Monet’s Water-Lilied Defense

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Abstract

Claude Monet donated many of his water lily triptych paintings to the French government after WWI, leading critics to theorize that his artistic motivation was a patriotic love for his war-torn homeland. This paper explores other theories on Monet’s motivation to create the works. Drawing from the analysis of art historian Tamar Garb in her paper, “Painterly Plenitude,” I will argue that we should not overlook the significance of the water lily series as Monet’s final work. The painter’s health was deteriorating with his increasing age, and yet his last project was his most ambitious. Applying Garb’s thesis to Monet’s final series, it appears that his fascination with painting water, the association he made between water and death, and Monet’s choice of huge canvases all suggest that the paintings were an intensely personal project, rather than patriotic.

Key Words: Claude, Monet, waterlily, Impressionism, Giverny, Garb, water, death, France, Camille

CLAUDE Monet’s final series of paintings consumed him. His series of water lily paintings, a project that he admitted was “an enormous task, above all at my age,” are now a wonder and a mystery to millions of modern viewers.1 Critics study their colors, brushstrokes, and compositions, speculating if Monet’s motivation was a response to WWI, a fascination with garden design, a result of his failing eyesight, or the expression of a mentality that belongs in the Narcissus myth.2 A different possibility is born in Tamar Garb’s article, “Painterly Plenitude,” in which she constructs a theory that Pierre-Auguste Renoir’s final painting, The Bathers (Figure 1), was an unconscious defense against the aging painter’s oncoming mortality.3 Applying her analysis to Monet’s Agapanthus (Figure 2 &3) and his series of water lily triptychs, a new perspective of Monet’s series is constructed based on his obsession with the appearance of water, his association of water with death, and the shocking scale of his final masterpieces.

Figure 1. The Bathers.

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2 Ibid., 12. An art historian psychoanalyzed the amount of time Claude Monet spent gazing into his pond to paint the water lily triptychs, referring to the Narcissus myth.
3 Tamar Garb, Bodies of Modernity: Figure and Flesh in Fin-de-Siècle France, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1998) 145-77. Garb supports her thesis by analyzing Renoir’s choice of the subject matter and his personal view of women, the size of his canvas for The Bathers, and his painting style.
Water was a subject Monet painted throughout his career, just as Renoir painted and repainted portraits of nude models. Both artists changed their compositions, edited their brushstroke styles, and experimented with applications of color, but they always returned to the subject matter that held their focus. In 1918, Monet explained water's appeal to him as an artist:

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. . . . So many factors, undetectable to the uninitiated eye, transform the coloring and distort the planes of the water.4

Monet painted the wavy horizon of the English Channel from his aunt's house in Sainte-Adresse in 1867; he studied the ripples of light and colors of La Grenouillère in 1869; he experimented with watery reflections at Argenteuil from 1872 to 1878; and he continued to observe and paint water from his youthful days by the sea and its stormy coast to his last days in his Giverny garden in front of his beloved, water lily pond.5

Monet’s fascination with water extended beyond its artistic appeal, as his association of water with death drew the motif into his personal life. “I would like always to be before it or over it, and when I die, to be interred in a buoy,”6 he once told his friend and biographer,

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4 Quoted in Kelly, (see footnote 1), 17. Monet’s words were recorded by François Thiébault-Sisson during a visit he made to the artist’s studio in February 1918.


6 Quoted in Mary Gedo, *Monet and His Muse*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010). Geoffroy was one of the earliest historians of the Impressionist art movement. His observations and correspondence with
Gustave Geoffroy, while they discussed the ocean’s waters. Monet’s 1879 portrait of his deceased wife, *Camille on Her Deathbed* (Figure 4), shows how strongly water was intertwined with Monet’s grieving process as his imagination viewed Camille’s corpse through a veil of water that was not actually there. In the painting, Camille’s fading face is nearly submerged under sharp ripples of soft purples, deep blues, and streaks of reflected yellow light. The brushstrokes and color tones bear strong resemblance to the technique and color palette Monet uses years later, in 1886, to paint the water in *Storm, Coast of Bell-Île* (Figure 5) with similar chaotic brushstrokes, cool tones with a few, jabbing scrapes of yellow and red, as if the purples and blues were creating sparks of warmth from the friction of their juxtaposition.

Some critics explain Monet’s watery depiction of Camille as being his interpretation of a death shroud that may be covering her body, but the theory ignores the consistent difference between Monet’s portrayals of fabric and water. Monet painted cloth as a predictable solid form. In his paintings of Camille in life, he treated her dresses with short, orderly brushstrokes with little variation of color, as seen in *Camille Monet and a Child in the Artist’s Garden in Argenteuil*, 1875 (Figure 6). While the brushstrokes that make up the blue and white dress are still loose and fully defined, the strokes of paint sit neatly beside each other. In Monet’s watery paintings, such as *Agapanthus*, and *Storm, Coast of Bell-Île*, the brushstrokes overlap and collide.
Many art historians and critics noticed Monet’s use of his water-painting technique in Camille’s deathbed portrait. Mary Gedo observes, “For me, the brushstrokes covering Camille’s form resemble a transparent veil of water, as if her body were floating Ophelia-like just beneath the surface of a clear stream.”

Steven Levine notes in a publication that Monet “memorialized the death of Camille with a watery portrait.” while Virginia Spate acknowledges Monet’s subscription to the “age-old association between water and death.”

The psychological association of water with death is present in literature and mythology throughout history, from the Grecian myths of Narcissus to Shakespeare’s drowning Ophelia. Gaston Bachelard, a French philosopher, analyzes the repeated association of water with death in his book, Water and Dreams:

No doubt the image of tears will come to mind a thousand times to explain the sadness of waters. But this parallel is insufficient; I want to conclude by stressing the underlying reasons for marking the substance of water with the sign of its particular form of misfortune. Death is in it . . . Water carries things far away, water passes like the days . . . Water dissolves more completely.

The consistent association of water with death did not wane in Paris, France during the Impressionist Movement. Camille Pissarro, one of Monet’s fellow French impressionists, exhibits this understanding in his book, Social Turpitudes (1890), in the image Suicide. He depicts water as a cleansing death for a prostitute who has flung herself off a bridge to drown in the river below.

Monet’s desire to have his remains encased in a buoy is not out of place in the history of human psychology that created sea burials, wove myths about underworld rivers, and made water a nearly universal, though not exclusive, symbol of death. His decision to paint a subject that he associated with an issue causing him emotional distress is consistent with his decision to paint his deceased wife, Camille. In both situations of strong, painful emotions, Monet turned to painting water to help him process his feelings. He painted a watery portrait of Camille to process his grief for his lost wife and he painted his garden’s water lily pond to process his anxiety about his approaching death.

The strength of the emotion that motivated Monet’s water-lily project is clearly seen in the sheer scale of the canvases Monet chose to paint. At the age of seventy-four, Monet began to paint Clear Morning with Willows, Green Reflections, and Clouds, three water lily triptychs, each with an average size of approximately seven feet by forty-one feet (Figure 7).

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7 Gedo, (see footnote 6), 208.
8 Quoted in ibid., 208.
A year into his projects, he began yet another triptych titled *Agapanthus* (Figure 2) and he worked on all four paintings until 1926 when he was finally physically unable to continue. While larger canvases can mean fewer small details for the artist’s eyes to paint, a canvas of that size is physically taxing. The canvases stood vertically on wooden frames, the top of the paintings two feet above Monet’s head where he had to reach up or stand on a chair to work (Figure 8). The bottom of the paintings sat just above the floor by his feet, forcing him to sit or bend down while he worked and reworked the surface of his paintings, his palette in one hand, brush in the other, and his pipe in his mouth. Monet even had a whole new studio built to house the huge paintings while he worked on them.

Kelly records that in “the summer of 1915 [workers] began to build another studio in [Monet’s] garden at Giverny. Soon completed, it measured twenty-three meters in length, twelve in width, and fifteen in height.” The large space became his second home where Monet spent the last decade of his life. He painted studies in his garden to underpin his indoor work, but the six and a half by six and a half feet canvases used outdoors apparently were not large enough to fully satisfy the burning ambition and emotional need in Monet’s heart and head.

The leading theory about Monet’s motivation for his water lily triptychs overlooks any internal unease Monet may have felt about dying. Many critics are led to believe that Monet’s decision to paint water lilies was in response to the chaos and hardship of war, since Monet began his ambitious project in 1914 when World War I was beginning and both his son and stepson were serving in the army. Monet donated many of his water lily paintings to the government after the war ended, supposedly supporting the theory that these works of art were always intended for the nation. However, Monet’s paintings were a personal project, chosen and executed for his own emotional and artistic needs. His self-interest shows in his subject matter, where he once again chose to paint water, this time from his own beloved garden. Instead of painting symbols of national pride or sacrifice, he painted water lilies -- exotic, African hybrids that he had specially imported for his

Figure 8. Monet in his studio with the water lily paintings.

Kelly (see footnote 1), 18.
Kelly (see footnote 1), 28. Kelly discusses many important events that occurred during Monet’s project, such as his son and step-son’s service.
Japanese-styled garden. There is no sign of France in these paintings. There is only Monet on the canvas, in the subject matter, the paint strokes, and the color choices.

The paintings contain Monet’s feelings of frustration and anxiety about aging, but his struggle is hidden in plain sight among the rapid, swirling brushstrokes of white and pink and the deep green and purple slashes and smudges. His difficulties become more transparent when the layers of paint that coat the canvases of his triptychs are studied. Monet, who was known for finishing his paintings quickly to catch the impression of the view in front of him, revised his four water lily triptychs again and again over the course of twelve years. He was frustrated with his failing eyesight and dissatisfied with his work, writing, “it’s become clear to me that I ruined [the triptychs], that I was incapable of producing anything beautiful. And I have destroyed several of my panels. Today I am nearly blind and I must give up working.”

He did not give up working, however, and received successful treatment for his cataracts in 1923 to 1924. Once he recovered, the revisions of his paintings continued for the next two years. Simon Kelly records that, “Monet’s late practice of reworking is clearly evident in Agapanthus, where the changes are considerable... examination of paint cross-sections has revealed the presence of several layers of pigment.” While there is speculation about how many of the revisions were caused by Monet’s problems with his eyesight, there is the possibility that Monet never intended to stop working on the paintings. From Camille on Her Deathbed, it is clear that Monet found comfort and stability in painting. To have this huge, consuming project waiting for him every night when he went to sleep may have helped him get up the next morning, motivating him despite the aches of old limbs and lost loved ones.

As a defense against age, idleness, and sorrow, Monet threw himself into a massive project, painting the water that challenged and intrigued him. His paintings of water lilies impacted his war-ravaged country, inspired the future American Expressionists, and presented critics with an opportunity to analyze his mental state during the last decade of his life. Despite the water lily triptychs’ years of exposure, critics have overlooked the idea that Monet used his paintings of his garden, his water lilies, and his pond as a defense against mortality. His triptychs, Agapanthus, Clear Morning with Willows, Green Reflections, and Clouds, were arguably his greatest creations and his greatest distractions. With jabbing, streaking brushstrokes and interlocking sweeps of purple, blue, and green, Monet captured the serene, reflective scenes while expending his frustrated energy. Turning to his art in response to life’s losses, Monet sealed his legendary career with a monumental project that continues to challenge critics and calm viewers decades later.

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14 Quoted in Kelly, (see footnote 1), 40. Written in Monet’s letter to Marc Elder in May, 1922 (letter 2494).
15 Ibid., 40. Kelly studied x-radiographs of Agapanthus, which revealed many layers of paint, as Monet painted over many blossoms and removed color accents.