

The *Nymphéas*

By Uma Knaven

The North Carolina Museum of Art exposed me to my first in-person Claude Monet painting. I was small and the water lilies were large, so I held my mother's hand to ground myself. I was seven, but I wanted a poster of that one, the water lilies.

Having completely forgotten about this event when I went to Paris for the first time, I couldn't understand why, when I stepped into the Musée de l'Orangerie, it felt like stepping into the past. The *Nymphéas*, a series of eight, large panels of water lilies, swept me into a feeling of nostalgia, brought on by the association of one beautiful experience with another. I felt like I had teleported straight into Monet's garden.

Why do I love them? First, there is Paris, a Mecca of art, culture, literature, and music. The act of being in Paris is enough to make the heart flutter. Then there is the river Seine, with its two famous islands, Île de la Cité and its little brother, Île Saint-Louis. Move North-East to find the Jardin des Tuileries, most famous for being the location of the Louvre, but also where you can take the long gravel incline up to the Musée de l'Orangerie. Though originally built, as the name suggests, to house orange trees, the building was converted into a museum after World War I.

Monet's *Nymphéas* are arranged in two oval rooms, which force a particular method of observation. You enter at the long end, making the first glance of water lilies far away from where you stand. This is how they are meant to be seen, from far away that is. Up close, the colors blur into one another so that individual shadows and highlights are messy and indistinct. But from far away, the brush strokes coalesce into lily pads bobbing on a pond. Lavender, gray,

blue, green, yellow, and brown merge into the lighting of a sunset and the shadow of a willow tree. Some panels seem to be on fire, the purples and oranges are so vibrant. Others move and flow perfectly so that the blues and whites pour off the wall into a puddle on the ground. Monet's mind, at times hectic and confusing, at other times calm and serene, is painted for the world to see.

My first trip to Paris, and my first visit to the *Nymphéas* exhibit, was a graduation gift from my mother. She and I went together. We travelled as a pair and plotted our trip as a pair, each night staking out our next move and each day completely abandoning our plan to instead explore Montmartre and eat crêpes.

Though my mother is American, she knows Paris well. In fact, she knows Europe well. She had already settled deeply into Amsterdam by the time she married my father and had me. And while she speaks Dutch far better than me, French is my strength. Together, we were an unstoppable duo, with her lifetime of city knowledge and my seven years of French language education. We stayed in the smallest apartment I had ever seen. The bed pulled out from the wall, so that either you could sleep, or you could open the bathroom door, but not both at the same time.

This was one of many firsts for me. I used my French in front of real French people for the first time. They thought I was Canadian. I ate my first French croissant and ordered a "café américain." Amusingly, the "américain" indicates a larger size, not any particular type of coffee. I saw Notre Dame glittering in her spotlights in the warm summer night air. I dipped my fingers in the Seine and skipped on the cobblestones of her walled bank. For the first time, I stepped into a room of paintings and realized I never wanted to leave.

I think for the both of us, my mother and I, the trip represented my first introduction into adulthood. I would have to learn to live alone, off in college, without her help. But staying for a week in the tiniest apartment I had ever seen most definitely prepared me for dorm life. Running around Paris together felt like the start of a real life, one where I could, or maybe had to, make my own decisions.

When we entered the oval rooms of Monet's exhibit, life took on a heaviness I hadn't noticed before. The *Nymphéas* were completed at the very end of Monet's life. In fact, the museum was not even open until several months after his death. I stood surrounded, at the entrance of my adulthood, by the works that Monet exited with. I felt the cycle of life, mirrored by the oval shape of the room, the rising and setting of his painted suns, and the coming and going of blooming flowers. The *Setting Sun* panel is, appropriately, the final panel Monet finished painting.

Though it is located more than an hour outside of Paris, the garden of Monet never seems very far away in this museum. The rooms of the *Nymphéas* are lit solely with diffused natural light, which filters in from above through cloth covered skylights. This may be the best way to display art. Since Monet's water lilies were based on his own garden, the natural light gives the viewer the feeling that she is there in Monet's shoes, in his garden. A cloud passes overhead, and shadows flicker across the canvases to create mottled reflections of the sky. In reality, the reason for skylights is mostly scientific; they permit all parts of the canvas to be lit at once to eliminate shadows. But there is something much more romantic about feeling exactly what Monet felt.

My love of the water lilies did not begin with a poster. It actually began with a book. *Linnea in Monet's Garden* sent a little girl on an adventure of watercolor through the beautiful garden that inspired the *Nymphéas*. I wanted to be her, exploring the pathways and ponds of the garden. She got to do as a little girl what I could only dream about, stand so close to a painting that the images were messy and splotchy, and then back away slowly to see every detail. This book was consistently chosen for bed time. I even had a little doll version of Linnea that made the story even more real.

As a young girl living in rural eastern North Carolina, I felt like I couldn't possibly get any farther from a city like Paris than I already was. But *Linnea in Monet's Garden* helped take me there. I was born in Amsterdam, a relatively large, artistically diverse city. But I have no memories of Amsterdam. I didn't have the opportunity to even return to my birth country until I was eleven. My only connection to my European roots was my parents. My father was a classical musician, my mother a professional ballet dancer. They taught me to be open minded and curious and artistically inclined.

But there was only so much my parents could pass on to me, through stories and books and trips to the museum. I knew at a young age that I had to see Europe for myself if I wanted to become the person I was born to be. Seeing Paris helped me realize a childhood dream. Monet's paintings brought me full circle, back to his garden, back to my bedtime story, and back to the dream of being Linnea. To have five-year-old-me's hope fulfilled was the ultimate entrance into adulthood.

Monet's revolutionary style called Impressionism stemmed from his garden. He painted outside in the physical location of his subject, a rather unconventional way of painting for his

time period. Impressionism concerns itself not with an artist's accuracy in depicting a scene, but rather the artist's visual impression of the moment. The paintings of this style, including Monet's, are characterized by soft light and delicate choice of color. He felt it was light that determined how things looked. While Monet's paintings maintained these characteristics throughout his life, a clear distinction can be made between his earlier works and his later works.

Monet was plagued by cataracts as he aged, influencing not just the clarity of his sight, but also his perception of color. What was once images of a garden dominated mostly by blues, greens, and whites, now consisted of muddied yellows and purples. As Monet's eyesight deteriorated, his paintings became blurrier and less defined as well. The *Setting Sun* panel depicts these changes most vividly; of all eight panels, it is the only one that uses dark purple and yellow. Once again, lily pads float gently on the surface of a pond; however, the reflection of the setting sun behind the willow trees on the water almost completely obscures the lily pads from view.

The colors and composition of this panel bring my thoughts back to the cycle of life. Here was Monet, only months from death, changing into color the feelings inside his head. Here I was, stare fixed so hard on the scene of a sun set that the colors melted together into a single blob of yellow. My youth clashed with his age. That something so simple as a painting could connect two people, not just separated by years but also death, was beautiful.

The bottom right corner of *Setting Sun* is not finished, and a patch of bare canvas can be seen. This bare patch struck me the first time I saw it. It made the painting feel raw and real. Before the paint was there, Monet had gazed on the canvas and then up at the sky. He saw the

world in its most beautiful and colorful form, right there in his garden. Like the skylights above, the unfinished corner put me right into his shoes.

Nymphéa is a French term for water lilies. The word comes from Latin, *nymphaea*, which are shrines dedicated to nymphs. The correlation of water lilies to nymphs evokes youth, life, and birth. Even as Monet became older and older, he continued to paint something so representative of new beginnings. But beauty begets beauty, in a constant cycle of rejuvenating the beautiful in many and newer forms. Elaine Scarry, in her book *On Beauty and Being Just*, makes this claim. The beautiful brings more and more of itself into being. Monet, as he aged, saw the beauty of the youth and freshness of his garden. He painted it for the world to see, so that I, over 100 years later, could be struck profoundly just as he was, by the cycle of life, death, and the beautiful.

I took a return trip to Paris last summer. This time, I went alone. I travelled alone and plotted my trip alone. Each night I staked out my move and each day I abandoned it to wander around Montmartre and eat ice cream under Sacré Cœur. It was beautiful and I rejoiced in being able to get absolutely and completely lost in Paris. But I listened to a lot of music through my headphones on that trip so that I wouldn't be alone as I wandered. Walking through the Jardin des Tuileries I felt a pang of loneliness without my mother travelling by my side. I did visit the *Nymphéas* again. They were just as beautiful as before, if not more beautiful. But their relationship to my mother forever tied me and her and them together. Though beautiful, the *Nymphéas* were not complete without her.