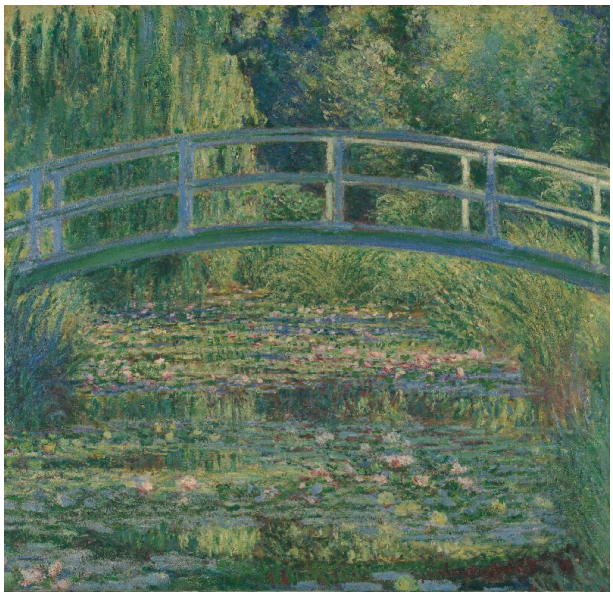
Claude Monet (1840-1926) ‘Water-Lily Pond’1899



Key facts:
Medium: oil on canvas
Size: 88.3 x 93.1cm
Location: National Gallery, London
Series: one of 18 images of the Japanese Bridge

ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject matter: After his success as an Impressionist in Paris, Monet moved to Giverny, Normandy in 1883, where he lived until his death. On the grounds of his property, he created a vast and spectacular garden that became the main subject and source of inspiration for his horticultural paintings. With a painter’s eye, Monet thoughtfully arranged plants according to colour and height to control his subject. He liked the flowerbeds to be dense and abundant. Monet was an enthusiastic gardener and did most of the gardening himself. In 1892 Monet bought a piece of land across the road from his house for an ambitious project – to create a water garden “for the purpose of cultivating aquatic plants”. Diverting a small stream from the River Epte, he formed a pool and surrounded it with an artful arrangement of flowers, reeds, weeping willow trees, silver birches, and bushes. Over this he built a wooden, arched footbridge in the Japanese style, painted green. The water garden became the focus of Monet’s art for the last 25 years of his life.

The water garden’s banks were lined with poppies, agrimony, blue sage, dahlias and irises. The structure, year-round interest and hardiness of bamboo created great interest in the water garden at Giverny. Water lilies, including the new hybrid pink lily from 1879, became a central motif in Monet’s work. Monet never wanted his water-lilies to completely cover the surface of the water, it was very important that the gardeners trimmed their leaves to form discrete floating rafts rather than allowing

them to make a continuous carpet. At the time, these plants from all over the world - the bamboo, ginko trees and Japanese fruit trees would have been described as 'exotic'.

"It took me some time to understand my water lilies. I planted them for pleasure; I cultivated them without thinking of painting them."

"I love water but I also love flowers – that's why the pond was filled, I wished to decorate it with plants, I took a catalogue and made a choice out of my head."

"A landscape does not get under your skin in one day. And then all of a sudden I had the revelation of how enchanting my pond was. I took up my palette. Since then I've hardly had any other subject."

Composition: More structured that his earlier Impressionist painting, the lower edge of the bridge at the frame is exactly halfway up the almost square canvas. The strong vertical rhythm of the linear bars of the bridge contrast with the water lilies that seem to expand horizontally for a simple balanced composition. While the rich softer expanse of foliage presents an overwhelming riot of perfectly planned wildness.
Space: The flattening of the picture plane and the tightly cropped and contained view display a compositional debt to Japanese artists Hokusai and Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858) - particularly his 'Wisteria' from the wood block print series 'One Hundred Famous Scenic Locations In Edo' (Boston) - see below. The space is crowded, without a horizon and without a sky, but with a series of overlapping planes. There is no hint of land, and so in a sense he has 'unmoored' us by not giving us ground to stand on. Monet takes a relatively low viewpoint close to the water that takes our eye Into the distance, looking directly at the bridge.
Colour: The painting stands or for the intensity of colour and beauty of colour harmonies throughout, initially for the range of greens, including the relatively new viridian green, with the soft pastel pinks. However on closer inspection the blue of the bridge is the dominant pigment and the chrome violets and other strong colours are all toned down by mixing with white.
Light: The flat surface of the water is broken up by the dappled light, shadows and reflections created with a range of directional brushstrokes. The light seems to be coming unusually from the right hand side highlighting the trees back left, while the foreground is in shadow.

CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Monet grew up by the sea in Le Havre and was taught by Eugene Boudin who introduced him to painting directly from nature. "*These brushmarks and Nature were worth several days in the studio."* By the 1872 first Impressionist exhibition he was painting on the spot on a small scale, not from memory or imagination. His aim was to capture the sensation of light, colour and atmosphere with pure landscape an increasingly prized genre. After the death of his first wife in 1879 Monet lived with Alice Hoschedé, the wife of his major patron, and their respective children.

In the construction of the bridge and water garden in their new home, Monet was influenced by Japanese prints and garden design. Monet never visited Japan, but learned of its culture through its art. The very notion of creating serial paintings may have been inspired by the Japanese landscape print series by Hokusai. He might have seen Japanese gardens on view at the Universal Exposition in 1889 (though

these were very different), and he collected Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints with images of bridges.

"Their refinement of taste has always pleased me and I approve of their aesthetic doctrine which evokes the presence of something by a shadow; and the whole by means of a fragment" (1874).

Japanese prints first began to arrive in the west after 1853, all things Japanese were very much in vogue, so much so that Jules Claretie coined the term “japonisme” in 1872 to describe the phenomenon, which continued into the 1890s.

Another influence was perhaps the poet Stéphane Mallarmé who was at the centre of artistic influence in Paris. Mallarme had invited Monet to illustrate his contemplative symbolist prose poem ‘The White Water Lily’, and although he did not fulfill the commission, it clearly made a lasting impression on him.

Monet was very much at ease in his natural floral surroundings, and he was proud of the psychologically transformative aspect of it. Some scholars reckon that the artist had sought – at the time of the Dreyfus Affair – to create a Utopian healing dream state for France through both his water garden and his paintings of it.

DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

Technical developments during the nineteenth century were directly responsible for the transformation of style in France. Monet used a white ground rather than the traditional biscuit colour, on small ready-prepared canvases in standard sizes, on a light portable easel outside. He used oil paints from tubes (from 1841) rather than grind his own colours, painted *alla prima* (directly onto the canvas without any preparatory drawings), using square-ended flat ferrule brushes in a number of sizes. His individual brushstrokes (*tache)* are visible, often short and dry. These catch the effects of light and make the viewer conscious of the paint surface through impasto. The new chemical pigments heightened his colour palette, and he avoided earth colours and blacks and greys. His art practice directly affected his style, even in this painting tha was reworked much more systematically with a dense painted surface of blended colours. Even so forms are fragmented through light and one can see small commas of pure colour that give the impression of spontaneity. He employed hatching, stippling and dry-brushing.

WAYS IN WHICH ART HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

The critics’ reaction to Monet’s new Japanese motif sometimes invoked patriotic sentiment. Though the Impressionist defender Julien Leclercq felt that Monet had surpassed the Japanese with this series. His exhibition of the water-lily pond series in 1900 directly followed his strong representations at the Universal Exposition of that year, and the quick shift in motifs brought forth mixed reviews and some puzzlement.

By the middle of the twentieth century in the USA, Monet’s technique of loosely applied paint, gestural brushwork and vague abstracted forms would appeal to those artists working in Abstract Expressionism. The painter Ellsworth Kelly visited an overgrown and seemingly abandoned Giverny in 1952. He recalled of this visit, and

the paintings in the studio that remained unfinished at Monet's death: "France had not discovered the 'Nymphéas'. Seeing the gardens and waterlilies prompted Kelly to paint "Tableau Vert" (see below) a work composed of a mix of green and blues similar to those Monet used.

Clement Greenberg acknowledged the influence that Monet's later works had on American painters, particular Clyfford Still. Fellow art historian Thomas Hess described Monet as the "most avant-garde of the 'old masters" in relation to his influence on American painting during the 1950s.

More recently, the work of David Hockney bears many parallels with Monet. He too creates series of works which focus on a specific outdoor locations. This occurred initially in the gardens he designed for his home in LA and more recently in the woods which surround his house in Bridlington, Yorkshire (see Untitled 2010). Having visited Giverny, Hockney noted the impact this garden must have had on Monet; "What a life! All he did was look at his lily pond and garden". Hockney later commented on what he felt important in the painting of Monet, namely that he allows one to observe the "beauty of a shadow on a leaf".

https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/claude-monet-the-water-lily-pond
Callen, Anthea Techniques of the Impressionists 1982