

Beauty has no obvious use; nor is there any  
clear cultural necessity for it. Yet civilization  
could not do without it.

—Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

# Introduction

## A MONUMENT TO PEACE

“The world upside down,” said one observer of Monet’s *Water Lilies* (fig. 1). Another viewer thought that seeing the painting was like “walking on the ceiling,” and still another referred to it as like being in an aquarium.<sup>1</sup> Some praised Monet as a painter of reality; others said he expressed the ineffable. Some were even at a loss to describe either the paintings or what they felt on seeing them. Yet no one underestimated their importance.

How could Monet’s ostensibly politically neutral subject matter, presumably chosen for personal experimentation and love, become the basis of a celebratory public monument to peace and then later the object of political denigration? How could an immersive interior decoration presenting such conundrums serve purposes usually associated with monumental outdoor sculpture? How could it be that works sometimes said to be narcissistic could represent the national spirit? Shouldn’t they have public meaning? Shouldn’t they be more than self-centered, private reflections? The *Water Lilies* paintings come as a stunning turnabout when compared to the art that followed World War I and directly acknowledged its effects, with subjects such as fields of graves (Félix Vallotton, *Military*

*Cemetery at Châlons-sur-Marne*, 1917, Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine) or abandoned weapons, helmets, and bodies in caved-in trenches (fig. 2).<sup>2</sup> And how is it that works associated with Impressionism, ostensibly so far behind the mainstream of French art of the time—that is, behind post-Impressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism—and so apparently lacking in historical content, could appeal to a major military and political leader and be regarded as profoundly French? Questions such as these lie at the heart of this book.

Why Monet matters may be a subset of why art matters. Whether art matters is not the question; we know it does. One may agree with Freud’s statement at the head of this chapter, but the challenge is to demonstrate precisely why he is right. This book focuses on why Monet *in particular* matters, even though it may offer some insight into the larger question as well. It may be an impossible task, but that is exactly why it seems worth attempting. I once stated rhetorically in a proposal for this book that it would say everything about the *Water Lilies* that had never been said, even though so much that has already been said is true. Of course, I was being ironic, for my view is that



Figure 1 | *Water Lilies Triptych*, 1914–26. 200.7 × 301 cm (each panel). The Beyeler Foundation, Riehen, Switzerland.

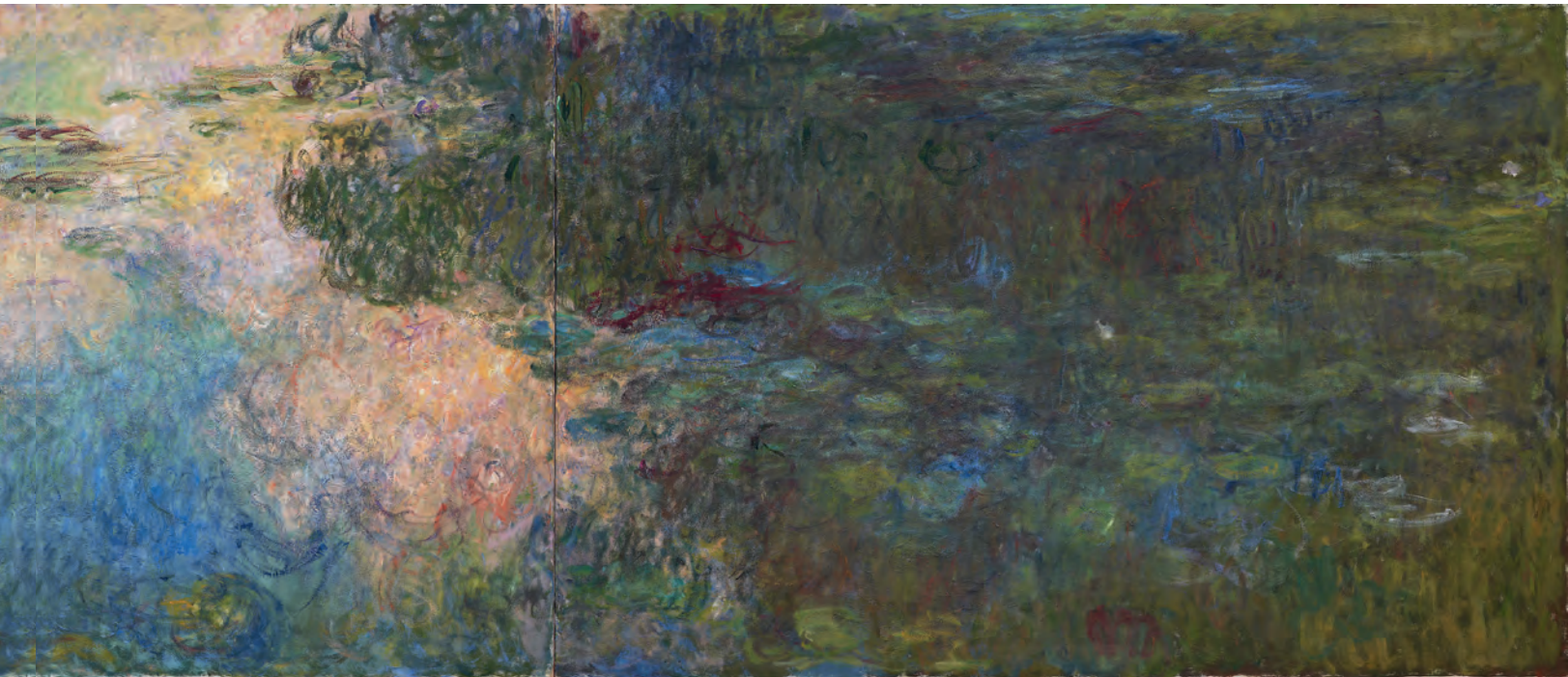


Figure 2 | William Orpen, *A Grave in a Trench*, 1917. 76 × 63.5 cm. The Imperial War Museum, London.

one can never say enough about such work. In my attempt, I will be relating Monet's more than 350 *Water Lilies* canvases, the crowning achievement of his career and more or less one-third of his overall output beginning in the late 1890s, to their context—to sets of meanings and various interrelated cultural and historical aspects of the artist's time. Whether he was in sync with some but not others contributes to his multifaceted significance.

Questions always open the mind; answers too often close it. That will be my excuse for raising more questions in the following chapters than I





am likely to answer. If they do not lead to definitive conclusions, then I hope that they will at least suggest possibilities and help others ask questions of their own. For me, the most informative reading initiates a conversation full of possibilities. Here I hope to do so on many levels and in several fields. A good painting is always more than the sum of its parts. As Monet proposed to his friend Georges Clemenceau, “Your hand in mine, let’s help others always to see better.”<sup>3</sup> I firmly believe that the person who knows more, sees more, for he or she can “see” beyond the visible.

In Monet’s time, indeed, it was often said that Impressionism was an optical art and that “the optical arts spring from the eye and solely from the eye.”<sup>4</sup> The remark was at first intended as a positive explanation of Impressionism, whereas others saw it as Impressionism’s gravest limitation. The negative reasoning held that by addressing solely

the eye, Impressionism failed to engage the mind; it was photographic (objective) rather than imaginative (subjective). It may be true that, unlike primarily narrative art, Impressionism favored vision over storytelling. But I argue that Impressionism’s success, and its importance to modern art, is that it engages not simply the eye but, importantly, the entire body as the site of the experience of painting. As even the earliest historian of Impressionism, Théodore Duret, wrote, “we don’t bother to look at a painting that is of interest only to the eye; we look at a painting in order to feel it, we look in order to experience through its appearance an impression or an emotion.”<sup>5</sup> The effects of a painting worth looking at go well beyond the optical. Duret’s acknowledgment of the role of feeling was, despite intervening years, heir to the Romantic tradition. For example, the English landscapist John Constable, while aspiring to be a “natural painter”—

and whose effect on French landscape painting was considerable—famously wrote that “painting is with me but another word for feeling.”<sup>6</sup> Neither saw any contradiction between naturalism and emotion. Monet’s views would ultimately recognize a similar truth.

As the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty puts it in the epigraph to my preface, “It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings.”<sup>7</sup> He means that even when the eye remains in place it takes the body with it on its imaginary journeys through the world, and that art is a materialization of that experience of being in the world. An Impressionist brushstroke experienced vicariously through touch draws the eye to it despite the mark’s material difference from what is represented—for example, sky, cloud, water and reflection, or light itself illuminating surfaces. Although feelings of pleasure or pain may first “enter” through the eye, they reside in the body; the body imagines itself as if it is wherever the eye is focused, and it responds accordingly. Only the subconscious functioning of mind and body together determines responses to and interpretations of optical stimuli. I want to suggest, then, that Monet’s painting mobilizes the body imaginatively and later also physically, as visitors enter rooms exhibiting his series and ultimately arrive at the Orangerie. Impressionism, and Monet’s art especially, materializes vision with a new intensity, using the physicality of painterly touches to call forth the body’s memories of the world as a material environment. It is in Impressionism that the sense of what might be called tactile space emerges as a primary aspect of the experience of modern painting and its themes. And as we shall see, critiques of Impressionism involved the conflict between the materiality of the Impressionist brushstroke and its traditional duty to produce illusion. No artist more than Monet made freedom from that requirement possible.

Hence, the notion of Impressionism as an ocular realism is not only inadequate: it is impossible.

In modern psychology and philosophy, aesthetic responses are known as *affects*, a technical word for emotion that emphasizes the physiological response. Affects are feelings that have physical consequences and may motivate attitudes and, in some cases, actions. It was especially during Monet’s time that both psychology and philosophy first considered such phenomena (see chapter 6). We shall certainly discover that to be the case in responses to the *Water Lilies*. As stated in the preface, I call this form of experience “seeing with the body,” transcending the false dichotomy between the “objective” eye and the “subjective” body. It is, in other words, by engaging the entire range of human consciousness and existence—from head to toe and in our three-dimensionality—that Impressionism became successful and the norm against which all future modern art would be measured, including the New York School of Abstract Expressionism and myriad current forms. I will show that it was at precisely the time of Monet’s paintings that philosophy attempted to bridge the divide between mind and body. (They merge in questions of identity, which are so often the ground of politics.) That is, Monet’s painting raised questions that matter profoundly even when we don’t think of them. Often they occur in what we call the gut.

A related concept this book aims to question, problematize, or complicate is the association of Impressionism with the instant or the moment. Like the notion of a purely optical art, the appearance of instantaneity is illusory, the result of what might be called the photographic fallacy. Impressionism was sometimes compared to photography, meaning that a painting’s supposedly accurate rendering of a moment (briefly disregarding how it is inflected by personal technique) revealed a mechanical rather than a creative or imaginative vision. That is because spontaneity is often confused with instantaneity, the former indicating an immediate response to the instant, but a response that must be maintained, extended, and repeated

Figure 3 | *Water Lilies*  
(*Les Nymphéas*),  
1918–26. Installation  
photograph at the  
Orangerie des Tuileries,  
1930. Roger-Viollet  
Collection, Paris.



over time in order to produce a painting. In fact, the investment of time required to produce the illusion of the moment had never been expressed so clearly as in Impressionist painting. Unlike a painting with an evenly finished and glossy surface, an Impressionist painting expresses its temporal production by separating individual brushstrokes and varying their properties. The eye must move from one place to another to take in its complexity.

Like the division between mind and body, the experience of time became a philosophical question in Monet's era. In chapter 6, again, we shall encounter philosopher Henri Bergson's notion that art immobilizes (*fixer*) or extends time, even as Bergson understood that a painting can only represent its object excerpted from the flow of time. One might speak of "the deceleration of the gaze," a phrase used in another context by Nerina Santorius.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the duality of Monet's painting, its ostensible freezing of the instant and its engagement of the body over time, was at the center of diverse and conflicting interpretations—esthetic,

philosophical, and political. Can painting truly represent an instant, or does it excerpt its object from time altogether, rendering time null?

### THE MONUMENT

Surrounded by the *Water Lilies* at the Paris Orangerie (fig. 3), one does not question whether they are art or have a value immeasurable by tangible means. If one has taken the trouble to view them, such truths seem self-evident. To many, the works require no explanation; they seem to speak a language universally understood by those members of all nations who travel faithfully to view them, often crowding the rooms. There is a thrilling vocabulary of shimmering beauty, a splendor that seems all the more precious and convincing for appearing to be disinterested.

One moves about the rooms. Although all art is interactive in the sense that it requires the viewer's imaginative participation, the *Water Lilies* canvases literally mobilize the body. The paintings are so







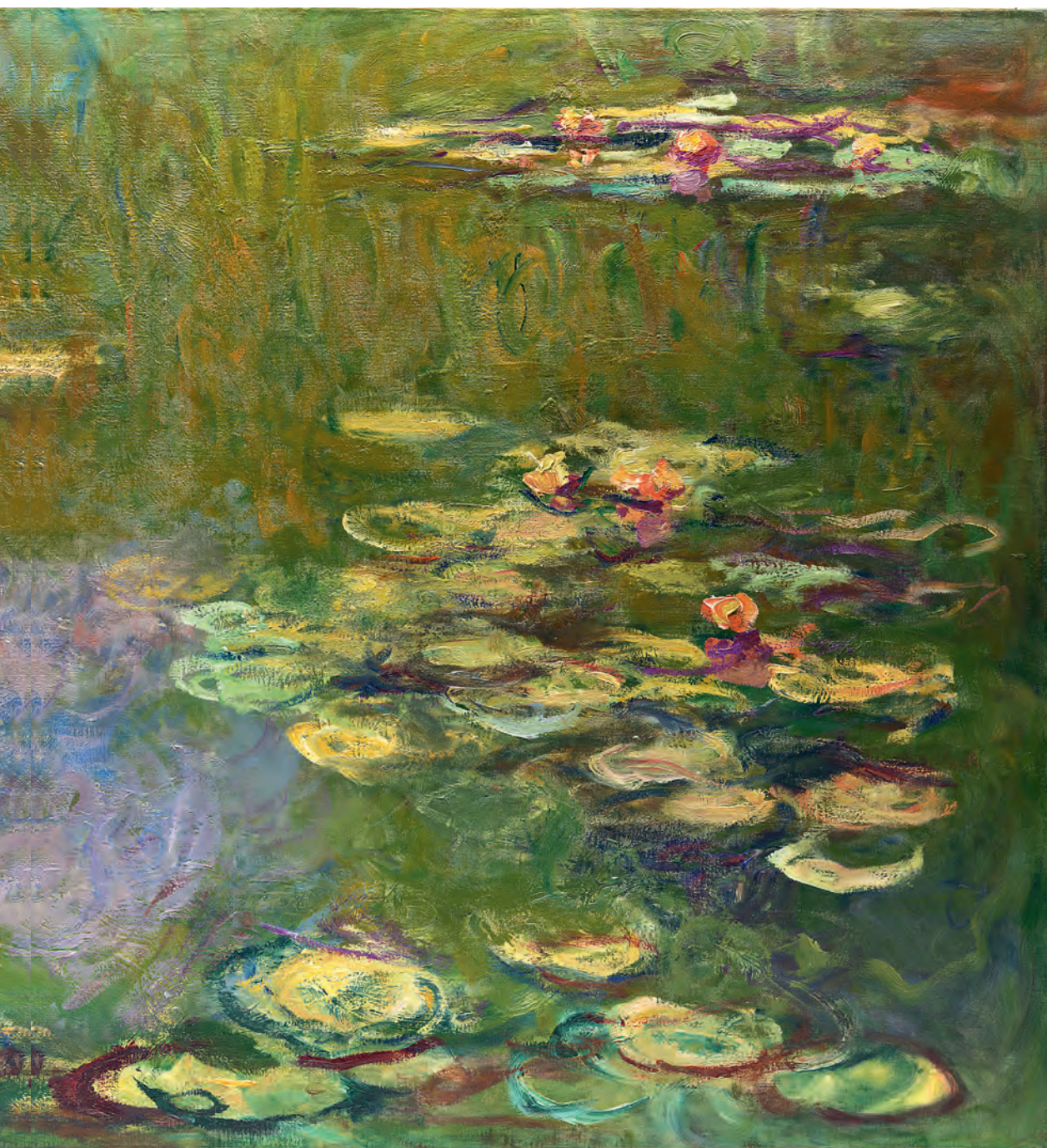


Figure 4 | *Pink Water Lilies*, 1919. 101 × 200 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Walter H. and Leonore Annenberg Collection, Gift of Walter H. and Leonore Annenberg, 1998, Bequest of Walter H. Annenberg, 2002.

large that walking back and forth is necessary to see them fully, to “take them in.” One enters first through a room with four large paintings called *Morning*, *Clouds*, *Reflections*, and *Sunset*, evoking the passage of time through the day, suggesting perhaps as well the various moods associated with such different states and views. The second room is a more unified ensemble, with a quasi-complete panorama of weeping willows hanging down over a lily pond, their continuity broken only by doorways. Although the rooms purportedly describe a single place, one can only acquire knowledge of that place thanks to the displacement of the body and the time required to view the paintings. The eyes move up and down, the head turns left and right, and the neck twists and cranes as the legs take one forward to relish individual passages or back in the attempt to encompass and absorb the whole. The body is deeply involved and activated.<sup>9</sup> Raised strokes of thick pigment create a relief that appeals to touch. Bright colors convey a feeling of richness. A blob of pinkish paint blossoms into a flower (fig. 4). A curved brushstroke of lavender becomes a lily pad. An iris stem dissolves into a streak of green pigment; a treetop melts into a swath of purplish blue. A roughened surface doubles as a smooth reflection, without the viewer questioning how tangible material can represent that which is immaterial—mere light reflected. The flat wall of paint itself morphs into indeterminate spaces where clouds, water weeds, opaqueness, and transparency interfuse. In the stillness of the image’s permanence, everything seems to move. In these metamorphoses, and thanks to their contradictions, the eye revels and the mind rejoices.

There is a sense of plenitude, satisfaction, and repose at the same time as there is hunger for direct contact, curiosity aroused by the rhythms of the body’s movements and the inadequacy of fixed glances. It is an immersive experience, a complete and enveloping environment—a surfeit, perhaps, and a private one, to the extent that no questions

seem relevant and it seems as if only the immature would break the silence. The interstices between lines and smudges create passages through which one loses one’s imaginative body within the image, as if the brushstrokes are dancing in thin air. The physical barrier of the canvas wall on which those markings seem to lie flat fades away, confusing one’s composure and interfering with one’s footing. Yet what lies behind the self-evidence, seeming to require no explanation, that these works appear to exhibit? What is it in them that seems so right, immediately recognizable, and from which so many take delight? How can we so easily take them for granted? What tools are necessary to decipher meanings, possibly hidden agendas, that may lie below surface beauties that appeal so readily to the eye’s appetite without provoking critical thought or controversy today?

Few artists in the modern world have been as successful as Claude Monet in their own time as well as able to sustain their popularity in ours. In a list of today’s fifteen highest-selling male artists, Monet is fourth and the only one born before 1850.<sup>10</sup> To what does he owe this success, and what can we learn from it? Brilliant colors, high prices, blockbuster exhibitions—what questions do his paintings raise, what do they ask of us, and what can they tell us about ourselves? This book does not intend to psychoanalyze, even though psychology is important to understanding both an artist’s motives and an individual’s response. Nor does it intend to moralize, even though there may be important lessons to be learned from viewing art. My approach will be to render as clearly as possible the multiplicity of sources and ramifications that constitute the inherent baggage, the cultural content of Monet’s art and its effects, and the reasons underlying them from the environment of his day to ours. I will not shy away from complex problems; I just hope to make their complexity accessible. The *Water Lilies* series is indeed unique, and yet the paintings are also thoroughly situated



within a larger cultural field that is not unique to them. Their relationship to the latter has been studied less than their uniqueness has been celebrated. Although in this book it may at first appear that I am swinging the pendulum away from their singularity, I believe that showing what an individual can produce from deep within a culture is itself a form of celebration.

For the historian and the philosopher, who are required to be skeptical in order to probe for truth, the works' enormous popularity and easy acceptance provoke daunting questions. That the works have become clichéd is a challenge to the critical mind, which can never be satisfied with received ideas and conventional taste without asking what lies behind them. It is an exploration, in other words, of both the properties of Monet's paintings and responses to them, responses characterized for most viewers today by the body's instant understanding but in their own time as politically dangerous. An exploration into diverse aspects of their nature as art will reveal elements that tie them to their particular era as well as aspects that have continued to matter over time. My goal is neither to attack nor to denigrate—nor, necessarily, to uphold or enhance—the status of Monet's works. It is rather to understand the grounds for these phenomena; to probe their meaning, whether it raises or diminishes Monet's reputation; and to offer a general theory of the artist's significance. I aim to deepen our understanding both of the works and of ourselves. The process will take multiple paths, with the understanding that the more directions in which any artwork leads are a tribute to its fecundity. In their wealth of possibilities, including their mysteries and paradoxes, great artworks persist in being meaningful.

## THE COMMISSION

Among other things, the *Water Lilies* paintings at the Orangerie are a radical war memorial. It is

often said that the winners of wars are the ones to write history, but in the United States, at least, even those on the losing side, such as Confederate military leaders, have been memorialized for what some believe was their heroic resistance to central authority. Such monuments nominally celebrate an individual. Even the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC, lists the names of individuals.

The *Water Lilies* rooms at the Orangerie do no such thing. Rather than overtly commemorating the victory of France and its allies over Germany, and indeed without mentioning names or even a specific war, the Orangerie decorations may have simply borne a plaque stating their dedication to peace. (The plaque has now disappeared, if it ever existed.) The armistice that brought World War I to an end was achieved at the cost of immeasurable pain and suffering: four years, mostly of stalemate; nine million killed in combat; twenty-one million soldiers wounded, plus millions of civilians; ruins everywhere; looting.<sup>11</sup> It was as if Monet, the so-called painter of light, meant to affirm France's eternal values—an important theme—and commemorate the country's rebirth to a new day, refreshed by nature. Even the more somber room with weeping willows (*saules pleureurs*), which might seem like a chamber for grieving, grants comfort through the modest aesthetic sensitivity of its delicately luminous harmonies. Simply put, Monet chose life triumphant over death. It is this optimism that runs through his art from the beginning and underlies his appeal to us today.

Monet's longtime friend Georges Clemenceau, who supported the work, was the principal French public figure of the moment. A moderately leftist politician of the French Republic and a journalist who frequented literary and artistic circles, Clemenceau had a long and complex political career. He began on the Paris City Council, was then elected to the French Parliament, and eventually was appointed head of various ministries. He served as council president (more or less the equivalent of

prime minister), first from 1906 to 1909 and then again from 1917 until 1920, during the height and end of World War I. Ever since the French defeat by the Prussians in 1870, Clemenceau had been staunchly anti-German.

Clemenceau's insistence at the armistice not only on the return of the lost French territories of Alsace and Moselle (northern Lorraine) but on heavy reparations made him the hero of the victory, and he basked in the glory of the German surrender. Following the war, of course, monuments to battle casualties were erected in practically every village throughout France, as were statues of military leaders like Marshals Foch and Pétain—the latter later disgraced by his collaboration with the Nazis. Clemenceau himself stands tall at the Rond Point des Champs-Élysées, to which was later added the name Place Clemenceau.<sup>12</sup> Yet it was Clemenceau who originated the idea for Monet to decorate public rooms with motifs seeming about as distant from politics and war as one can get. Indeed, rising above those temporal domains was certainly the point, and that meant that politics and war had everything to do with his decision.

Scholarly publications based on archives and correspondence have revealed extensive details of the commission, its vicissitudes, and Monet's efforts both to accommodate himself to changes and to create a definitive ensemble measuring up to the high standards he had always set for himself,<sup>13</sup> all while struggling with eyesight hampered by cataracts.<sup>14</sup> I summarize their findings here. Victorious troops entered the city of Strasbourg, the capital of Alsace, exactly one week following the armistice of November 11, 1918, which returned the region to France.<sup>15</sup> The following day, Monet wrote to Clemenceau declaring that he wanted to donate to the state two of the great decorative pieces on which he had been working since the beginning of the war, as "the only way I have of taking part in the victory."<sup>16</sup> Calling them panels, even though they were painted on canvas, implied a decorative intent, one integrated with architecture.<sup>17</sup> Gustave Geffroy,

Monet's early biographer, recalled being present when Clemenceau came to Monet's house the following week to make some choices from among the many available examples. He said that Monet "offered them to France like a bouquet of flowers in homage to the victorious war and the conquest of peace."<sup>18</sup> (We shall see how frequently the bouquet or flower image occurs in the discourse of Monet's time.) Monet had also wanted to honor Clemenceau, whom he believed to have saved France.<sup>19</sup> Clemenceau may have saved Monet as well, for how else but through the former's influence during an all-consuming war could the painter manage to get supplies transported by railroad to build a new studio where he could work on large, unwieldy canvases and obtain the other materials he needed to make them?<sup>20</sup> In any case, the two men agreed soon after their meeting that Monet's contribution would be not two but a series of water lily paintings that would decorate a public room built for their display.

It was most likely assumed that thanks to Clemenceau's political position, any problems could be overcome. The architect Louis Bonnier, whom Monet chose because of a family connection, drew up plans for an elliptically shaped pavilion and then, thinking it better to have a greater and equal distance from all of the work, a round building to house twelve panels that followed the panorama format popular at the time. It was to have a minimalist classicizing style reminiscent of Etienne-Louis Boullée's utopian architecture—a possible instinctive allusion to what I shall suggest was the quasi-utopian content of the *Water Lilies*. Correspondence between Monet and the architect suggests that Monet insisted on the original elliptical shape.<sup>21</sup> Presumably he realized that an ellipse would enhance the effect of immersion because it would permit closer proximity of the two opposing walls in each chamber than would be possible in a perfect circle. The plan was to locate the edifice in the garden of the eighteenth-century Hôtel Biron, which had just become the Musée



Rodin, exhibiting works by the great sculptor and friend of Monet's. Compared to the elegance of the mansion, the austere structure would have offered a jarring contrast.<sup>22</sup> The draft was completed on paper, but it was ultimately rejected by the General Council on Civic Buildings in December 1920. It is hard to know whether the decision was related to Clemenceau's waning power: he had been defeated in a presidential primary election the previous January. Monet became despondent.<sup>23</sup> By this time he had accumulated forty or so canvases, some of which were conceived specifically for the canceled rotunda.

The project was revived when, instead of a new building, the council proposed creating two long elliptical rooms at the Orangerie of the Louvre, where the canvas panels are now permanently installed. Once a winter shelter for royal orange trees, the Orangerie (now the Musée de l'Orangerie) is at the other end of the Jardins des Tuileries from the Louvre, formerly the royal palace. It overlooks the Place de la Concorde at the very heart of Paris, facing up the Champs-Élysées toward the monumental Arc de Triomphe. The increased centrality and prestige of the new location as well as its conforming to his preference for elliptical spaces made it easy for Monet to accept the new proposal, and he forged ahead. It now seems impossible to imagine the *Water Lilies* in any other place. In January 1922, Bonnier was replaced by Camille Lefèvre, who happened to be the chief architect assigned to oversee the Louvre; he was therefore an insider who could get things done. On April 12, 1922, a deed formalizing Monet's donation included twenty panels, ten for each room. In fact, one room has twelve, making the final total twenty-two.<sup>24</sup>

To accommodate the format for their display in two rooms, which nearly doubled the number of canvases needed, Monet altered his choice of groups and retouched some to improve interrelations within them. At the same time, by 1922 his cataracts had become so troublesome that he finally agreed to have an operation. Although his

recovery took about a year, Monet tried at times to work. Both circumstances explain the length of time he took as well as his many pentimenti. They may also help us understand why, as he was never completely satisfied, he refused to allow the works to leave his studio. Only when he was too sick to paint any longer did he finally acquiesce, yet he still considered them unfinished. He died on December 8, 1926, at the age of eighty-six. In 1927, they were shipped to Paris and installed in a more or less coherent order.

One of Monet's stipulations was that, rather than being hung, his canvases should be glued directly to the wall. The frames are minimal, the simplest of moldings, attracting little attention. The idea was for the canvases to become integral with the walls themselves, as if they were murals, like Renaissance frescoes, done directly on the spot and merged with their architectural support.<sup>25</sup> This strategy underlined their permanence and monumentality, and it still contributes to their illusion of timelessness. On the negative side, however, it made their restoration arduous. During World War II, some mortars hit the building, damaging the roof and two of the canvases. The Orangerie was closed for repair between 1944 and 1952, and its slow reopening was a reflection of Monet's fall from favor. In the end, however, it allowed for his rediscovery, especially by American artists visiting or living in France (see chapter 8). From 2002 to 2006, a major cleaning and restoration was performed, which included renovations to the interior of the building. Approximately half a million people are able to visit the happy result each year.

## MONET, MAN OF HIS TIMES

Resituating Monet in his historical and cultural contexts is based on human social realities. The human being, in his or her individuality, and the rest of society collectively form a culture expressed through shared and conflicting attitudes and beliefs. Art, a product of both, is produced at an

intersection of the two. Philosophers have always pointed out that the individual is both “of the self” and “of the world.” The same is true of art. It is always both subjective and objective (admittedly simplistic terms), having varying proportions of one to the other, the visibility of the conventionally understood indices of one or the other varying as well.<sup>26</sup> All art is always based on personal sensibility and the discourses of one’s time, on imagination as well as on references to the surrounding world—at least until abstract art claimed to eliminate the latter, assuming that to be possible. Both are subject to their time and culture.

Of course, what distinguishes art from the natural world from which it was historically derived and/or to which it refers is indeed the human element—the supplement (or deficit) that an individual’s creative process adds (or subtracts, such as reduction to a two-dimensional canvas). Even for the artist who tries their hardest to produce a complete illusion of the real, transformation is inevitable. The French novelist and art critic Émile Zola defined the art of his time as “a corner of nature seen through a temperament,” the latter meaning artistic vision or personality, which leaves its mark on whatever the artist chooses to represent. Zola’s emphasis was on the individual, but individuals do not exist in a vacuum; they manifest values and ideologies they acquire through culture.<sup>27</sup> Even abstract art is related to the circumstances in which it was produced, its producer, and its culture. We all live in the world and approach or deal with it in one way or another. Art is how those people we call artists do so. All art is subject to economic forces, too; artists have living and material expenses. Without the support of galleries, collectors, and art critics, which led to Monet’s celebrity, the Orange-rie commission would never have occurred to even the most progressive politician. The reasoning underlying their backing will be explored here as well.

The cultural field is both formative and always changing. Although varied and extending beyond

the individual, this is where the individual operates, in the same way a speaker forms a statement within a language, which is subject to region, social class, gender, education, and personal emotion. The artist relies on concepts and norms that structure expression while producing something unique, even if not necessarily effective. Culture, in other words, is never passive. Even when individual expression is deliberately original, it is shaped through interaction with existing concepts or debates that constitute the culture. The most creative gestures still depend on their immediate world for their vocabulary, forms or signs, and techniques and objects, which are culturally codified in ways that enable them to communicate. Art that is authentically avant-garde simply pushes the limits of the cultural envelope, and if the work survives it establishes new norms. Indeed, Impressionism, while seeming at first to challenge bourgeois culture, helped confirm that culture’s preeminence in the long run.

Works of art in Monet’s time and beyond are objects; they exist physically in the world—even if today that norm is sometimes questioned. And yet works are also known by the artist’s name, as in, “There’s a Monet over there.” “A Monet” names both the man and the work he produced. The work exists in a historical field, within which the artist lived and performed and continues, in a sense, to do so posthumously, even as history and attitudes evolve. On the one hand, the artwork becomes a stand-in for the artist. Zola claimed that, in the work of art, he wished to see “a man.” For him, a work of art was an affair of the body—“a human secretion,” the artist’s “flesh and bone.”<sup>28</sup> At the same time, he insisted that the artist express the essence of his times. Indeed, we are now highly conscious of how our ideas about the body are themselves sociocultural constructs. If it can be said, then, that art is the result of how artists process the human condition at a certain time and place, it can contain lessons both about its own time and about ours.



In sum, *Why Monet Matters* revises the notion of the late Monet's isolation from his world. The *Water Lilies* paintings are usually treated almost exclusively apart from most contexts, hailing especially the later Monet as if he is heroically individualistic. This book shows how an artist can work alone and produce unique work yet be deeply tied to the art, ideas, and historical events of his period. It does so by bringing together new research and a variety of approaches to Monet that rarely, if ever, have been combined. The book is organized as a series of chapters focused on specific themes or issues. They are intended to build on one another, even though in certain cases they could probably stand on their own. Some being more complex than others, the reader should feel free to skip around. I have included cross-references from one chapter to another because they are closely interlinked, and some readers may want information ahead of time or want to know where to check back. Even though Monet may be absent from some pages, their aim is to bring him back more richly.

From the very beginning of his career, when he followed Eugène Boudin out onto the beaches and began to paint *en plein air*, Monet immersed himself in nature. In French, *plein-air* says more than its rather weak English translation as “out of doors,” which refers simply to location. “Plein-air” describes a condition of being enfolded within an air-filled space. It describes an immersion in an environment that applies to the entire body. Monet's view of nature is circumambient rather than fenestral—that is, rather than as seen through a window. Monet's favorite pastime, gardening, like painting outdoors, is an activity of the body operating both upon and within nature more directly than from the physical and psychological distance of the artist's studio. Even when Monet finished paintings in the studio or was forced to execute large formats away from the motif, the notion of his body being present in the natural realm was essential to the fashioning of his self-image. Nature frustrated and

sometimes battered him with bad weather, as many of his letters tell. His art embodies these adventures, which, as discussed in chapter 5, redounded to the masculine identity of his struggle to dominate what some still call “Mother Nature.”

The quest for motifs that would refresh his sense of discovery within the heart of nature became a necessity to the nourishment and continuation of Monet's life and art. After many travels, he realized he such motifs were abundant near his home and then in the water lily basin he designed for a new, second garden. The merging of life and art had long since become an expression of art's authenticity, as theories of creativity tended toward the biological in the nineteenth century. The execution of series exhibited together and the increasing scale of Monet's paintings, culminating in the Orangerie's immersive ensemble, testify to the painter's development of a way of seeing and looking that involve not just living nature but living art through the bodily senses as a whole. As such, they become temporary alternatives to everyday life, a suspension of its ordinary plane. By living in nature through art and encountering art as nature, Monet both experienced and proffered a way of looking that has come to characterize the art of our times. In calling it “seeing with the body,” I propose that the themes on which I focus are of their time while also producing the conditions for what was a new way of understanding art, the self, and one's relation to the world. This way of seeing is a legacy of the nineteenth century and was embodied most successfully in Monet's art. It is an ambitious program, but one that makes paintings that have been written about ad nauseam worth considering afresh.

In appealing to the body, Monet's art can be related to efforts in philosophy, especially those of Henri Bergson, to bridge the mind/body separation, which continues to be the central concern in what we call continental (European) philosophy. And since identity, both individual and social,

conscious and unconscious, is one place where mind and body crucially bond, it is inevitable that the *Water Lilies* acquired political significance beyond Monet's intentions. I will remind the reader how Impressionism was forged within a political crucible, and I have already suggested the political context for the Orangerie. The consequences of Monet's paintings followed far into the future, both artistically and otherwise. The still-extraordinary market for Monet's works is evidence of his legacy's importance. My claim for why Monet matters is therefore also a claim for modern art at large.

The French philosopher Michel Foucault once said that what he liked about painting is that it forces you to look. Close looking will be an important aspect of my approach. What are the implications of a mode of painting that focuses the eye so physically on the materiality of its medium and techniques of paint application, to the exclusion of the outside world? What can be learned through reflections on the water's semitransparent surface, made of solid pigment painted on an implacably opaque canvas? What can be learned from art that substitutes its materiality for the experiences of nature and yet so convincingly produces a natural effect? How could such a work of exclusion and substitution become a political expression for a nation ravaged physically and transformed socially by war? Foucault's pleasure in painting was infused with self-consciousness and moral concern. Forced looking included the imperative to look at oneself.<sup>29</sup>

These are some of the more abstract questions to be considered in these chapters. As to methodology, my approach is not guided by any particular school or ideology but by common sense or "whatever it takes." I do not eschew theory, but I do not believe there is one overarching theory that can explain everything—there is no string theory for art history. I look for diverse ways to shed light that depend on what I believe is at stake. If I were to cite a model, I would refer to a technique I learned

from studies in France referred to as "explication de texte." I begin with the text, or in our case art objects, and I attempt to follow systematically, from fruitful points of view, the most important clues embedded in their imagery and visual vocabulary, taking account of what Hollis Clayson has called "the generative weight of circumstance."<sup>30</sup> That is not the same as Roland Barthes's extreme notion, "the death of the author," in which only language speaks, independent from its writer. It is more like Foucault's notion of archaeology, which focuses on the discourses that constitute a culture, its rules and standards.<sup>31</sup> For the art object leads back as much to Zola's "man" as to all of its unintended repercussions and contexts. Whether one arrives at a coherent whole is not the point. With products of human activity and expression, contradictions and ambiguities are to be expected. Claims of normativity or universality based on formalist aesthetics demand to be folded into the conditions that could give rise to such claims in the first place.

I end this introduction simply by saying that one element I have tried to emphasize is "looking," in Foucault's sense, for that is what art requires. Approaches to the questions I have raised must take us beyond the surface to the structuring principles and the cultural meanings of Monet's art in its time and in ours. It will require a combination of historical, critical, and philosophical thinking. In its disguise of easy-going charm and, as his contemporaries sometimes said, his brightly decorative surfaces, there is something deeply felt and personal underlying Monet's art. It begins simply with his love for the scenes that surround him and develops into a nearly philosophical self-awareness. Through the thoughts I gather and the arguments I present, I hope to come closer to an understanding of why Monet matters while offering a case study of how art and art history can matter. My effort is inspired by those fundamental questions of what art is and what it has to do with our humanity, which I believe lie at the core of humanistic studies.<sup>32</sup>