

MONET'S AND LOTI'S JAPANESE SPACES

Creating a Contemplation Space for Artistic Creation

Pierre Loti's Essays on Japanese Temple Art as a Key to Claude Monet's Water Garden

By Richard M. Berrong

For text with images see the Zeteo Journal website: zeteojournal.com

Though there is no evidence that Claude Monet and French novelist Pierre Loti ever met, these almost exact contemporaries developed similarly Impressionist styles.¹ They also, and probably not coincidentally, shared an interest in Japanese art, to the extent that they both incorporated it in significant ways into their homes. Loti's two essays on the Japanese temple art he discovered during his first tour of duty in the Far East give us insight into why his fellow Impressionist, who declined to write about his own work, may have designed his famous water garden to contain Japanese elements. It served not just as motifs for paintings but as a sort of secular temple necessary for the creation of his art.

¹ When Monet's Giverny estate was sold to the French government, the library contained several works by Loti, including his most Impressionistic novel, *Iceland Fisherman*. Letter from curator C. Lindsey to the author, 16 July 2008.

Richard M. Berrong is professor of French literature and Director of the Master of Liberal Studies program at Kent State University. His recent book, *Putting Monet and Rembrandt into Words: Pierre Loti's Recreation and Theorization of Claude Monet's Impressionism and Rembrandt's Landscapes in Literature* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Studies in Romance Language and Literature, 2013), explores the similarities between certain aspects of Monet's Impressionism and several of Loti's narratives. A previous *Zeteo* article, [**Oil Paintings of Word Paintings of Nature's Paintings**](#), discusses Gauguin's early Tahitian canvases and Pierre Loti's *Le Mariage de Loti* (*The Marriage of Loti*).

Monet's two gardens at Giverny

Claude Monet (1840-1926) is known today because of his paintings, of course. In addition, however, he is also famous for the two gardens he created on his property in Giverny, the flower garden immediately in front of his house and especially what he called the “water garden,” the pond with the arc bridge and water lilies on the other side of the road. Monet’s early biographer Gustave Geffroy was probably not the first and certainly not the last to assert that these gardens are works of art in their own right.² The botanist Georges Truffaut, perhaps reflecting a professional bias, wrote after the painter’s death that “Claude Monet’s most beautiful work, in my opinion, is his garden.”³

Monet initiated these gardens for the same reason any gardener works: to make his home life happier. His remark upon seeing a painting of irises by van Gogh makes this clear: “How could a man who has so loved flowers and light . . . have managed to be so unhappy?”⁴

Monet also developed his gardens, eventually, with an eye to potential painting motifs. The property is enclosed by a stone wall; Monet called it his *clos normand* (Norman enclosure). While the immediate world it shut out was itself lovely, full of open fields and woods that the artist painted many times, Monet arranged his gardens so that he would see a nature-filled world over which he nonetheless exercised complete aesthetic control. As art historian John House has remarked, the water garden “offered him a motif which was at the same time natural and at his own command.”⁵ For an artist who, while painting the Creuse river valley, had hired workers to cut the new leaves off a tree one spring so that it would remain as he had first started to paint it earlier in the year, the garden was the perfect compromise with nature, in that it did not appear to be one.⁶

Monet did not initially create the gardens to provide motifs for his work, however . . .

² Gustave Geffroy, *Monet: sa vie, son œuvre* (Paris: Macula, 1980) 443. After several decades of neglect following the painter’s death, Monet’s gardens were beautifully restored—largely with money donated by art-loving American philanthropists—after his son Michel gave the property to the state in 1966. On the history of the house and gardens and their restoration, see the book by the museum’s first curator, Gérald van der Kemp, *Une visite à Giverny* (Versailles: Art Lys, 1994). The same publisher also brought out an edition in English entitled *A Visit to Giverny*.

³ Georges Truffaut, “The Garden of a Great Painter,” *Jardinage*, November 1924, in *Monet: A Retrospective*, ed. Charles Stuckey (Beaux Arts Editions, 1985), 317.

⁴ John House, *Nature into Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 225.

⁵ House, *Nature into Art* 31. Marcel Proust observed that the flowers in the garden were arranged not naturally but so as to produce certain aesthetic effects (Judith Bumpus, *Impressionist Gardens* [New York: Phaidon, 1990], plate 25).

⁶ For a well-recounted version of the tree story, see Paul Hayes Tucker, *Monet in the 90s: The Series Paintings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 54.

. though, as we shall see, he definitely created them to facilitate that work. As Ann Dumas points out in her essay for an exhibition catalog devoted to the artist's garden canvases: "for the first dozen or so years that Monet spent at Giverny he did not paint the garden."⁷ The gardens were created and maintained to serve yet a third purpose, one intimately linked to the first two.

Monet creates his water garden

The more famous of the two gardens is probably the water garden. In 1893, three years after purchasing the house in Giverny that he had been renting since 1883, Monet acquired a parcel of land on the other side of railway tracks that ran along the bottom edge of his flower garden.⁸ After battles with the local government that he finally resolved by going over the officials' heads, the artist eventually obtained permission to divert water from a small stream to create a pond that he surrounded with trees, shrubs, and flowers and filled with water lilies. (The townsfolk did not have the foresight to realize that Monet's celebrity would one day save their town from extinction.) Over the pond Monet built a green wooden arc bridge, the design for which he evidently got from some of his Japanese prints. He referred to the structure in some of the paintings he did of it as a "Japanese bridge." Since then, this second garden has often been called his Japanese garden, though, as already noted, Monet himself called it a water garden.⁹ At first he and his children maintained it, but as Monet got older and wealthier, he employed as many as five full-time gardeners to take care of it.

As Paul Hayes Tucker has pointed out with regard to both gardens, "neither was planted exclusively with species from its own Eastern or Western region."¹⁰ When Monet went over the town officials to the department prefect to get permission to develop the water garden, he wrote that he wanted to create basins "with a view to growing aquatic plants."¹¹ He made no mention of Japanese gardens. In 1904 he went so far as to tell art

⁷ Ann Dumas, "Monet's Garden in Giverny," in *Painting the Modern Garden: Monet to Matisse* (London: Royal Academy Publications, 2015), 49.

⁸ House, *Nature into Art*, 31.

⁹ On Monet's source for the arc bridge, see Tucker, *Monet in the '90s*, 270; Anne Dumas, "Monet's Early Years at Giverny," *Painting the Modern Garden*, 215–16.

¹⁰ Tucker, *Monet in the '90s*, 270.

¹¹ Monet correspondance 1191. Monet's correspondance was published by Daniel Wildenstein at the end of the five volumes of his first catalogue raisonné of the painter's works: *Claude Monet: biographie et catalogue raisonné*, 5 vols. (Lausanne: La Bibliothèque des arts, 1974–1991). In this edition the pages are very large, the print small, and there are often many letters on a page. Therefore, in my citations I refer to the items as "Monet correspondance" and reference the painter's letters by the numbers assigned to them in the catalog.

critic Maurice Kahn that any resemblance between his water garden and a Japanese garden “is quite unintentional.”¹² Unlike what had been done for various “exotic” countries at the Paris Universal Exposition just a few years before in 1889, therefore, Monet’s goal in creating the water garden was not to replicate Japan in Normandy. Rather, he sought to provide himself with a peaceful, isolated world that was conducive to a certain state of mind. As Derek Fell remarked in his book about Monet’s gardens, “the water garden . . . is designed for introspection.”¹³

Nevertheless, the Japanese-style bridge and the water lilies, a European hybrid adapted from the lotus associated with Buddha, were not random decorations.¹⁴ Monet did consult a Japanese gardener in 1891 and followed up on his suggestions for plants to buy.¹⁵ He therefore seems to have believed that a certain type of Japanese-influenced setting would be particularly conducive to the sort of contemplation and reflection he felt he needed.

Monet’s refusal to talk about art

Understanding why Monet believed that it was worth the considerable expense involved to create and maintain these gardens gives us insight into his conception of his general creative process. The problem, however, as in studying his painting, is that the artist did not like to put his ideas about art into words. When one of his regular dealers, the Bernheim brothers, asked him to grant art critic Félix Fénéon an interview to promote their sale of his latest paintings, the painter tried to get out of it, explaining: “as for me, I find that it’s enough if I turn over my works to the public.”¹⁶ Elsewhere he phrased this more bluntly. To an unidentified correspondent he wrote: “It’s already quite enough to turn over what I do to the public without beating them over the head with what I think.”¹⁷ Monet never changed his stance on this issue. Near the end of his life he told Edmond Claris “Painting is my trade, and I feel that you should leave discussions [of art] to those who get excited about them and whose trade is writing.”¹⁸

¹² Maurice Kahn, “Claude Monet’s Garden,” *Le Temps* [Paris], 7 June 1904, in *Monet: A Retrospective*, 244.

¹³ Derek Fell, *The Magic of Monet’s Garden: His Planting Plans and Colour Harmonies* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2007) 84. As Claire A. P. Willson remarked in her essay on “Making the Modern Garden” in the catalog of the *Painting the Modern Garden* exhibit, French gardens of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “were typically places for pausing: somewhere to meditate, converse, remember a dream” (46).

¹⁴ Fell has enumerated the various sources from which Monet would have learned about Japanese gardens (*The Magic of Monet’s Garden*, 76–78) and noted that “many of the traditional Japanese garden designers were Zen Buddhists” (78).

¹⁵ Monet correspondance 1111b.

¹⁶ Monet correspondance 2248.

¹⁷ Monet correspondance 1308.

¹⁸ Monet correspondance 2634.

Fortunately for us, one of his fellow Impressionists, Pierre Loti (1850–1923, born Julien Viaud), did practice writing as a trade and did not experience Monet’s reticence about verbalizing his ideas on artistic creation. Examining his two essays on Japanese temple art, first published shortly before Monet began to develop his water garden, can give us insight into what may have been behind the creation and maintenance of the painter’s now famous space for contemplation.

Pierre Loti: “the great Impressionist”

In 1926, by which time Loti had died and Monet had ceased painting, André Suarès, the co-founder of the influential *Nouvelle revue française*, declared that “far more than Sisley, Claude Monet, or the Goncourt brothers, Loti was the great Impressionist.”¹⁹ This ranking may surprise modern American readers, but during their lifetimes Loti was as well and widely known an Impressionist in French literature as Monet was in French painting. Both men’s work subsequently fell out of fashion, but interest in Monet was revived in the 1960s, largely by American art scholars and museum exhibits. That the same has not yet happened for Loti is unfortunate for art lovers because, a student of painting himself, Loti did a remarkable job in some of his novels of reproducing verbally several aspects of French Impressionist painting, in particular Monet’s version of it.²⁰ It is perhaps no coincidence that Loti also shared with the painter a sustained effort to create in his home a Japanese space, one from which, as we shall see, he sought to derive the same benefits, benefits that he explained in several of his essays and travel narratives.

As royalties came in more and more plentifully over the last four decades of his life, Loti transformed the interior of his family home in Rochefort in southwestern France, one room at a time, into reminders of his travels as an officer in the French navy. He eventually acquired the houses on either side and in back and knocked down the separating walls until he had created behind the undistinguished facade that faces the street—as the street facade of Monet’s *clos normand* is undistinguished—a Turkish room, a Chinese room, an Arab room, a Medieval dining chamber, a Renaissance banquet hall, and even a mosque transported from the Near East.²¹ (There is a small garden in the interior courtyard but it is less striking

¹⁹ André Suarès, “Loti,” *Présences* (Paris: Émile-Paul Frères, 1926), 212.

²⁰ For a study of Loti’s literary Impressionism, see Richard M. Berrong, *Putting Monet and Rembrandt into Words: Pierre Loti’s Recreation and Theorization of Claude Monet’s Impressionism and Rembrandt’s Landscapes in Literature* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Studies in Romance Language and Literature, 2013), vol. 301.

²¹ On the development of Loti’s house see: Thierry Liot, *La Maison de Pierre Loti à Rochefort 1850–1923* (n.p.: Editions Patrimoines médias, 1999). Those who don’t read French can consult the lavishly illustrated article by Brigitte Baerl, “Historic Houses: The Novelist Pierre Loti. Dreams and Visions at Rochefort,” *Architectural*

than the rooms of the house, whereas Monet's house is less striking than his gardens.) Those rooms allowed Loti to both relive past experiences in foreign lands and—in the case of the Medieval dining chamber and Renaissance banquet hall—imagine others. In the same respect, Monet's gardens allowed the painter to re-experience old and capture new encounters with some of the nature that he had painted during the first decades of his career.

By supervising every detail of the decor, as Monet did with his gardens, Loti was also able to transform his living space into a work of art under his complete control for his own delectation and inspiration. Recalling John House's already-cited words on Monet's enclosed gardens, Loti biographer Alain Quella-Villéger wrote in his book on Loti's home: "it was with this house that he tried to invent his world."²² Like Monet's estate in Giverny, Loti's home became famous in his lifetime, the subject of articles in Parisian illustrated magazines.²³ After his son sold it to the city of Rochefort in 1969 and it was opened to the public, it also became a popular tourist attraction, welcoming 44,000 visitors in 1995.²⁴

Loti creates his Japanese pagoda

When he returned in 1886 from a tour of duty in the Far East as a naval officer, a tour that had included time in Japan, Loti found himself flush with royalties from the publication of his most recent—and most Impressionist—novel, *Pêcheur d'Islande (Iceland Fisherman)*.²⁵ He used some of that money to transform a dining room in his home into a place where he could live among the many objects that he had brought back.²⁶ He had a simple description—"the Turkish room"—for the bedroom that he had converted previously into a reminder of his time in Turkey. But he christened this new space for mental travel his "Japanese pagoda," at least in part because the objects with which he filled it were religious

Digest 35.3 (April 1978): 128–36.

²² Alain Quella-Villéger, *Chez Pierre Loti : Une maison d'écrivain-voyageur* (Poitiers: CRDP de Poitou-Charentes, 2008), 134.

²³ It is certainly true that Loti made use of the exotic décor he installed in his home as part of his efforts to shape the public's view of him as an adventurer and a lover of exotic foreign cultures. He invited the popular illustrated magazines of the era to send photographers when he staged festivities in the Renaissance banquet hall, the Medieval dining chamber, and the Chinese room. (On these festivities see Quella-Villéger.) That does not exclude the fact that he created and used these rooms for very real, personal purposes as well.

²⁴ For the history of the house's transformation into a museum and visitor statistics, see Quella-Villéger, *Chez Pierre Loti*, 120. After 1995, for fear that so much human traffic would cause deterioration, the hours and access were limited. Since 2013, it has been altogether closed to the public for extensive renovations.

²⁵ On the many similarities between *Iceland Fisherman* and Monet's Impressionism, see Chapter One of *Putting Monet & Rembrandt into Words*.

²⁶ In one of the essays that he wrote about his travels in Japan Loti mentions the cases of religious objects that he purchased there. See Pierre Loti, *Japoneries d'Automne* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1923), 69. Since this is one of the few Loti books not available in English, I simply give the page numbers in the standard French edition.

in nature.²⁷ As Monet with his own water garden, so Loti did not try to recreate a purely Japanese site. Quella-Villéger has pointed out that Loti included objects from other parts of the East as well.²⁸ However, in the two essays on the temples that he visited in Japan, Loti repeatedly remarks on the heterogeneity of the objects he observed in them.²⁹ The mix of objects he included in his pagoda can therefore not be adduced as an argument that Loti was not trying to reproduce at least some aspects of the Japanese temples he had visited.

The question then becomes: What specifically of his experience in those temples did Loti hope to recapture and maintain by constructing a Japanese pagoda in his French home? Bruno Gaudichon makes clear that the pagoda was “far from the prints . . . and the frail chinoiseries that impassioned the second half of the nineteenth century,” the bric-à-brac filled salons fitted out by wealthy Parisian hostesses to impress their guests with the latest trend in fashionable home decoration.³⁰ Loti was trying to create a space that afforded him a chance to think in a specifically different way.

Mental travel triggered by a carefully arranged enclosure was not new to Loti in 1886. A small garden in the courtyard of his childhood home had served the young Julien Viaud, not yet the world-famous Pierre Loti, as a place for reverie in solitude. In his semi-autobiographical narrative *Le Roman d'un enfant* (*The Story of a Child*), 1890, he recalls with great affection that the courtyard seemed to have a door that allowed his protagonist to travel in his imagination to far off lands.³¹ Even before he had the money or experience to transform a middle-class French kitchen into a fantasia on Japanese spirituality, therefore, Loti had known that the right setting made it possible to escape mentally, even when necessity required him to live in nineteenth-century bourgeois France.

The novelist subsequently created a Gothic dining chamber, a Renaissance hall, and a Chinese hall. These served as settings for elaborate costume balls, which received extensive

²⁷ For an inventory, see Marie-Pascale Bault, “La Pagode japonaise de la maison de Pierre Loti à Rochefort,” *Revue Pierre Loti* 34–35 (April–September 1988). Unfortunately, Loti’s son dismantled the pagoda in the early 1950s and sold off most of the contents on 26 December, 1953. Our knowledge of how Loti furnished it is therefore based on a few surviving photographs and two auction catalogs.

²⁸ Quella-Villéger, *Chez Pierre Loti*, 48.

²⁹ Loti, *Japoneries*, 18, 20, 221.

³⁰ Quoted in Liot, *La Maison de Pierre Loti*, 92. Loti made fun of such late nineteenth-century Parisian interior decoration in his first Japanese novel, *Madame Chrysanthème* (*Madame Chrysanthemum*) (Ch. XXXV). This novel was published at the same time as the two essays. It is, among other things, a critique of Emile Zola’s 1886 novel *L’Œuvre* (*The Masterpiece*), which had ridiculed Manet, Monet, and certain other modern painters in whose work Zola had lost interest. Cf. *Putting Monet & Rembrandt into Words*, Ch. Two.

³¹ Loti, *The Story of a Child*, Ch. XLVI.

and sometimes bemused coverage in the illustrated press of the day.³² The Japanese pagoda, however, like the mosque that Loti installed in 1895, remained for its creator a place to meditate and reflect alone. As Marie-Pascale Bault noted, from its very inception “the Japanese pagoda, unlike many of the other rooms in the house, was not the object of an inauguration marked by a [public] dinner or a celebration.”³³ But why did Loti choose to give a Japanese cast to his place of creative reflection, he who had traveled to so many different lands around the globe?

Loti’s Two Essays on Japanese Temple Art and The Insight They Offer into Monet

The answer can be extrapolated from two extended essays Loti published first in Juliette Adam’s *La Nouvelle revue* and then in a volume of pieces entitled *Japoneries d’automne* (*Things Having to Do with Japan in the Fall*).³⁴ They describe trips he made while in Japan to see temples in Kyoto and Nikko.

In both essays Loti begins by making a clear distinction between the modern Japan from which he departs, Kobe or Yokohama, and his destination. In Kobe he hears “all the familiar sounds of bells and whistles and steam that are made in Japan as in France” and remarks on “le quartier cosmopolite,” the cosmopolitan section of the city where one could hear English, French, and American nationals. But when he arrives in Kyoto he feels that it is an example of “le vrai Japon” (the real Japan).³⁵ If Yokohama is “a city and a population like those one finds everywhere.” In Nikko, however, “for the first time I have the feeling that I have penetrated to the very heart of this strange country, a heart full of life, full of artistic activity, rituals, and religion.”³⁶ Loti presents the real, authentic Japan as very different from the West, whose busy industrial culture another part of Japan was trying to assimilate.³⁷ For him real Japanese culture was a living creature, one with a pulsating, life-giving heart that was in contact with creative artistic forces. It was not the noisy and industrial elements that Japan had imported from the West, however.

³² On these balls, see Quella-Villéger, *Chez Pierre Loti*.

³³ Bault, 42.

³⁴ « Kioto, la ville sainte, » *La Nouvelle revue* (1 March, 1887); « La sainte montagne de Nikko, » *La Nouvelle revue* (15 Sept., 1 and 15 Oct. 1888). Both were included in *Japoneries d’automne* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1889), 1–76 and 153–258 respectively.

³⁵ Loti, *Japoneries*, 3, 2, 8.

³⁶ Loti, *Japoneries*, 155, 197.

³⁷ In certain respects Loti’s best novels display an interest in what has come to be known as Modernism. Here, however, he makes it very clear that the industrial, fast-paced aspects of the movement so dear to its definer, Charles Baudelaire, did not interest him. After flirting with them in some of his earlier work, Monet also abandoned those content aspects of Modernism.

a. Peace and Tranquility for the Creation of Art

Nor was this creative life force violent. The Japanese temples that Loti visited provided peace and tranquility, just the opposite of what he found in the modern world, whether in France or modern Japan. Nikko is “this place of repose . . . that is the goal of my trip.” There Loti finds “eternal . . . peace,” “an impression of nothingness [the nineteenth-century understanding of the Buddhist concept of emptiness], and supreme peace.”³⁸ That peace is, he realizes, essential for the creation of Japanese art, specifically painting. Visiting the porcelain factories in Kyoto, Loti decides that “it must have taken a long continuation of calm and temperance passed from generation to generation to form these virtuosos with hands so steady,” the artists whom he observes painting the cups and vases.³⁹

Monet felt this same need for “calm and temperance” to prepare his own mind and hand to paint, and he came to find it in his “Japanese” garden. By 1920 he wrote Geffroy that his time outside in the water garden was devoted solely to “the contemplation of nature, my eyesight no longer allowing me to give myself over as in the past to work outside, alas.”⁴⁰

b. Living in Harmony with Nature

The peace and tranquility Loti found in the Nikko temples came from an interdependence with nature. He is careful to describe how each section of the temples he visits includes trees, often flowers, sometimes streams or even waterfalls. “This complete communion with real nature, undisturbed in any way, is what gives these magnificent works their air of enchanted, magic things,” he remarked of the temple in Nikko devoted to the Emperor Yeyaz.⁴¹ Even the most basic, least glorious forms of nature, moss and lichen, are allowed to enter the innermost shrine where the emperor is buried.⁴² There is “an admiration for moss and lichen, for all the smallest luxuries of the forest.”⁴³

Monet would have been in sympathy. His friend and biographer Gustave Geffroy

³⁸ Loti, *Japoneries*, 190, 207, 225. On the nineteenth-century misunderstanding of the Buddhist concept of emptiness, see Jacquelynn Baas, *Smile of the Buddha: Eastern Philosophy and Western Art from Monet to Today* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 8.

³⁹ Loti, *Japoneries*, 37.

⁴⁰ Monet correspondance 2355.

⁴¹ Loti, *Japoneries*, 207–208.

⁴² Loti, *Japoneries*, 207.

⁴³ Loti, *Japoneries*, 230; cf. 214–15.

declared that the artist's "adoration for the universe found as its goal a pantheistic and Buddhist contemplation" of nature as well.⁴⁴ As Baas conceded, however, "for the Impressionist Claude Monet, the evidence of Buddhist influence is largely circumstantial."⁴⁵ Paul Hayes Tucker has asserted that, like Loti with regard to Japanese temple artists, Monet "understood Japanese woodblock prints as the product of 'primitive' artists whose talents derived from their deep feeling for nature," part of a people who "were able to penetrate the very essence of nature."⁴⁶ For Monet as for Loti, therefore, some Japanese artists lived in a world where there was a "complete communion with real nature."

This was an idea also held by other French artists who had not been to Japan, no doubt a reflection of their distaste for the recent rapid industrialization and urbanization of their own country and a consequent idealization of what, for lack of knowledge, they saw as a pre-industrial country. Thus Pierre Renoir imagined that "the Japanese still have a simplicity of life which gives them time to go about and to contemplate. They still look, fascinated, at a blade of grass, or the flight of birds, or the wonderful movements of fish, and they go home, their minds filled with beautiful ideas, which they have no trouble in putting on the objects they decorate."⁴⁷

Baas declared that "Claude Monet was one of the first artists to articulate a meditative state of mind in the process of creation."⁴⁸ Like the Japanese artists Loti observed, Monet came to see living in harmony with a closely observed nature to be necessary to his artistic creation.

c. Finding the Harmony in Nature that Leads to Peace and Tranquility

For Loti, the peace and tranquility he found in the Japanese temples allowed the artists who worked there to discover harmony in even the apparently most disparate aspects of nature. In the artwork inside the Nikko temple devoted to the Emperor Yeyaz, for example, he felt that "so many rare and extravagant things end up forming great tranquil lines when taken as a whole; so many living forms, so many contorted bodies, turned up wings, extended claws, open maws, and suspicious glances end up forming calm, absolute calm, as a result of

⁴⁴ Geffroy, *Monet*, 453.

⁴⁵ Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 17. At the risk of being repetitive, I will repeat the line dear to the best of Monet scholars: if there are similarities between the painter's work or thought and that of others who preceded him, it is usually less a question of influence than of Monet making use of something that he found in accord with his already existing ideas.

⁴⁶ Tucker, *Monet in the '90s*, 139.

⁴⁷ Judith Bumpus, *Impressionist Gardens* (New York: Phaidon, 1990), 38.

⁴⁸ Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 19.

inexplicable harmony.”⁴⁹ Elsewhere in that shrine the author observed the same effect. There was, he wrote, “such taste in arrangement beneath thousands of diverse forms, such agreement in drawings of extreme complexity, that the whole seems simple and in repose.”⁵⁰ Loti went so far as to proclaim: “I believe, for that matter, that this is the quintessence of Japanese art; the detached sections of it brought into our European collections cannot give a true impression of that.”⁵¹

Once again Monet would have been in sympathy. As Paul Hayes Tucker has pointed out, after a painting trip the artist liked to gather all his new canvases around him in the calm of his studio back in Giverny so that he could “harmonize” them as parts of one larger whole.⁵² In November, 1886, for example, a year after Loti’s experience in the Japanese temples, the painter approached the end of a sojourn on Brittany’s Belle-Île. He wrote to his companion Alice Hoschedé about the canvases he had partially completed there: “I’ll have to ripen all that when I see it in the studio, with you next to me on that poor old sofa.”⁵³ To his principle dealer, Paul Durand-Ruel, he wrote: “I don’t have anything completed. . . . I can only judge what I’ve done when I look over it at home, and I always need a moment of repose before I can put the last touches on my canvases.”⁵⁴ Like those Japanese temple artists, Monet felt that he needed repose to find the unifying harmony that lay behind individual forms derived from nature. One of the great appeals of Giverny for him was that, far from Paris, it provided such repose. His letters, especially the later ones, are filled with requests that friends not visit him in Giverny while he was working and ever more frequent refusals to leave it for Paris.

As Denise Delouche has shown, Monet’s depictions of the rough Belle-Île coast constitute the artist’s first real attempt to create what we now refer to as his “series” paintings, the most famous of which are the *Grainstacks*, the *Poplars*, and the *Rouen Cathedral*.⁵⁵ The fact that he continued to develop such series during the last four decades of his life shows that, like Loti recalling the art in the Japanese temples, the painter had come to feel that the potential for finding harmonies between different artistic depictions of nature added

⁴⁹ Loti, *Japoneries*, 221.

⁵⁰ Loti, *Japoneries*, 219.

⁵¹ Loti, *Japoneries*, 221. In this sense Loti anticipated modern art museums, which often try to display works of art in the same sort of context they would originally have enjoyed, rather than as works in isolation, which was how they were customarily displayed in nineteenth-century Parisian homes.

⁵² Tucker, *Monet in the '90s*, 87.

⁵³ Monet correspondance 739.

⁵⁴ Monet correspondance 741.

⁵⁵ Denise Delouche, *Monet à Belle-Île* (Plomelin: Palantines, 2006).

to a viewer's experience of those interpretations. In 1907 he wrote to Durand-Ruel that the canvases in his first series of impressions of the water lilies—paintings indebted to Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai's "Two Men Washing a Horse in a Waterfall"—would benefit from being seen and shown together "since their complete effect can only be produced when shown together in one exposition."⁵⁶ Like Loti after visiting those Japanese temples, Monet was coming to believe that art inspired by a holistic understanding of nature could not be truly appreciated if it was not viewed in its original, complete context, a context that was the result of the artist's efforts to capture all, or at least many of, the aspects of that nature and harmonizing them.⁵⁷

d. Art That Takes Us Back in Time

Perhaps because it was in such close accord with nature, in both Nikko and Kyoto the real, vital Japan that Loti found seemed to have a direct link with and foundation in the very distant, primitive past. In the Kyoto temples "the whole sends your mind very far away to past eras."⁵⁸ In Nikko even a new temple is "similar to those from a thousand years ago" and allows Loti to discover "that past that seemed so far away."⁵⁹ With these temples and their art the past was—or at least appeared to Loti to be—still present, not just as ancient artifacts but as part of a still-living-and-creating culture.⁶⁰

The giant canvases of the water lilies and others of the works Monet did as a result of reflections in his Japanese garden also take the viewer back through time to distant and still living origins. Speaking of the *Les Grandes décorations*, the great waterlily panels that Monet painted during his last years and that now hang in the Orangerie art museum in Paris,

⁵⁶ Monet correspondance 1832.

⁵⁷ As mentioned earlier with regard to the different exotic rooms Loti had installed in his home, some of Monet's series paintings were not without a commercial aspect. As Paul Hayes Tucker has very convincingly argued in *Monet in the 90s*, Monet undertook the *Grainstacks* and *Poplars* series, both of which he was able to sell for record prices, with an awareness that some of his *haute bourgeois* clientele were taking a renewed interest in life in the country and, especially after the humiliating defeat of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, were starting to see the French farmer as the symbol of important virtues. Again, however, that does not negate or exclude the fact that his growing interest in creating series seems to have been a result of a more holistic conception of nature, the subject of most of his paintings from 1886 on.

⁵⁸ Loti, *Japoneries*, 19.

⁵⁹ Loti, *Japoneries*, 196–97.

⁶⁰ Loti felt he had encountered something similar a few years before in small-town Brittany, which he got to know through two navy friends, Pierre Kermadec and Guillaume Flourey. In fact, what Loti—and many nineteenth-century artists, among them Paul Gauguin—saw in Brittany as the living continuation of an ancient culture was not that at all, but rather relatively recent. On this misreading of Breton costumes and those who wore them, see Fred Orton, Griselda Pollock, "Les Données Bretonnantes: La Prairie de Représentation," *Avant-gardes and Partisans Reviewed*, ed. Fred Orton, Griselda Pollock (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996) 53–88.

art historian Georges Grappe wrote that the artist “simplifies the universe and reduces everything to the primordial elements that govern nature.”⁶¹ René Gimpel saw these panels while they still hung in Monet’s studio in Giverny. In his diary for 19 August 1918, he wrote: “we seem to be present at one of the first moments of the birth of the world.”⁶² Like the Japanese artists in their isolated temple cities, Monet appears to have found in his Japanese-inflected contemplation space a way of reconnecting his art and its viewers with the life-giving origins of nature.

e. Art that Frees Us from the Limits of the Self

If this art freed the viewer from the apparent limits of time, it also removed the conceptual shackles imposed by our Western idea of the individual self occupying a specific, discrete place in space. On the evening of his second day in Nikko, after having observed the temples there and learned so much from his consideration of their art, Loti meets a young boy to whom, earlier in the day, he had given some coins. The boy now hands him a bouquet of simple flowers that he gathered for Loti in gratitude. “This is the only proof of heart and memory that has been given to me in Japan, in the nearly six months I have wandered around here,” Loti wrote. It “evokes so quickly the feeling of the universal brotherhood of suffering, sweet, deep pity! . . . I leave, carrying away my bouquet of wild campanula, the only disinterested memory of this country that will stay with me.”⁶³ For a moment he feels one with his fellow man, even someone so very different as this particularly scruffy young boy.

Monet strove to bring out what he saw as the interdependence of apparently disparate things in nature as well. By the summer of 1888 Loti had published both of his essays on Japanese temple art in *La Nouvelle revue* and Monet had realized his first series (Belle-Île). Monet told an English friend, the art critic E.M. Rashdall:

One of his great points is to use the same colors on every part of the canvas. Thus the sky would be slashed with strokes of blue, lake, green, and yellow, with a preponderance of blue; a green field would be worked with the same colors with a preponderance of green, while a piece of rock would be treated in the same way, with a preponderance of red. By working in this way, the same color appearing all over the canvas, the subtle harmony of nature, that middle tint or base, in which nature puts her accents, is successfully obtained without the loss of color which was

⁶¹ Cited in Geffroy, *Monet*, 384.

⁶² René Gimpel, *Journal d'un collectionneur, marchand de tableaux* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1963), 68.

⁶³ Loti, *Japoneries*, 239–240.

necessary by reducing the whole to a base of brown or gray [as academic painters did].⁶⁴

House does a wonderful job of showing with specific examples how “in the series, from the *Grainstacks* onward, . . . Monet’s interest in overall colour harmonies became apparent.”⁶⁵ As Loti learned during his travel to Nikko, so Monet strove to depict worlds in which everything was connected, the boundaries that separated one thing from another ever more on the verge of dissolving. In her chapter on the painter, Baas went so far as to suggest that “the paintings of Claude Monet may yet be the most eloquent Western expression of the Buddhist concepts of impermanence and the interdependence of all things.”⁶⁶

f. The Importance of Light and Its Dissolution of Discrete Forms in Nature and Art

Light is part of this view of the world. Loti twice explains how the cedars in the courtyard of the temple devoted to the Emperor Yeyaz “rise up like obelisks and seem to bring down from up above that pale, sliding light that makes the splendid things in the temple enclosures shine softly.”⁶⁷ If Monet’s water garden is known for its pond and water lilies to those who have never visited it, those who have strolled along its winding paths know that it is also full of just such tall trees which produce exactly the same lighting effect as the one Loti describes. More generally, it is with his focus on the effects of light that Monet’s impressionism seems to dissolve and intermingle the natural forms that inspired his canvases. As art historian John Canaday remarked: “the impressionist does not analyze form but only receives the light reflected from that form onto the retina of his eye and seeks to reproduce the effect of that light, rather than the form of the object reflecting it.”⁶⁸

The Function of Japanese Space for Loti

After having looked at his two essays on Japanese temple art, we can now turn back to Loti’s Japanese pagoda, which he also referred to as a “Buddhist pagoda,” and have a better understanding of what purposes he might have meant it to serve.⁶⁹ As noted earlier, his choice of the word “pagoda” makes it clear that, unlike most of his other room transformations, Loti saw his Japanese space as a place of retreat from the everyday world

⁶⁴ Quoted in House, *Nature into Art*, 127. Rashdall’s interview appeared in the 2 July, 1888 edition of *The Artist*.

⁶⁵ House, *Nature into Art*, 127.

⁶⁶ Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 25.

⁶⁷ Loti, *Japoneries*, 205; cf. also 203.

⁶⁸ John Canaday, *Mainstreams of Modern Art* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1959), 182. Loti did the same sort of thing in *Iceland Fisherman*. See *Putting Monet & Rembrandt into Words*, Chapter One.

⁶⁹ Quella-Villéger, *Chez Pierre Loti*, 47.

into an area designed for spiritual contemplation. This is also suggested by the fact that most of the objects he put in it were of a religious nature. Interestingly, a photograph taken of him in the pagoda shows Loti in regular European attire. Usually, when he had himself photographed in the other geographically specific rooms, he presented himself wearing appropriate outfits. The Japanese pagoda was not, therefore, created as a place to imagine that he was physically somewhere else. Rather, he installed it to provide a space where the Loti who had to be in France could move beyond concerns with which individual he was, where and when, to recapture what he had learned after viewing the temple art in Japan about the timeless oneness of all nature. As Quella-Villéger observed with regard to his decoration of his house, “Loti isn’t a collector, he’s a stage designer. . . . [T]he truth is not to be looked for in the museum value of the objects . . . , but in the intent to create an ambiance,” one that in this case freed him at least mentally from the limitations of time and space.⁷⁰ A courtyard, providing the presence of nature, was just on the other side of the pagoda’s outside wall.⁷¹ Within the limitations imposed on him, therefore, Loti was in fact able to construct something that must, in the darkness, have done a good job of reminding him what he had learned from the temples in Japan and the flower-offering young boy.

The Function of Japanese Space for Monet

Monet wrote to his friend, the statesman Georges Clemenceau, that when he was working in his water garden:

I focus my attention on a maximum number of appearances [that are] in close correlation with unknown realities. When you are working with concordant appearances, you can’t be very far from reality, or at least what we can know of it. All I’ve done is look at what the universe showed me, to give witness to it with my paintbrush. Is that nothing?⁷²

Like the Buddha and the Japanese artists who followed him, some of whom designed gardens in Japan, Monet believed that what we see of nature is “in close correlation with unknown realities” that might be perceived through its regular, careful, sympathetic contemplation.

Above all Monet did this through contemplating his water garden in the last two decades of his life and conveying his impressions of it on canvas. This seems to have led him

⁷⁰ Quella-Villéger, *Chez Pierre Loti*, 45.

⁷¹ For a floorplan of Loti’s house, see Liot, *La Maison de Pierre Loti*, 144.

⁷² Georges Clemenceau, *Claude Monet* (Paris: Perrin, 2000), 130.

to a Buddhist perspective. In their fascinating introduction to the catalog of an exhibit devoted to Monet and Japan, Virginia Spate and David Bromfield, analyzing the innovations of the 1907–08 water lily series, remark that “Monet’s new construction of space destroyed the way Western linear perspective centered on and controlled the individual consciousness of the spectator. In so doing, it dissolved that consciousness into the otherness of the natural world which he embodied in paint.”⁷³ This recalls the dissolution of individual human identity that Loti learned to appreciate during his study of Japanese temple art, something that was exemplified by his reaction to the young boy’s floral gift at the end of his stay in Nikko.

For art critic Louis Gillet, that 1907–08 water lily series was definitely proof of the influence of Buddhism on Monet’s art. In a review of the series, Gillet declared that the painter’s work was “the sole European work which is truly related to Chinese thought, to the vague hymns of the Far East . . . on detachment, on nirvana, on the religions of the Lotus.”⁷⁴

Spate and Bromfield attribute this Buddhist perspective to Monet’s study of Japanese art: he “had been inspired by Japanese paintings whose very meaning lay in breaking down the boundaries between the self and nature. It should not be surprising that Monet’s paintings lure the spectator into such experience,” which the later ones certainly do, as I have already noted. “The eye drawn into multiple, fluctuating dimensions, one can lose the sense of separate bodily identity and feel consciousness dissolve into the painting, and into the light that it embodies,” an experience similar to the one Loti describes in the Japanese temples.⁷⁵ Monet’s contemplation in and of his Japanese space seems to have led him to this similar perspective on nature and the place of human beings in it.

Conclusion

Both Monet in his water garden in Giverny and Loti in his pagoda in Rochefort sought and apparently on occasion found the same things: the peace and tranquility necessary for artistic creation and self-renewal, born at least in part of a release from the Western concept of the

⁷³ Quoted in Spate, Bromfield, “A New and Strange Beauty,” 57. Degas went to see the exhibition of the 1907 *Water lily* series at the Durand-Ruel gallery. He told Monet afterward: “I only stayed a moment. Your paintings made me dizzy.” (Gimpel, *Journal d’un collectionneur*, 179.)

After finishing revisions on this article, I went up to the Cleveland Museum of Art to stand, once again, for a long time before the example of the 1907-08 *Water Lily* series that I provide here, the one that belongs to the Museum of Fine Art in Houston. It is truly an astounding work, very different from/more innovative than his previous *Water lily* studies, some of which were hanging in the same gallery as part of the *Monet to Matisse* exhibit. The perspective changes as you focus on different parts of the painting; no one perspective can make sense of it all. Years before Picasso, Monet had indeed found a way to make the viewer lose himself in a painting as he tries to figure out where he is situated with respect to what it presents.

⁷⁴ Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 25.

⁷⁵ Spate, Bromfield, “A New and Strange Beauty,” 60.

discrete, independent self. This came, it would seem, from a Buddhistic ability to lose themselves in the greater whole of nature.

This search for what, for these two artists, was a state of mind necessary for artistic creation was not appreciated by some of their critics, however. One of the saddest but most revealing passages in all of Loti's work comes in the last chapter of *L'Inde sans les Anglais* (*India*), 1903, his narrative of an extended trip through that subcontinent. There he wrote:

I will not try to repeat what [the Sages] started to teach me [during an effort to learn more about Buddhism].

First of all, can I be sure that you would follow me in those abstract regions, which would seem so outside my [regular] path? I know that people expect only the illusion of a trip, a reflection of the thousands of things over which I cast my eyes.⁷⁶

Like Monet, Loti knew that in his day painters of “appearances” were not taken seriously by the art establishment, many of whom still preferred works that have since fallen out of favor: mythological and historical works designed to edify viewers with profound and noble thought.⁷⁷ As John House has pointed out, “Monet’s work was regularly described as decorative from the 1870s on.”⁷⁸ Fortunately for us, neither Monet nor Loti seems to have cared enough about these critics’ dismissal of their Impressionism to change what they were doing. (Nor did they need to conform to survive. By the last two decades of their lives, both were earning large incomes from their very Impressionist work.) This was at least in part, no doubt, because they had created their Japanese spaces to help them forget about the aggravations of the passing world and lose themselves in the dreamy lands from which emerged their Impressionist interpretations of the deeper realities they found in the nature around them.

⁷⁶ *India* VI: 14. Loti had arranged for a meeting with Annie Besant, a then-famous member of the Theosophical Society, which played an important role in introducing Buddhist thought in Europe. On Besant see: Anne Taylor, *Annie Besant: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁷⁷ For a very readable account of the Impressionists’ struggles with the Academy and traditionalist art critics, see Ross King, *The Judgment of Paris* (New York: Walker & Company, 2006).

⁷⁸ House, *Nature into Art*, 133.