



LASTING IMPRESSIONS

A GARDENER'S REFLECTIONS ON THE GLORIES OF MONET'S GARDEN AT GIVERNY

By Irene Virag

THE RAIN FELL in intervals out of a gray-blue sky and misted the light – giving the day the quality of an impressionist canvas. I could imagine the old man strolling in the garden, dressed as I have seen him in photographs, with a wide-brimmed straw hat and a white jacket, the buttons open at the bottom. His white beard stops at the top button, his face is weathered as a gardener's often is. He peers at the world he created and perhaps envisions blooms to come.

The sun peeped out between the showers and I thought that Claude Monet would have loved the interplay of light and shadow. I fancied the painter who marched in the forefront of Impressionism reveling in shape and color and texture as he studied the irises growing beneath the apple trees in the orchard. I saw him working at an easel near the Japanese bridge that traverses the water garden, matching his paints to the color of the lilies and capturing the reflection of the willows in the dappled pond.

I'd been told that the garden at Giverny was beautiful and that I shouldn't miss it while I was vacationing in Paris. But I still wasn't prepared for the pure and constant wonder that Claude Monet created in Normandy on an old cider farm near a tributary of the Seine called the River Epte. He had come to Giverny after receiving an eviction notice at a rented house in Poissy, which he disliked. The Epte flows toward his childhood home of

Le Havre, and I do not pretend to know what longings of past and future stirred inside him when he first saw the abandoned pink stucco house and the blossoming apple trees. As an artist, he was, by his own description, "a master moved by a fine vision, yes, a vision and nothing more." For the multitudes whose lives would be touched by his work – whether in museums or prints or even greeting cards – the vision was more than enough. It is that way in the garden, which was overrun by nature after Monet's death in 1926 and was not restored to the glory of his vision until a half-century later.

The artist's stepdaughter, Blanche, lived at the house after his death and tried her best to keep up the garden. It was difficult because Monet had willed the property to a son, Michel, who spent his money on safaris. Michel left the house and the faded garden to the French Academie des Beaux-Arts, which called in Gerald van der Kemp, director of the renovation of Versailles. Money was a requisite and van der Kemp turned to Lila Acheson Wallace, co-founder of the Reader's Digest, and other American backers. The restored garden was opened in 1980 and it is now run by the Claude Monet Foundation.

If the garden is not precisely as it was, it is faithful to its creator's spirit. I have no expertise when it comes to art – I react to paintings with my feelings. I love Monet. And on a drizzly morning this past spring when I first saw Giverny, my eyes misted with tears as well as rain, and I felt a surge of joy. The sight of Monet's garden was like a religious experience. If you're a gardener, Giverny is a cathedral.

The garden, which grows about 34 miles northwest of Paris, draws half a million visitors a year. Fellow congregants eddied and swirled around me, their manner a mixture of smiles and reverence. The museums of Paris were closed by a strike and I couldn't view paintings I had hoped to experience – paintings in which Monet had brought his passion and inner eye to the celebration of light and nature. No matter. Roses and irises, sunlight and shadow were all around me. When I stood on the curved green footbridge known as Le Pont Japonais it seemed that I was gazing at the very same water lilies I had seen years before in the Museum of Modern Art. They looked as if they were waiting for Claude Monet to appear.

I felt as if he were somewhere nearby, and perhaps he was. Even when he wasn't painting – and sometimes these periods could last for months – he strolled about his garden three or four times a day or worked in the beds. "He carries on with his work without seeming to, simply by taking walks," said the writer Maurice Guillemot. "His eye contemplates, studies, stores." It seemed to me as I walked in Monet's shadow that he created a garden to paint and the garden became a work of art in itself. I don't know whether he was a better gardener or painter. Certainly, he was a master of both media. "I am good for nothing," he once said, "but painting and gardening." Monet's sense of color, his feeling for light and movement, are all visible in the garden. White and pink foxgloves rise up in slender majesty. Red field poppies bounce in the breeze. Sumptuous mauve roses drip in clusters from an arbor. An artist started with a vision of a garden and planted it and made it a reality. Then he took that realized vision and reinterpreted it on canvas. Where did all that talent come from? I wondered.

And more than that, where did he get the energy? The garden may have been a labor of love, but labor it surely was. The painter was already 43 when he rented the pink house with Alice Hoschede, whose husband, a former patron of Monet, had gone bankrupt and skipped out to Belgium. Monet was a widower with two children; Alice had six of her own. They were so badly off that Monet's art dealer had to buy Alice's train ticket to Giverny.

The farm offered little more than the orchard and a small potager, where flowers mingled with vegetables. The alkaline soil was hard clay with poor drainage. Like most gardens, it needed constant care and compost. "My salon was the barn," Monet would say in later years. "All of us worked in the garden. I dug, planted, weeded and hoed myself; in the evenings, the children watered."

And with the sky as his roof, he came out of the studio and painted the fields and the trees and the river and his own garden.

If the flowers helped the painting, the painting helped the flowers. In 1890, at the age of 50, the artist was able to buy the farm that would become the subject of more than 500 works. Two years later, he and Alice were married. By then, the garden included gardeners and greenhouses. As Monet became famous, so did the garden that grew on the 2 1/2-acre expanse outside the pink house. He replaced many of the apple trees with Japanese cherries and apricot trees, and turned the wild grass into an English-style lawn. The Grande Allée, once heavily shaded by cypresses and spruces, became a sunwashed path where roses climbed over metal arches and other flowers tumbled onto the pathways.

Monet built bamboo tuteurs with his own hands for the island beds, where he planted dark-red climbing nasturtiums and designed sloping frames to show off his white and pink Clematis montana. He banned Sweet William, heliotrope, cannas, veronicas and everlasting helichrysum from his fields but he was a dahlia hybridizer who produced many hybrids of the white star-shaped variety Etoile de Digoin. He shared plants with friends, saved seeds, frequented local nurseries, collected blue flowers and amassed a horticultural library.

And 10 years after he bought the farm, he diverted an arm of the Epte itself to create a pond. Monet built sluices to clean the water and put in a grill to slow the current so it wouldn't overwhelm the lilies. Eventually, he constructed the bridge and crowned it with a trellis where white and mauve wisteria perfumed the air.

"This is where Monet came to refine his sensations, making them as sharp as possible," said his friend, the statesman Georges Clemenceau. "He would remain here in his armchair for hours without moving, without speaking, peering at the undersides of passing and sunlit things, trying to read in their reflections the elusive glimmer where mysteries are revealed." Monet said that it took him time to understand his water lilies. "I had planted them for my pleasure; I cultivated them without ever thinking of painting them ... And then, suddenly, the magical world of my pond was revealed to me. I took up my palette. Since that time, I have scarcely had any other model." Few restorations are absolutely true to the past - time etches irrevocable lines; even land and water change.

Factories along the Epte polluted the water and affected the pond. Now clear water is pumped from a hole sunk in the limestone bed. The Japanese bridge is a faithful copy – the original rotted into the water. Monet bought land on the other side of an unpaved road and railroad tracks for his water garden. Today, visitors use a pedestrian underpass instead of the chemin de Roy to get from the house to the pond.

On my visit, I turned first to the water garden, to Le Bassin des Nymphéas. I did not solve any of the mysteries of art or, for that matter, life, as I stood silent on the Japanese bridge, but I felt one with the place and the moment. I recall that a woman complained about the spatter of rain but I barely heard her – she seemed far away, on the edge of my consciousness.

The reverie continued as I walked along the bank, my thoughts and feelings shimmering like the reflections in the pond. The reflections were, it seemed to me, a lesson in Impressionism. White and pink and yellow and lavender lilies floated in clear water that held the reflections of weeping willows and towering lindens and a bower of pink roses. The slender foliage of fading irises waved along the bank. A breeze blew and rain tickled the water, dissolving the images into specks of rippling color.

"The water lilies are far from being the only thing in the show," wrote Monet.

"The motif's essential is the mirror of water whose aspect is constantly being modified by the changing sky reflected in it, and which imbues it with life and movement. The passing cloud, the cooling breeze, the sudden storm that threatens to burst and finally does, the wind that stirs and suddenly blows with full force, the light that fades and is reborn are all things ... that transfigure the color and shape of the bodies of water."

My wonder at Monet's passion for horticulture carried into the garden that unfolded in front of his house. All through Paris I had seen lovely gardens, which culminated in the magical rose garden that crowns the Bagatelle in the Bois de Boulogne. But they tended toward formality. Giverny felt different. It is still the garden of a man who hated the prim landscape designs of his time, who let his poppies and mullein self-seed at their own discretion, and favored simple roses and loved the color blue because nature used it so sparingly.

Masses of pink and white and yellow roses cascaded on trellises along the facade of the apple-green-shuttered house, where Japanese prints lined the walls of his living room and his bright yellow dining room sparkled like sunshine. Monet favored big-flowered yellow roses like the ones that grow outside his bedroom window. Red geraniums partied merrily in island beds near the front porch. Just beyond them, tree roses that looked like pink umbrellas laughed at the rain.

Poppies are still ubiquitous in the Clos Normand, as the garden is called – classic reds and pale pink and mauve beauties and more. Monet loved color – bold hues that gave way to softer tones. He planted in paintbox rows – long row after long row, separated by narrow footpaths and crammed with flowers. Bees and butterflies darted from pastel poppies to lavender larkspur and back again.

If some of the flowers in the restored garden are new varieties, the effect remains true to Monet's time. White peonies and purple phlox and pink foxgloves. Red cosmos and white datura and blue delphiniums. Towering alliums and sprawling nasturtiums and twining clematis. And roses of all kinds – tree roses and ramblers and hybrid teas, and pillar roses scrambling up green metal tuteurs.

And it seemed appropriate that gardeners were silently going about their business in the rain. Weeding and deadheading and trimming. As Monet lay dying in the winter of 1926, he told his friend Clemenceau about a shipment of bulbs and seeds that were on their way. "You will see all of this in the spring," Monet said, "I will no longer be here." He died on Dec. 5. It was Monet's wish that his gardeners be his pallbearers. They wore their work clothes.

As the seasons change, so does Giverny. I saw Monet's garden in late spring, long after the snowdrops and the tulips and the irises and the drifts of daffodils and the pansies and primroses and the wisteria and the lilacs had bloomed. It is nice to think that some day I will see them, too. It is nice to think that on a midsummer day, I will come again to admire the hollyhocks and the nicotiana and the lilies and the lupines. And that in fall, I will delight in the Japanese anemones that are so heartbreakingly lovely and the nasturtiums spilling onto the path of the Grande Allée and the dahlias and the sunflowers and the purple asters and the cosmos and the cleome.

In the meantime, I will look at paintings of the garden that is known by the name of the village where it blooms near the river Epte. Paintings that will take on added dimension for me now that I've spent a brief moment in the place Monet loved. Since I've seen his inspiration, his art is even more intimate, more human. I don't think I'll ever look at a Monet again without remembering a day in spring when the sun came out between sprinkles of rain and I imagined an elderly man with a white beard and a wide-brimmed straw hat strolling across the green bridge that spans a pond where reflections come and go and water lilies float.

I am sure I will think about it sometimes when I work in my own garden. I am not an artist. I am just a gardener and I am glad of it. It helps me to know that places like Giverny exist. And that Claude Monet, the painter, found inspiration in the sweet earth.

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