

Of War, Wall-Sized Water Lilies, and Hot-House Oranges for the King

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Monet's Waterlilies (Les Nymphéas) in their oval room at L'Orangerie in Paris

There's an off-the-beaten-track museum in Paris called "The Orangery," built as an elaborate hothouse for growing oranges in winter. The top floor consists of two adjoining oval-shaped rooms devoted to one of the few almost universally celebrated achievements of modern art. Both rooms overflow with light, sky, water, and flowers in 360 degrees, without beginning or end. The huge paintings seem to flow into each other and form a single walk-in work of art six-and-a-half feet high and more than half a mile in continuous length. It's called *Les Nymphéas*, or *Waterlilies*, by Claude Monet.

Conceived as a gift to the nation in celebration of the end of World War I, each set of four curved wall panels is installed in a white room with rounded corners created to the painter's specifications shortly before his death in 1926. It's all the more delicious when you consider the building is a symbol of power returned to the people. It was built in 1852 for Napoleon III, who,

unwilling to relinquish his reign at the end of his term as France's first president, declared himself an emperor until defeated at war with Germany.

I was there in 1997, when the skylights were still covered over by a second story, since demolished, housing modern works by the likes of Cézanne, Matisse, Modigliani, Picasso, and Renoir. The waterlilies took up the entire floor. A group of French schoolchildren were on a field trip that day, and their teacher, a harried young woman with a pageboy, seated them cross-legged on the floor. The children swiveled their heads back and forth, trying to take it all in, quiet and presumably entranced by the rarefied atmosphere. The schoolteacher described the war in their country, the life of the artist, and the subsequent course of modern art.

Even people who say they know little about art tend to know Monet. His paint-flecked parks, waterways, country outings, and above all his garden's reflected waterlilies and watery footbridge repeat themselves endlessly in flat, more or less garish reproductions on cheap prints, coffee mugs, postcards, magnets, keychains, posters, mouse pads, phone cases, gift-wrap, raincoats, and umbrellas. So thriving is this cottage industry that it's challenging *not* to look down on Monet. The odd thing is that not all that long ago, anyone paying attention loved to hate not the great Impressionist but his archenemy, Adolphe Bouguereau, a master Academician of realistic virgins, satyrs, and nymphs. Lately it's been Bouguereau's turn for revival and reconsideration. Still, most of the people who dismiss Monet because their mother has a sentimental fondness for his flowers have never seen one of his paintings on the wall of a museum, or if they have, weren't seeing it clearly.

The rounded walls full of continuous Monets at the Orangery in Paris aren't those of a typical museum. It's really a permanent, intentional art installation, one of the first in history, and it's a complete masterpiece of Western art. The four gently curving panels in each room are inseparable from their setting. The effect is enveloping - you are literally surrounded by Monet's vision. It's a bit like being inside a fishbowl, only the water's outside. This was the only way Monet could realize his dream of saturating us, submerging us in the beautiful.

The point, he told us, was the experience of wholeness, the permeability of time, space, and eternity - to give us, in his words, "the illusion of an endless whole, of water without horizon or bank." In 1918, while world politics converged in Paris to negotiate World War I's peace treaties and the artist had gone headlong into the water lilies series (some 236 paintings on this theme in all), a visitor to Monet's studio remarked, "We seem to be present at one of the first hours in the birth of the world." That's exactly how Monet's room at The Orangery feels even today.

One doesn't look at art here - one swims in modulations of lavender, ultramarine, and viridian. Monet collaborated with the architect on the installation, which ballooned to four times larger than planned, and he completed the last panel shortly before he died. Despite Monet's avowed faithfulness to perceived reality, these giant flowers verge on the abstract. The flows of violet and the dabbed-in blossoms (just quick, deft flecks of paint really), the water, and its reflections, dissolve from natural forms into "just" modulating color and back again. At the same time they stubbornly remain broad, purposely visible brushstrokes on the surface of the painting. One

drifts through it in a dreamlike cycle, following the sensual ebb and flux, now forceful, now delicate, of color liberated from form, like a summer daydream, a melody half-remembered from a sunlit sleep. At the same time, one comes gently and inevitably up against the fact of the paint, the incomplete and hurried gesture of human making. So the work of art is not the paint or even the image, but the offering up of a silent collective visual hymn to a desire defeated by definition: homage to the sharp ache of the acceptance of the limits of human being.

This was Monet's final gift and legacy. It's unlike anything his peers created, and something you have to be present to fully comprehend, because words can point to it, but they can neither express nor name its sacred space. Thus is this room one of the precious spiritual shrines scattered over the earth - like Ryoan-Ji Temple in Kyoto, Bighorn Medicine Wheel in Wyoming, the cliffs of Big Sur in California, the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine - rare places preserved for meditation, contemplation of the beautiful, and for profound acceptance, however fleeting, of what is.