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MELBOURNE WINTER MASTERPIECES

MONET'S GARDEN

THE MUSÉE MARMOTTAN MONET, PARIS

Artwork labels

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State Government Victoria

Claude Monet

Oscar Claude Monet was a leading figure of the Impressionist movement that revolutionised painting in late nineteenth-century France. Throughout his life, Monet devoted himself to painting the immediate experience of nature and developed unique techniques to portray its ephemeral effects.

Born in Paris on 14 November 1840, Monet was raised at Le Havre on the Norman coast. His father was a grocer and his mother died while he was in his teens. Monet was a gifted draftsman and caricaturist from an early age and in Le Havre met the artist Eugène Boudin, who encouraged him to paint landscapes directly from nature. Boudin urged him to 'retain the first impression – which is the good one'. 'Eventually', stated Monet, 'my eyes were opened'.

After studying briefly at the Académie Suisse in Paris, Monet entered the liberal studio of Charles Gleyre in 1862, where he met Fréderic Bazille, Auguste Renoir and Alfred Sisley. The friends took train trips to the forests of Fontainebleau and Barbizon to paint outdoors (en plein air). Monet's pictures met with limited success at the Paris Salon, and his early career was dogged by hardship.

Monet was a lover of water and boats, and his life and works were closely associated with the great rivers and coasts of Europe. He painted the waters of Italy, England, Holland and France. In the small village of Giverny on the Seine, Monet found a focus for his art and a base from which to traverse the meandering river between Paris and the Norman coast.

Taking a walk near Argenteuil
En promenade près d’Argenteuil
1875
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Mrs Nelly Sergeant-Duhem, 1985 inv. 5332

This view of the rolling hills around Argenteuil was painted towards the end of the crucial period in which the Impressionists formulated their distinctive pictorial language and approach to painting, and it encapsulates Monet’s development to date. During his ‘Argenteuil years’ his commitment to recording the natural world became absolute and henceforward everything was to be subsumed into landscape. Note how the figures here blur into the natural surroundings. Although Monet’s wife, son and a close friend modelled for him, they are rendered completely anonymous. Critical to Monet’s creative process were his acute powers of observation and his astonishing capacity to record in paint what he saw. Paul Cézanne occasionally visited Monet at Argenteuil and painted alongside him in the countryside.
Cézanne said of his companion that he was ‘only an eye, but my God, what an eye!’

Pierre Auguste RENOIR

French 1841–1919

Portrait of Madame Claude Monet
Portrait de Madame Claude Monet

1873
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5013 bis

Monet and Camille Doncieux (1847–79), a model from a humble background, probably met in the winter of 1864–65. Camille's beauty was admired by Monet's circle of artists, and their paintings of her pay close attention to her hats and dresses. It was not long before Camille was transformed from artist's model to muse and mistress, and eventually, in 1870, to Monet's wife. Until her death at the age of thirty-two Camille was Monet's sole female model, and after her death he refused to part with any paintings of her. Renoir painted many studies of Monet, Camille and their son Jean on his frequent visits to the Monet household at Argenteuil. This portrait is a strikingly tender likeness of Madame Monet which captures the stylish black trim of her gown, offset by her dark hair. It remained, along with its companion portrait, *Claude Monet reading*, 1873, in the Monet family until 1966.

Pierre Auguste RENOIR
French 1841–1919

Claude Monet reading
Claude Monet lisant
1873
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5013

In the aftermath of the Paris Commune and civil war that had torn apart Paris, the French capital was largely abandoned by artists. Monet, aged thirty-three, settled with his wife and young son in Argenteuil, a picturesque leisure spot on the Seine, nine kilometres north-west of Paris. He was visited there by many friends, but most often by Renoir.
In the summer of 1873 the two artists painted outdoors side by side, and their painting styles became almost indistinguishable.
In this work the men's comfortable intimacy is conveyed by Renoir's close framing of his friend, whom he portrays rugged up against the chill air, absorbed in reading the latest news from Paris. Later that year Monet and his colleagues gathered in Argenteuil to found an independent exhibiting group. The Anonymous Cooperative Society of Artist-Painters, Sculptors, Engravers etc. would soon after be dubbed 'the Impressionists'.

For Kids

Claude Monet always wanted to be an artist. When he was young he filled his sketchbooks with cartoons of his friends, teachers and people around town. When he was eighteen he moved to Paris and studied art. While he was at art school he made many friends, including Pierre Auguste Renoir, who painted his portrait.

Can you find another portrait by Renoir? Who is the portrait of?

Portrait of Michel wearing a hat with a pompom
Portrait de Michel en bonnet à pompon

1880
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5018

Monet delighted in the birth of his second son, Michel (1878–1966). When the baby arrived on 17 March 1878, Monet exclaimed in a letter to the writer Emile Zola that Camille had delivered 'a superb boy'. However, this happy event was tempered by the family's perennial financial woes and the anxiety surrounding Camille's worsening health. On the morning of 2 September 1879 Camille died after three years of an undetermined illness. She had conceived, given birth and nursed Michel while sick. Michel was around two and a half years old when Monet painted this portrait.

Portrait of Jean Monet
Portrait de Jean Monet

1880
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5021

Jean Monet (1867–1914) was the firstborn son of Monet and Camille Doncieux. The circumstances surrounding his birth were fraught. Monet's father was incensed to learn of Camille's premarital pregnancy and immediately cut off Monet's allowance, forcing him to return from Paris to the family home in Le Havre. In absentia Monet provided for the impending birth as best he could by subletting a room in a friend's apartment and by arranging for another friend, who was a medical student, to attend the birth. He also asked Renoir to check on Camille's welfare throughout her pregnancy. Monet painted companion portraits of Jean and his second son, Michel, around Christmas 1880, just over a year after Camille's prolonged illness and death. The sadness of recent events seems apparent in Monet's sensitive depiction of his eldest son.

For Kids

Monet and his first wife Camille had two sons, Jean and Michel. When the boys were still young Camille became very sick and died. Afterwards Monet met Alice Hoschedé, and later married her. Monet's boys and Alice's six children combined to become one family. Find the portraits Monet painted of his two boys. Who would you paint a portrait of?

Invention of a landscape: the Seine Valley

In the 1870s, the city as a subject lost much of its appeal for Monet. Instead, he immersed himself and his art in nature and focused more on capturing the light and atmosphere of the countryside.

Monet found the Seine Valley an ideal place to work and live. In December 1871 he settled with his family in Argenteuil, a semi-rural, partly industrialised area eleven kilometres by rail from Paris. Argenteuil was a haven for pleasure seekers, especially boaters who, like Monet, enjoyed the vast and serpentine river and the richly varied towns and landscapes along its banks. Monet remained there for the next six years, recording the bustling river life and pastoral surrounds. Removed from Paris, he began to refine his pictorial language of Impressionism.

By the winter of 1878 industry was expanding steadily in Argenteuil, Monet was under great financial pressure and he craved new motifs to paint. He left Argenteuil, but stayed on the Seine, moving fifty kilometres west to Vétheuil, a small rural village that was far quieter and had more rustic charm.

At the same time as being captivated by the broad landscape, Monet enjoyed the creativity of gardening around his homes. In Vétheuil he employed a gardener for the first time to tend his small grounds, establishing a pattern that would reach a crescendo in Giverny.

Vétheuil
1879
oil on canvas

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Felton Bequest, 1937 406-4

In August 1878 Monet and his family moved to the small farming village of Vétheuil. During the four years he lived there, Monet painted the townscape in all weathers and in all seasons. His approach was systematic and campaign-like, foreshadowing his famous paintings, executed in series, of later years. Looking across the Seine from the town of Lavacourt, this brilliantly luminescent view of Vétheuil vibrates as a result of Monet's radically modern placement of strong colours adjacent to one another. Buildings are used only to structure the array of watery reflections in the river that are clearly Monet's primary concern. He edited this view of the town, deleting and shifting buildings as he saw fit. As this canvas demonstrates, reflections in water had captivated Monet for years before he created his garden at Giverny. Forever enamoured of Vétheuil, Monet revisited Lavacourt two decades later and painted a view across the river from an almost identical spot.

Vétheuil in the fog
Vétheuil dans le brouillard

1879
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5024

In Vétheuil, Monet became completely captivated by nature. His primary concern was to record his sensations as the seasons and weather changed. Even in a view of the riverside town such as this one, frostily obliterated by misty fog, there is a vigour and sheer joy conveyed by Monet's consummate technique.

Few people in 1879 really understood what Monet was trying to achieve with his unorthodox style and approach to painting. Sales were rare and critics of the Impressionists were numerous and vocal. For Monet, however, this view of Vétheuil encapsulated all that he was endeavouring to master during an otherwise desperate period. Although to others this work represented Monet's abject failure as an artist, for him it was the opposite, a touchstone of his fidelity to Impressionist principles. He exhibited it often, yet refused to sell it, keeping it with him all his life.

An arm of the Seine at Giverny
Bras de Seine à Giverny
1885
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5175

Completed two years after moving to Giverny, this view of a quiet reach of the Seine was evidently painted from the studio-boat Monet had built and used at Vétheuil. It was in Vétheuil that he first used the river as a mirror to the sky. Rising early, he rowed out into the Seine in the studio-boat to witness the dawn light colouring its surface. From this time water increasingly became Monet's dominant motif, determining the evolution of his art. Changes in Monet's technique are revealed in this painting: he applied his colours unmixed, with a brusque directness, using much broader brushstrokes to animate the painting. The summary depiction of the distant boat and its occupants lends scale to the image and speaks to older traditions; for this reason, perhaps, it is a device that Monet very soon abandoned.

Field of yellow irises at Giverny
Champ d'iris jaunes à Giverny

1887
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5172

Monet had been living in Giverny for approximately four years when he painted this radiant scene, which indicates his ongoing appreciation of the surrounding countryside. Monet's creation of such a light-filled painting by means of only five colours is a triumph of technique. He has employed a limited range of tones, diluting only the pure blue and green. The yellow, too, remains pure, which is perhaps a key to the vibrancy of this field of irises in summer light. In the lower third of the work Monet has also left small areas of the primed canvas exposed. As with so many of his landscapes, Monet here eliminates shadows to reinforce the illusion of light.

The Seine at Port-Villez, rose effect
La Seine à Port-Villez, effet rose

1894
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5002

Looking at this work and its companion *The Seine at Port-Villez, evening effect*, it is easy to imagine Monet working at his easel on the banks of the Seine. Monet painted furiously to capture the varied and fleeting effects of light and atmosphere in the landscape, switching canvases as his prospect evolved. Yet he did not slavishly paint what he saw, but endeavoured to render an impression of what he felt before a particular view. In 1890 he wrote to his friend Gustave Geffroy, 'I'm hard at it, working stubbornly on a series of different effects … I'm increasingly obsessed by the need to render what I experience'.
These two paintings are indicative of this new approach to his art. Port-Villez is only two kilometres from Giverny, easily accessible by foot or boat, and was a great subject for Monet while the grand scheme for his garden was being realised.

The Seine at Port-Villez, evening effect
La Seine à Port-Villez, effet du soir

1894
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5025

Once set on a particular composition or view, Monet would work methodically for many hours to achieve his aims. While on one of his 'campaigns', Monet wrote to Alice, 'Think of me getting up before 6; I'm at work by 7 and I continue until 6.30 in the evening standing up all the time, nine canvases. It's murderous and to think I drop everything, you, my garden, all for this …' By 1894 Monet's obsession with capturing light and reflections on water was all-consuming. Daylight hours were precious to him. In these two canvases Monet defined the landscape sparsely, and quickly blocked it in to preserve his energy and time to render the sky and the mist veiling the banks of the Seine. The river has become a mirror, and land meets water almost precisely across the middle of the canvas.

For Kids

Monet often painted the same scene many times to show the way light changes during the day. This was a new way of painting nature. Find another painting of this scene and compare the colours Monet used to capture light. At what times of day do you think they were painted?

The view from a train: discovery of Giverny

In 1876 Monet was commissioned to paint decorative panels in the country home of Ernest Hoschedé, a wealthy businessman and collector of Impressionist paintings. In the weeks he spent there, Monet became close to Ernest's wife, Alice, and to their five children. When Ernest went bankrupt in 1877, Monet, his wife Camille Doncieux and their two sons Jean and Michel pooled resources with the Hoschedés, and from 1878 the families lived together at Vétheuil.

Life at Vétheuil, although marred by money problems and Camille's declining health, was serene for Monet. He worked constantly, and Alice nursed Camille. Following Camille's death in 1879, Alice assumed the role of mother to Jean and Michel. Ernest worked in Paris and abroad, spending little time at home, and Alice and Monet's intimate relationship developed into love. In 1881 they moved to Poissy and rented an inadequate, flood-prone house. Afraid that Alice would return to Ernest, Monet searched for a more salubrious home, declaring, 'I shall travel until I have found the countryside and house that suit me'.

In spring 1883, while on a train to Rouen, Monet spied Giverny, a village some eighty kilometres from Paris, located between the Vexin hills and the Seine. Its combination of meadows filled with wildflowers, lanes, fields, hills and streams offered infinite painting possibilities. Monet found Giverny's largest house, Le Pressoir, available to rent. Pink with grey shutters, it stood in a *clos normand*, or traditional walled garden, comprising flowerbeds, orchards and a vegetable plot sloping down to a road. Monet's dealer Paul Durand-Ruel helped finance the move to Giverny, where Monet and his family would remain for the rest of their lives.

White clemati
Clématites blanches

1887

oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5011

This painting and its subject are both larger than life. The vigorous, large flowering clematis pictured is possibly the hybrid species *Henryi*, which was introduced into nursery catalogues in 1858. Monet was a passionate gardener and keen horticultural student and was always eager to acquire rare plants for his growing garden at Giverny. He kept up a lively correspondence with his fellow gardening friends the artist Gustave Caillebotte and writer Octave Mirbeau, as well as with nurserymen and specialised plant dealers and botanists. Festooning a tall pillar, the spectacular clematis obviously provided Monet impetus to create this lush close-up view, which has all the richness and asymmetrical design of Japanese kimono fabric, and the elongated format of a Japanese scroll. The heavily cropped edges are quite atypical of Monet's usual practice; it's as though we are looking at a slice of a larger composition.

Impressionism: the early years

In 1859, when Monet arrived in Paris to study painting, the city was rapidly modernising. Broad avenues, department stores, gaslights, electricity and sanitation were transforming cobbled quarters once congested and dark. Only the new reproductive technologies of photography and colour lithography seemed able to capture and reflect images of this changing world.

Traditional art practice and training were bound by centuries-old rules. Painting students diligently followed the example of the Old Masters in their use of light, colour, line, composition and subject to produce highly finished pictures for approval by a conservative Paris Salon jury.

A loose affiliation of rebellious artists began to form in the art classes and cafes of Paris; they included Fréderic Bazille, Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas, Édouard Manet, Camille Pissarro, Auguste Renoir and Alfred Sisley. Impatient to capture the essence of modern life, these young artists pioneered new methods. They painted out of doors, in town and country, working quickly to capture changing light, people and scenery. They made use of new materials – synthetic colours, paints in portable tubes, ready-stretched canvases – and new 'looks', appropriating the spontaneity and radically cropped effects of Japanese prints and photography.

Each of these artists suffered repeated rejection by the Salon. By virtue of their independently staged exhibitions and the support of a small circle of friends, art dealers, collectors and sympathetic critics, they persevered to forge a new style that came to be known as Impressionism. Claude Monet was the leader of this radical art movement.

Springtime, through the branches
Le Printemps, à travers les branches
1878
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Mr and Mrs Donop de Monchy, 1940 inv. 4018

This painting is one of many views of Clichy, a suburb of Paris, painted by Monet in 1878, although the subject is rendered almost unrecognisable by trees. This distinctive screening effect is a device unique in Monet's oeuvre, possibly borrowed from Japanese woodblock prints. The viewer is virtually imprisoned, barred from both the river and the town beyond. Unlike the exploration of reflections so typical of his later practice, here Monet obscures the river.

This scene was painted during one of the most difficult times in his life. Following a short period of prosperity that instilled him with great confidence, sales of his paintings slowed to a halt and he became quite impoverished. To exacerbate matters, Camille, who had recently given birth to their second child, fell gravely ill. Dogged by debt, Monet and his family moved briefly to Paris and later to Vétheuil.

Rouen Cathedral

In early 1892 Monet embarked on a campaign to paint the facade of Rouen's Gothic Cathedral, sixty kilometres from Giverny. The project occupied him for three years and resulted in over thirty canvases. Monet painted from a rented room across the street from the cathedral and later reworked his canvases in his Giverny studio. Until this point he had never devoted so much time to a single motif. 'I am working as hard as I can', he wrote, 'and do not even dream of doing anything except the cathedral. It is an immense task'.

Monet's choice of this medieval landmark coincided with a nationwide surge in Catholic feeling and a renewed appreciation for France's historic monuments. When the series was exhibited in May 1895, the melting effects of colour, tone and light across the carved features of the cathedral caused a sensation. Monet's friend, the publisher and future politician Georges Clemenceau, called upon the President to buy the entire series for the state.

While in Rouen, Monet frequently corresponded with Alice about the garden and his envisaged lily pond. A local source of inspiration and encouragement was Émile Varenne, Director of Rouen's Botanical Gardens, who took Monet on tours of the Gardens' orchid houses. Varenne became a generous collaborator and helped Monet source rare plant specimens for Giverny.

Rouen Cathedral, at the end of day, sunlight effect
Cathédrale de Rouen, effet de soleil, fin de journée

1892
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5174

Rough weather at Étretat
Gros temps à Étretat
1883
oil on canvas

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Felton Bequest, 1913 582-2

The rugged coast around the Norman town of Étretat had been a favourite destination for painters for many years, in particular for Monet's mentor Gustave Courbet. Monet visited the area in January 1883 and immediately grasped its creative possibilities. He wrote to Alice, 'You can't imagine how beautiful the sea has been for the last two days, but what a talent it would need to render all that, it's enough to drive you mad. The cliffs here are like nothing else anywhere'. Shortly before settling in Giverny, Monet spent three weeks in Étretat and completed no fewer than twenty canvases during his stay. X-radiography has revealed that Monet had some difficulty placing the two tiny figures on the beach in this painting as he progressively enlarged the waves.

This expansion of the sea seems indicative of the shrinking relevance of the figure in his work. Material analysis also reveals grains of sand in the paint layers, showing that he painted the work on the beach.

Cliff and the Porte d’Amont, morning effect
Falaise et porte d’Amont, effet du matin

1885
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5010

During Monet’s sojourn in Étretat in late 1885, he explored the region more intently than ever before. He rose at sunrise and did not return to his lodgings until evening. He took his sketchbook everywhere, rapidly executing simple drawings that blocked in the sea, sky and the outlines of cliffs. These sketches were often worked up on canvas just as they appeared in his sketchbook, devoid of figures and landscape detail, highlighting Monet’s focus on capturing the effects of atmosphere and light above all else.

In this painting Monet returns to a motif that he had painted two years before in vastly different weather. The soft pink light of morning is shown reflecting off the white clouds, causing the chalk cliffs to glow with a subtle rosy hue. The pastel shades of the sky, sea and beach harmonise with the atmospheric qualities of early morning.

For Kids

Monet grew up by the seaside and water was one of the things he most loved to paint. On painting trips he would send home presents, including chickens and ducks. Once Monet sent home a bucket of shrimp from the beach. Find another painting nearby that shows the same cliffs.

The sailing boat, evening effect
Le Voilier, effet du soir

1885
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5171

Although Monet constantly vented his frustration with the changeable weather in Étretat, he also found his time there stimulating and returned to the site three years in a row. In 1885 he wrote to Alice, 'Étretat is becoming more and more amazing; it's at its best now, the beach with all these fine boats, it's superb and I rage at my inability to express it better. You'd need to use both hands and cover hundreds of canvases'. Consequently, Monet sometimes executed paintings very rapidly, such as this incredibly bold and wonderfully atmospheric image of a boat at sunset. Despite the boat's presence, Monet's brilliantly coloured depiction of calm water seems eerily empty compared to his portrayal of turbulent seas. He uses thick layers of paint and his long serpentine brushstrokes suggest the mesmerising movement of the ocean.

The beach at Pourville, sunset
La Plage à Pourville, soleil couchant

1882
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5008

The beaches of Normandy provided Monet with recurrent motifs which he came back to year after year during the 1880s. At the same time, these beaches returned Monet to the landscapes of his childhood in Le Havre, not far from Pourville. After repeatedly painting the river Seine, Monet took up residence in Pourville in February 1882 to gain inspiration from its 'marvellous' landscapes, as well as to enjoy his new fascination with the wilder aspects of nature. *The beach at Pourville, sunset* conveys a deep tranquillity, and the absence of people focuses the viewer's attention entirely on the rough coastline displayed in the dim light of the setting sun.

Boats in the port of Honfleur (sketch)
Bateaux dans le port de Honfleur (esquisse)

1917
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5022

In October 1917 Monet, aged seventy-six, travelled to Normandy, retracing his journeys of the 1880s and visiting the towns and landscapes of his childhood. He had been working hard on both his painting and his garden at Giverny, and felt the need for an invigorating break. By this time the battles of the First World War were taking place far away in Belgium, and Monet travelled in safety. His journey offered an ideal opportunity to take a break from his work on the mural project which left him ‘in a state of complete exasperation’, and to leave behind what he at times called the ‘sheer madness’ at Giverny. This painting shows that Monet was not only obsessed with depicting flowers, but also maintained an interest in depicting boats and water more generally.

Charing Cross Bridge (sketch)
Charing Cross Bridge (esquisse)

1899–1901
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5101

Monet wrote, 'I love London much more than the English countryside; yes I adore London … but what I love more than anything is the fog'. This somewhat distant view of Charing Cross Bridge seems to recall earlier works by Monet with similarly broad vistas, such as the celebrated view of Le Havre, *Impression sunrise*, 1872, or, more especially, his Argenteuil paintings in which sky and water are bisected by a bridge. Monet contrasts the strongly graphic structure and solidity of Charing Cross Bridge against the formlessness of both river and sky.
His almost monochromatic painting has the freshness and roughness of a sketch, drawn swiftly in paint: the river's fluid, formless calm is given life in two dark streaks; the wake of a boat is barely indicated; while the dark mass of buildings on the far shore dissolve into the indistinct fog.

Waterloo Bridge

1899–1901
oil on canvas

Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth

From his suite of rooms on the sixth floor of London's Savoy Hotel on the Thames Embankment, Monet had a splendid view of the river and its bridges. The notorious London fog that hung over the entire city, caused by the polluting smog from coal fires and industry, was at its most picturesque along the reaches of the Thames where Monet concentrated his efforts. From his hotel window he had a fine view of Waterloo Bridge. However, in this painting Monet depicts a fog so thick that the sun is barely visible – reduced to a molten disk in a mirage of almost hallucinatory colour – and the bridge almost obliterated. Yet the painting is a tour de force of blues and greens, as though air and water have merged in a fury of brushstrokes.

Houses of Parliament, reflections on the Thames
Le Parlement, reflets sur la Tamise

1905
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5007

On his several visits to London between the years 1900 and 1905, Monet painted ten paintings of the Houses of Parliament. Each is painted from the same viewpoint, but records a unique combination of time, weather and light. Monet's 'studio' was a room in St Thomas' hospital, opposite Parliament, where he went each afternoon. Contrary to earlier practice, Monet did not complete his paintings while in London, but worked on them back in France, often using photographs as *aides-mémoire*. Inspired by Turner's painting *Houses of Parliament on fire*, 1835, and also by his friend James McNeill Whistler's pictures of the Thames, Monet dissolves the solidity of the Parliament buildings into a vivid silhouette – a blue-green mirage illuminated against a dramatic sky.

For Kids

Monet travelled overseas many times to paint different landscapes. In London he painted the fog across the river Thames, and in Norway he painted the snow-covered land. Even though Monet wore a bearskin coat, one day he stayed outside painting too long and icicles formed in his beard! Name the colours that Monet used to paint snow.

Charing Cross Bridge, smoke in fog, impression
Charing Cross Bridge, fumée dans le brouillard, impression

1902
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5001

Monet had encountered J. M. W. Turner's paintings on his first visit to London in 1870. More than three decades later, Monet painted his response to the same conditions that produced Turner's much-admired *Rain, Steam and Speed*, 1844. The use of the word 'impression' as part of the title of this London painting is a reminder of what Monet sought to create: not a description but rather a vivid evocation of the instability and insubstantiality of appearances. As in Turner's painting, the steam from the locomotive simultaneously evokes speed and diffuses light. Symbols of modernity, the train and the iron railway bridge slice the pictorial space in two along the horizon. This demarcation between water and sky forms a pictorial anchor to the violence of colour, divergent brushwork and diffuse radiance.

Mount Kolsaas, Norway
Le Mont Kolsaas en Norvège

1895
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5100

The inspiration for this painting, Monet's first of a mountain, was almost certainly the great Japanese master Katsushika Hokusai's woodcut series, *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, c.1829–33, of which he owned nine. 'I am doing a mountain that is visible from everywhere here and that reminds me of Fuji-Yama', Monet wrote from Norway. He made numerous studies of Mt Kolsaas in which the craggy mountain is silhouetted against the sky's changing light. The bold, dark outline across the mountain ridge, separating earth from sky, reiterates the simplifying design of Japanese woodblock prints and creates a dramatic tension, with bands of colour differentiating the various layers of mountain top, dense fir forest, the lower reach of bare rocky earth and the snow-covered valley below. Monet's vigorous, assured handling of paint conjures the impenetrable, remote majesty of the place.

Norwegian landscape, the blue houses
Paysage de Norvège, les maisons bleues

1895
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5169

In the winter of 1895 Monet visited his stepson, Jacques, in Oslo with the aim of painting snow. At first Monet was dismayed by the food in Norway, the alien customs and unwanted attention he received as a celebrated artist. But once he and Jacques left the capital he found new and unpredictable motifs to paint, and wrote, 'There are no more beautiful effects than the ones I can see here. I mean the snow effects which are absolutely stunning but unbelievably difficult'. Delighted by the painted wooden houses with their snow-crusted roofs in Sandviken and Bjørnegaard, Monet painted these rustic buildings a number of times. Sometimes, however, he concentrated on the wider vista, highlighting the effects of winter light reflected off snow. Here his loose, hatched brushstrokes are vivid evidence of the speed with which he was forced to capture the particular light.

Norway, the red houses at Bjørnegaard
Norvège, les maisons rouges à Bjørnegaard

1895
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5170

Monet rented a room in Bjørnegaard, north-west of Sandviken, in the house of Norwegian playwright Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's wife Jenny. He stayed there from mid February to early spring, making numerous paintings of these buildings until the snow began to thaw from the rooftops and their appearance changed. The painted wooden houses with their rich reds contrasted vividly with the white snow, blue shadows, moody skies and distant mountains. Are they horse heads projecting from the openings of the red barn?
Monet renders the deep drifts of snow in quite dry, impasto paint – we can almost feel the ice crunching underfoot. Touches of aqua greens sharpen Monet's contrasting red, white and blue palette and his evocation of reflected light. The buildings depicted in this painting are still standing today.

Monet the traveller

While Monet established his house and family at Giverny and began to create the now famous garden, he constantly sought new motifs to paint, finding them not only in his immediate surroundings, but also on his extensive travels within France and further afield. Although he was increasingly absorbed by his garden at Giverny, Monet continued to travel widely, especially during winter when the garden was either dormant or covered in snow.

Fleeing the Franco-Prussian War, Monet first visited London in 1870. He so loved the river Thames, with its fog-shrouded, atmospheric vistas, that he returned several times over the next three decades to record the changing moods and drama of reflected light on the river and along its shores.

Although he regularly visited Paris, the urbane Monet always sought to be near water on what he called his painting ‘campaigns’. A childhood spent by the Norman coast had instilled in him a great love of the sea, its varying moods and rocky coastline. He returned to Normandy to paint almost every winter, when accommodation was cheaper and the holiday-makers were gone. He also loved the wilder coastline of Brittany and the radiant light of the Mediterranean coast. Monet’s sole expedition to Norway was in search of the dramatic frozen landscapes of fjords and mountains, and light reflected off snow.

The *bassin*

Monet’s fame and fortune were secured by his immensely successful exhibition of haystack paintings in 1891. His personal life also stabilised that year with his marriage to the Catholic Alice, following the death of Ernest Hoschedé. As Monet’s wealth increased, his idea for a separate exotic garden in which to house the rare and imported plants that increasingly distracted him began to take shape.

In 1893 Monet bought a 1,200 square-metre plot of land at the end of his garden, situated across the road that bordered his property. In former times a stream named the Ru had fed a pond used by medieval monks for fishing. Monet sought council approval to divert the Ru’s waters into a new pond, or *bassin*, he intended to create for the purpose of growing aquatic plants. His plans encountered bitter objections from neighbouring farmers, who feared the spread of exotic plants into the waterways.

Monet won the dispute and planted willows, bamboos, irises, Japanese cherries, lush grasses and water-loving edging plants around his *bassin* for, in his words, ‘the pleasure of the eye, and for motifs to paint’. He also constructed the most famous motif of all, an arched wooden bridge, painted green, inspired by the Japanese drum bridge depicted in woodblock prints. This famous structure would briefly dominate Monet’s paintings of his gardens, before his interest transferred to the floating waterlilies.

The bridge over the waterlily pond

1900
oil on canvas

Art Institute Chicago, Illinois
Mr and Mrs Lewis Larned Coburn
Memorial Collection inv. 1933.441

Monet's water garden, commenced in 1893, was almost complete by 1899. The once awkward-looking bridge and pond had softened with the passing of time, and the key elements – waterlilies, edging plants, willows and bridge – had begun to fuse, erasing in the process earlier traces of man-made construction. Monet began painting his water garden in earnest, working from the northern tip of his pond. Over the next two years he recorded the scene more than twenty-four times. In this 1900 version, Monet has depicted the water's surface as still and glassy, shot with reflections of overhanging foliage. Seen from the bridge, the depths of the water and its drifts of lilies appeared as a vast, richly textured Oriental tapestry. By contrast, the bridge itself seems strangely insubstantial, permeable to light and air, with its anchor points hidden from view.

For Kids

In 1883 Monet, Alice and their children moved to the small town of Giverny. Monet was inspired by plants, gardens and Japanese art and created his own waterlily pond, which he loved to paint. He enjoyed the pond so much that he kept making it bigger and bigger! Monet built a Japanese bridge across the pond and included it in his most famous works of art.

Waterlilies
Nymphéas
1908
oil on canvas

Fuji Art Museum, Tokyo
Purchased, 1974

In this raked vertical panel, perspective and naturalistic detail give way to abstract effects and melting colour harmonies of lilac, pink, green and gold that might easily be transposed to a larger canvas. The chalky Symbolist palette suggests Monet's momentary shift closer to the examples of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, who had elevated the decorative mural to an esteemed and contemporary public art form, and Puvis's follower, Maurice Denis. Denis emphasised colour harmonies over motif, stating memorably that 'a picture, before being a battle horse, a nude, an anecdote or whatnot, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order'.

Waterlilies
Nymphéas
1907
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5168

This trio of waterlily works, which evidently share the same compositional elements, could hardly be less alike in mood. It has been suggested that the nightmarish literary portrayal of Monet's water garden published by his close friend Octave Mirbeau in 1899 may account for the curiously sinister glow of the pond in this version of the composition. In *Le Jardin des supplices (The Torture Garden)*, Mirbeau outlined a vision in which an enclosed water garden is 'fertilised with human flesh and blood and filled with erotic flowers and tortured bodies'. This striking symbolism might, it has been suggested, have provoked in Monet this dramatic but disturbingly ambiguous portrayal of a sunset, in which the water seems stained with blood.

Waterlilies
Nymphéas

1907
oil on canvas

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas
Gift of Mrs Harry C. Hanszen, 1988 68.31

Monet’s close friendships with the foremost Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé and the writer Octave Mirbeau may well have influenced his own attitude to the occultism of the fin-de-siècle culture. Symbolism’s obsession with the unknowable, the mysterious and often dark places of human imagination, dreams and experience were not so far removed from the ‘unknown realities’ that Monet once professed he would like to capture in his art. While he distanced himself from the morbid and occultist notions of Symbolism, nature itself embodied mysteries for him. This painting’s mood of reverie, for example, is striking – the pathway of reflected early morning sky weaves between darkly sentinel reflections and is threaded with stepping stones of delicately depicted waterlilies.

Waterlilies, study
Nymphéas, étude

1907
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5109

In his younger days, Monet carried sketchbooks with him everywhere in which he made studies for his paintings, recorded observations and tried out new motifs. However, in his old age and more settled habits, he increasingly made his preparatory studies directly on the canvas. The proximity of the maturing gardens and lily ponds of Giverny diminished Monet's need for preparatory studies on paper. Moreover, as the size of his compositions increased, they necessitated planning directly onto the canvas, as is evident in this preliminary study of sky reflected in the lily pond. In this oil sketch we clearly see Monet's strategy of pitching horizontal clusters of lily pads against the vertical thrust of reflected foliage and clouds.

For Kids

Monet loved to paint water and reflections. He would paint the same subject many times, watching the changing sky and the way it reflected on the water. Monet called these paintings ‘waterscapes’. Notice how you cannot see the edge of the pond or the sky. When you look at the art, it makes you feel like you are floating. Look closely at other paintings of reflections, can you tell the time of day? What else can you see in the reflections?

A passion for gardening

By the late 1880s Monet's thirst for travel was abating. His interest in the garden at Giverny began to extend beyond its function as a source of cut flowers to paint in times of bad weather. Monet had discovered other self-exiles from Paris who were also interested in gardening. The writer Octave Mirbeau and the artists Gustave Caillebotte and Camille Pissarro all lived in nearby villages. Soon they were visiting one another and exchanging cuttings and letters about plants, which they ordered from specialist growers.
Their gardens attracted fellow enthusiasts from Paris, including the eminent journalist Gustave Geffroy and the publisher Georges Clemenceau.

Fuelled by this shared passion, Monet's expertise in horticulture burgeoned. A series of successful exhibitions as well as financial assistance from his dealer Paul Durand-Ruel enabled Monet in late 1890 to buy the house and grounds at Giverny. He set about reshaping his garden, writing, 'I must admit I am reluctant to leave Giverny, especially now that I am redesigning the house and garden as I want them'.

As he developed the means to create a world on his own terms, Monet's interests shifted towards Japanese aesthetics, which he had always admired and which were popular in avant-garde circles. Perhaps inspired by James McNeill Whistler, Monet decorated his dining room as a complete ensemble, including blue and white ceramics and yellow walls to show off his collection of Japanese prints. Monet might also have been considering outdoor Oriental effects and in 1891 invited a Japanese gardener to Giverny.

Waterlilies, evening effect
Nymphéas, effet du soir
1897
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5167

The waterlilies are the most famous symbol of Monet's oeuvre and *Waterlilies, evening effect* is one of the first waterlily paintings he attempted after work began on his water garden at Giverny, in 1893. Monet intended the lily pond to be more than just a simple pleasure garden. It evolved into the very centre of his work and became the motif he depicted most often over the course of the next thirty years. *Waterlilies, evening effect* is one of Monet's pure flower paintings, a life-sized portrait of the open waterlily corollas, beautifully lit in soft evening light. Monet spent many years refining his approach to the motif, commenting, 'It took me a while to understand my waterlilies'.

Waterlilies
Nymphéas
1907
oil on canvas

Saint-Étienne Métropole, Musée(s) Art Moderne,
Saint-Étienne Gauthier Dumond Bequest, 1924 inv. 924

1906 was a year of crisis for Monet during which he destroyed dozens of waterlily paintings that he considered overworked. The following year he tilted horizontal planes in his work to near-vertical and imbued the water's surface with the iridescence of shot taffeta. He then transferred these effects to a remarkable new circular format. Released from the conventional constraints of a rectilinear frame, Monet's aqueous world now ebbed into the viewer's space and consciousness. The four round waterlily panels Monet created served as a step towards visualising a rounded setting for his later waterlily murals. In 1908 he wrote, 'You must know I'm entirely absorbed in my work. These landscapes of water and reflections have become an obsession. It's quite beyond my powers at my age, and yet I want to succeed in expressing what I feel. I've destroyed some ... I start others ... and I hope that something will come out of so much effort'.

Waterlilies
Nymphéas
1903
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5163

Monet began painting his newly established waterlily pond in the late 1890s. By the early years of the twentieth century what he was painting, and how he painted it, had changed dramatically. In this group of paintings from 1903, Monet takes the radical step of eliminating the sky so that we hover like a dragonfly across the surface of the water. The entire composition is the water's surface, in which reflections of the willows fringing Monet's lily ponds are mirrored. Distance is created by a very slight shift in the scale of the densely painted lily pads and by the tiny, enigmatic, blood-red stain in the foreground. It is as though a veil of shimmering mauve-blue and green is drawn across the surface of the painting.

Waterlilies
Nymphéas
1903
oil on canvas

Bridgestone Museum of Art, Tokyo
Ishibashi Foundation, 1961 F.P.22

The subdued opalescent palette and quiet luminosity of this work suggest it must have been painted in the early morning. Everything shimmers, washed in first light, conveying a delicacy and freshness that belies the preparatory work demanded of Monet’s gardeners, who were up before dawn to clean the previous day’s dust from the surface of the lily ponds. Although the surface of the lily pond occupies the entire canvas, Monet establishes an illusion of perspective by diminishing the scale of the lily pads towards the top, so that the water’s surface appears to recede from us – an effect emphasised by the painting’s ‘empty’ lower third.

Waterlilies
Nymphéas
1914–17
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5085

The pale beauty of this work suggests the light of either dawn or dusk, though it was most likely painted in the early morning. Because waterlilies close their petals as the sun goes down, we know Monet painted them in the morning.

Monet's inversions of the seen world enabled him to move towards a more abstract formal language. In this image, for example, clumps of water irises are caught in reflection upside down, with roseate clouds below. Monet's restrained palette of cool tonalities and gently harmonious hues has an elegiac, almost musical simplicity. The image functions simultaneously as a mirror to the sky and surrounding vegetation while representing water itself as fluid living matter.

For Kids

Before Monet, most artists painted landscapes with the horizon marked by land or water. Monet wanted people to look at scenes in a different way. Notice the clouds at the bottom of this painting. Do they make the painting look upside down? Next time you make a picture, try to look at and record the world in a new way.

Hemerocallis (Daylilies)
Les Hémérocalles
1914–17
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5097

Monet's love of water endeared him to plants that thrived at the edge of his ponds. He enjoyed the arching, strappy leaves of the *Hemerocallis* (daylily) and its striking orange flower head on a tall waving stem. In general, Monet preferred single flowers of pure, uninflected colour. In the early twentieth century *Hemerocallis* had not yet undergone diversification into elaborate and ruffled hybrid forms. In this painting limited to greens, oranges, purples and browns, a dramatic diagonal bisects the composition and marks the transition between land and water. Monet's brushmarks across the water's surface are elongated to mimic the forms of the daylily foliage, and their hooked, purple lines animate the opaque pond.

Yellow irises
Iris jaunes
1924–25
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5095

In 1924 French botanist Georges Truffaut described some of the varieties of irises that he saw at Le Pressoir: ‘There are abundant irises of all varieties along the edges of the pond. In the spring there are *Iris siberica* and *virginica* with their long, velvety petals; later Japanese iris (*Iris kaempferi*) abound and impart an Oriental touch … In June … *Iris germanica* or orchid irises are in bloom. They are always planted in long, wide beds, some of them over three feet wide’.
From 1914 onwards, Monet produced a number of vigorous flower studies celebrating the riotous display of water-loving plants that bordered his lily pond. In this composition of foreshortened clumps of foliage, Monet draws the viewer down to the base of the plants so that one can almost smell the damp soil. *Yellow irises* is thought to belong to Monet’s final period, following cataract surgery, when he was able to return to a more naturalistic colour palette.

The *Grand Decorations*

As Monet became increasingly absorbed by the challenges of painting his water garden, he formed an idea for a series of large panoramic paintings. He envisaged them enveloping the viewer in sensations similar to those he experienced before the quiet mystery and majesty of the lily pond.

In 1909, following a hugely successful exhibition of some forty waterlily paintings at Durand-Ruel's gallery in Paris, Monet spoke of his dream to create an installation designed to offer meditative repose for the weary: 'The essence of the motif is the mirror of water whose appearance alters at every moment, thanks to the patches of sky that are reflected in it, and give it its light and movement'. These works would come to be known as the *Grand Decorations*.

Around this time Monet's eyesight began to deteriorate and, in addition, he was grieving the deaths of his wife and son Jean. The horrors of the First World War were also imminent. In a state of depression, Monet ceased painting for many months until eventually encouraged by his friend Georges Clemenceau and stepdaughter Berthe to take up this ambitious project. Monet sustained work on the *Grand Decorations* for some fifteen years, producing over two hundred preparatory works in the process. Clemenceau later suggested to Monet that the *Grand Decorations* be donated to the nation. Monet envisaged his panels in large oval salons at the Orangerie des Tuileries in Paris. That building was adapted and the paintings were installed following Monet's death in 1926.

Weeping willow and the waterlily pond
Saule pleureur et bassin aux nymphéas

1916–19
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5125

Around the pond of his lower garden Monet planted willows and offset their fine, trailing foliage with angular thickets of bamboo and the gnarling forms of Japanese cherry trees. In this way, he gradually created dense and textured living walls within and around his water garden.

For Monet the willow linked the spheres of land and water. Although he gradually sought to remove all traces of land in his waterscapes, he usually permitted a vestigial reference in the form of willow fronds dangling over, or reflected in, the water's surface. He shows willow trunks less often, but they do appear in his finished *Grand Decorations* as a dark vertical presence in the foreground used to establish scale and structure, which is perhaps their intended purpose in this particular sketch.

Waterlilies
Nymphéas

1916–19
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5117

In the years 1916 to 1917, Monet's magnum opus, the *Grand Decorations*, to which he devoted the last decade of his life, was taking shape in his mind's eye. This painting was a crucial step towards the realisation of his ambitious project. In it he experiments with the representation of depth while accentuating the flat plane of the pond's surface. He dramatically increases the size of his canvas and loads his broad brushes with pure colour, creating a drama of expressive brushstrokes. Stubbly green vegetation is introduced on the pond's bank at the painting's lower edge. Above the bank, reflections of the hanging willow rise to join the tips of the willow itself, forming a continuous blue-green column punctuated by the flowering pink and white waterlilies. Monet wrote of these paintings, 'My sight is – would you believe it – good enough to enable me to work hard on these blessed decorations which obsess me'.

For Kids

At Giverny Monet built hothouses for his plants and employed six gardeners.
All of the children helped in the garden, too. They planted, weeded and in the early days watered the garden using watering cans. Monet even had a local stream redirected to fill up his pond. He said, ‘My garden is my most beautiful masterpiece’.

Waterlilies, reflections of weeping willows
Nymphéas, reflets de saule

1916–19
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5122

In preparing for his *Grand Decorations*, Monet made experimental sketches of his lily pond using the same large square format of this painting. The small area of horizontal brushstrokes at its centre, rich in cerulean and cobalt blues, overlays the agitated vertical movement and opens a space figured with lily pads, reminding us of the water's surface. In this way Monet creates the illusion of depth. However, there is also an air of desperation in the handling, seen in the dry, dragged blue and mauve brushstrokes. Was this the trauma of Monet's failing eyesight? At this stage the weeping willow was coming to symbolise for Monet his distress at the loss of life in the First World War.

Waterlilies: symbol of the Orient and modern science

Today the waterlily subject is identified almost exclusively with Monet's paintings. In the 1880s, however, the waterlily was a powerful emblem of the Symbolist movement. It signified femininity, desire and the occult. The waterlily also represented resurrection, opening afresh each day, unsullied by the muddied waters in which it grew. Its mysteries were dwelt upon by Monet's friend the poet Stéphane Mallarmé, and the painter Gustave Moreau. In 1897 the writer Maurice Guillemot visited Monet's water garden and noted the artist's 'unusual varieties of aquatic plants, with wide, flat leaves, and disquieting, strangely exotic flowers'. During Guillemot's visit, Monet spoke of his vision for a decorative scheme that featured the waterlilies: 'Imagine a circular room, the lower walls covered with paintings a metre high, entirely filled with a plane of water scattered with these plants, transparent screens, sometimes green, sometimes almost mauve'.

The waterlily commonly grew in France in its simple white form. Monet saw new coloured hybrids at the Exposition Universelle of 1889 shown by the Bordeaux botanist Joseph Bory Latour-Marliac, and in 1894 ordered three varieties from him. Monet experimented with raising both tropical and Northern Hemisphere waterlilies. He had particular success rearing blue cultivars from South America, white Egyptian types with external pink petals and yellow lilies that blushed to red as they aged. Eventually Monet designated a greenhouse specifically for waterlilies, which his gardeners lifted from his pond late each autumn and replanted in early spring.

Waterlilies
Nymphéas

1914–17
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5115

Monet may have been standing on his beloved Japanese bridge when he orchestrated this lush impression of his waterlily pond. While the lily pads in the lower half of the composition feel almost within reach, the flowering lilies retreat from sight and grasp. Floating towards the painting’s edge, their pale beauty becomes tantalising. Although the flowers are brusquely painted with his customary economy of brushstrokes, Monet’s delicate palette of whites shadowed with blue and melting pinks – underscored with sure strokes of deeper pink and the briefest moment of yellow – gives them the appearance of hovering like butterflies. Their fragility is heightened by the contrast of colour. Monet’s deliberate decisions to leave the edges of the painting ‘unfinished’ and the primed canvas visible reinforce his insistence on painting’s essential materiality.

Waterlilies and agapanthus
Nymphéas et agapanthes

1914–17
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5084

Ever curious about varieties of flora, Monet experimented with his plants. He planted irises, *Hemerocallis* (daylilies) and agapanthus around his waterlily pond, and bred new hybrids from imported and local waterlilies. He composed his garden with a painter's eye, sensitive to colour, shape and texture. Though conceived on a larger than life scale, this is an unusually intimate depiction of Monet's lily pond. Both the darkly reflective water and the pale, floating lily pads are subordinate to the assertive thrust of the agapanthus. A kind of dialogue of opposites is created by the contrasting forms and delicate positioning of these plants. Although the handling of paint is scrubby and appears muddled close-up, with umber browns overlaid by cobalt blues and greens, the effect is warm and rich, enlivened by delicate touches of mauve in both the agapanthus and lily pads.

Waterlilies
Nymphéas

1916–19
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5164

This radiant painting from late in Monet's career is a symphony of blues and greens set off by a few calculated eruptions of pink waterlilies in the foreground. Colour and scale are used to introduce depth of field to the composition which, for all its lightness of touch and the freshness of Monet's drawing-in-paint, is perfectly balanced, even classical. The hanging willow branches frame the water's busy surface and the clouds reflected at the painting's centre.

Monet wrote of his continual experimentation in painting his water garden: 'It took me some time to understand my waterlilies … I had planted them for pleasure; I cultivated them without dreaming of painting them … A landscape does not percolate through your mind in a day … And then, suddenly I had the revelation of the fairyland of my pond. … Since then I have hardly had another model'.

Waterlilies
Nymphéas
1914–17
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5116

Monet suffered greatly and lost the will to work following his second wife Alice's death, in 1911. 'I am finished with painting', Monet declared in 1912. Only the intervention of his friend Georges Clemenceau restored Monet's interest in painting again, and so began his second *Waterlilies* series. Once again Monet focuses exclusively on the water's surface. He creates an hallucinatory image by simultaneously depicting the depths of the water and reflections on its surface. Monet emphasises the vivid contrast between the physicality of floating lily pads, with their knotted flowers, and the insubstantiality of the water itself. The result is an equivocal sense of space and surface. Monet's fascination with the abstract and decorative qualities of Japanese textiles is evident in this luscious painting.

Waterlilies
Nymphéas

1916–19
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5098

To establish the life force of this powerful painting, Monet relies entirely on the small cluster of five cupped and vivid pink waterlilies, just slightly off-centre. The dense brushwork, layered and tumultuous – as though both the water's surface and its depths are agitated – seems almost symphonic in its complexity, despite the simplicity of the composition and Monet's palette. The small vertical touches of pale blue throughout must surely be reflections from the wisteria flowers, which by 1916 were festooning Monet's Japanese bridge.

Waterlilies
Nymphéas
c. 1914–17
oil on canvas

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased, 1979 NGA 1979.2858

From 1914, when weather permitted, Monet painted by his pond, capturing the water and edging plants in sketch-like brushstrokes. Although these large canvases were not intended for public view, but rather as a reserve of motifs for his *Grand Decorations*, they nevertheless function as autonomous panels with their own compositional structure and tonality. *Waterlilies* explores the effect of diffused sunlight apparently set into swirling motion by atmospheric moisture; a phenomenon that also fascinated Turner. Monet was cautious about whom he allowed to see these exercises, especially when many regarded the pursuit of clearer, more classical forms as a patriotic duty in times of national crisis. Monet was conscious that his experiments might attract criticism, and wrote in 1914, 'I should be a bit ashamed to think about my little investigations into forms and colours while so many people suffer and die for us'.

For Kids

‘When you go out to paint, try to forget what objects you have before you, a tree, a house, a field or whatever. Merely think here is a little square of blue, here an oblong of pink, here a streak of yellow, and paint it just as it looks to you, the exact colour and shape.’

Claude Monet

Weeping willows and the First World War

Like many of his generation who had witnessed the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and violent repression of Paris Communards by government forces in 1871, Monet developed a lifelong aversion to war. However, the First World War, which came close to Monet's doorstep, led him to modify his position. German forces approached Paris a month after the commencement of hostilities. Monet's son Michel and stepson Jean-Pierre Hoschedé both enlisted. A makeshift hospital was created at Giverny to which Monet provided vegetables, and he donated many paintings to fundraising efforts for war victims.

Monet read horrifying accounts by soldiers wounded at the Western Front. He also heard firsthand reports of the conflict from Clemenceau, then Minister of War (and, by November 1917, Prime Minister). In 1918 Monet ordered twelve small canvases, of a format he abandoned many years earlier, and created a series of weeping willows on an intimate scale. In these paintings, conceived in homage to the common soldier, Monet recuperated the traditional mournful symbolism of the weeping willow. On 12 November 1918, the day after Armistice, Monet offered a painting from the series to the French state.

Weeping willow
Saule pleureur

1918–19
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5081

The onset of the First World War awakened in Monet, previously an anti-militarist, a sense of national solidarity. At Giverny, Monet and his daughter-in-law Blanche Hoschedé listened to artillery fire from nearby Beauvais and witnessed injured soldiers being evacuated along the road at the end of their garden. Disturbed and yet determined to remain on the property, Monet commenced a series of twelve paintings of willow trees that are widely regarded as allegorical in impulse. These paintings were executed in a smaller and more intimate format (approximately 100 x 130 cm) than was customary for the artist during this period. They show the full length of the willow trunk, stretched and vulnerable. In this curiously expressive example, the mournful forms of the weeping willow branches seem to both shelter and stifle.

Weeping willow
Saule pleureur

1921–22
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5107

Monet's Impressionist method of transcribing colour, form and light was always sensory, but rarely overtly emotional. In the last two decades of his career, old age, infirmity, bereavement and war saw his customary detachment give way at times to a more subjective and expressionist painting mode, as in the case of his late rose path, bridge and weeping willow canvases. Monet was passionately attached to his willow trees and when a cyclone struck the oldest of them in 1912 the recently-widowed artist became inordinately distressed and insisted on its repair. Six years later Monet was oppressed by eyesight problems and by a deepening conviction that he did not have long to live, a fear he confided to his dealer Joseph Bernheim-Jeune in 1918. In this context, Monet's willow 'portraits', created with unruly brushstrokes in dark pigments, seem ominous and highly personal.

Wisteria
Glycines
1919–20
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5124

The scale of this painting, along with others here, is indicative of Monet's work towards his ambitious *Grand Decorations* project, which was intended as a gift to the French nation. Though designed as public murals, paradoxically these works celebrate private and subjective sensations.

In 1909 Monet articulated his dream of a salon that would have 'produced the illusion of an endless whole, a wave with no horizon and no shore; nerves exhausted by work would have relaxed there, following the restful example of those stagnant waters, and to anyone who would have lived in it, that room would have offered a refuge of peaceful meditation in the middle of a flowering aquarium'.

Finally, in 1915, following the construction of a studio large enough to accommodate the necessarily huge canvases (2 x 4.5 metres) Monet began serious work on this increased scale, using his studies and preparatory work made outdoors.

For Kids

As he grew older, Monet painted larger and larger canvases. In his final years he painted twenty-two enormous panels, which he gave to people of France as a gift. When he died at the age of eighty-six, these panels were hung in a gallery in Paris made especially for them. The panels are twice as high as this painting. How do you think Monet painted the top of them?

The Japanese bridge
Le Pont Japonais

1918–24
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5106

Dappled light filtering through the wisteria blooms festooning the Japanese bridge in high summer inspires Monet's vivid tapestry of colour in this painting. Only the emphatic repetition of rich saturated reds, blues and greens in decisive and dominantly vertical strokes work to unite this almost discordant painting. Here, Monet's diminished eyesight and uncertain response to both light and colour clearly destabilises his depiction of a deeply familiar and intimately felt landscape – a landscape of his own creation endlessly rehearsed in hundreds of paintings.

The Japanese bridge
Le Pont Japonais

1918
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5077

In this painting of his water garden Monet evokes both lushness and heat, uniting the pond and bridge in a closely knitted, almost monochromatic harmony of warm yellowish greens. With its structure defined primarily by the direction of Monet's brushstrokes, and animated by the contrasting additions of various reds, the work pulses with life and motion. Tiny touches of pink in the lower left of the canvas conjure floating waterlilies, and the vigorous burst of diagonal brushstrokes (surely a clump of water irises) at its very edge defines the surface of the pond, establishing foreground and hence space. In paintings of this scale the act of painting becomes an expression of the body itself: the action of applying paint is no longer from the wrist (as it is in smaller easel paintings), but involves the full reach of the body.

The Japanese bridge
Le Pont Japonais
1918–19
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5177

In marked contrast to the earlier, elongated green painting of the Japanese bridge, here Monet brings us closer to the pond and bridge. Despite this work being considerably smaller, the composition and viewpoint assumed in both paintings is almost identical, and in both Monet applies his paint with energetic, tightly looping brushstrokes that make the paint appear knitted together, as if in perpetual motion. Once again Monet uses an almost monochromatic palette to evoke the mysterious light of a midsummer night. Everything seems inverted as in a photographic negative: the reflections on the water's surface are ghostly pale, so too the clump of vegetation at the bottom left of the canvas, and the shadows and water at once recede and advance. The image seems to vacillate between pictorial space and flatness.

The path under the rose arches
L’Allée de rosiers

1920–22
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5104

Perhaps as an effect of his reduced eyesight, Monet’s paintings around this time appear flatter, often hermetic and devoid of depth. Yet in them he establishes a dramatic tension between the flat picture plane – the painting’s two-dimensional surface – and the depiction of depth and space within the barely observable motif. In this painting of the rose path, one of three from 1920–22, Monet consciously changed the proportions to enhance the feeling of a vortex, resorting to a more traditional landscape format.
In the remaining two works, Monet favours proportions closer to square. A squarer canvas negates the conventional landscape mode and hence our perceptual expectations. It allows Monet to play with the more abstract and decorative elements of composition. Arguably, Monet is teaching us to see afresh.

The path under the rose arches
L’Allée de rosiers

1920–22
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5090

This painting gives some idea of the darkening vision from which Monet was suffering. The tunnel effect is created by the low arches freighted with climbing and rambling roses. But its claustrophobic atmosphere also owes much to the artist’s limited vision and skewed colour perception. Monet had lived with diminishing eyesight for over a decade by the time he eventually submitted to surgery, in 1922, to remove the cataracts causing his increasing blindness. Monet fought his degenerating sight by combining his profound knowledge of his garden with his technical command of painting, honed over a long lifetime, and by increasingly relying on his carefully labelled paint tubes. He was painting as much what he knew as what he saw.

Pierre Auguste RENOIR

French 1841–1919

Claude Monet reading
Claude Monet lisant

1873

oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5013

In the aftermath of the Paris Commune and civil war that had torn apart Paris, the French capital was largely abandoned by artists. Monet, aged thirty-three, settled with his wife and young son in Argenteuil, a picturesque leisure spot on the Seine, nine kilometres north-west of Paris. He was visited there by many friends, but most often by Renoir.
In the summer of 1873 the two artists painted outdoors side by side, and their painting styles became almost indistinguishable.
In this work the men's comfortable intimacy is conveyed by Renoir's close framing of his friend, whom he portrays rugged up against the chill air, absorbed in reading the latest news from Paris. Later that year Monet and his colleagues gathered in Argenteuil to found an independent exhibiting group.
The Anonymous Cooperative Society of Artist-Painters, Sculptors, Engravers etc. would soon after be dubbed 'the Impressionists'.

The house seen from the rose garden
La Maison vue du jardin aux roses

1922–24
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5103

Monet commented following his surgery late in 1922 (although a second operation was required some months later) that he could see blues again. Perhaps this accounts for the kaleidoscopic layering of blues, pinks and soft greens in this picture, which seems to conjure either twilight or dawn in its pink hues. Unlike the other two paintings titled *The house seen from the rose garden*, this version is constructed of a thousand small touches, each searching out the multi-layered densities of the roses themselves and densities of form and shadow. The senses of touch, sight and even scent seem to be Monet's real subject in this joyous painting.

The house seen from the rose garden
La Maison vue du jardin aux roses

1922–24
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5087

These undated paintings of Monet's house seen from the garden are almost identical in composition and handling and must have been produced in close succession. Their dramatically contrasting palettes, which alternate between blue and pink, red and yellow, and red and green, suggest the works were made following the removal of Monet's cataracts, when colours would have appeared startlingly vivid to him, but unstable and unreliable. At different stages of his recovery Monet suffered from both cyanopsia and xanthopsia, and he was forced to use tinted spectacles to alleviate these disturbing colour biases. Two of his paintings reveal a red/yellow bias, despite the introduction of various greens, applied in places with furious, knotted brushstrokes. The dense impasto paint and sense of urgency implied in its application suggest Monet was trying to find a way to resolve his own erratic vision. Ultimately, the effect negates space and depth.

For Kids

As Monet got older he started having problems with his eyes. For a time everything appeared darker, with a yellow tinge.
He started using bigger brushes and making bigger brushstrokes. He experimented with both the colour and thickness of paint.
Monet had operations that fixed his vision and continued to paint until he died, at the age of eighty-six. His paintings are collected and can be seen in art galleries all around the world. Two works nearby show the same view from Monet's garden; compare their colours.

The house seen from the rose garden
La Maison vue du jardin aux roses

1922–24
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5086

The three paintings of Monet's rose garden that include glimpses of Le Pressoir (seen obliquely in the background and most easily identified by the vertical shafts of its chimneys), tell us more about his painterly preoccupations and disturbed eyesight than they do about either his house or rose garden; although they do clearly attest to the latter's prolific growth and abundance. The works introduce a painterly expressiveness, born perhaps of frustration. Monet often declared his determination to paint his sensations in front of a motif. With hindsight we can see that these paintings unhitch the act of painting from the literal and move it towards the expressive. In this sense they anticipate the later twentieth-century's shift to abstraction. Almost a century after their creation, these paintings resonate with a contemporary sensibility.

Roses
Les Roses
1925–26
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5096

Monet's post-operative acquisition of corrective Zeiss spectacles enabled him to once again see the combinations of red and blue, and red and pink that he loved and had especially contrived in the planting of his flower beds. *Roses* is one of his last paintings and is a celebration of his regained colour perception. Painted freely and on a grand scale, it depicts an arc of the magenta 'American Pillar' rose stretching against a light blue sky. Monet purchased 'American Pillar' roses, one of his favourite climbers, from the Pennsylvania grower Conard-Pyle and later distributed cuttings to friends, including Georges Clemenceau.

On 7 September 1925 the poet Paul Valéry visited Monet and recorded seeing this picture, painted earlier in the summer. Presumably unaware of the personal victory over colour that Monet had achieved in this last batch of paintings, Valéry mused: 'He show[ed] us his last canvases. Strange clumps of roses captured under a blue sky'.

Monet's final years

In the last years of his life, Monet alternated between painting the panoramic *Grand Decorations* and smaller canvases of his *clos normand* (upper garden) and Japanese bridge. While the arched structure of the bridge, embellished with wisteria, echoed the arcade of rambling roses leading to his house, the predominant pinks and reds of the rose beds and rose-clad arches presented Monet with the agonising problem of his damaged eyesight.

In 1912 Monet was diagnosed with bilateral cataracts that affected one eye more seriously than the other. The crystalline lens of his right eye was becoming opaque and yellowish, initially causing exaggerations in his perception of colour and eventually muddying his vision. To compensate, Monet labelled his paint tubes and worked increasingly from experience and memory. He also maintained a strict order of colours on his palette. The blurring of shapes and detail in his vision can be seen in the broader and more generalised handling of form in his late paintings, and in their often repeated layering of raw colours.

Surgery in 1922 and again in 1923 restored much of the sight in Monet's right eye, and while at first he found colours too extreme, tinted spectacles helped him resume painting with renewed assurance. With growing confidence he was able to complete his immense *Grand Decorations* project which, along with the gardens at Giverny, became Monet's greatest legacy to the world.

The Japanese bridge
Le Pont Japonais

1918–24
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5093

In this unfinished painting, the underlying structure of Monet's composition for the series of Japanese bridge paintings is evident. The architecture of the bridge, to which Monet added a pergola in 1905, spans the canvas in a double arc, simultaneously bisecting the canvas and tying it together. Monet counterbalances these dominant horizontal elements with the vertical shaft of the weeping willow at the right edge of the canvas, and with the dense clump of vegetation at the lower left edge. These two details serve to frame and contain the powerful geometry of the bridge. This strong compositional device left Monet free to elaborate the muddled and loose foliage behind the bridge and surrounding pond without dissolving the image's structural unity.

The garden at Giverny
Le Jardin à Giverny

1922–26
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5102

This ebullient and rapidly executed oil sketch records the layering and sequencing of colour Monet so carefully arranged in his flower beds at Giverny, and reveals that he composed the colours and forms in his garden as carefully as those on his canvases. Except for the most rudimentary sketches made in the planning of his compositions, later in life Monet preferred to 'draw' directly on the canvas with paint. In 1914 he wrote, in response to someone wanting to acquire a drawing, 'I find it very difficult to know how to deal with your request, since I never draw except with a brush and paint, and I've always refused requests even from friends to employ a technique I know nothing about'.

Waterlilies
Nymphéas

1917–19
oil on canvas

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5118

This is among the most audacious and peremptory of Monet's paintings. In its speed of execution – closer to drawing than painting – we feel Monet's excitement and his urgency in recording the fugitive effects of light and matter, both in the water and on its surface. Much of the primed white canvas remains bare and each brushstroke is a kind of shorthand conveying the spectrum of refracted colours and movement of rippling water. The huge scale and panoramic composition with which Monet envelops the viewer suggests his ambition to rival the popular dioramas of the late nineteenth century. Monet offers us his entirely subjective response to the sensation of sight, executed without concession to the appearance of the visible world, with almost abstract results.

Claude Monet's corrective glasses

1924
metal, glass

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5187

Monet underwent the removal of a cataract from his right eye in 1922, and again in 1923. He also had a cataract on his left eye, but declined further surgery. This remaining cataract dulled contrasts in his vision and filtered it through a yellow-brown film that screened out violet, blue and green.
Monet complained the world looked too blue with his right eye and too yellow with his left, and had to be stopped from destroying works made before the operations.
These corrective glasses were provided to him after the surgery. The tint of the thick right lens compensated for the excessive blueness that so troubled him, and the left lens was clouded to obscure vision in his left eye while he looked with his right, which meant he could no longer see with both eyes simultaneously. Several more lenses were made by his ophthalmologist and surgeon, Dr Charles Coutela, in an attempt to accommodate Monet's troubled post-operative vision.

Monet’s pipe
clay

Monet’s palette
wood

Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris
Gift of Michel Monet, 1966 inv. 5137, inv. 5188

GENERAL DE PRODUCCIONES Y DISEÑO, Madrid
Spain est. 1990

The Last Day at Giverny
2012
colour DVD, sound, 6 min (looped)

General de Producciones y Diseño, Madrid

The footage for this specially commissioned multimedia installation was filmed in November 2012 on site at Monet’s spectacular garden in Giverny. Viewers will be immersed in the daily beauty of Monet’s garden and his home from sunrise to sunset on the last day of the season.

‘My garden is my most beautiful masterpiece.’

CLAUDE MONET

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