of French culture, despite the uncertainty that resonated among the French people.

It is interesting at this point to note the connection between Monet and Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau. For years, Clemenceau and Monet had fostered a close relationship, and it is known that Clemenceau was one of Monet’s principal confidants during the last years of Monet’s life. Their relationship was both personal and professional, for in each other they saw the possibility of forwarding their own initiatives. For Monet, Clemenceau provided a close liaison with the French political sphere, a spokesperson of Monet’s work and a legitimate connection between Monet’s paintings and the French state. On the other hand, Clemenceau saw in Monet’s visual project (his grandes décorations), a way of countering the deep-seated political and economic upheaval—a sensory response to destruction and devastation. Clemenceau wrote at length about the originality of Monet’s visual project. He also drew freely from the variety of interpretations Monet’s work presented, proposing that “Monet’s series paintings represented ‘an evolution that confirmed a new way of seeing, of feeling, of expressing: a revolution.’…Such links between atheism contemporary thought and progressive art were self-evident to Clemenceau…”

Monet’s paintings functioned as aesthetic analogues of Clemenceau’s political campaign—promises of peace and change following the hard times of war. When asked about the propagandistic nature of Monet’s water lilies, one that I envisioned functioning much like

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29 Ibid, 135.
that of the Abstract Expressionists in the post-World War II period. Simon Kelly postulates that this might have occurred with Monet’s paintings if Clemenceau had been reelected as prime minister, but it was unlikely that Monet’s paintings had ever acquired such a role.

It is also clear that Monet had wanted Impressionism to become an identifiably French style. Beginning in 1882, when his art dealer in London, Paul Durand-Ruel, tried to find markets for Impressionist paintings outside France, Monet disagreed so strongly with this policy that he split with Durand-Ruel in 1886. Regarding his water lily canvases, Monet believed that his panels should not be sold, but instead “form a museum that would celebrate the glory of France and establish his name for posterity.” It is known that he turned away several art dealers and collectors who had traveled to Giverny in hopes of acquiring the panels. In November 1918, having earlier considered the idea of bequeathing two large water lily panels to the French government to mark the end of World War I, Monet was persuaded by Clemenceau to present his *grandes decorations* in its entirety to the state. Then, in the summer of 1920, Monet received a delegation from the Art Institute of Chicago wishing to buy an ensemble of his panels and devote the upper floor of the museum to their installation, as Monet had explicitly wanted. Monet

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30 “The political relationships between Abstract Expressionism and the cold war can be clearly perceived through the international programmes of MOMA…Heralded as the artistic ‘coming of age’ of America, Abstract Expressionist painting was exported abroad almost form the beginning.” For more information see Eva Cockcroft, ‘Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War’, *Artforum*, vol. 15, no.10, June 1974.
32 “…America was the most important market tapped by Durand-Ruel. Soon enterprising Americans were searching out the painters themselves—particularly Monet…in 1984, the Parisian world was stirred up because most of Monet’s “Cathedrals” series were being sold to American who could afford and were willing to pay the 15,000 each asked by Monet. The prosperity of most of the Impressionists from 1890 on was due to this largess, attracted by Durand-Ruel in his “American Ventures.” White, 77.
33 Kelly, 29
refused the offer, despite the large sums of money he was offered.\textsuperscript{35} It is possible that by the time the delegation from the Art Institute of Chicago had arrived in Giverny, Monet was set on giving the panels to the French state. Even without Clemenceau, I believe Monet would have given the panels to the state. It would have been his intention all along, considering his ardent desire to consolidate his legacy as the French painter and make Impressionism the national style. The only way of truly securing this legacy was to keep the panels in France.

Monet’s refusal to sell his paintings beyond the confines of his native country might seem questionable, if not incredibly shortsighted. Is it not likely that selling his paintings to American dealers and collectors have expanded his popularity? If he had done so, would his work not have been neglected for so many years after his death? No one will ever be sure of the effect that Monet would have imparted, had he sold his paintings to American collectors. What his actions do show are his unbending aspiration to establish himself as the main exponent of French painting. This claim is supported by Paul Hayes Tucker, who states that:

\begin{quote}
…When Monet abandoned the capital region and contemporary subjects, he set out to remove Impressionism’s strong ties to Paris…He wanted to make it a style that would be responsive to the country as a whole…he concentrated most exclusively on French sites, suggesting his desire to assert Impressionism’s continued association with the nation.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

His paintings are not only nationalistic in their function; but they are also patriotic representations because for Monet they were uniquely French. In my opinion, Monet felt that only a French individual could truly understand the context in which his landscapes were painted. Others could possibly appreciate his work, but for Monet his work was meant for the

\textsuperscript{35} Karin Sagner-Düchting, 88.
\textsuperscript{36} Tucker, 19. “By painting such varied and demanding subjects, Monet could also assert his powers as an artist and demonstrate the range and versatility of the Impressionist style…To realize these imperatives—to gain prominence for himself and his decentralized style, to underscore Impressionism’s ties to the French countryside, and to broaden his market while satisfying his urge to paint new sights—to do all of this in the most profound and professional manner was Monet’s primary goal…”
French people, and would only ever truly belong in France. The reception of Monet’s work, both during his lifetime and posthumously, and the validation he sought as an artist, must be considered when trying to determine the importance Monet placed on consolidating his legacy.

**Issues of Legacy—Musée Monet and Public Exhibitions**

“One is too preoccupied with what one sees and what one hears in Paris, however, strong one is, and what I do here will at least have the merit of resembling no-one—at least that’s what I think because it will simply be the expression of my own personal experience...The further I go, the more I realize that one never dares to express frankly what one experiences.”

- Claude Monet, 1868

At the start of his career, Monet, like many other young artists of the time, found it difficult to establish himself within Parisian art circles. The best and most successful way for an unknown painter to earn a good reputation was by exhibiting work at the Salon, where he first exhibited his work in 1865. Throughout his career Monet explored different venues for art exhibition. Unlike his fellow Impressionists, Monet believed that public showing was the best outlet for his work and exhibited at the Salon on certain occasions, something that other Impressionists found reprehensible. Yet, Monet struggled to find support within the Salon, for his paintings were considered by many to be too radical. In *Monet and French Landscape: Vétheuil and Normandy*, Francis Fowle states:

> The possibility that the pictures of Claude Monet and his fellow exhibitors were resisted as much for their perceived links with oppositional thought as for their painterly license... embracing not only the threat of the ‘revolutionary banner’ but challenges to the moral and religious fabric of French society and the intrusion of heterodox ideas from modern science. This broad spectrum of intellectual concerns, some of which had immediate and revealing consequences for the painting of Monet…

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38 Ibid, 205.
39 Fowle, 129.
At first, Monet had no consistent outlet for his paintings and made few sales. He struggled financially and had little success finding buyers for his paintings. During the earlier years of his career, despite his aspirations of exhibiting at the Salon, Monet had little success. The Salon rejected most of his submissions and following his rejection in 1870, Monet did not submit to the Salon again for a decade. During his time away from the Salon, Monet participated in the first four Impressionist group exhibitions and began selling his work to art dealers, hoping to find a reliable market for his paintings. “Monet was the first of the younger Impressionists to succeed financially. Although his prices were no more stable than those of the other Impressionists in the 1870s, individual works from time to time brought 800 to 1500 francs.”

In her lecture about Monet’s water lilies and the Impressionist landscape, Dr. Elizabeth Childs, Associate Professor of Art History and Archeology at Washington University, attributes Monet’s success to a variety of factors, including the gradual breakdown of the Salon and the emerging world of capitalist markets where private art dealers began to flourish. During the last years of the nineteenth century, the old establishment was replaced by Third Republic culture, a society that valued and sponsored individualism and entrepreneurship. The Third Republic’s goal of countering the politics of Napoleon III’s regime and the emergence of art dealers who promoted artists’ individual “temperaments,” offered artists the possibility to show their paintings in more intimate settings, unlike that of the Salon. Single artist showings became a possibility and proved to be an effective and profitable exhibiting technique. In these showings, as well as in their galleries, private collectors sought to domesticate the art form, by presenting it

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40 Ibid, 206.
41 White, 85.
as something that could enhance the home. By aligning the paintings they sold with trends in home décor among the bourgeoisie and upper classes, private art dealers made hefty profits.\textsuperscript{42}

In 1880, Monet made one last attempt to gain success at the Salon and only one of his submissions was accepted. Not surprisingly, the one chosen was not representative of Monet or the Impressionist style. Once again, Monet’s attempts at winning the appreciation of the Salon jury and the Salon-going public clearly backfired. Not only had the establishment continually rejected him, but he had also provoked a vehement response from his fellow Impressionist artists, who found the Salon a completely unsuitable venue for their style of work.\textsuperscript{43} Meanwhile, constant disagreements amongst the members of the original Impressionist group and the relative success of his small single-artist exhibition in June 1880 made group exhibitions less appealing to Monet.\textsuperscript{44} Until the mid to late-nineteenth century, Monet’s career was plagued by fluctuations in popularity and problems regarding fellow Impressionists, exhibitions, and art dealers. Why did Monet attempt to exhibit at the Salon after being so obviously rejected? Monet’s ultimate goal had always been to establish himself as one of the main exponents of French art and he knew that it was only through established institutions like the Salon that one could attain the recognition he wanted. Monet continually struggled with being both an insider and an outsider within the art establishment, and it was this struggle between being accepted and being radical that pushed him, after so many years, to show at the Salon once again. In my opinion, Monet felt that the only way to achieve long-term status as a painter was to do it within the establishment.

Although he struggled financially, Monet was constantly aware of the art market. In 1881, he made a formal agreement with Durand-Ruel, whereby Monet would sell his paintings

\textsuperscript{42} Lecture with Dr. Elizabeth Childs, Saint Louis Museum Seminar, The Impressionist Landscape, Monet’s Water Lilies, Dec.10.
\textsuperscript{43} Fowle, 27.
\textsuperscript{44} House, 208.
through the dealer in return for a steady income and financial support. This gave him new possibilities the Salon had not—he now had a certain amount of freedom to work with different themes and experiment with new styles, so long as his work sold.\textsuperscript{45} He found support amongst the bourgeois clientele, who found his paintings of unspoiled nature appealing, a retreat from the hectic and overwhelming Parisian city life.

By 1890, Monet had consolidated himself economically, having made substantial profits through his commercial transactions with dealers such as Durand-Ruel in London and Boussod & Valadon, fashionable art dealers in nineteenth-century France, who sold his work to collectors for considerable amounts of money.\textsuperscript{46} He had a well-established reputation and began visiting Paris less, entertaining friends and colleagues at his home in Giverny, which became not just a place to amuse guests, but the tangible result and material demonstration of his hard-earned wealth. His separation from the Parisian art world did not in any way decrease his popularity. After 1890, Monet’s problem was no longer one of finding buyers, but one of keeping his patrons content without making himself prisoner to their demands. Free from the financial worries that had plagued his earlier career, Monet was able to experiment more freely with the style and composition of his later works. During the last years of his life, Monet financed his \textit{grandes decorations} with money earned from the sales of previous paintings. Despite his financial security, Monet ultimately remained dependent on the art market to maintain his lifestyle, for he had no private means of financial support.\textsuperscript{47} In his book, \textit{Monet: Nature into Art}, John House, a notable scholar of nineteenth-century French painting states:

\begin{quote}
One crucial distinction must be made at the start: between the exhibition as a shop window to attract buyers, and the exhibition as an art work in its own right. In the
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\textsuperscript{45} Fowle, 14
\textsuperscript{46} House, 11.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
simplest terms, Monet changed from the former to the latter attitude at the point at which he reached financial security, around 1890, and at last found himself able to paint and exhibit what he wanted, when he wanted and how he wanted…48

In my opinion, Monet never truly forgave the Salon or the public for the rejection he experienced during the early years of his career. The problems that surrounded the selling and exhibiting of the water lily compositions in his later years show the resentment Monet still felt. The issues surrounding his legacy demonstrate the displeasure he experienced at not being held in the esteem he felt he deserved.

Several instances support the belief that Monet’s resentment at his earlier rejection led him to take advantage of his artistic leverage during the final years of his career to dictate, with exact precision, the exhibition space and installation of his grandes décorations. Monet carefully considered the exhibition of his grand-scale works, those panels of which he imagined lining the walls in such a way that gave the viewer in an integrated experience of the artwork. In exhibiting a series, Monet’s individual canvases formed integral parts of the larger entity. The cumulative effect of his pictorial ensembles, like the water lilies, gave the sense of a continuous surface, unbroken by boundaries, that was meant to immerse the viewer in a world of form and color. “The form of these later exhibitions expressed a rejection of his previous exhibiting policy; no longer was the exhibition a shop window for the diversity of his merchandise…”49

On September 27, 1920, the Minister of Fine Arts Paul Léon visited Monet at Giverny. After much delegation and particular insistence from Clemenceau, both men arrived at an unofficial agreement; Monet would make a gift of twelve panels to the state, in exchange for a new museum built especially to house them. Even more telling of Monet’s resentment was the other

48 Ibid, 205.
49 Ibid, 216
demand he made during this meeting. In her book *Monet and his Muse: Camille Monet in the Artist’s Life*, Mary Mathews Gado refers to this well-known demand:

In view of the significance *Women in the Garden* assumed in the inner world of the elderly artist, it is hardly surprising that when representatives of the French government approached him in 1921 to finalize details of Monet’s proposed donation of the great *Water Lilies* murals (now installed in the Orangerie) to the state, the artist made it contingent on the government’s purchase of *Women in the Garden*. He demanded—and received—the astounding sum of 200,000 francs for this wonderful child of his fancy, which had been so cruelly rejected by the art officials of an earlier era.  

As promised by the state, the plan was for this museum, the Musée Monet, to be set alongside the Musée Rodin, a notion that Monet very much welcomed, for it offered the possibility of bringing together work by arguably France’s best contemporary painter and sculptor. The establishment of a Musée Monet became part of Monet’s larger goal to protect and maintain his legacy. A museum in his name, with his paintings, neighboring the museum of arguably France’s greatest contemporary sculptor, consolidated Monet’s place in the art world. By placing him side by side with Rodin, an artist who was considered to be the epitome of French sculpture, long having outshadowed any other, not only were Monet’s painting compared with Rodin’s sculpture, but Monet himself was considered Rodin’s equivalent.

The exhibition and installation of the canvases in the museum would be done on his terms. Monet wanted a panoramic presentation of his panels set in a circular room, where visitors would be able to see the entire ensemble of paintings when standing in the center of the room. “He carefully selected the components so that they would offset one another in terms of coloristic and compositional effect.”  

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51 Kelly, 19.
52 Ibid, 31
the *Agapanthus* (fig. 1). This was Monet’s way of demonstrating to those who had once rejected him, the fame, success and prestige he had now acquired. Unlike his work in the Salon, which was usually exhibited in barely visible places, or the group exhibitions, where he was just one more “independent,” the museum was *his.* “Although Monet had offered the paintings as a gift free from recompense, he must have derived great satisfaction from the fact that the state, after having reviled, or worse, ignored his art for more than fifty years, was now prepared to spend public funds to erect what was in effect a Monet Museum.”

In December 1920, the General Council for Public Buildings rejected the building plans for Musée Monet (fig. 5 and 6). Letters between Monet and the architect show complex debates, in which Monet’s persistence in adhering to a specific design was unflagging. Once the plans of the Musée Monet were rejected, Monet carefully reconsidered the plans for the installation of his water lily canvases, which would eventually occupy the oval rooms of the Orangerie (fig. 7). On April 12, 1922, Monet signed a formal contract with the state to deliver his ensemble of panels within two years. It was not until his death on December 5, 1926, however, that the panels intended for the Orangerie were finally moved from Monet’s studio to the walls of the museum. In my opinion, Monet’s apprehension in handing over the panels to the state came from the realization that these panels might be his last statement as an artist. His anxiety was the manifestation of this realization—the awareness that his *grandes decorations*

53 Levine, 278.
54 “This permanent recreation of the famous joint Monet-Rodin exhibition of 1889 was not to be. In 1921, Monet himself tried to withdraw the donation altogether. Clemenceau was furious. On April 1922, through the agency of Clemenceau, a notarized agreement was finally signed between Monet and Paul Leon, acting for the State. The contract, however, called for the installation of the Nymphias in two rooms to be especially constructed for the purpose at the Orangerie des Tuileries, which had been recently annexed to the Musée du Louvre. Included in the gift were nineteen panels comprising eight compositions of one to four panels each.” Levine, 374-375.
55 Kelly, 38.
56 Ibid, 40-41.
were more than a commission, but potentially his most visible declaration as the foremost painter of his day.

It is interesting to note that despite Clemenceau’s insistence on acquiring Monet’s panels for the state, the government had never actually commissioned anything from Monet.\textsuperscript{57} It was during the last years of Monet’s life that the French state decided to rectify its negligence. Throughout his career, Monet had been in search of some form of validation—a validation by the state and by the French people of his artistic ability. It was only through this validation that Monet would feel that he had achieved his goal of becoming the main exponent of French painting. Some might say he received this validation the day his paintings were affixed to the walls of the Orangerie. But I disagree. Monet only truly received this validation posthumously, when, after years of neglect, artists in the 1950s began reconsidering his work. The fact that the consideration and reception Monet had sought throughout his lifetime came decades after his death does not in any way undermine his lifetime ambition, for he did manage to establish himself as arguably best known French painter of his time.

**Conclusion**

\textit{“I have painted for half a century and will soon have passed my sixty-ninth year, but, far from decreasing, my sensitivity has sharpened with age...I have nothing to fear from old age. I have no other wish than a close fusion with nature, and I desire no other fate than (according to Goethe’s precept) to have worked and lived in harmony with her laws. Beside her grandeur, her power, and her immortality, the human creature seems but a miserable atom.”}  
- Claude Monet, 1909\textsuperscript{58}

For many, Monet’s water lilies are works that show Impressionism at its culminating point. But, they seem to signify so much more when seen in terms of Monet’s development as an artist. Monet’s talents were recognized years before he painted his water lily canvases.

\textsuperscript{57} Levine, 375  
\textsuperscript{58} Monet to Gustave Geffroy, 1909, in White, 17.
Although he had remained on the fringes of acceptability during these early years, Monet worked his way from the margins of the artistic world to an emblematic figure, not only of the Impressionist movement, but also of nineteenth century French painting. The success that would finally come to him at the end of his life would have much to do, in my opinion, with the way Monet navigated himself between being an insider and an outsider within the artistic establishment. At times, especially during the earlier and later years, he was too radical. Other times, he was too traditional. Monet’s evolution was defined by these continual fluctuations, by the public’s reception, the Salon’s acceptance, and his clients’ tastes. Yet, we cannot simply define Monet’s development according to these factors. We must look beyond—at the stylistic innovations of his work, his unbending patriotism, and his constant need for validation that would secure his legacy.

We see the incomparability and superiority of Monet’s artistic talents in all his work, but most particularly in his water lilies:

The canvases he was painting, however, suggest that he had gone beyond…They suggest a mystery in is career, and the possibility arises that, to justify his boldness, he continued to describe as “visual expressions” what he knew to be the pure creations of his own mind. At a time when the observation of nature was still the golden rule of pictorial decorum, would we have ventured to describe his work as pure creation? The time was not yet ripe, and Monet must have realized that any such claim would have stigmatized him as a lunatic in the eyes of the world.  

Monet’s acute sensitivity to the world around him lies both in his recognition of the world he lived in and in the simultaneous detachment of the contemporary developments that defined it. This is what comes across in his paintings, particularly his water lily compositions, which seem to define the entirety of his career. In being attuned to the conditions of the contemporary society in which he lived, he selected subjects that resonated with his public,

59 Rouart, 113
rendering them in ways that acknowledged established artistic traditions but that also pushed those boundaries into new artistic territory. Seeing Monet as an individual removed from the demands of his time, into his private retreat and own aesthetic preoccupations, seems to simplistic a reading.

Some would say that Monet has been unfairly treated, his legacy misconstrued by succeeding generations. First, his work neglected as new, radical trends in art overshadowed what was now the passé Impressionist technique; later, wrongly interpreted as a modernist painter, considered by artists decades later to have been working years ahead of his time. The Monet I have come to know, cannot be read outside the context of nineteenth century France, for he was too dedicated to it, too attached, and too defined by it to be looked at separately. Today, in some instances, Monet and his artistic vision has been baldly reduced to posters hanging in office spaces or scarves of water lilies hanging on museum shop windows. Maybe Monet himself contributed to this misinterpretation. Maybe this is the most obvious end to his ambitions of becoming an iconic French painter—your work becomes mainstream to the point where it is no longer art, merely decoration. To relegate Monet to this cynicism would undermine his legacy, but above all his life as an artist.
Bibliography


Mary Mathews Gedo, Monet and his Muse: Camille Monet in the Artist’s Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).


