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Exhibition in Focus

RA

Painting the Modern Garden Monet to Matisse

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An Introduction to the Exhibition for Teachers and Students

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For the Learning Department
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Painting the Modern Garden: Monet to Matisse

Main Galleries

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COVER

Cat.139, Claude Monet, *Water Lilies (Agapanthus)*, c.1915–26 (detail)

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'I perhaps owe it to flowers that I became a painter.'

Claude Monet, quoted in René Delange, 'Claude Monet', *L'Illustration*, 1927

Introduction

Across civilisations and throughout history, gardens have provided artists with a rich source of inspiration. But within Europe from the early 1860s to the late 1920s, a phenomenon arose that this landmark exhibition at the Royal Academy seeks to describe: the moment when painters became gardeners, and the emergence of the 'modern garden'. Here for the first time a group of artists sought to portray gardens from life, focusing on their intrinsic form and colour rather than including them only as a background. Painting environments of their own creation led to a remarkable symbiosis between artist and garden, as paintings of their gardens inspired more innovative planting, which led to more imaginative works on canvas, culminating in a glorious, repeating chain of cause and effect, set against a rapidly changing and modernising world.

In the eighteenth century, especially in Britain, the private garden spilled into public parks with a 'picturesque' layout, as planners and landscape architects bestowed the rapidly growing industrial cities with parks and pleasure grounds, democratising public space and creating places where different social classes could mix. Magazines, books and public exhibitions also fed the new enthusiasm for horticulture. Thus, by the time Claude Monet (1840–1926) and his fellow Impressionists began to use gardens as the basis of their strong visual experiments, public gardens had been developed in cities across Europe, and provided rich and colourful motifs for painters. As they explored and took inspiration from this theme, artists such as Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), Gustave Caillebotte (1848–1894) and Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) were able to break new ground and gain a new understanding of nature. After Impressionism, this fascination continued and became international as the next generation of avant-garde artists went on to explore the relationship between nature and artistic experimentation.

While landscapes have always been an important genre in art, they usually reflect a view of nature mostly untouched by human hand. In contrast, gardens are purely man-made spaces, where the order of nature is entirely planned, designed and nurtured. That is an important distinction, as this ground-breaking exhibition at the Royal Academy charts the emergence of the garden as a theme in modern art, and explores in depth how artists from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century related to these spaces, how they used them for new artistic investigation, and how a close, harmonious relationship developed between many artists and their gardens.

Impressionist Gardens

The Impressionists, a group of Paris-based artists, broke away from the conventions of established artistic standards as dictated by official, government-sanctioned exhibitions (or 'salons'). The group, including artists such as Monet, Pissarro and Renoir, turned away from the high finish and realistic attention to detail to which most of their contemporaries aspired, and instead sought to capture on their canvas the 'impression' of an object or scene, its fleeting and sensory effect. Their concern with sensations and how to depict what we perceive was well illustrated in gardens, thanks to the visual explosion provided by trees, flowers, leaves, grass, paths, light, shadows, the changing seasons and varieties of weather. The Impressionists were some of the first artists to leave their studios and paint outside, *en plein air*.

Gardens were a key motif for the Impressionists. They were an ideal place to experiment with sensory displays of colour, form and movement. Also, many of Monet's fellow Impressionists shared his passion for gardening and were inspired to paint gardens as emblematic of the pursuit of modern, middle-class leisure. They were among the first painters to portray gardens observed directly from life, disconnected from the historical, religious or literary themes that were among the approved subjects at the Salon de Paris.

Gardens became immensely popular in the second half of the nineteenth century in Europe, especially in France. While the Industrial Revolution had radically changed the landscape of cities and villages, gardens became places of respite, where people could reconnect with nature in an increasingly urban age. This led to many privately-owned gardens being designed and nurtured by individuals, perhaps based in the 'garden cities' that sprang up along new commuter railway lines. New scientific research and a popular interest in the natural sciences, especially botany and horticulture, further increased the enthusiasm for designing gardens. By the 1870s, many new and exotic varieties of plants and flowers were sold commercially, including foreign species that had been imported and crossbred with native plants to thrive in temperate climates. In turn, the Impressionists were able to devise more colourful and bountiful gardens to paint.

Cat. 29 Gustave Caillebotte's painting *Dahlias: The Garden at Petit-Gennevilliers* is a good example, as it not only portrays the artist's own garden beside the river Seine, his great artistic technique and vibrant use of colour, but also his expert horticultural knowledge. While we can admire Caillebotte's beautiful painting of dahlias in the foreground, we can also see behind them a large greenhouse. Greenhouses had only come into use in botanical institutions, such as Kew Gardens in London, during the early nineteenth century, and later in private gardens, to hybridise and shelter the more fragile plants. Dahlias, as seen in the foreground of the painting, had recently been introduced into gardens in France,

'As soon as Renoir had crossed the threshold of the door [of his studio in Montmartre], he was charmed by the view of the garden which resembled a beautiful abandoned park!'
Georges Rivière, 1921

Cat. 29
Gustave Caillebotte
Dahlias: The Garden at Petit-Gennevilliers, 1893
Oil on canvas,
115.6 × 88.4 cm

Private collection
Photo © Private collection

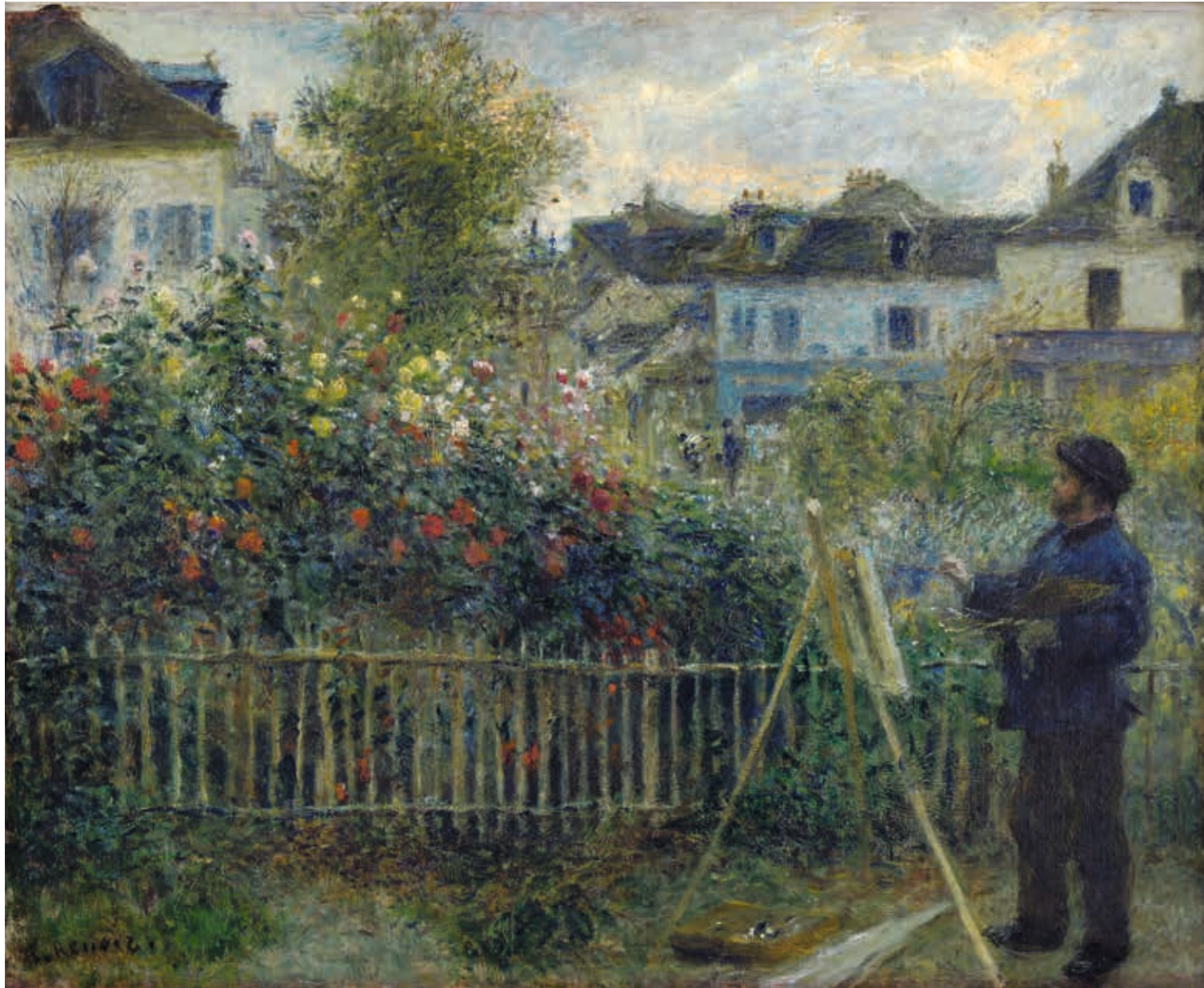


having been imported a few decades earlier from Mexico and Mesoamerica. Using quick brushstrokes, Caillebotte captures the vibrancy of the dark red petals, and contrasts them against the thick, green leaves of the plant. He was known as the 'knowledgeable lover of gardens', and of all the Impressionist group, Caillebotte and Monet shared a vast interest and skills in gardening, around which their strong friendship was centred.

Gardens were often used as an extra room, outdoors, where families could meet and enjoy themselves, entertaining friends and relatives. Many paintings by Monet and Renoir from the 1870s and 1880s show their own gardens populated with people strolling in the lanes, sitting and picnicking on the lawn, reading a

Cat. 2
Pierre-Auguste Renoir
Claude Monet Painting in His Garden at Argenteuil,
1873
Oil on canvas,
46.7 × 59.7 cm

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art,
Hartford, CT. Bequest of Anne Parrish
Titzell, inv. 1957.614
Photo © Wadsworth Atheneum
Museum of Art, Hartford, CT



book or playing with children. As secluded and intimate spaces, gardens also lent themselves to being artistic laboratories. Artists could put down their own roots in a garden and plant whatever inspired them to sketch and paint.

Among the Impressionists, Monet, Caillebotte and Pissarro were especially active gardeners. They devoted considerable time and effort to planning their gardens, raising their own seeds and planting out in order to create their own artistic vision, which they could then enjoy painting as often as they liked. In a way, each garden can be seen as the artist's own 'garden self-portrait'. Pissarro's kitchen garden, for example, was largely a vegetable patch, functionally providing herbs, fruit and vegetables for his own consumption. Whereas, Monet and Caillebotte created a different aesthetic by filling their gardens with flowers, climbers and trees. In fact, Monet selected his plants and trees by colour, shape and height, arranging them in such a way as to ensure continuous blooming throughout the year.

Cat. 2 In Renoir's *Claude Monet Painting in His Garden at Argenteuil*, we can see Monet early on in his career, working outside in his garden. The masses of flowers he is painting, perhaps vast dahlia plants (specifically the giant *Dahlia imperialis* and the red *Dahlia juarezii*) colourfully punctuate the scene. In the background, typically large suburban houses obscure the horizon. Monet is depicted in front of a fence at the end of a narrow path, as if he has chosen to paint in a secluded part of the garden. Pausing in front of his easel – a palette held in the crook of his left arm, a brush poised in his right hand – Monet seems wholly absorbed in his own act of painting. Monet's captivation is highlighted by Renoir's fluid technique in a painting which makes apparent the friendship that united the two men, which was rooted not only in their painting experiments and techniques but also in their shared love of gardens. Ultimately, this work can be seen as an ode to garden painting and Impressionism.

How has Caillebotte used colour, light and shadow to suggest mood in the depiction of his garden?

Would you describe Renoir's painting as a portrait of the artist Claude Monet, or as a garden painting? Explain your answer.

International Gardens

By the end of the nineteenth century, gardens had become a common motif for artists to explore. Many had come to study in Paris and discovered the Impressionists' use of landscape and gardens as they toured the French countryside and the Parisian suburbs. Others built on long-established national traditions of painting outdoors, as was the case in Italy, particularly in Naples. The need for artists to create a haven away from busy life caused many painters to

leave the city, especially during the summer months, and seek inspiration from painting *en plein air* in gardens. Yet, the era's fascination with gardens was not confined to Impressionism. Internationally, various artistic depictions of gardens emerged across the United States, Britain and continental Europe, often large in scale with bold, fluent brushwork.

John Singer Sargent (1856–1925) was an American painter, perhaps best known for his portraits, who came into close contact with artist gardens when, in 1885, he visited his good friend Monet at Giverny. Monet convinced Sargent to explore the atmosphere and light of the outdoors in his work. Sargent painted entirely outside during the late summer of both 1885 and 1886, catching the delicate twilight glow of day fading into evening. Indeed, some of his most famous paintings, including *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, and *Garden Study of the Vickers Children*, (cat. 36) are a culmination of this period. Monet received many visitors at Giverny, including other artists such as Paul Cézanne, Pierre Bonnard and Henri Matisse, as well as critics and art dealers. Many of the artists who visited were avid gardeners, and made the journey to Giverny to examine Monet's paintings but also to discuss horticulture.

Outside France, the garden trend continued. In Germany, the artist Max Liebermann (1847–1935) collected many works by the Impressionists, and was greatly influenced by them. In his large property on the shore of the Wannsee Lake, southwest of Berlin, he produced over 200 paintings of his garden (including *Flower Terrace in the Garden, Wannsee*, 1915, cat. 56, and *The Artist's Granddaughter with Her Governess in the Wannsee Garden*, 1923, cat. 57). Unlike the wilder gardens of other artist-gardeners, which reflected the fleeting effects of nature, Liebermann's garden was built in a rigorously geometric layout that gave the impression of rooms extending from the house, in keeping with contemporary ideas in German garden design. In his paintings, he attempted to represent the deep personal feelings inspired by nature. In painting vast vistas from his front terrace, he used contrasting colours to express human emotions: a darker palette and a more serious mood can be seen in his works from the 1920s onwards, when Germany was living under the difficult circumstances that would give rise to the horrors of Nazism.

Cat. 52 The Spanish artist Joaquín Sorolla (1863–1923) became well established in the USA after a successful solo show in New York in 1909. This enabled him to purchase a plot of land in Madrid where he planned his garden in minute detail, always mindful of plant proximities and contrasts. By the time his house was complete, each room opened onto and was linked to his Moorish-inspired garden. Spain had a strong tradition of preserving artistic and historic gardens, which Sorolla visited in Valencia, Seville and Granada, home of the Alhambra palace. This gave him an endless source of motifs, plus an escape from having to paint commissioned portraits. *Garden of the Sorolla House*,

'If you want to know what an Impressionist tries for, go out of doors and look at the landscape with the sun in your eyes [...] it takes years to be able to notice this accurately enough for painting purposes [...] it has the effect of coming across a picture that looks like nature and gives the sense of living – for these reasons Monet bowled me over!'

John Singer Sargent, extract from a letter to Fredreck Jameson, 1911–12

'As far as outdoor work is concerned, a studio is only a garage; a place in which to store pictures and repair them, never a place in which to paint them!'

Joaquín Sorolla

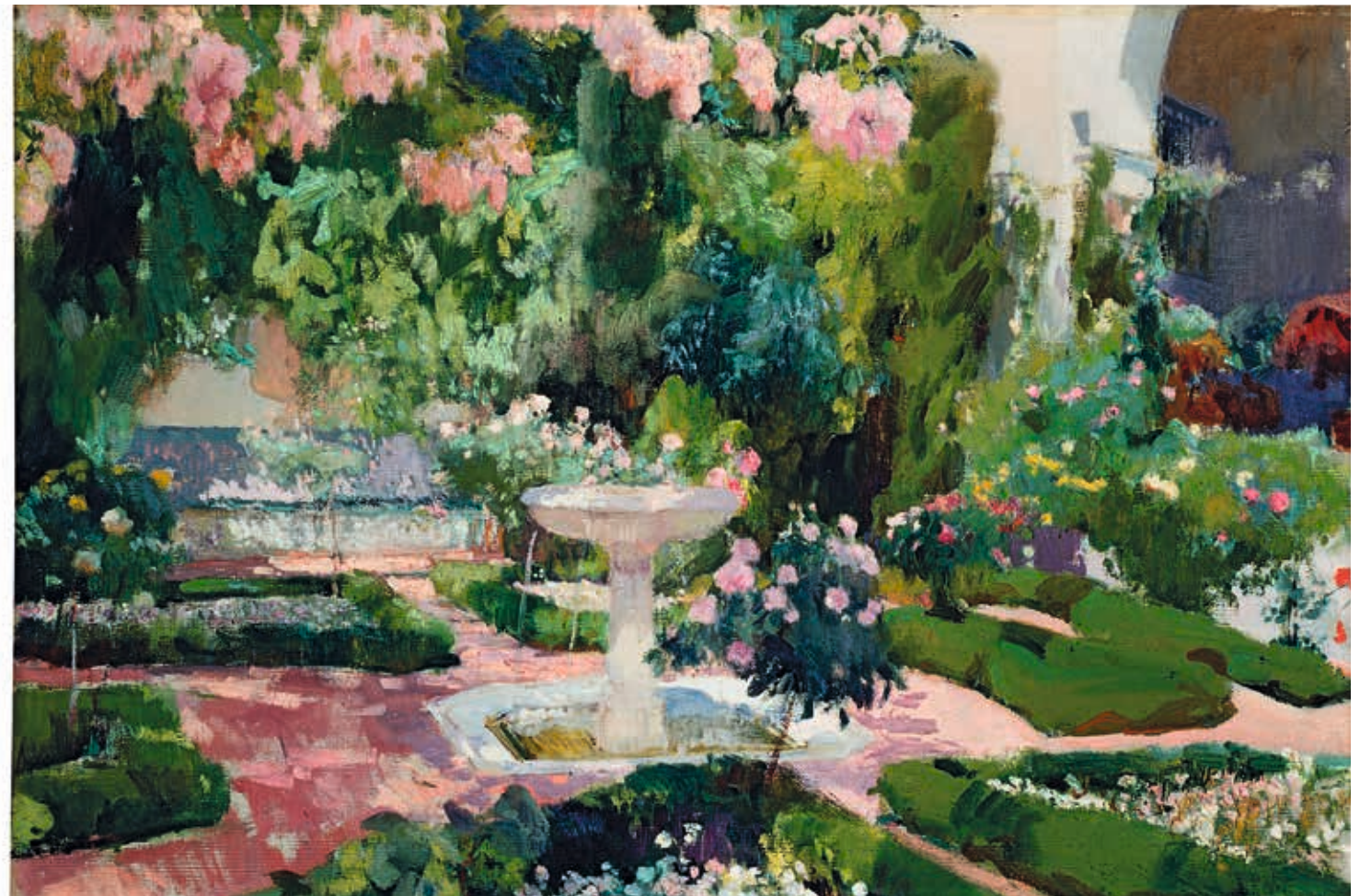
Cat. 52

Joaquín Sorolla
Garden of the Sorolla House, 1918–19
Oil on canvas,
64 × 95 cm

Museo Sorolla, Madrid, inv. 01232
Photo © Museo Sorolla

1918–19, provides an exquisite depiction of his sunny garden, its pink blooms picked out against lush green foliage and reflected in the salmon-coloured terracotta tiles. The large pink flowers bowing down from the top-left corner of the canvas are echoed in the smaller peach-coloured blossoms by the fountain. The lusciously abundant garden, with its flowing water fountain and shaded flowerbeds, seems to provide some respite from the heat of the day, so clearly evident at the top right of the painting where the walls are almost whitewashed with bright light. Tall walls and trees seem to enclose the garden, protecting it from the bustle of life beyond them: we can almost hear the trickle of water in the fountain and feel the coolness of the shade.

How does Sorolla evoke a sense of location and climate in his paintings?



Monet's Early Years at Giverny

In 1883, Monet set up home in 'Le Pressoir', a long pink house in the village of Giverny, 50 miles northwest of Paris. He was already known as the leader of the Impressionists, one of the most important painters of gardens in the history of art, and as an avid horticulturist who cultivated gardens wherever he lived. In Giverny, Monet masterfully created a beautiful garden, scenes of which were to become some of the most recognisable in his paintings. He himself said the Giverny garden was his 'most beautiful work of art'. Gardens and nature had always been a tremendous inspiration for Monet, but his enthusiasm for the garden in Giverny was unparalleled.

Between 1890 and 1896, Monet worked hard at devising his new garden with an artist's eye. Flowerbeds were densely planted with colourful flowers, climbing roses cascaded over arched structures that punctuated a central path leading through crowded squares of planting. In 1901, the journalist Arsène Alexandre said after visiting the garden, 'In Giverny there is no respite from the flowers. Wherever you turn, they are at your feet, over your head, growing to chest height, lakes, garlands, hedges of flowers whose harmonies are at once improvised and calculated, and renewed as season follows season.' At Giverny, Monet introduced greenhouses, and commissioned a new studio so he could work outdoors during rainy or colder weather.

'Apart from painting and gardening, I'm no good at anything.'

Claude Monet, quoted in Maurice Kahn, 'Le Jardin de Claude Monet', in *Le Temps*, 1904

Fig. 1

J. Minot after J. Guillerat, *Nymphæa Chromolithograph* from G. Nicholson, *Dictionnaire pratique d'horticulture et de jardinage*, vol. 3, 1895–96, f. p. 492, plate 41.

Private collection
Image courtesy La Librairie Grandchamps



'[The water lilies] were rich and [have] more subtle shades of colour; there are pink, yellow and white flowers. A small wooden bridge, painted green, spans the pond. All around the pond, water irises. In the background, azaleas, tamarisks and a weeping willow.'

Maurice Kahn, 'Le Jardin de Claude Monet', in *Le Temps*, 1904

In 1893, Monet expanded his original garden to include a plot of land with a small river running through it. This enabled him to create his famous water garden, with a pond spanned by a lightly arched, Japanese-style bridge, now instantly familiar as one of the main features at Giverny. The pond was further enlarged in 1901 and again in 1904, effectively tripling the size of the water garden. Monet planted beautiful water lilies (*les nymphéas*), which became a key theme of his work over the next 30 years. The banks of the pond were planted with weeping willows, bamboo and a profusion of irises.

We know from Monet's journals that he was a keen gardener and horticulturist. He kept up-to-date with the latest horticultural research and techniques by subscribing to specialist magazines. His partner, Alice, and children assisted him in the early days of the garden, but after 1890 he employed a team of six full-time gardeners, led by Félix Breuil, to help him realise his vision. Monet liked to visit flower shows and exhibitions. In fact, he probably had the idea for his water-lily pond at the 1889 International Exhibition, where a well-known nursery had been awarded prizes for its colourful water lilies. A horticultural print of the water lily (**fig. 1**) reveals how colourful and shapely these flowers are. Usually yellow or white with pointed, colourful petals, these lilies were an ideal motif for an artist. Monet also planted hybrid species of red and pink water lilies that had been newly cultivated by specialist growers. He was also fond of irises and peonies, both of which originated in Japan (in late nineteenth-century France the fashion for all things Japanese, included wood-block prints and ceramics, was prevalent).

Monet's depictions on canvas of his meticulously planned garden, flowerbeds and pond are astonishing. Flowers are realised in beautiful dabs of colour and light that lead one's eye around the canvas, while the surface of water in the pond often becomes the entire composition of some paintings. By creating his garden, Monet devised the kind of landscape he wanted to paint, while moving away from his Impressionist experiments. No longer simply interested in the effect of light or movement on the landscape, he tried to capture the vibrancy of the flowers and the natural elements of the garden as well as the meditative reverie they could arouse. It is as if he used the garden as his own emotional space in which to experiment with and contemplate painting.

Cat. 100 Around the turn of the century, we see a new departure in Monet's work, in his series of water landscapes and water-lily paintings. His technique changes – from the quick brushstrokes of the Impressionist years, he moves on to using more complex layers of paint, gradually building up the colours to produce a colourful and dream-like glaze. This can be seen perfectly in the *The Pond with Water Lilies, Harmony in Green*. In this painting, Monet's famous Japanese bridge arches elegantly over a languid suggestion of water interspersed with horizontal bands of colourful lilies. Drawing our gaze into the background, a majestic weeping willow and other large trees reflect the warm, almost meditative, sunlight. The scene is calm, yet the colourful and vibrant brushstrokes seem to evoke the

sound of flowing water, the rustle of leaves, the smell of fragrant air, inviting viewers to bask in this extraordinary depiction of the pond. The canvas is a fine example of Monet's distillation of atmosphere with its all-embracing *enveloppe* of air, unseen but nonetheless there.

How, if at all, does Monet differentiate between land and sky in this depiction of the water-lily pond?

How does the Japanese bridge create structure within the painting?

Describe the colour palette used by Monet in this painting.

'These waterscapes and reflections have become an obsession. They are beyond my old man's powers, yet I want to succeed [in describing] what I feel!'

Claude Monet, in a letter to his friend the critic Gustave Geffroy, 1908

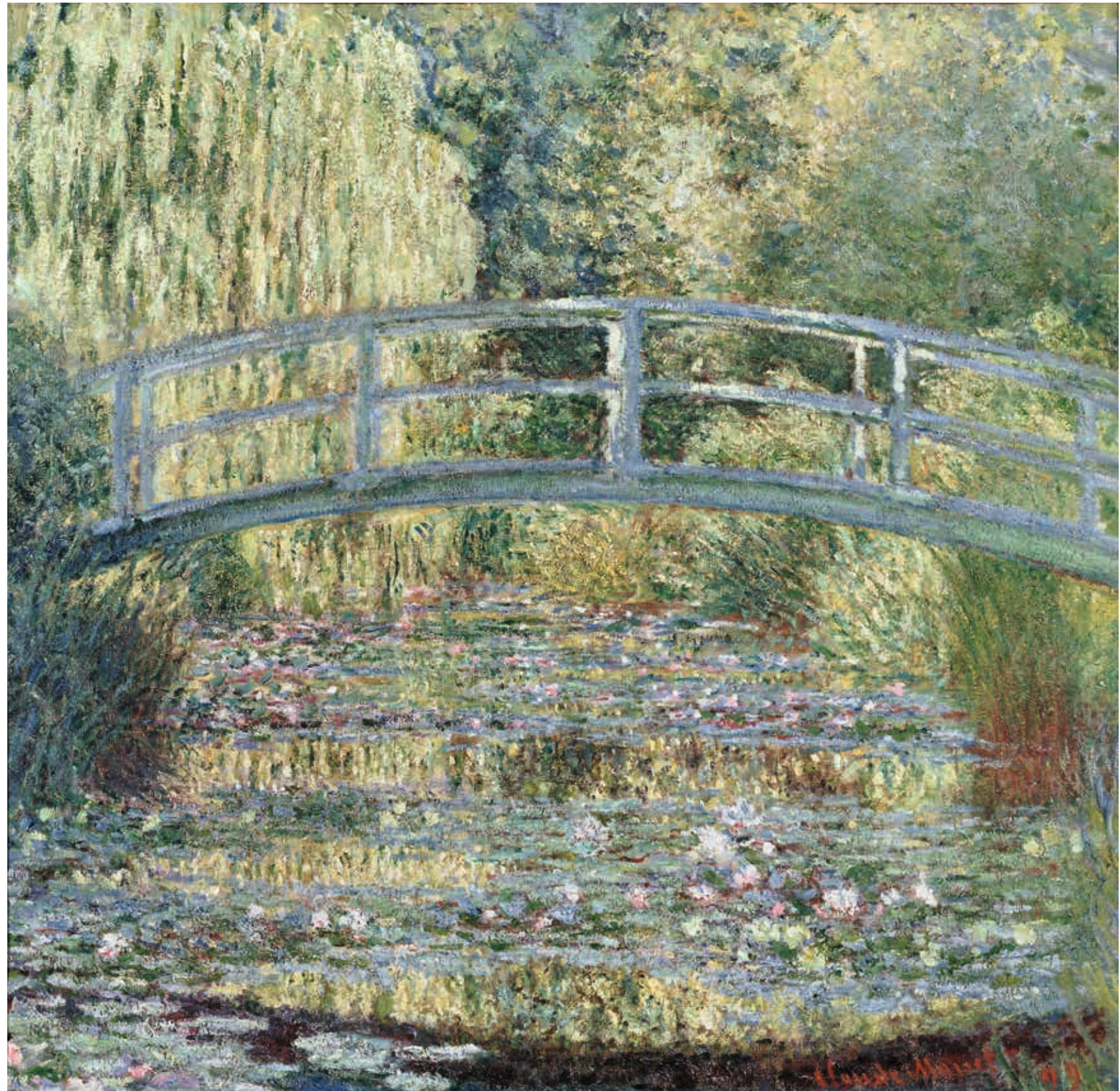
Cat. 100

Claude Monet

The Pond with Water Lilies, Harmony in Green, 1899

Oil on canvas,
89 × 93.5 cm

Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Bequest of Comte Isaac de Camondo, 1911, inv. RF 2004
Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (musée d'Orsay) / Hervé Lewandowski



Gardens of Silence

This group of paintings from the turn of the century describe a more solemn and mysterious mood. Having moved away from the more usual depiction of gardens as gentle, enclosed human spaces, the works on show in this exhibition create a timeless embodiment of the natural world. At the end of the nineteenth century, gardens were steeped in fantasy and nostalgia, places where an artist could project their imagination. Both the Spanish painter Santiago Rusiñol (1861–1931) and the French artist Henri Le Sidaner (1862–1939) explored the timeless characteristic of gardens, seeking to expand and enrich the subject.

After Le Sidaner settled in Gerberoy, France, in 1900, his house and garden provided constant inspiration. Like Monet, he transformed its original orchard into

Cat. 83

Santiago Rusiñol
Glorieta VII, Aranjuez,
1919

Oil on canvas,
119.5 × 149.5 cm

Fundación María José Jove, 2007, La
Coruña, inv. 527/07
Photo © Colección Fundación María
José Jove



a well-ordered garden, known as the 'white garden'. It had a small rectangular lawn with a gravel path and a centrepiece of flowers, which he painted at least 80 times (cat. 73 and 74). He also designed a magnificent rose garden (cat. 75), which in time produced cascades of fragrant blooms. The poet Camille Mauclair even described it as 'an orgy of roses'. Le Sidaner used a bright palette for flowers and foliage, often in contrast to the more sombre tones he used for man-made elements such as houses, chairs and tables. The overall darker feel this gave to his work conjures up a sense of silence and melancholy, in which a human presence is only hinted at through an illuminated window or a dressed table. In this respect, the gardens in Le Sidaner's paintings appear eternal. Barely disturbed by people, they seem to speak to the more permanent dominance of nature.

Cat. 83 Rusiñol's gardens tell a different story. Also devoid of people, but painted in brighter tones and with a more precise focus, they recall the glory of Spain's *ancien régime*. In 1898, Rusiñol travelled extensively throughout Spain, visiting the secluded gardens of Andalusia and especially the Alhambra. Painting these crumbling properties of Spain's poignant past, possibly to illustrate Spain's decline following the Spanish-American War of 1898, became his life's work. In *Glorieta VII, Aranjuez*, the vista is clearly divided between the darker foreground and the incredible fiery light of the background. Depicting a fraction of the once glorious garden of the Royal Estate of the Crown of Spain, this painting reflects the garden's imposing geometry with neat rose bushes arranged around the tall central tree that first snags our gaze. This formal landscaped garden embodied the grandeur of the Spanish Crown, who from the middle of the nineteenth century used Aranjuez as a spring residence. Impeding our view is a stand of cypress trees, pruned to create a small forest cut through with darkly intriguing walkways. Beyond that, the luminescent autumnal colours of tall trees set the whole painting alight. This powerful depiction of nature so flamboyantly evoked creates a mysterious atmosphere that celebrates the autumnal season and the southern light of Spain.

Has Rusiñol succeeded in evoking a garden that synthesises past and present? If so, how has he achieved that?

Avant-gardens

Following the Impressionist period, the early decades of the twentieth century were rich in artistic experimentation and new art movements. Cubism, Fauvism, Expressionism and Futurism all emerged in the 1900s and 1910s. As already established, gardens provided a perfect opportunity for artists to connect with nature, as well as a peaceful and fruitful refuge in which to create. Just as Monet and the Impressionists had done, avant-garde artists of the twentieth century also

found a source of inspiration in nature and gardens. In fact, they were keenly aware of the historical depiction of gardens in art and literature. However, in addition, they wanted to connect with nature as an organic force capable of growing and regenerating itself. Together, their interest in gardening and painting gardens helped to forge the path of new Modernist art.

First, it must be noted that artists such as Henri Matisse (1869–1954), Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), Emil Nolde (1867–1956) and Paul Klee (1879–1940) were all keen and knowledgeable gardeners. Matisse received many illustrated horticultural magazines and ordered seeds, which he grew in his greenhouse and later transferred to his garden at Issy-les-Moulineaux. While living together in Murnau in Germany, pioneering painters Kandinsky and Gabriele Münter (1877–1962) tended their garden avidly, as the many letters between them testify, with Münter specifically requesting updates from Kandinsky about flowers coming into bloom. Throughout his life, Nolde cultivated gardens which greatly inspired his work. As for Klee, his passion for gardening is revealed in this quote taken from a letter he wrote in 1905: 'My mind is clearest and freshest and I often experience the most captivating moods, even moments of great joy, when I am tending plants in my garden.'

For all these artists, the act of gardening was not only immensely pleasurable, it also expanded their creative pursuits. Kandinsky and Münter's garden provided them with metaphorical motifs for their paintings. In the mid-1900s, for example, they each used sunflowers in their works to embody the sun and the power of life. Indeed, Kandinsky's garden paintings became stepping-stones along his path to abstraction.

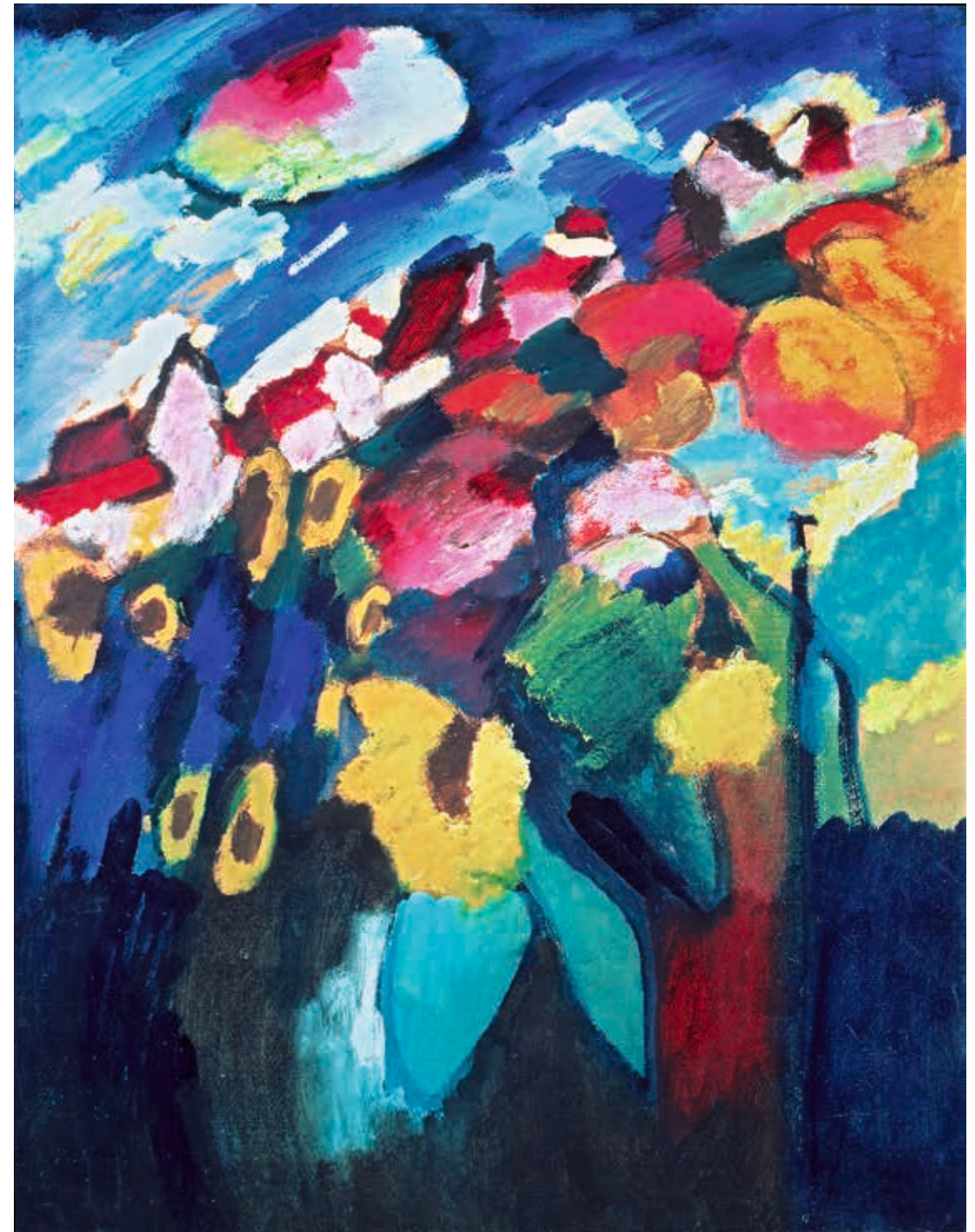
Cat. 118 Kandinsky, who was interested in the metaphysical forces of nature, used motifs and shapes from the garden to experiment with abstraction. In his tumultuous painting *Murnau Garden II*, the vivid sunflowers in the foreground contrast sharply with the darker blue background and the overall heightened and frenetic sense of colour. In this painting, we can observe Kandinsky's move into abstraction, where the colourful and shapely forms are quite difficult to recognise and the earth and the sky seem to merge. Similarly, Klee was inspired by the abstract concepts observed in plant structures, genesis and metamorphosis. For him, the experience of gardening itself stimulated his range of imagery. He went further than being interested in the representation of plants, he wanted to 'feel like a plant' and experience the phenomenon of natural growth and transformation. In a lecture he delivered in 1924, he went so far as to compare the creative artist to a tree, where both have 'creative juices' flowing from the roots up through the trunk to the artist's eye.

In 1912, Matisse also experimented with the more spiritual aspect of garden painting after obtaining permission to paint in the private grounds of Villa Brooks in Tangier, Morocco, which was a 'revelation' to him. He wrote, 'The voyage to Morocco [...] helped me make contact with nature again better than did the

'They are such calm and beautiful hours when one sits or moves about between the fragrant and blossoming flowers; I really wish to give my pictures something of this beauty and I myself have this feeling – the first beautiful happiness.'
Emil Nolde, 1908

Cat. 118
Wassily Kandinsky
Murnau Garden II, 1910
Oil on cardboard,
67 × 51 cm

Merzbacher Kunststiftung
Photo © Merzbacher Kunststiftung





application of the theory of Fauvism which was lively, but had become somewhat limiting.'

These avant-garde artists confidently experimented with bursts of colour in their gardens. The Impressionists had used gardens and plants to depict the effects of light and shadow, and experimented with the application of complementary colours, but these new avant-garde artists went further in trying to use the very colour of plants as the basis of their works. We know that the Fauves and especially Matisse were interested in using the force of pure colours to build their compositions, and applied paint directly from the tube, often without first mixing it on a palette. Matisse recalled his use of gardens and plants as a key element in his search for perfect colour when he wrote, 'The intensity of these colours [the rich hues from his garden], that texture is unattainable. Sometimes I put flowers right alongside my paintings and how poor and dull all my colours

Cat. 112
Emil Nolde
Large Poppies, 1908
Oil on canvas,
73 × 87.7 cm

Leopold-Hoesch-Museum &
Papiermuseum, Düren, inv. 1950/758
Photo © Leopold-Hoesch-Museum &
Papier museum Düren
© Nolde Stiftung Seebüll

'From there the artist – who is the trunk of the tree – receives the sap that flows through him and through his eye. Under the pressure of this mighty flow, he transmits what he has seen to his work. His work then is like the crown of the tree, spreading in time and space for all to see!'

Paul Klee, 1924

'This [the garden] is my favourite place to be. Isn't that flowerbed more beautiful than the finest antique Persian rug?'

Henri Matisse, 1911

seem.' Equally, Nolde recalled that, 'The colour of the flowers drew me magnetically to them [...], the blossoming colours of the flowers and the purity of these colours; I loved them so very much.' In another letter, Nolde wrote, 'The flowers in the garden [...] greet me jubilantly with their pure and beautiful colours.' The colour of flowers and plants, which the artists tried to capture and use as inspiration for their own art, illustrate both Matisse's Fauve and Nolde's German Expressionist periods. In his *Large Poppies*, (cat. 112) Nolde shows how the search for and use of pure colour helped him compose his paintings. By thickly applying the complementary colours red and green in the central part of the painting, Nolde creates a striking visual effect. Similarly, the vivid yellow brushstrokes used around the poppies burst like fireworks against the darker and cooler areas of the canvas, in a luxuriant feast of colour.

Can you see how both Nolde and Kandinsky have used 'pure' colour in their paintings? How has it been applied?

Gardens of Reverie

As enclosed spaces, gardens were used by some artists to depict enchantment and reverie. Picturing gardens as a semi-magical place, Jean-Édouard Vuillard (1868–1940), Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947) and Maurice Denis (1870–1943) sought to enhance the dream-like quality of their gardens. Throughout his career, Vuillard explored natural space to convey reverie. He collaborated with Paul Fort and his Théâtre d'Art to produce sets for plays that bestowed a 'synaesthetic' experience on audiences. Synaesthesia – a condition whereby a sensation in one of the senses, such as hearing, triggers a sensation in another, such as taste – linked perfectly to Vuillard's garden backdrops. When Vuillard's human figures, often women, do appear, they seem pensive, absorbed in their own thoughts, as seen in the pair of decorative panels, *Woman Reading on a Bench* and *Woman Seated in an Armchair* (cat. 77 and 78). Their young and graceful silhouettes accentuate their communion with nature and echo the fertility of the garden. In contrast to Pissarro's everyday vegetable gardens, Vuillard's gardens offer an oasis of dreams and possibility. Similarly, Denis depicts fecund gardens tinted with mystery and charm. The virginal women in *Orchard of the Wise Virgins* (cat. 69), while seated in a group, all seem absorbed by their own thoughts.

Cat. 143 Bonnard, also a keen gardener, had a country villa at Vernonnet on the Seine, just three or four miles from Giverny. He often visited Monet and had been dazzled by his *Water Lilies* series. Even so, Bonnard preferred his own more natural and relaxed garden arrangements to the organised environments of Giverny, and often portrayed the calm, peaceful life of his summer retreat at Vernonnet. Bonnard enjoyed painting people reading, dozing or daydreaming. In

Resting in the Garden, a contemplative woman (his wife Marthe) lies alone, apart from a cat, in a state of reverie. Reclining gracefully, her arm wrapped around her head, her eyes half shut, she is either dozing off or retreating into her own dream world. We can almost experience the pleasant sensation of a body relaxing, the warmth of summer, the wafting scents of the garden, the vibrant vista and the fertile fields in the background. Bonnard's brushstrokes and colours in this painting, and in other garden works, are intensely peaceful, as if he were musing with his brush, himself retreating into his own artistic reverie.

Why do you think gardens lend themselves so well to mystery and reverie?

Monet's Later Years at Giverny

In 1914, Monet built a bigger studio in Giverny, to accommodate larger canvases. The series of work he then produced, known as the *Grandes Décorations* (because the works were monumentally big, often measuring more than 2 x 4 metres) would change the way he approached painting. From this time until his death, he mostly painted his water-lily pond, the water, the

Cat. 143

Pierre Bonnard
Resting in the Garden,
1914

Oil on canvas,
100.5 x 249 cm

Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo. Gift 1931 from the Friends of the National Gallery, Oslo. Bought by the collector Walther Halvorsen, 1920, from Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, inv. NGM.01643
Photo © Nasjonalmuseet for kunst, arkitektur og design/The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design / © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2016

sky and the Japanese bridge at Giverny. These permanent yet ever-changing subjects allowed him to explore painting as a meditative process rather than as an impression or a reflection of colour, plants, water and light. This was a radical change for Monet, and has often been categorised as his move towards abstract art. These paintings contain no traditional structure or focal point. As the curator Ann Dumas writes, 'swirls, dabs and trails of paint no longer described plants, water, sky and reflections, but assumed a virtually abstract life of their own.'

In 1914, as the German troops approached Paris from the north at the beginning of World War I, Monet had just started work on his *Grandes Décorations* and even though he could hear the sound of cannons and battle from his garden he refused to leave Giverny. Earlier that year, his eldest son Jean had died after a long illness. His other son Michel and stepson Jean-Pierre were both called up and deployed to the front. Monet rarely heard from them, and as news of the casualties increased dramatically every day, he was often in a state of anxiety. Monet became more patriotic during the war, providing local help to the Giverny hospital and taking part in benefits and events to boost morale. In December 1914, he wrote, 'Yesterday I resumed work [...]. It's the best



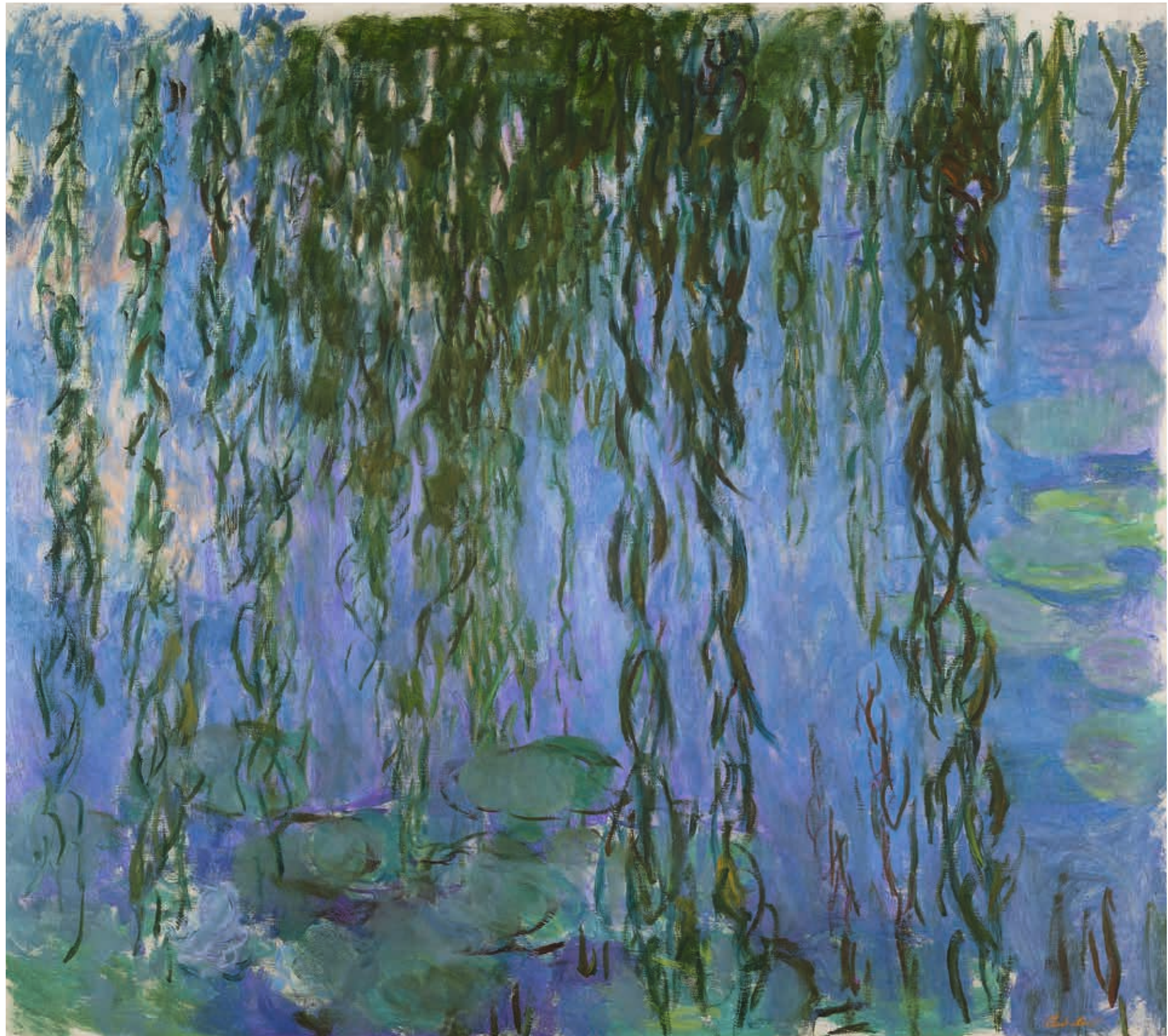
Cat. 131
Claude Monet
Water Lilies with
Weeping Willows,
1916–19

Oil on canvas,
160 × 180 cm

Lycée Claude Monet, Paris
Photo © Lycée Claude Monet, Paris.
Photography: Jean-Charles Louiset

‘The water-flowers [...] are the accompaniment. The essence of the motif is the mirror of water, whose appearance alters at every moment. [...] One needs to have five or six canvases that one is working on at the same time, and to pass from one to the next, and hastily back to the first as soon as the original, interrupted effect has returned.’

Claude Monet quoted in
John House, *Monet*, 1981



way to avoid thinking of these sad times. All the same, I feel ashamed to think about my little researches into form and colour while so many people are suffering and dying for us.' Darker nuances inhabit his work during this period: his colour harmonies look gloomy, possibly expressing his fears for the future of the human race. In 1916, he painted a series of works focused on the weeping willows by his pond. Filling the canvas with the pendulous swathes of these traditional symbols of mourning was his most explicit response to the war. *Water Lilies with Weeping Willows* (cat. 131), painted between 1916 and 1919, is consumed by a downward dynamic created by the long, sorrowful branches that rest gently on the surface of the pond. Still, painting provided a refuge for Monet. It helped to restore some sense and harmony to his world, and the permanence of the Giverny garden gave him much comfort.

After the end of World War I in 1918, Monet wrote to his friend Georges Clemenceau, then Prime Minister of France, proposing to donate twelve paintings to the French state to 'honour the victory and peace'. They were to be installed in

'Looking at it, you thought of infinity; you were able to discern in it, as in a microcosm, the presence of the elements and the instability of a universe that changes constantly under our very eyes.'

Roger Marx, 'Claude Monet's Water Lilies', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1909

Cat. 139
Claude Monet
Water Lilies
(*Agapanthus*),
c.1915–26

Oil on canvas,
201.3 × 425.8 cm

The Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund and an anonymous gift, inv. 1960.81
Photo © The Cleveland Museum of Art

a building constructed specifically to house the panoramic canvases and after a few aborted plans, the paintings were finally exhibited in the curved galleries of Musée de l'Orangerie in the Tuileries Gardens near the Louvre, where they still are today.

Early in the 1920s, Monet underwent cataract surgery. Art historians have suggested that prior to this the cataracts would have severely limited his colour discrimination, which may explain the muddied tone of his later paintings, which in essence became progressively more red and brownish (cat. 135 and 136). After the operation, he would have been able to see more ultraviolet light and deep into the blues, which could account for the overall purple tones of some of his last works. This is especially true of his *Water Lilies* (*Agapanthus*), (cat. 139) at the Cleveland Museum of Art, where the dark blue-green colour of the expansive water merges into glorious tones of magenta and lilac.

Towards the end of this life, Monet became more reclusive and only invited a select few to see his *Grandes Décorations*. That included Vuillard, Matisse and



Bonnard, but also a few photographers who were able to capture Monet at work. They also recorded Monet's garden and studio, which has given us an intimate insight into his garden and painting practices. Henri Manuel's photograph of the artist in front of one of his large canvases of the water-lily pond (**fig. 2**) shows the huge scale of both the artwork and the studio itself. We can appreciate how physical the act of painting would have been for Monet, who by this time was in his eighties, and the effort required to manoeuvre such enormous canvases. Perhaps this is what prompted him to envision more abstract compositions and to use bolder shapes and forms. As John House writes, 'The water-lily decorations dispense almost completely with the conventional ingredients of painting. They have no clear compositional focus; seem as if they could be continued indefinitely beyond their margins. [...] Within this broad framework, Monet extended the vocabulary of naturalism in painting, by freeing colour, brushwork and composition from many outworn conventions, and using them to create a new sort of pictorial coherence.'

Conclusion

Looking at Monet's final paintings of his garden at Giverny, it is easy to get lost in the sensual pleasure of colour and form, and forget how revolutionary they were at the time. Exploring extreme close-ups in a contrastingly expansive format was radical in the extreme, and these images are inextricably linked to Monet's experiments with the planting of his water garden, the hybrid species of water lilies which he cultivated, then sought to depict in new and dramatic ways (no trace of the pond's bank is visible in the exhibition's final water lilies triptych, just swirls of coloured light realised in thick, heavily scumbled paint). And while Monet is undoubtedly the consummate master of garden painting, we also see that in the other artist gardeners presented in this exhibition – his fellow Impressionists, Internationalists, Post-Impressionists and beyond into the twentieth century with the avant-garde painters. Their love of gardens generated new opportunities to experiment with colour, themes and emotions, and can be felt in the development across Europe, as the garden emerged as a major subject in modern art.

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Fig. 2
Henri Manuel
Claude Monet in his Studio, 1920 (detail)

Gelatin silver print,
30.5 × 23 cm

Credit: Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris,
France/Bridgeman Images

