

Portraits: Home and Family

Camille, and Monet's early bohemian years

Monet's personal life was in many ways a small social revolution in its own right: his free approach to the transformation of Western painting as we know it was similarly applied to his private life, despite opposition from his own family and society at large, still rooted in a deeply old-fashioned moral code. His first companion, who became his first wife in 1870, was also his model: Camille Doncieux was a young woman of good family who posed for Monet's first Salon success, the *Woman in a Green Dress* (1866, Bremen, Kunsthalle). Painter's models often became their mistresses, but it was much rarer for the children of such 'illicit' liaisons to be recognised by their fathers. Yet Monet did just that after the birth of his first child, Jean, in 1867, registering the boy as his legitimate son and recording his intention to marry Camille, despite his family's opposition (to the extent of cutting off his allowances and forcing him to return to live in Le Havre, the town of his youth). Still, the young painter continued to travel widely, frequently returning to Bougival to join his wife and son, who were now living in secret, in desperate poverty – a situation he often described in despairing tones, in letters to his friends and collectors.

Monet was passionately attached to the idea of family life. Letters to his friend, the painter Bazille (Jean's godfather) speak of mother and child in tones of deep affection:

'I am very happy, very delighted. I'm setting to like a fighting cock for I'm surrounded here by all that I love [...] And then in the evening, dear fellow, I come home to my little cottage, to find a good fire, and a dear little family. If you could see how sweet your godson is now. Dear friend, it's a delight to watch this little person grow, and I am glad to have him to be sure.'¹

Monet and Camille were finally married on 28 June 1870. Monet's father did not attend, but gave his consent via his solicitor. The witnesses included Gustave Manet (the brother of the painter Édouard Manet), and Gustave Courbet – early signs of an emerging, prestigious artistic entourage.

Monet's happiness with Camille and Jean was not destined to last: the birth of a second son, Michel, in 1878, took place in tragic circumstances. The boy's mother, already ill, grew

¹ Letter to Bazille, Étretat, December 1869, quoted in Kendall (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 34.

increasingly weak, and died in agony on 5 September 1879, probably of uterine cancer. Monet mourned his wife, and painted a celebrated portrait of her on her deathbed, confessing that he took great pains to select the right colours for the picture of the dead woman, who had been so dear to him.

A modern family at home in Giverny

Monet's sense of guilt was not, perhaps, confined to the painting executed on Camille's deathbed. For some time, he had been at the centre of an acutely difficult situation. The bankruptcy of one of his early patrons, the well-known collector Ernest Hoschedé — an adventurous, luxury textile trader who risked his fortune buying up Impressionist paintings, and who had commissioned Monet to decorate his chateau in Montgeron in 1876 — created an unforeseen set of circumstances: the Monets and the Hoschedés established an unconventional household that was to last the rest of their lives. Monet and Ernest's widow Alice became increasingly close, a situation apparently unnoticed by her husband, until it was too late (it is not known for certain whether Hoschedé's youngest son was in fact fathered by Monet).

Beginning in 1875, things took a turn for the worse: the unhappy collector spent more and more time away in Paris, often sending no news for long stretches of time, so that his wife and family considered themselves abandoned. On Camille's death in 1879, Alice and Monet turned to each other for help and support: prior to this, Monet had taken in Ernest's wife and six children, and Alice had looked after Monet's sons while Camille lay dying, in agony. Things were established on a clearer footing in 1881, when Monet and Alice moved to Poissy. 'This was a resonant act for it confirmed the nature of their relationship: after all, when Monet left Vétheuil, Alice could have gone back to live with her husband in Paris.'²

The discovery of Giverny, in 1883, brought further stability to this thoroughly modern, blended family. Still, the situation was potentially so awkward that Monet continued to refer to Alice as 'Madame' in his letters, although they were lovers, while Alice ordered Monet to burn her letters to him as soon as they had been received and read, so as not to compromise her honour. Only following Ernest's death did she agree to marry her now-established partner. The couple were married on 16 July 1892, shortly before Alice's daughter's marriage to the American painter Theodore Earl Butler, enabling Monet to walk his step-daughter down the aisle as convention dictated.

Such a long-standing affront to conventional morality was rare indeed at the time, especially in rural communities, which were still thoroughly intolerant of such free, bohemian lifestyles. The household at Giverny, isolated from the oppressive intrusions of society at large, and financially independent thanks to Monet's growing success, became a paradisaical retreat where this most modern of families found peace and privacy. Monet's few visitors – friends and admirers all – were certainly not about to disapprove his flouting of convention. His occasional quarrels with the local farming community threatened Monet's plans to extend his pond, but no one exerted any real control over these 'strangers' and their separate, autonomous lifestyle. The

²Noémie Goldman, *Claude Monet. A Museum for Monet* (trans. Charles Penwarden), Paris: Hazan, 2010, p. 74.

situation did leave its mark on Monet's work, however: Alice was never painted. She remains the great 'absent friend' in his œuvre, although she was his intimate correspondent and confidant in letters exchanged whenever the two were apart. Did she not want to have her portrait painted by the man who wrote her such ardent, increasingly passionate letters? It is also true that Monet painted fewer and fewer figures in his landscapes, over time. Absent from his work, Alice was nonetheless omnipresent in the artist's life; and Monet remained fascinated by her passionate, fun-loving, unruly character – a source of joy and despair all at once, jealous, possessive, anxious, and tender, as hinted at in their surviving correspondence, both before and after their marriage: '...it is upsetting to hear your endless laments over household or money worries, or over loving me too much; come now, what I would like is to be near you, this is my real wish, but we must be patient for a little while longer.'³ Even some years after their marriage, Monet wrote: '... Rest assured that you have no reason to be jealous...'⁴ and '...don't get too anxious or over-excited [while waiting for Monet to return home].'⁵

A historic legacy: a testament of family life

The impossibility of painting Alice's portrait did not dissuade Monet from painting the rest of his family. We have numerous portraits of Camille and their children, together with the two Hoschedé girls, often in poses echoing those adopted by Camille, earlier — notably the *Woman with a Parasol* (1886, Paris, Musée d'Orsay), which reproduces the composition of a portrait of Camille with Jean, painted in 1875 (National Art Gallery, Washington). The most surprising, intimate images are those in the artist's personal collection, however, bequeathed to his youngest son Michel, and now in the collection of the Musée Marmottan: pencil portraits of the Monet-Hoschedé children drawing together, and small, lively sketches of his own sons Jean and Michel. Monet's attachment to his family is clearly expressed in this 'album,' unknown until the bequest entered the museum at Michel's request, in 1964. Never seen in public during the artist's lifetime, these small oil and pencil sketches reveal Monet's intimate world and domestic life. They are the vital pendant to the artist's letters, expressing his great love for his nearest and dearest, as typified in a letter written from Belle-Île in 1886, showing the artist's attentive concern for his 'big lads' and other children: 'I'm very glad to know they are being civil to each other, and I can't wait to see them; it feels like a lifetime since I left.'⁶

The family paintings and sketches reveal a clearly accomplished technique, unlike Monet's finished paintings, which do their utmost to mask the labour that went into their making, yet succeed in giving the exact opposite impression, of a subject captured in a few, swift brushstrokes. Here, the painting is clearly of the instant, and the painter's accompanying 'notes' show the extent of his mastery of his media, most often sketching directly in colour, capturing the essence of each child's character and psychology in a few, deft strokes.

Michel Monet's bequest may seem surprising, however: why leave the private collection of a painter who was a lifelong opponent of the French Academic tradition, to an institution that is part of the Institut de France? The question has been posed, quite rightly, by Noémie Goldman,

³ Letter from Monet to Alice Hoschedé, Kervilahouen, Belle-Île, 26 October 1886, quoted in Kendall, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

⁴ Letter from Monet to Alice Monet, London, 26 February 1900, quoted in Kendall, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

⁵ Letter from Monet to Alice Monet, London, 28 March 1900, quoted in Kendall, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

⁶ Letter to Alice, Kervilahouen, 26 October 1886, quoted in Kendall, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

who suggests a number of convincing explanations. In the first instance, the bequest represented an opportunity to unite the sketches with the founding canvas of Impressionism, Monet's celebrated *Impression, Sunrise*, first exhibited in 1874 and bought by that pioneering collector, Ernest Hoschedé, before entering the collection of Dr Georges de Bellio, and being presented by his daughter to the Musée Marmottan in 1947. 'In addition to this sentimental reason, others have suggested that for Michel Monet the Marmottan represented just the right type of museum for Monet's canvases: a mansion, an intimate home set in a garden, located in Paris, capital of the arts.'⁷ As a (former) private house in the acknowledged centre of the 19th-century art world, the museum reconciled the collection's intimate quality and its acknowledged art historical importance. And so it is on the walls of the Musée Marmottan, and the restored family house in Giverny that we discover the private Monet, as he would doubtless have wished. Monet was, after all, an artist who eschewed official awards and medals throughout his life, but strove to attract private collectors, critics and fellow artists from all over the world. Giverny's success has led to attempts to recreate it elsewhere: the facade and garden were 'reproduced' in the Bronx, in New York, from June to October 2012, as described in an article dated June 27, 2012. Monet's private collection, on the other hand, can never be duplicated.

⁷Goldman, *op. cit.*, 2010, p. 12.

In Search of Giverny

Getting away from Paris

Monet was not a city person. True, in his early years he was drawn to Paris, which no artist hoping to forge a career for himself could avoid, but as early as 1868 he made no secret of his reservations to Bazille: 'I don't envy you being in Paris [...] don't you think that face to face with nature, and alone, one can do better? I'm sure of it myself. [...] One is too taken up with all that one sees and hears in Paris [...] and what I do here will at least have the merit of being unlike anyone else, at least I believe so. I don't think I will spend much time in Paris now, a month at the most, each year.'¹ The young painter felt he was wasting his time in the endless, lively discussions at the Café Guerbois and other social haunts. While Paris was where he made the decisive acquaintance of Manet, and while the city certainly played an important role because of the ferment of ideas that incited students from Gleyre's atelier – especially Monet, Bazille and Renoir – to try out new solutions, including *plein air* painting, Monet soon came to view it as negative, a place where one lost sight of one's individuality, and where an impecunious painter would struggle to get by on his meagre income.

But there was a host of reasons for Monet to flee Paris. Apart from the worries of losing his identity and merely scraping a living, it is important to note that he was above all a landscape painter. That was how he first came to the attention of the critics. Nature was his great love. Discovering the capital as an enthusiastic young student, it was Corot and the Barbizon School who most caught his eye at the Salon. In the letters he wrote to his favourite correspondent of those years, Boudin, Monet was effusive in his praise of the canvases by Troyon he saw there: '*Returning to the Farm* is marvellous, it has a magnificent sky, a stormy sky. There is lots of movement, of wind in the clouds; the cows and dogs are quite superb.'² Monet even told Boudin that the heirs to such artists had yet to appear, and that there was a gap in contemporary landscape painting waiting to be filled.

Was he thinking of his friend and master, or simply of himself? The first landscapes he painted in Île-de-France suggest such an ambition. In Argenteuil, where he moved in December 1871, he sought to reconcile the modernity of what was already an industrialised suburb with the

¹ Letter from Monet to Bazille, December 1868, Étretat, quoted in R. Kendall (ed.) and B. Strevens Romer (trans.), *Monet by Himself*, London: Time Warner, 2004, p. 34.

² Letter from Monet to Eugène Boudin, June 1859, quoted in Ségolène Le Men, *Monet*, Paris: Citadelles et Mazenod, 2010, p. 60.

bucolic charm of its riverbanks, where Parisians came to boat on the Seine. This was an important new phase in Monet's work as, in the words of Ségolène Le Men, he went about inventing a 'new picturesque based on simple signs from everyday life,'³ one that combined nautical pleasures with the rampant industrialisation of the suburbs, the play of light on water with the metal struts of bridges and the smoke of distant trains. The fields of poppies and pictures of figures amidst flowers punctuating Monet's work in this semi-urban context only underscore his longing for the joys of the countryside, for an almost total immersion in nature. It is indicative that in his painting of La Grande Jatte, an island west of Paris, only a few houses appear and even these are seen through a screen of branches. Monet was following his passion for nature. Even his creation of a studio-boat for himself is symptomatic of this oneness with his surroundings.

Love of the sea: excursions to Normandy

Given these proclivities, it is hardly surprising that Monet made so many trips to Normandy throughout his career, from 1882 to 1917. Nor was it simply a matter of getting away from Paris: the painter had an undying passion for the sea. Having grown up in Le Havre, he was constantly drawn back to his childhood landscapes, on the Normandy coast. This love comes through clearly in his letters: 'You know how passionate I am for the sea, and here it's particularly beautiful,' he wrote from Brittany to Alice Hoschedé, his faithful confidante. 'With my experience and my unceasing observation I have no doubt that if I carried on for another few months I could do some excellent work here. Each day I feel I know the 'old hag' a little better and there's no doubt it's a perfect name for the sea here, terrifying as it is; just one look at those bluesy-green depths [...] I'm absolutely mad about it in other words : but I do know that to paint the sea really well, you need to look at it every hour of every day in the same place so that you can understand its ways.'⁴

The jealousy that Alice expressed in her own letters was understandable, given Monet's frequent tendency to suddenly prolong his sojourns, but she was mistaken about the cause: if mistress there was, she was not in a hotel, but out there in front of the painter, denying his brushes the satisfaction of steadiness. Indeed, Monet spoke of light like a lover describing an unfaithful sweetheart, and this mercurial rogue certainly captured him in its silky turbulence more securely than any glossy female mane ever could. It was partly because of its continual changes that Monet began to think of working in series. The idea had been there, unformulated, even in his youth, and it is not surprising that it should have crystallised when he was staying in Belle-Île-en-Mer, in 1886.

Setting aside this nostalgia for his roots, Monet seems to have been driven by the need to match himself against familiar, obsessive subjects, but also with the masters he admired, Delacroix and Courbet. In his personal collection he had a watercolour by Eugène Delacroix, *Cliff of Étretat* (1838, Paris, Musée Marmottan-Monet), showing the famous arches hollowed from the stone, a subject he would himself take on. The liquid vastness of the sea made him rage with despair, but at the same time offered a unique freedom, a freedom from precise references. It stimulated the wild energy of the brush more than the lazy meanders of the Seine, and while the

³Le Men, *op. cit.*, 2010, p. 148.

⁴Letter from Monet to Alice Hoschedé, Belle-Île, 30 October 1886, quoted in Kendall, *op. cit.*, 2004, p. 89.

subject remained present it was only secondary to the expanse of water, to the respiration this afforded. It was, indeed, during a stay in 1885 that he came close to his central idea and spoke of 'repetition.' Even if the unpredictability of the weather drove him mad, it was precisely what inspired the idea of the series: 'I had no idea I'd stay here for such a length of time, but I've been poorly favoured by the weather and it's damned hard to bring anything off [...] It was not much use getting something down on canvas for every kind of weather, I can't get to the end of it all now.'⁵ It was through this difficulty of dealing directly with pure light, free of picturesque effects and almost of subjects, refracted in glints and waves, that Monet arrived at this process which included time in the very way of going about painting.

Giverny

It was indeed as a painter of water that Monet won his early acclaim. In one of the first publications on Impressionism, marking a milestone in the history of the movement, Théodore Duret observed that 'water occupies the central position in his work. Monet is the painter of water *par excellence*. In the old style of landscape, water appeared in a fixed, regular form, with its "water colour," like a simple mirror for reflecting objects. In Monet's work, it no longer has a defined, constant colour but takes on infinitely varied appearances which it owes to the state of the atmosphere, to the scenery through which it flows or the alluvium it carries along with it; it is limpid, calm, opaque, tormented, flowing or placid, depending on the momentary appearance observed by the artist on the sheet of liquid before which he has set up his easel.'⁶

As painted by Monet, water was no longer an artistic platitude or commonplace, but regained its identity as something almost feminine. It was not one but many things. Such was its nature. Of course, this grappling with the sea could not occupy him permanently. As he so often said in his letters, Monet aspired to a quiet life. And he found it in the meanders of the Seine.

'I have painted the Seine all my life, at all times and in every season. I have never wearied of it. For me, it is always new.'⁷ Monet realised just how much he loved the river when looking for a place to settle with his new family. He expresses this in the letters to Durand-Ruel written in the early 1880s. His quest, not to say his wanderings, would last several years. Vétheuil, where he painted the Seine under snow and ice, and then their thaw, was doubly chill, for it saw the death of Monet's first wife. The move to Poissy was a mere interlude, and an unsatisfying one. His search now became systematic. 'If we are to believe the family tradition, Monet came upon Giverny when exploring the countryside around Vernon. [...] The plum trees were in bloom on that April day in 1883. Monet had been travelling since the sixth. The day before he informed Durand-Ruel that he was taking the train to Vernon in order to explore the region and find a house there. It was no doubt the day after, or the day after that, walking upstream along the northern bank of the Seine, he finally found the place where he could settle.'⁸

Recounted in this way, the search leading to Giverny becomes something of an epic adventure. Where others, such as Gauguin, sought their lost paradise in the Tropics, Monet found his on the banks of the Seine. Simple. Giverny was a small farming village of barely three hundred

⁵ Letter from Monet to Pissarro, 27 October 1885, quoted in Kendall, *op. cit.*, 2004, p. 81.

⁶ Théodore Duret, *Les Peintres impressionnistes, Claude Monet, Sisley, C. Pissarro, Renoir, Berthe Morisot*, Paris: Librairie H. Heymann & J. Perois, 1878, pp. 216-217.

⁷ Marc Elder, *À Giverny chez Claude Monet*, Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2010 (first published 1924), p. 35.

⁸ Marianne Alphant, *Monet, une vie dans le paysage*, Paris: Hazan, 2010, pp. 353-355.

souls, and the house there was traditional and somewhat faded. The scenery though, pleased the painter immensely, and it was the painter who wrote to tell Durand-Ruel, his dealer, that 'Once settled, I hope to produce masterpieces, because I like the countryside very much.'⁹ Later that same year (1883), Monet confirmed his love for Giverny in a letter to Théodore Duret : 'I am utterly charmed. Giverny is a splendid place for me.'¹⁰ Seven years later, when the owner decided to sell his house, Monet asked Durand-Ruel to help him finance the purchase, arguing decisively that he was sure of his choice: 'I shall never find another place like it, again, nor such a beautiful landscape.'¹¹ It was almost an ultimatum: there would be no good painting far from Giverny. Now he could make the place his own.

⁹ Quoted in *Monet's Years at Giverny: Beyond Impressionism*, Daniel Wildenstein, Charles S. Moffett and James N. Wood, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, p. 16.

¹⁰ Quoted in Sylvie Patin, *Monet "un œil ...mais bon Dieu quel œil !"*, Paris: Gallimard, 2005 (first published, 1991), 2005, p. 83.

¹¹ Quoted in Daniel Wildenstein, *Monet, or the Triumph of Impressionism*, Taschen, 1999 (first published 1996), p. 273.

The Water Lilies

The invention of a theme

The water-lily pond was a full-fledged creation, inventive and carefully thought out, living proof that Monet conceived his garden in terms of painting. To implement his plans, he of course had to rely on botanists, whose skills he himself lacked, in order to create new varieties of flowers and plants. One of the great initiators of these water gardens was Joseph Bory Latour-Marliac, 'who has brought the colours and forms of the water lilies of the east to the waters of the north.'¹ Caroline Holmes, a specialist on Impressionist gardens, highlights the decisive role played by this botanist, who enabled Monet to conceive his pool of water lilies in colour. At the 1889 Exposition Universelle he displayed his first yellow water lily, the especially bright 'nymphaea Marliacela Chromatela,' a hybrid of a European and an American variety, which brought colour to these flowers known in Europe only in their white form. On the same occasion he published *Les Aquariums de plein air, de serre et d'appartement*, which inspired a European fashion for water gardens. Monet undoubtedly responded to this, but he did so with a creativity that was very much his own. Indeed, Roger Marx reported that he used the word 'aquarium' to describe his project for the *Grandes Décorations* at the Orangerie.

From the outset, the conception of the pond at Giverny was that of a painter. Monet combined the brightest, most surprising colours: yellows and pinks, and even blue – a real painter's palette. The creation of the pond, evoked in the introductory essay, resulted in a presentation that was purely painterly. As Clare A. P. Willsdon observes in *Impressionist Gardens*, the 'purple red undersides' of Latour-Marliac's 'new scented varieties'² appear in the second series of paintings on this theme, in 1900. Curiously enough, Monet does not seem to have immediately grasped the magnitude of his invention, or realised how much could be done with his pond: 'It took me some time to understand my water lilies. I had planted them for pleasure and cultivated them without thinking of painting them. A landscape does not sink into you all at once. And then suddenly, I had a revelation of the magic of my pond. I took up my palette. Since then I have had hardly any other subjects.'³ Should we conclude that Monet thought as a painter but without realising that the creation of his garden was a form of painting, even before it entered his oeuvre? Perhaps, but

¹ William Robinson, *The Garden*, vol. 44, 1893, quoted in Caroline Holmes, *Monet at Giverny*, Woodbridge: Garden Art Press, 2011 (first published in 2001, Cassel & Co), p. 97.

² Clare A.P. Willsdon, *In the Gardens of Impressionism*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2004, p. 220.

³ Marc Elder, *À Giverny chez Claude Monet, 1924*, quoted in Marina Ferretti Bocquillon (ed.), *Le Jardin de Monet à Giverny : l'invention d'un paysage*, Giverny: Musée des Impressionnismes, 2009, p. 58.

Monet always liked to cultivate the legend of ‘an artist in spite of himself,’ a man whose innate gifts would naturally have prevailed over any kind of education or intellectually premeditated arrangement. Either way, the water lily pond appeared in his painting in 1899 in a series that is still very realist and close to the subject. The second series, in 1900, shows him starting to take greater liberties, as he would increasingly do.

A growing obsession, in perpetual mutation

The critic Arsène Alexandre certainly interpreted the results as unpremeditated in the article he published in *Le Figaro* on 23 November 1900, when Monet exhibited the first series on this theme with his dealer Durand-Ruel: ‘It is said that M. Monet has flooded part of his garden in Giverny and had water lilies put in and over this pond as abundantly floral as it is improvised, had a bridge built in the Japanese style. The idea was charming but the artist has perhaps not sufficiently diversified his effects, and the series is not without its repetitions. Moreover, for pictures of this size, the subject is perhaps a little too simple and of rather secondary interest. Still, M. Monet often hides this insufficiency behind the splendour of his symphony. No one excels as he does at making colours festive. For example, a view of the garden, but with a splendid bed of lilac flowers, is extraordinarily rich.’ As is often the case, the least enthusiastic articles are the most revealing: they tell us what the artist was challenging, the visual habits he was rubbing up the wrong way.

It is quite clear here that the very principle of the series, and the repetition that it implies, constituted a flaw for the critics of the day. All the more so in that the ‘disappearance’ of the subject, or at least, its insignificance in relation to the format, shows that the restrictive hierarchy of genres had not completely disappeared from people’s minds: a water lily did not warrant the honours of a large format. One could almost argue that, from this moment onwards, Monet’s works were too ‘abstract,’ their subject too insignificant in the eyes of certain contemporaries.

The variations on the theme and the form of the canvases clearly indicate that the subject was itself a most handsome pretext. From a still panoramic vision including the edge of the pond, Monet soon slid towards a more unusual vision, in formats that were rarely used for landscape, focusing exclusively on the flowers floating on the water and the reflected light. As Michel Hoog points out, in 1904–06 Monet began experimenting with a square format within a series of a score of *Water Lilies*.⁴ In 1907, some thirty canvases took the pond as their sole subject, with the sky present only as a reflection. Now appeared the first circular canvases, a format rarely, if ever used by landscape painters. No doubt it would be more appropriate to speak in terms of *tondi* or, when the dimensions exceed the modest format of the portrait, architectural medallions. In other words, here was a totally new approach, one rather close to an architectural understanding. This unusual shape was also fairly similar to that of the telescope lens, created to observe the stars, or even to photographs, since many pictures taken in the nineteenth century were focussed at the centre and hazy round the edges, thereby taking on a similarly round form.

⁴M. Hoog, *Musée de l'Orangerie. Les Nymphéas de Claude Monet*, Paris: RMN, 2006, in conformity with the second edition of 1989.

A literary and symbolic flower

We have reached the eve of the *Grandes Décorations* project, as Monet himself called it, which was mentioned in the introductory essay on the garden. We know about the patriotic import of such a donation to the state. The *Water Lilies* at the Orangerie are also festive flowers, celebrations of victory.

Taken together, Monet's *Water Lilies* have given rise to all kinds of commentaries. Reading descriptions of their singularity we see that on occasion their disorienting effect has encouraged critics and art historians to follow the inclinations of their own imagination. Some, as mentioned earlier, see them as condensed images of the cosmos. Certainly, their round, evocative forms seem to contain worlds.⁵ Other authors, who were just as inspired, have spoken of the kind of syntheses evoked by Baudelaire, but also of the literary milieu that Monet frequented – and read. Mallarmé and Mirbeau were the painter's close friends, and we know for sure that he read the literature of the day, starting with theirs. In 1896 Gustave Geffroy even compared Monet to the Symbolists in an essay entitled 'The Idealist Movement in Painting': he was, said Geffroy, 'the artist who sums up meteors and elements in a synthesis.'⁶ This view was quickly taken up by Belgian critics in the person of Georges Lecomte, a friend of Geffroy and Félix Fénéon.

We know that the question of the correspondences between the senses, or synaesthesia, was of concern to many Symbolist writers and painters, and the *Water Lilies* soon came to be understood in these terms: 'None of the earlier series can in our opinion, compare with these fabulous Water Landscapes, which are holding spring captive in the Durand-Ruel Gallery. Water that is pale blue and dark blue, water like liquid gold, treacherous green water reflects the sky and the banks of the pond among the reflections pale water lilies and bright water lilies open and flourish. Here, more than ever before, painting approaches music and poetry. There is in these paintings an inner beauty, refined and pervasive; the beauty of a play and of a concert, a beauty that is both plastic and ideal.'⁷

It is true that Latour-Marliac's water lilies were fragrant, as people wrote at the time. But Vaudoyer was not the only person to view this great ensemble as a musical symphony. Caroline Holmes believes Monet was punning on the word 'nymphe': 'Rather than use the official name of the water lily, *Nymphaea*, he referred to them as "Nymphéas" – pink-petticoated nymphs gently dancing in their surrounding leaves.'⁸ Others more explicitly evoke the woman he loved: 'Monet's dedication to the depiction of his water lily garden after Alice's death in 1911 has often been likened to Mallarmé's finding of presence within absence in his prose-poem *Le Nénuphar blanc* (The White Water Lily), which describes his plucking of a white water lily – an emblem of the absent woman of whom he dreams.'⁹ It is true that Mallarmé himself asked his Impressionist friends to illustrate his book of poems, *Le Tiroir de laque*, a project that, sadly, was never carried through.

To see the water lily paintings as an implicit portrait of Alice is perhaps excessive, not least because the series began well before her death, but it is true that their evocative quality had an effect on the writing of the very Symbolist poet Octave Mirbeau. This friend of Monet's described the garden in complex, imaginative and slightly old-fashioned language. Marcel Proust, too, used

⁵In addition to the analogy with the lens and the astronomical stereoscope, we may recall that the Ancient Greeks and Romans pictured the world as round.

⁶Quoted by Le Men, *op. cit.*, 2010, p. 321.

⁷Jean-Louis Vaudoyer, *Chronique des Arts et de la Curiosité*, 15 May 1909. Quoted in *Monet's Years at Giverny: Beyond Impressionism*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, p. 31.

⁸Holmes, 2011, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

⁹Willsdon, 2004, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

descriptions of Monet's garden for his famous evocation in *Du côté de chez Swann*, published in Paris in 1913. This was possibly the most perfect of all the descriptions, even though the author had not actually seen the garden: 'But farther on the current slackened, where the stream ran through a property thrown open to the public by its owner, who had made a hobby of aquatic gardening, so that the little ponds into which the Vivonne was here diverted were aflower with water lilies. As the banks at this point were thickly wooded, the heavy shade of the trees gave the water a background which was ordinarily dark green, although sometimes, when we were coming home on a calm evening after a stormy afternoon, I have seen in its depths a clear, crude blue, that was almost violet, suggesting a floor of Japanese cloisonné. Here and there, on the surface, floated, blushing like a strawberry, the scarlet heart of a lily set in a ring of white petals.'¹⁰

¹⁰ M. Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann*, Paris: Gallimard, 1913, p. 206-207 (translation: K. Scott Moncrieff, *Swann's Way*, Wordsworth Edition, p. 174).

Floral Splendour

From still-life to decoration

'It was perhaps to flowers that he owed his career as a painter.'¹ If the French critic René Delange is right, his comment casts Monet's garden in a singular light – not as a pretext for the act of painting, a composition created by an artist in love with colour, seeking to live at the very heart of his own motif, but as a central inspiration, the very origin of his vocation, the budding source of his distinctive approach to colour itself. This chapter will chart the remarkable evolution of the flower motif in Monet's work – itself a revolution in the history of flower painting in Western art.

Flowers first appear in Monet's early work in their classic form, as a subject for still-lives, a genre he admired in Dutch painting in particular, and which he studied at the Louvre. Monet's early paintings include a number of still-lives: *Fleurs de printemps* (1864), shown at the annual Beaux-Arts exhibition in Rouen, reveals an emerging flair for the genre. The canvas overflows with roses, carnations, lilacs and other species. Another floral composition was one of Monet's first canvases acquired by Dr Gachet: *Chrysanthemums* (1878, Paris, Musée d'Orsay) is doubly interesting, firstly for its subject-matter: Chrysanthemums were introduced from the Far East, and much in vogue throughout the nineteenth century, featuring regularly at the Paris Salons, as reported by Marcel Proust in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. This striking flower also features in Monet's own collection of Japanese prints, by Hokusai (*Chrysanthemums and Bee*, Giverny, Fondation Claude Monet). The treatment of the 1878 painting anticipates later developments in Monet's work: the bouquet is seen against a background of floral wallpaper, anticipating the floral decorations of his last years. More than any other species, chrysanthemums are worthy of monumental treatment in painting. This is without doubt one of the minor revolutions in decorative painting wrought by Monet's brush: the genre's traditional goddesses, allegories, or mere human figures disappear in favour of flowers. The theatre of the floral motif's revolutionary shift from still-life to monumental, decorative painting was the Château de Montgeron, which Monet was invited to decorate by his patron Ernest Hoschedé. The first oil sketches for this scheme, sadly curtailed by the collector's bankruptcy, break with every accepted code of the hierarchy of painterly genres: the landscapes and genre scenes enshrine the floral motif 'centre stage,' in panels like the *Corner*

¹ René Delange, 'Claude Monet,' in *L'illustration*, 15 January 1927.

of the Garden at Montgeron (*Dahlias*) (1877, Saint-Petersburg, Hermitage Museum). Instead of portraying the Hoschedé family strolling in their garden, the panels present the garden itself, in all its majesty, with a concentrated focus on the foreground motif – a flowering shrub that Monet especially liked, and used later in his own garden at Giverny.

In 1882-1885, Monet worked on another decorative scheme for the large drawing room of his dealer Paul Durand-Ruel, painted while he was moving in to the property in Giverny. The ensemble of thirty-six exclusively floral panels was presented in situ on six sets of double doors. Durand-Ruel specified still-life paintings, and arranged for his choice of vases to be sent to Monet's studio. The subject matter – cut flowers or plants, close-up details or complete bouquets, flowering shrubberies and baskets of fruit – testified to Monet's imaginative mastery of the still-life. The lively, refined, decorative scheme was worked on in parallel with the garden at Giverny. Despite the simplicity of the subject, chosen in close collaboration between the artist and his patron, it should not be assumed that Monet treated the commission casually: he devoted as much energy and artistic rigour to the floral panels as to any other work. 'It is devilishly difficult,' he wrote. 'Since my return, I have done six that I had to destroy, one that I liked has survived.'²

From the flower garden to the water garden's edge

Typically, Monet first garden paintings are studies of flowers, including three versions of the *Poppies* of 1887. Commentators have cited the bold, close-up composition of one of the paintings in the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Geneva, with its notable absence of sky and perspective, pointing out that none of these studies, nor the delicate white clematis flowers painted at the same time, was shown or sold before 1922.³ Perhaps Monet did not consider these as anything other than experimental works, pointing the way ahead, to what would gradually become the core subject of his work: his garden. Beyond the composition of the garden itself, we may safely assert that his attention was focused on the flower as a motif in its own right, rather than on the composition as a whole.

We know that Monet cultivated flowers in greenhouses, for use in the cut bouquets he painted during the cold, rainy winter months. His letters to Alice are full of patient, loving notes recommending the best ways to care for his 'rivals' during his absences from home. 'Tell me if the chrysanthemums are in flower; if they are, and if some of them are pretty, mark them with a piece of wool.'⁴ Or again: 'Thank you for all your careful attention to my beloved flowers, you are a fine gardener; no urgency to lift the gladioli as yet, but when they do, I recommended replacing them with perennials, anemones and my pretty clematis.'⁵

And so, thanks to the garden in Giverny, still-life disappeared from Monet's oeuvre, to be replaced by living flowers as subjects for veritable portraits in their own right.

Beyond the garden in front of the house (described in detail in the other chapters of this catalogue), the water garden and its immediate surroundings were the object of a particular *mise-en-scène*, giving rise to a new ensemble of paintings – floral 'portraits' or bouquets. Facing the water lilies, or rather all around them, Monet planted 'the others – iris, marsh marigolds and

² Letter from Monet to Paul Durand-Ruel, written in Giverny, 18 October 1883, quoted in Daniel Wildenstein, *Monet: catalogue raisonné*, Taschen, 1996 (letter no. 377).

³ Marina Ferretti Bocquillon (ed.), *Monet's Garden in Giverny: Inventing the Landscape*, Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2009.

⁴ Quoted in *Monet 1840-1922*, *op. cit.* 2010, p. 224 (French edition).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

arrowhead – to mark the curve of the banks, every species that is a delight to the eye. At the edges of the plot, rhododendron bushes, azaleas and hydrangeas, and rose hedges to enclose it, and then an arching bridge, Japanese-style, overhung with wisteria, some mauve, some white, straddling the pond.⁶ Among the flowers planted around the pond – offsetting it to fine effect – Monet included blue flowers from Brittany and southern France, cultivated quite deliberately to ‘capture’ the sky. Blue is a rare colour in the world of flowers, and it is no accident that Monet chose blue flowers here. He disliked ‘black, and tarmac, and dark flowers that were always excluded from his gardens. He adored, and sought out blue flowers.’⁷ A difficult task in itself, it seems, because quite apart from the rarity of the colour, many blue-flowering plants are delicate and susceptible to the rigours of the European winter: ‘Another plant cultivated specially in Monet’s garden was a superb *plumbago* with masses of blue flowers, trained up an ironwork colonnade; unfortunately, in our climate, it needs the shelter of a greenhouse in winter.’⁸ As Jean-Pierre Hoschedé frequently points out (he was a keen botanist himself, and took a close interest in his father-in-law’s garden), the painter readily mixed ‘indigenous’ plants from the French wetlands – like marsh iris, arrowhead and globeflower (a type of large, yellow ranunculus) – with exotic species bought from a specialist nursery near Lyon. These included a Japanese iris, and ‘*Iris ochrolencum*, the giant iris’ depicted in several paintings. ‘Monet also bought many varieties originally bred by Pierre Victor Louis Lemoine, who had introduced nearly a hundred species into cultivation and had hybridized a number of tropical and sub-tropical plants.’⁹

The sky between the flowers; flowers in the sky

Monet’s innovations had an immediate influence on garden design, and his orders inspired the creative imaginations of the botanists he worked with. In October 1913, Georges Truffaut published an article on irises for water gardens, written by Monet’s head gardener, Félix Breuil; a piece by Truffaut himself about Monet’s garden appeared in November 1924.¹⁰ Monet’s inventive, innovative approach was expressed not only in the hybridisation of certain species, but also in the way they were presented in the garden itself. One of the garden’s finishing touches was in place by 1903, when the Japanese bridge was covered with arched metal supports, and the supports covered with wisteria. Imported from Japan, and planted over the Japanese bridge, the flowers heightened the garden’s ambivalent dialogue of nature and artifice, blurring the contours of the arches against the sky. Above the pond, they inverted the effect of the sky reflected in the water – something Monet had clearly thought about and planned. Marc Elder, one of few visitors to Giverny at the time, describes the effect of these ‘flowers in the sky,’ their heady, intoxicating scent, and the arc of violet and white specks of colour over his head.

‘An arched bridge, covered in wisteria, leads into the water garden. In June, the scent is so thick, the impression is of walking through a tube of vanilla, the clusters of white and mauve flowers – a pale mauve that looks as if it might have been painted in watercolour – tumble like fabulous grapes, in the aqueous greenery of the vines. The passing breeze harvests the fragrance. The sound of footsteps attracts the fish, clustering in the shadows beneath the stroller’s feet. We

⁶ Hoschedé, *op. cit.*, 1960, pp. 61–62.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁹ Caroline Holmes, ‘The waterlily magician: An appreciation of the life of Joseph Bory Latour-Marliac (1830–1911), whose waterlilies made an impression on artist Claude Monet, and how the nursery he built flourishes today,’ in *The Garden*, vol. 136, no.1, Royal Horticultural Society, 2011, p. 103.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

bend over and see our own image, shattered suddenly by the beak of a chub, like a finger poked through a thin film.”¹¹

Beyond this blurring of the senses – orchestrated by the plethora of stimuli (wisteria can also be eaten, in fact, but Monet was not known for using flowers in his cooking) – Monet the painter-gardener sought to blur the effects of space itself: the bridge is a fragile, magical place, doubling, echoing and reflecting the surrounding space. In one sense, Monet was planting flowers in the sky, using the transparent framework of the arches. In another sense, he achieved the same effect through the reflections of the sky amongst the water lilies. A fascinating creation – a miniature cosmos, multiplied twice over.

¹¹ Marc Elder, *À Giverny, chez Claude Monet*, Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2012 (first published Paris: Berheim-Jeune, 1924), p. 11.

Willows and the Japanese Bridge

The columns of the garden: a meditated *mise-en-scène*

Once Monet had moved to Giverny, it was, as Marina Ferretti Bocquillon has observed, twenty years before the garden acquired its definitive appearance. The digging of the pond was an essential step. It is 'very likely' that the idea came to him 'on the occasion of the Exposition Universelle of 1889: the Latour-Marliac nurseries had won a prize for their water lilies and it was to them that the painter sent his orders in 1894 and 1904.'¹ If 1904 was the year when his representation of the water lily pond, as evoked above, underwent decisive developments, the Japanese bridge had existed since the 1890s (the first painting to feature it dates from 1895). It was Maurice Kahn who must effectively captured the ensemble in 1904, when he described the new water lilies ordered for the occasion spreading out under the bridge: 'kinds of water-lilies with wider leaves, with richer, more delicate colours: there are pink ones, yellow ones and white ones. A small wooden bridge painted green, passes over the pool. Moored to the bridge, a dinghy. All around the pool, water irises. In the background, azaleas, tamaris and a weeping willow.'² Of course, the willows edging the pool were not there by chance. They provide the vertical element in the composition, as used in numerous paintings, like a kind of backbone. The willow and its trunk, which he paints in many pictures, were chosen for their pictorial quality: the knotted trunk, whose bark Monet loved to depict, the leaves falling gracefully in little waves, like a curled head of hair. Near the bridge, on the edge of the pond, its reflection in itself suggesting a reassuring bulk compared to the impalpable nature of the water and its surface, or painted in majesty, like a portrait of a tree: the weeping willow is a subject in its own right, its very distinctive branches like a counterpoint to the meanders of the water.

It may also, as Noémie Goldman suggests, be a kind of self-portrait, the arboreal incarnation of upright will and sorrow in the face of adversity. For when Monet returned to the theme of the willow, times were especially mournful. Alice had died, and around her others – close friends who deceased one by one. In addition to Caillebotte, Berthe Morisot and Sisley, all towards the end of the nineteenth, the twentieth century witnessed a series of deaths: Pissarro in 1903, Cézanne in 1907 and, in 1919, his youthful friend, Renoir. 'During those years marked by solitude and the feeling of being a castaway, isolated in his garden, Monet devoted a series of canvases to the

¹ Ferretti Bocquillon (ed.), 2009, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

² 'M. Kahn, 'Le Jardin de Claude Monet', *Le Temps*, 7 June 1904, no. 15606, p. 2-3.

weeping willow theme. Alone and on his feet, facing the water-lily pond, at the age of nearly 83, he must have felt and lived like a survivor, like a tree left standing when the storm and the sad harvest have carried away the landscape.³ We have seen what an inspiration Monet's garden was to poets and writers, by virtue of its suggestive power; why not also imagine that the artist, being very much *au fait* with all these literary variations, did not project something of himself onto these vegetal entities which embodied his dream of uniting earth and sky? We know from Jean-Pierre Hoschedé, indeed, how much effort he put into keeping erect one of the willows that had been half uprooted by a storm: rather than fell the tree, Monet preferred to right and support it, to lash it firm with all kinds of fixations so that it would stay standing, come what way, and even if the elements were once again unleashed on it.

A bridge between two cultures

Beyond his visceral, personal attachment to his garden as such, what most interested the painter was of course its pictorial potential. The bridge was the central element of a genuine *mise-en-scène*: it materialised the views in many of his paintings – which is not to say that Monet actually set up his easel there – in the middle of the pond, as if the painter was standing in the water. It is also, as we can see in the old photographs kept in the family archives, the place where the patriarch of the garden liked to have his visitors pose. The bridge is almost a theatrical prop, the only way of being on the water, following the gaze of this painter who loved to be so close to his subject, and doing by means of a boat (including a gondola when in Venice).

It is also a typically Japanese decorative element, found in Hiroshige's print *Wisteria*, made in 1857, which shows the blossoms hanging down in front of an arched bridge in the background. Although Monet insisted that he never aimed at such an analogy, it is hard not to agree with Mr. Hayashi, a Japanese curator at the Exposition Universelle of 1900, who saw Monet's bridge as having affinities with his own culture. True, bridges in Japanese prints are usually red, whereas Monet deliberately chose a colour that naturally merged with the landscape: green, albeit a very bright green, sufficiently bright for the line between nature and artifice to be very fine, as the Duc de Trévise observed: 'everywhere, one discovers the finest order [...]. Everything is neat, even the exuberance; everything is prepared, even what appears to be wild.'⁴ Whatever Monet may have said, the reference to Japan, heightened by the later addition of wisteria, is evident. But at the same time, with Monet, it is an unconscious reference, simply because Japan informed his way of seeing and thinking at such a deep level. In Norway, for example, the village of Sandviken reminded him of a 'Japanese' village.⁵ Most writers on Giverny, where the bridge gradually became covered with wisteria from 1905 onwards, described it as Japanese. But it would seem that Monet's reticence about naming his sources should not be seen as simply an artist's scruple. The Japanese reference was more like a confirmation, the support of his experiments, and not a revelation that changes everything. Pissarro's letter to his son about Japanese art, written after visiting the exhibition at the École des Beaux-Arts in 1890 with Monet and Rodin, shows how much this revelation both validated and spurred on their own explorations: 'Good God, this decides in our favour. There

³ Goldman, 2011, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

⁴ Duc de Trévise, 'Le pèlerinage de Giverny,' *La Revue de l'art ancien et moderne*, vol. LI, no. 282, January 1927 p. 44, quoted by Ferretti Bocquillon, 2009, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁵ Quoted by Alphant, 2010, *op. cit.*, p. 542.

are some grey sunsets that are extraordinarily impressionist.' And: 'Hiroshige is a wonderful Impressionist. Monet, Rodin, and Myself are in rapture over him. I am glad to have made my effects of snow and flood; the Japanese artists give me confirmation of our visual choice.'⁶

Garden of delights, garden of torture

The *Japanese Bridge* series, which came late in the artist's œuvre, is also one of the most innovative, alongside the *Water Lilies*. It is so extreme in its almost abstract explosion of colours, and the frantic vigour of its touch, that one biographer has written: 'Placed there like a toy, like a prop in a Japanese-style set, the bridge supports, in its way, Monet's final adventure. It was also through it, on this curve and under it, that he advanced into the twentieth century. But this is also the dark side of his work, the least known, the least loved, so far is it from the radiant images that, from Sainte-Adresse to Holland and from Argenteuil to the *Water Lilies*, constitute his catalogue of felicitous, serene paintings.'⁷ Certainly, the *Japanese Bridge* series, which was built up in several phases (the bridge began to be a recurrent motif in 1899), developed in what was an extremely gloomy context, when the inconsolable Alice was mourning the death of her daughter Suzanne, Monet's favourite model. Could this be why the son of the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel found them so 'dark and sad'?⁸

Does the bridge represent the dark side of Monet's œuvre? Certainly, the series has seldom been exhibited, and was ignored even by the recent Parisian retrospective at the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais in 2010. Perhaps this, along with the avenue of rosebushes, represents the most modern and also the wildest aspect of his work. The energy of the brushstrokes is equalled only by the radicalism of the abstraction, which becomes more marked towards the end of the 1910s. It is as if the garden of delights, that earthly paradise, is being made to express Monet's torments. And that, presumably, is what makes it so modern, but also so incompatible with the somewhat clichéd idea of an equable artist – an 'eye,' as Cézanne put it – not overly affected by the spectacle of life. For proof that such a vision is quite wrong we need look no further than this garden, and that is probably why this important facet of Monet's work still awaits discovery, as does Mirbeau's book *Le Jardin des supplices*. A close friend of Monet's, this now forgotten poet drew inspiration from the garden, from its pool and its bridge, to compose one of the most harrowing poems in fin-de-siècle Symbolist literature. As Marianne Alphant notes, the dates are no coincidence: the first series of Japanese bridge paintings was made in the same year as Mirbeau published his fascinating and equally disturbing poem: 1899. It is set in an imaginary China. Two lovers are walking in a headily perfumed garden where, with each step, they discover more of the most refined torments invented by man: 'It is here, among the flowers, amidst the prodigious enchantments and the prodigious silence of all the flowers, that instruments of torture and death stand, the stakes, the gibbets the crosses [...] Soon you shall see them so intimately blended with this floral orgy, with the harmonies of this unique and magical nature, that they seem in a way to be one with it, to be the miraculous flowers of this soil and this light.'⁹ In the middle of this garden is a pool spanned by a bright-green arched bridge covered with wisteria. There is absolutely no doubt that Monet was familiar with Mirbeau's text. We have no evidence of what he thought about its transformation of his garden.

⁶In 1890 the first exhibition of Japanese art was held at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Focusing mainly on prints, it was well attended by European artists. See *Lettres de Camille Pissarro à son fils Lucien*, Lucien Pissarro (ed.) with the help of John Rewald, Paris, Albin Michel, 1950 (translation, *Camille Pissarro Letters To His Son Lucien*, Kessinger Publishing, 2010).

⁷Alphant, 2010, *op. cit.*, p. 581.

⁸Wildenstein, 1974, IV, p. 304.

⁹Quoted by Alphant, 2010, p. 583.

Beyond the Water Garden: The Rose Arches

A gradually developed *mise-en-scène*

The path under the rose arches, linking the Clos Normand in front of the house to the water garden, was in a sense the backbone of the composition that is the garden. Although it was a while before it took on its definitive appearance, it basically enhanced the existing topography: 'He kept the geometric layout of the garden: a large central path leading to the house with an entrance porch opening in the wall at the back, a series of small alleys parallel to that, rectangular flowerbeds to the left of the house and a set of square flowerbeds to the right of the middle path. But all these straight lines would soon be blurred under the opulence of the plants put in by Monet and the portal disappeared under the mass of nasturtiums that also spread over the sanded paths.¹ This continued on the path under the rose arches. The profusion was such that, seeing the artworks, we have a distinct impression that the rose bushes have risen up the arches along the alley and similarly devoured the façade of the house, for this riot of colour leaves little room for the architecture.

However, this orchestration of the main path happened only gradually, and not without some very lively discussions with Alice, who was as passionate about trees as she was about flowers and did not want Monet to touch the trees existing on the property when they arrived. 'He [Monet] found himself with a large orchard and, in front of the house, only a few clumps and two long flowerbeds on each side of the central path, the entrance to which is on the Chemin du Roy. They have always been the same, today and yesterday, but their physiognomy has changed. At the centre they were planted with rows of spruces and cypresses and edged, like the clumps, with pruned boxwood.² Big trees were not at all to Monet's taste. He had visions of a great expanse of flowers in front of the house, and the shadow cast by the trees would have made this difficult. He therefore planned to cut them down, keeping the two large yews in front of the house, like guardians watching over the path. According to the account by Jean-Pierre Hoschedé, the painter's son-in-law, who experienced this clash as something epic, the rose path was a conquest over the trees. And against Alice herself: 'It hurt her to see a tree cut down, she said. First of all, the decision was taken to pull up the cypresses. They were replaced by metal arches spanning the

¹ Ferretti Bocquillon (ed.), *op. cit.*, 2009, p. 41.

² Hoschedé, *Claude Monet ce mal connu, op. cit.*, p. 58.

path, and soon these were covered with climbing roses.³ The assault of the roses could begin. It is indeed troubling that this project conceived by the painter, a lover of flowers, these touches of natural colour, should have so destroyed the domination of the big trees that even the yews were totally invisible in the paintings of the rose path. It was a bit like a new staging of the fight between drawing and colour, but transposed into the garden. Only the main path kept this armature of landscape, this sense of the straight line. By covering it with a vault of roses, and having all kinds of plants crawling along the ground, including the famous nasturtiums, Monet was organising the triumph of colour, using many small touches of it and nothing else to construct the forms of his domain. As Caroline Holmes observes: 'Beds run parallel to the Grande Allée, their mix of climbers and herbaceous perennial and annual plants giving an impressionist effect focussed by spikes of colour and sentinel standard roses.'⁴

A spectacular alley, an explosion of roses

There was nothing particularly unusual about Monet's love of roses. Empress Josephine, who collected roses at her property in Malaise, had revived the fashion at the turn of the nineteenth century, and even had new ones designed by the famous botanist and painter Pierre Joseph Reroute. Earlier, in 1792, the introduction in France and England of varieties from China and Bengal multiplied the varieties. Roses were also made popular by the painters of Lyon, who came to specialise in pictures of flowers, and particular by Simon Saint-Jean, whose symbolic approach was a great success at the Parisian Salon in the early years of the nineteenth century. But Saint-Jean's roses carried a wealth of non-painterly meanings, whereas Monet never dealt in symbols. His roses are multifarious, with a host of varieties and colours. The painter was known for appreciating both rare and common specimens, uninhibitedly mixing the two, since his overriding concern was the effect of the colours and materials. 'Monet was said to grow roses in every shape, form or colour. The full pink blooms of the rose "centenaries de Lourdes" in this glorious display cascade around upright alliums heads.'⁵

Naturally, this floral prodigality was observed and reported by his rare visitors, and particularly by members of his close circle whom he regularly invited to come and see how the garden and its flowers were coming along. The description by his friend the critic Gustave Geffroy is so vivid that it makes one want to set off for Giverny at once: 'If it is the season for roses, all these gloriously-named wonders surround you with their hues and their fragrances. They are upright at regular intervals, in bushes, in hedges, espaliered, climbing on the walls, hanging from pillars and from the arches of the central path. There are the rarest and the most ordinary, which are not the least beautiful, simple roses, clumps of dog roses, the brightest and the palest, and all the corollas speak of an enchanted hour, voice the summer chorus, inspire belief in the setting for possible happiness.'⁶

This firework display of colours was even more intense in the paintings than in the garden, however undeniably the latter charmed with the variety of its colours and its profusion. Compared to Monet's paintings, nature was still too restrained, and the series from the 1920s titled *The Path under the Rose Arches* displays an exuberance that is unlike anything else.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁴ Holmes, *op. cit.*, 2011, p. 80-81.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁶ Gustave Geffroy, *Monet, sa vie, son œuvre*, Paris: Macula, 1980 (original edition Crès & Cie, 1924), p. 445.

As viewed in an anonymous photograph of Claude Monet 'on the rose path at Giverny' (c.1923, gelatine silver print, 29 x 39.1 cm, collection Philippe Piguet; see p. 38), taken at exactly the same time as some of the paintings exhibited here, nature certainly pales by comparison. True, this image does not show the rose season, but the spacing of the bowers would not really allow the kind of floral roof we see in the paintings. Even if at the end of the path, roughly where Monet is standing, it would certainly be possible for perspective to heighten the effect of continuity of the floral arches, it nevertheless seems unlikely that the garden would have had the same exuberance as the paintings.

The language of freedom

The flower theme is in fact a place of extreme freedom; something that hardly has any connection with reality. A comment by Renoir, another flower lover whose garden was even more wild in appearance than Monet's, can give an idea of this particular relation to the subject, a freedom that other themes did not afford: 'When I am painting flowers I experiment boldly with the tones and values without worrying about destroying the whole painting. I would not dare to do that with a figure because I would be afraid of spoiling everything. The experience I gain from these experiments can then be applied to my other paintings.'⁷ In other words, and to put it somewhat provocatively, the flowers do not constitute a real subject, in the literal sense of the term, in the sense of a living, human subject which introduces a degree of respect that is also a brake on the artist's creativity. The flower as such is above all a note of colour, and flowers were a favoured theme, precisely, for these artists who experimented with colour. Standing at the bottom of the hierarchy of genres, flower painting is unassuming, and it is precisely this lowly status that allows any kind of daring or extravagance. Seeing the paintings from 1920-1923, these words hardly seem excessive, even for a time when abstraction was an established genre. After all, American action painting was still some way in the future.

What Monet puts us into here is a genuine tunnel of colours, without beginning or end, without even a location, since, having no view of the house, the beholder does not know how to situate it. Such a loss of spatio-temporal bearings in a landscape painting is a rare thing indeed. But then is the word landscape still apt here? It is more like a melee, a battle of colours, with only the arch shape giving some idea of space, and then only a very abstract one in topographical terms, in the manner of the *Japanese Bridge* paintings.

And what about roses, do they really look like that? The question is perhaps redundant here, for it reveals the degree of abstraction in the late Monet. These yellows, blues and greens sometimes seem a long way from any kind of flower. The great art historian Élie Faure emphasised the artist's ability to transform the real, or rather, to modify the way we perceive it: 'He rinsed painters' eyes, enriched their senses with an enormous treasure of direct sensations that no one before him experienced in such a subtle, complex and living way, gave their technique a strong new instrument, and, by his very intransigence, worked for the future liberation of an imagination that had hitherto been the prisoner of a visual idealism and literary constraints that had yielded all their fruit over the past four or five hundred years.'⁸

⁷ Renoir, quoted in Willsdon, 2005, p. 43.

⁸ Élie Faure, *Histoire de l'Art*, vol. 4, *Art moderne*, quoted in Geffroy, 1980, p. 420.

More than a landscape, the garden in these last years was above all an interior state, and the birth of abstraction in the art of the twentieth century is inseparable from this very important idea which guided Monet, even in his reading. Without seeing him as a Symbolist painter, it is important to recall that he was a friend of writers in that movement, who were particularly close to him, and who were familiar with this idea of the 'inner garden.' 'A landscape is a state of mind like anger, love, or despair.' says Lucien, the hero of Mirbeau's novel *Dans le ciel* (1892-1893).⁹ It is hard to resist the idea that Monet consciously or unconsciously made this maxim his own – he who found consolation in his garden on days of despair. It is as if, along those paths ruled by colour, he was growing rather more than flowers.

⁹ Quoted in Willsdon, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 94.