



Claude Monet, "Les 2 Saules", Musée de l'Orangerie

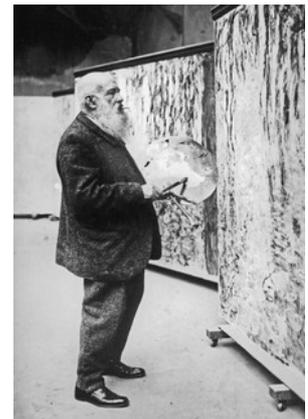
The Water Lilies, an inexhaustible source of inspiration

The Centennial of Claude Monet's Gift To France

by [Gabrielle Thierry](#)¹

Abstract:

Monet's *Water Lilies* might not have revealed all their secrets. One century ago, one day after the Armistice Day, Claude Monet offered to France the *Water Lilies* to participate in the victory. This article tries to better understand how this masterpiece, painted when the soldiers were dying at the front, and then decried, criticized and forgotten for decades, could have inspired so many artists afterward throughout the century. How Clemenceau's eye was essential for the discovery and preservation of these varied compositions of a symphony of light. The latest exhibitions in Paris and United States allow approaching the abstraction born from the music and these landscapes of water. Gabrielle Thierry had the privilege of painting in front of these creations to extract the musical emotion, to make it visible. Here she tackles the question of the inexhaustible inspiration of Monet's waterscapes, through this great hunt for painters, aesthetic researches and universal sensitivities.



Claude Monet in his studio, working on his *Water Lilies*' panels, Giverny

1 This article has been published in french in the new magazine *Revue internationale d'art et d'artologie*, N°2 under the direction of Marc-Mathieu Münch: . The review is available here; <http://effet-de-vie.org/RIAA/riaa-2-2018-dec.pdf> - Gabrielle Thierry is a french artist, working on the links between music, painting and landscapes. The website www.waterliliespaintingmusic.com is dedicated to her series on the Water Lilies

What if Monet's *Water Lilies* still have secrets to be unveiled ? A hundred years ago, Claude Monet offered two of his *Water Lilies* to France, impressionist compositions created at the time of the birth of modern art. Decried, rejected by the critics and all of Paris, shunned by the public, they became national treasures only very recently, having been rediscovered in the early part of the 1950's, and are now so well known and revered today that it is difficult to propose a new interpretation of them.

My artist's eye encountered Monet's *Water Lilies* almost by chance 8 years ago at the Orangerie Museum. Following this experience, I was very lucky indeed to have the incredible opportunity to actually go there over a period of 18 months, one hundred times to paint and interpret them in "[Colored Partitions](#)", using a new musical and colorful language following in the footsteps of the masters of geometric abstraction. Alas, this incredible opportunity didn't lead to a public showing although an exhibit had scheduled in 2012 at the Musée de l'Orangerie.

So, what could possibly link Monet's *Water Lilies*, abstract art, music and... the centennial of The Great War (WWI)?

Between 1895 and the year of his passing in 1926, Claude Monet painted more than 250 *Water Lilies*. Two *Water Lilies* of the [Orangerie Museum](#) were offered to France at the moment of the signing of the armistice on November 11, 1918. *"I am about to finish two decorative panels that I want to sign on the day of the victory, and I come to ask you to offer them to the State on my behalf. It's a small thing but it's the only way I have to take part in the victory"*, he wrote to Georges Clemenceau on November 12th. Clemenceau would order six other panels from the artist and would reserve a special place for these panels at the Orangerie Museum of the Tuileries Garden. Claude Monet designed the oval rooms himself, which would become home to his water landscapes in 1926. The painter would not be there to see them hung, as he did not allow the State to collect his paintings until after his death.

This gift made to France would be much disputed by the critics of the time: a cumbersome gift made to the State, the most ugly gift, a self-parody, a cold work, too pretty, without form, unremarkable, et cetera. It was a thunderous clamor, which masked the few favorable critics. I encourage you to read Romy Golan's book, "[Muralnomad](#)", which very clearly presents this period which was so critical of Monet's gift at the time of the armistice.



In front of "Nuages" at the Musée de l'Orangerie, 2011

Georges Clemenceau would fight to defend Monet's *Water Lilies* against the almost unanimous condemnation of his critics and the indifference of the public. He wanted a public monument to house them. He wrote his book about the *Water Lilies* "by speaking with sincerity of what I have felt, what I have seen, what I have loved, of a great figure who is no longer" ([Plon publisher, 1928](#)) and, in order to make up for the lack of a catalog at the inauguration, he describes these "fairy-like porticos" as "varied compositions of luminous symphony". He quotes the art critic Georges Grappe: "Claude Monet treats the light waves as the musician treats the waves of sound. The two kinds of vibrations respond to each other. Their harmonies obey the same fundamental laws, and two shades of color are juxtaposed in a painting following as rigorous requirements as do two notes in harmony. Even better: the different episodes of a series are linked together as the different parts of a symphony. The pictorial drama develops according to the same principles as the musical drama." I did not know this quote by Georges Grappe before writing these lines, but this is more than coincidental, there is a real musical emotion in these works that transports us. The music of the *Water Lilies* travels across the century discreetly.



Georges Clemenceau at the front.

In 1910, in the United States – a place where French painting has always been welcome - the [Worcester Art Museum](#) (WAM) near Boston was the first to acquire and exhibit a 1908 painting of Monet's *Water Lilies*, bought at the Galerie Durand-Ruel during an exhibit in 1909 of the first *Water Lilies*. I had the privilege to take students there for a lecture on synesthesia, the sound of colors, and to hold a workshop on the music of the first *Water Lilies* acquired in America.

Many artists have been inspired by Monet's waterscapes. In fact, just this year a show at the Musée de l'Orangerie exhibited works of many [American abstract painters](#) inspired by Monet. Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Joan Mitchell, and many others whose works were exhibited in the show have drawn their inspiration from Monet's final *Water Lilies*. These dark, almost violent *Water Lilies* with inflamed and exacerbated tawny, wild, fauve-like colors, were created while the ageing painter was going blind and had lost much of his vision. Through the brushstrokes of these American artists, their *Water Lilies* become lyrical abstractions, impressionistic or expressionist. Everything is in the movement of the paintbrush. The color matters for some. As to forms, they no longer seem to exist.



Philip Guston, 1954, Huile sur toile, 160x 152

Going upstream along the Seine towards the Trocadero, at the Museum of Modern Art of the city of Paris we were very fortunate to see a triptych of [Zao Wou Ki](#), including yet another interpretation of Monet's

Water Lilies. Like me, Zao Wou Ki had seen these works at the Orangery Museum, and was moved by the waterscapes. He decided to create a triptych, producing an interpretation on the *Water Lilies* theme with his own personal style and touch. We find a willow in the shade as a focal point, and a large space of light that evokes peaceful silence...



Zao Woo Ki - Hommage à Claude Monet, 1991, 194×484 cm

But for me, I hear [Schubert's movements](#), Bach's structure, Beethoven's colors and the dark thoughts of [Shostakovich](#). The original *Water Lilies* are not imposing only by their size, but by the sometimes strong and powerful music that emanates from these heavy layers of paint so rich in color.

To the gestural interpretations of the modern American painters and to the critics of the time who sometimes called these paintings empty, informal, and unremarkable, I respond that in Monet's painting there is a complex construction made of multiple forms, arranged as a musical space - geometric, abstract and colored by essence.

At first glance the depth of Claude Monet's painting is not apparent. On closer inspection, one finds a dry, irregular surface made up of stroke upon stroke of paint, laid not with sentimentality, but with a frightening power.

As Claude Monet paints in his workshop, war rages on the battlefield. His battle is clearly on the canvas as he paints the reflections of light on his lily pond. He pushes on with his series started 15 years earlier and enlarges the task. In 1916 Monet has a large workshop built to accommodate his immense panels. One could ask, *why begin such a new and enormous endeavor at this point in time?* The war has already broken out, and Monet is faced with the additional hurdles of age complicated by the onset of blindness that threaten the future. Why now? This work is Monet's answer to the question; this is his powerful testimony to life. He throws himself completely into these panels combining spirit and beauty, with an emotion that he knows is universally shared when in the presence of the wonders of nature. He is alone faced with the dazzling beauty of the world, with the infinite reflections of his pond, within the closed walls of his garden. *"All I did was look at what the universe showed me, bearing witness to it with my brush. Isn't this important? Your error is to want to reduce the world to your own scale, whereas, the more your knowledge of the world increases, the more you will find that your self-knowledge also grows. Put your hand in mine, and let us help each other to better see things,"* he said to Clemenceau.

If I can feel the psychological state of mind of the artist when surrounded on all sides by the conflict of war, it's because for over 15 years, I have put myself in the shoes of the artist [Renefer](#) whose testimony of war, his drawings, were done on the battlefield. If the pencil or the dry point of Renefer seems fluid and free to us, his drawings are a testimony to the life of the men, and his letters are evidence of truth. The same is true for Monet. His *Water Lilies* are a hymn to life and color: the brightness, sumptuousness, richness, and intensity of color in the landscapes are an inexhaustible source of the highest emotions of beauty. How can one explain that these works of art produced during the worst of times are able to generate strong positive and luminous emotion, a "life-like effect" as [M.-M. Münch](#), for whom art is a human science, says it so well. This life-like effect is a criterion of a work of art, of its beauty. A work of art goes far beyond the conceptions of classical beauty such as harmony, equilibrium, truth or imitation of nature.

Do these two artists feel the same worries and the same doubts when they are in front of the canvas or the blank page? What can the artist say to express the conflicts of man? What sort of legacy can one leave behind when faced with the destruction and collapse of the world? Thousands have asked themselves these questions and have tried to find answers. Both Monet and Renefer faced the same concerns, and coincidentally, found themselves in the same location. Monet was living and painting in Giverny. By coincidence, Renefer went to Giverny and Vernon during his leaves during the Great War (WWI) to see his daughter, *Belle Petite Monde*, who attended school in the village. But this is a completely different story.

Let's go back to Paris in 2018. Beyond the Place de la Concorde at the Grand Palais a vast retrospective exhibition of F Kupka was held during the summer. This exhibit shed light on one particular point: with the influence of music, the artist has gone from figurative art to geometric abstraction. One must read his writings about the formal and colorful perception of music, entitled "*La création dans les arts plastiques*", "*Creation in the Visual Arts*" to understand the intimate connection he makes between music and painting.

The painting entitled "*Le Touches de Piano Le Lac*", or *Piano Keys – The Lake*, 1909 is revealing. Kupka demonstrates to us just how much the links between the music and the landscape are real and powerful. He really seems to be at the origin of abstract painting. In this work by Kupka, the music travels through the landscape in colorful waves. The reflections combine with the waves of water, and the vertical theme, so



F.Kupka , Piano Keys – The lake, 1909

dear to Kupka, dominates the colorful rhythm of the painting. My discovery of this painting came very late, while I was working on the third painting in my series of the music of the *Water Lilies*. In Kupka's painting I rediscovered the reflections of Monet, and a strong similarity with my treatment of the musical space of bodies of water. As for me, the initial presence of music in the landscape appeared in 2006 while working on my first painting along the banks of the Seine in Andrésy, located between Paris and Giverny. Reflections of water were already a subject in their own right. This is still the case today with "[Last Reflection of Ophelia](#)" done in 2017 for Holy Cross College in the United States.

If the representation of colored spaces of the music leads to abstraction, it to enable one to better grasp the dimension of time. The dimension of time is an integral part of music. Its representation on the canvas is linked to the space created by the construction of shapes or forms arranged together. It is also related to the viewing experience, the time spent by the viewer in order to assimilate the composition, to absorb the dynamics and to perceive the colored vibrations.

The moment of experiencing a painting is a subject in its own right. It required several decades after Monet painted his *Water Lilies* for people to understand and re-discover them. The painter asked that his canvases be hung on the curved walls of the museum by gluing them in place. Moreover, he insisted that no other artist's works would be allowed to be exhibited in these same rooms. He wanted to give the public the opportunity to fully immerse themselves in these paintings.

One hundred years later, I spent a total of [300 hours in the Musée de l'Orangerie](#), closely examining these canvases, listening to them, and then spent 10 times more in the studio to translate them into my own pictorial expression. The *Water Lilies* appeared very constructed to me, not only in their vertical dimension but also in the movements of the reflections. Based on this structure, my musical composition could now unfold: I positioned the notes and the chords reflecting the dynamics taking place on the body of water; the waves on the water combining with the acoustic waves, and the propagation of sound extending through the surface of the canvas. My paintings now appear as many colored musical scores. These colored musical scores representing Claude Monet's eight *Water Lilies* from the museum were created at the quarter-scale (between 1.50m and 4.20m each). This extensive work has resulted in a length of more than 20 meters of canvas, and dozens of gouaches and sketches.



Last Reflection of Ophelia, the colored musical score
Music, Eric Lebrun, Op.39
©Gabrielle Thierry, 2017 - Oil on canvas, 60x120cm
Iris and G.Gerald Cantor Art Gallery collection
College of the Holy Cross, Mass.



G.Thierry painting in front of "Clear Morning with willows" at the Musée de l'Orangerie, 2011



G.Thierry, *Colored Musical Score of "Clear Morning with Willows"* based on on F. Liszt's *Obermann's Valley*, Oil on canvas, 50x320cm 2011

I naively expected that my series of paintings would be readily accepted and quickly exhibited in France. In spite of all my efforts and energy meeting with critics, and unenthusiastic administrators and curators, the doors remained closed.

It is in the United States, in 2017, in Worcester, Massachusetts (an incredible coincidence and connection to the acquisition of first Monet in the United States) that my series of *Water Lilies* would be exposed for the first time. [The Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Gallery at Holy Cross College](#) orchestrated a festival of synesthesia centered around [the exhibition of my colorful musical scores of *Water Lilies*](#). Iris & B. Gerald Cantor are great collectors of the works of Rodin and their attachment to French art is unwavering. Conferences, Workshops and Concerts were organized to immerse the public in the music of the *Water Lilies*. With my series of paintings, the public has been able to discover the *Water Lilies* from a new perspective, to touch the music of its water landscapes, to listen to the colors, to see the music and to understand the evocative power of synesthesia, the power of abstraction, and the interaction of the senses.



Exposition "The musicality of the *Water Lilies*" - Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Art Gallery, 2017

Music as abstract thought, and landscape-related thought has interested American artists since the beginning of the 20th century. The movement called Synchronism was founded in 1912, shortly after the creation of Kupka's *Piano Keys - The Lake*, at the same time as his fugues and discs of Newton. At the same time, overwhelmed by Monet's *Haystacks*, Kandinsky writes *About Spirituality in Art*, in 1910. He describes a pictorial vocabulary of music, makes colorful compositions and participates in the birth of the *Blue Rider* movement the following year.

Synchronism, the first vanguard of the American abstract movement, was founded in 1912 by S. Macdonald-Wright and M. Russell. They proposed the first music-color analogies and painted the first abstract paintings as early as 1912. Russell and Macdonald-Wright worked in

Paris as early as 1910 to bring painting out of figurative art and create colorful spaces intimately linked to music.

The first “musicalist” American paintings would be exhibited at the Gallery Bernheim-Jeune in 1912-13, a few steps from the Galerie Durand-Ruel exhibiting works of Monet. The place and time coincide! Russell, seeing his works along side those of Delaunay would be faced with their Orphism, discovering similarities. Russell spent the next 40 years in France. Synchronism would be rediscovered very late in the United States. In France, the musicalist movement would be created 20 years later in 1932, then abandoned and quickly forgotten.

The question of abstraction and the relationships between painting and music can be posed in regard to the *Water Lilies* paintings. There are so many instances of places and of time coinciding. There is a great crossover, the back and forth of the perspective of painters, the aesthetic research about understanding the world and our universal sensitivities taking root just before the Great War.

A century of painting, a century of *Water Lilies*, and all the time it takes to comprehend and absorb what is happening on the canvas. The reflections of artists and their achievements on the canvas, their disappointments, and their struggles all seem to have become invisible. Here "*Monet embellishes the field of our sensations of the world and of ourselves*" writes Clemenceau, and that is what makes them mysteriously incomprehensible.

A hundred years of *Water Lilies* and Monet continue to inspire us.



Morgan Russel *Cosmic Synchrony*, 1913-14

