

## Mad Enchantment: Claude Monet and the Painting of the Waterlilies by Ross King, 2016

The following are excerpts from King's book on Monet's water lily paintings and his deteriorating health, specifically his sight. Passages that track eyesight issues are in bold type.

p. 23 CM began creating his garden in 1893, after buying marshland on other side of the road and railroad tracks, beside the River Ru. Pulled strings to create pond by diverting the river with sluices and grilles; inspired by Hokusai woodcuts, had a Japanese bridge built.

p. 24 First waterlilies arrived in 1894, from Joseph Bory Latour-Marliac's nursery in Bordeaux. He had crossbred hardier white water lilies with tropical varieties from the Gulf of Mexico to create viable lilies in yellows, blues, and pinks. CM saw them at the Exposition Universale in Paris in 1889. He vowed to plant his garden to please the eye and create "motifs to paint." CM ordered two pink and four yellow lily plants. Later he ordered red plants. In 1895 he painted his pond for the first time. In 1896 Maurice Guillemot, a journalist, marveled at the water garden and CM told him he planned to decorate a circular room with his waterlily pond paintings.

p. 25 CM did not create the circular room display and stored his early WL paintings. By 1898 (?) he tripled the size of the pond and built four more bridges; he added the wisteria trellis to the Japanese bridge.

p. 40 CM began painting his expanded water garden in 1903. Reportedly worked on 12 canvases at same time, rotated according to the light. Paul Durand-Ruel planned to show them in 1907 but CM asked to postpone the show for a year, then destroyed 30 canvases. A violent storm damaged the gardens that spring, prompting CM to renounce the project. Alice despaired of his moods; reportedly on one day in May he destroyed \$100,000 worth of paintings.

p. 41 **He began suffering headaches, fits of dizziness and blurred vision. By the summer of 1908, the waterlily paintings "had become an obsession." In 1909 he exhibited 48 paintings of the lily pond. Nervous fatigue set in, due to "his attempt to do something entirely new and different, indeed revolutionary." CM: "The crucial thing is the mirror of water whose appearance changes constantly with the reflections from the sky."**

p. 42 CM unique in trying to paint a still, reflective surface of water in a steep, close-up perspective — instead of distant effects such as moonlight shimmering on ruffled waters. Also wanted to include "vegetation undulating" in the half-hidden depths. His success was the result of a sophisticated technique of applying his paints— " a touch of many accents: crisscrossed, ruffled, speckled...a frenzy." Monet chose canvases with a pronounced weave, one whose weft was thicker than the warp. The he applied a series of undercoats, allowing each to dry before adding the next.

p. 43 He brushed at right angles to the weft so its threads trapped more of the pigment, creating corrugations and giving the canvas "textural vibrations." Thus he used canvas and brush to suggest the rippling of the water on the surface and, in the declivities marked by the warp threads, the underlying depths. He sometimes used a dozen or more layers of paint; often

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scraped off one or two layers, leaving an uneven texture to further enhance the shimmering appearance of later paint.

CM began to lower his focus; gradually water, land, and sky began to blend and change places, or even disappear entirely, as standing by the pond, CM lowered his gaze to focus on the water. By 1904 the sky was cropped out, appearing only as a reflection. By 1905, the opposite bank of land disappeared. In 1907 he began painting views that were taller than they were wide, showing reflected willow branches among the lilies. In 1909 Louis Gillet called them up-side-down paintings because the sky was at the bottom and the landscape (the reflection of the willows) was at the top. No one had ever painted like this before.

p. 44 Gillet said they were remarkable for their abstraction, saying “the pure abstraction of art can go no further.” Monet would have disagreed, as his art was an “attempt to reproduce what he saw as faithfully as possible, with fanatical attention to visual evidence, however transient.”

Success of 1909 exhibition led to calls for the 48 paintings to be kept together as a decorative ensemble, just as Clemenceau had called for the Rouen Cathedral paintings to be purchased by the government in 1895. To no avail in either case.

p. 50 After Clemenceau’s visit in 1914, CM wrote he was rising at 4AM “whatever the weather...I have undertaken a great project.”

CM downplayed the role of drawing in his art because it smacked of forethought and went against the Impressionist ideal of spontaneity. But he was talented draftsman with charcoal, pen, pencil or crayon and often did preparatory studies.

p. 52 **CM able to resume work in spring of 1914 because his vision had stabilized since learning he was losing the sight in his right eye. Undergoing treatment from an ophthalmologist to delay an operation. He still had poor vision in his left eye with limited depth perception. His color vision was distorted but he compensated by “trusting the labels on my tubes and the method I adopted for laying out my pigments on my palette.” But he confessed his “infirmity” gave him various remissions, periods of visual clarity that allowed him to tinker with the color balance of his canvases. In spring of 1914 his complaints ceased for the moment and he took the precaution of avoiding direct sunlight and wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat when out of doors.**

p. 53-4 CM returning to use of oversize canvases (Luncheon on the Grass, 1865, and Women in thenGarden, 1866). Almost all his paintings since the mid-1860’s had been 3 feet wide. The works that made his reputation — wheat stacks, poplars, Rouen Cathedral, London— barely ever exceeded 3 feet in width or height.

In 1914 CM began to work on canvases 5 feet tall by 6.5 feet wide. He may have used a smaller canvas by the pond and scaled up to the larger size in his studio, as he would have needed assistance to move a large canvas with paint boxes and easel the 100 yards to and from the pond. Blanche helped him in earlier days and was a constant source of companionship and support.

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p. 55 It was Blanche who brought him out of his depression and back to painting after Alice's death in 1911.

p. 57 Paradoxically, for a painter who wished to give the impression of spontaneity, CM's painting technique involves a good deal of forethought and groundwork. Each canvas primed with lead white, a luminous ground for bright color (not the brown or red used by academic painters, old masters). Also did not use bituminous-based glazes that gave an Old Master patina.

Earlier in his career CM had captured the sparkling effects of sunlit water on the Thames thanks to a palette that included cobalt blue, invented in 1859, and chromium oxide green, created in 1862. He also aimed to use pigments that would not fade or yellow, as so many pigments were prone to do. By 1914, his palette had been narrowed to those pigments he believed to be the most stable. He also mixed them much less than he had in the 1860s and 1870s. Also squeezed them out on absorbent paper to extract some of the poppy oil binder because he knew it was the oil rising to the surface that caused the yellowing of many Old Masters.

p. 69 CM vowed to stay at Giverny during the war: "if those barbarians wish to kill me, I will die among my canvases...."

p. 72 CM tells Gustave Geoffroy he was at "the beginning of a great work."

p. 76 Octave Mirbeau was among the first to see the beginnings of the grand new project. But CM did not paint after June.

p. 80 By the end of November he had resumed.

p. 82 Upholding French artistic and cultural values in the face of such barbarism was an important part of the war effort.

p. 89 CM was admired by writers like Emile Zola and Marcel Proust. A member of the Les Dix, the ten members of the Academie Goncourt, founded in 1900, which lunched once a month at the cafe de Paris.

p. 94 CM's ambitions for his paintings, his "grand decorations," were beginning to stretch beyond his and Clemenceau's original vision of a domestic setting. He was aiming at a public venue. The question was where and who would pay for it. (He usually exhibited with Durand-Ruel but thought the gallery too small and not well enough lit.)

p. 101 CM invites Les Dix to Giverny. Five come; he explains his plan to decorate a circular room and may have begun to consider an oval shaped room, as in the restaurant Drouant's Salon Goncourt.

p. 102 CM revealed he was to build a studio expressly for the project; it was completed in four months.

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p. 106 CM works through out summer of 1915, despite inclement weather.

p. 109 CM worked hard through the autumn of 1915, despite falling ill and being confined to bed for a time.

p. 121 CM did his part in the war effort. He donated several paintings to be raffled to help charities for soldiers, often buying lots of tickets as well. He helped Madame Clementel's charity with a painting donation. Her husband had just persuaded August Rodin to donate his works to France so that his Paris home could be transformed at state expense into a museum in his honor.

p.123 CM began a plan for a similar sort of glorification for himself.... In 1916 he wrote he had no time to waste (he's 76) and place orders for larger canvases (6.5 feet by 4'11" and 6.5 feet by 4'3").

p. 138 By November 1916 CM appeared to think he was at the end of his labors on the Grand Decoration. Yet uncertainty about his achievement suddenly took hold, apparently precipitated by the prospect of Matisse's scrutiny, which appears to have unnerved him or made him look at his paintings anew. (Matisse was to have visited in 1916 but didn't come until May of 1917.) This crisis persisted into the new year. Not even the highly successful sale of 24 paintings in New York could lift his spirits.

p. 142 CM did little or no work in the early months of 1917. He mad frequent trips to Paris to his dentist.

p. 144 Clementel and Briand, two important members of the government came April 30, 1917.

p. 145 They were undoubtedly given a tour of the Grand Decoration in Monet's studio. They proposed CM go to Reims, "the national cathedral," to paint the cathedral in its present state (between shelling assaults). Twenty-six kings and queens of France had been crowned there. It had become the victim of German artillery during a five-day bombardment on 1914, killing dozens of people and hitting the cathedral with 200 shells.

p. 147 CM's painting would be part of a propaganda offensive against the Germans. He was eager to to accept — he would finally be working on a state commission which he had coveted — and he would be contributing to the war effort.

p. 154 CM may have gone to Reims with Clemenceau in September of 1917, according to Louis Vauxcelles. But the town was still under attack.

p. 156 Although the Reims commission seemed in jeopardy, it appears to have kick-started Monet's interest in painting. By August he was working "with more passion than ever." His older brother Leon died, and after the funeral he took a vacation to the Normandy coast.

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p. 159 Did not stay in Hotel de l'Amirauté, where he painted Impression Sunrise in 1872, but in the Continental.

p. 160 Clementel officially offered the Reims commission to Monet in October and his mood brightened.

p. 161 Durand-Ruel wanted photos of Monet's large paintings to tantalize their clients. A photographer arrived in November of 1917, taking pix of the paintings (6.5 by 14 feet) and the studio. Several of the paintings were positioned at 160 degree angles or end to end to create an immense curving tableau, almost 56 feet in length, as if for a large circular room.

p. 162-3 CM was working out complexity of ensuring the ensemble made a continuous loop, with perspective remaining consistent and convincing and that the color and lighting in harmonized with that of the paintings adjacent.

p. 165-6 Clemenceau becomes prime minister. CM felt this boded well for his Grand Decoration being accepted by the state.

p. 167 The scale of Monet's ambitions were divulged to an art critic, Francois Thiebault-Sisson, who came to Giverny on a spring-like day in early 1918. He revealed Monet's plan was to paint a total of 12 large canvases, 8 of which had already been completed and 4 "under way." Meanwhile 4 other paintings of similar size were in stages of progress. The finished ensemble would stretch 168 feet or 56 yards, around the perimeter of the desired room, which would need to be at least 60 yards in circumference and 20 yards across. He thought he might finish in a year but had trouble finding carpenters and materials due to the war.

p. 168-9 He began to transfer from Reims to the Grand Decoration. Clementel appears to have been considering the Grand Decoration to be he propaganda — the glory of French culture — instead of the ill-fated Reims project.

p. 172-4 Paris being bombed, 1917-18. By end of May 1918 the Allied line bilged and the Germans 40 miles from Paris. CM considers the possibility he'll be forced to flee. Later said, "I don't believe I shall ever leave Giverny....As I've said, I would still prefer to perish here in the midst of all I have done." As always, he worked best in a crisis, throwing himself into his work to escape the calamities that were virtually within earshot of his garden... throughout the perilous spring of 1918.

p. 175 What he achieved during those months was a number of remarkable canvases that reveal a combination of artistic experimentation, mental disturbance, and defiant resolution in the face of age and death. **Most striking, a series of paintings of his Japanese bridge, painted on canvases only three feet high, painted only at certain times of day. He painted only in early morning and late afternoon to preserve his eyesight; most at dawn and dusk. Many he would rework, but all were painted with wildly undulating forms added in flickering tongues of tropical color. (cf. Mia's The Japanese Bridge, 1923-5?) In some the bridge is outlined in blood red accents; other times it dissolves into a sea green reverie with calm sapphire highlights; while in others the bridge is a multicolored arch twisting across a lake**

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of fire and blood, with a conflagration raging in the background— an apocalypse devouring a fairyland.

p. 176-7 CM's paintings of weeping willows have aspects of the traditional elegiac qualities: symbol of death and or female mourning. Yet CM's weeping willows, with their contorted branches and Monet's darker palette suggest torture and suffering. A firm riposte to anyone who regards CM as the "great anti-depressant." The willow is the ideal metaphor for CM himself, a kind of emblem of the artist heroically struggling during the war years (Paul Hayes Tucker).

p. 178 August, 1918. According to art dealer Rene Gimpel, CM said, "I don't receive when I'm working, no, I don't receive. When I'm working, if interrupted, it just finishes me, I'm lost. ... I'm chasing the merest sliver of color...I want to grasp the intangible. It's terrible how the light runs out, taking color with it. Color, any color, lasts a second, sometimes three or four minutes at most.... Ah how I suffer, how painting makes me suffer. It tortures me. The pain it causes me."

p. 179 Gimpel was shown 3 x 6 foot paintings painted in spring and summer of 1918, not Grand Decoration. Gimpel thought about 30 of them. Gimpel wondered who might buy them, as they were too large for most of the homes of his American buyers, his most reliable market.

p. 191 Clemenceau visited CM Nov. 18 and selected two paintings CM intended to give to the state. Not known which they were but in Musee des Arts Decoratif (?). But Clemenceau had seen the large Grand Decoration.

p. 192 More grandiose plans (than the donation of the two smaller paintings) were quickly proposed. Gustave Geoffrey wrote that Clemenceau came that day to "choose some canvases from the new series of waterlilies." In another account, published in 1920, Geoffrey wrote "On that [November day] the gift to the state of a series of water lily paintings was decided, with the paintings to be selected by Clemenceau and accepted as a tribute to victorious France." Geoffrey credited CM with expanding the donation; CM credited Clemenceau.

p. 194 A few days later, CM ill and despondent.

p. 199 Seine flooding, January 1919, with Giverny surrounded by water. Discouragement.

p. 205 By summer of 1919, CM "working in a state of euphoria, favored by the splendid weather." (very hot, though) "I've started a series of landscapes (3 x 6.5') that I love and hope will interest you," he wrote to gallery owners Gaston and Josse Bernheim-Jeune, adding he was postponing work on the Grand Decoration until winter. Similar in theme but intended to be sold on the art market. (Could Paul G. Allen's The Water-Lily Pond, 1919, be one of these?) CM felt he needed some income to offset the loss of income from the five years of work on the soon-to-be-donated Grand Decoration.

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p. 206-7 Ominously none of the 4 works found a buyer — shifting trends post war. More than 350 artists had died in the war, many the apostles of modern art (Boccioni, Franz Marc), and others had died of Spanish flu (Klimt, Schiele). Youthful avant-garde not fans of Impressionism.

p. 207 **For the previous 5 years, CM had suffered very few problems with his cataracts, partly because of the precautions he took. However, the good weather of the summer of 1919 had coaxed him out of the shadows and into the bright light, and the many hours of daring at the sparkling surface of the pond exacerbated his eye condition. Clemenceau advised an eye operation, but CM wary.**

p. 208 **CM fears dying in operation; that good eye will worsen. One reason CM had painted a new series in the summer was the Grand Decoration was essentially completed. Only a few touch-ups needed. But the completion of the project spoke of an end, and as he approached 80, he felt the shadows were lengthening.** Also Renoir died in December 1919, a terrible blow.

p. 213 Clemenceau resigns as PM in January of 1920. Goes to Giverny to have lunch with CM. Clementel no longer in government either. What would happen to Grand Decoration donation?

p. 215 Jacques Zoubaloff, an industrialist from the Caucasus, was interested in exchanging a Poplars for a Palace of Westminster and add 15,000 francs. CM turned him down. Then Zoubaloff inquired about buying the Grand Decoration, but CM turned him down. Foreshadows the “unspeakable drama” of the waterlilies [reluctance to part with them, reworking them]. Did sell earlier works.

p. 220-1 CM refuses to sell Grand Decoration to American Ryerson purchasing with gifts to AIC in mind.

p. 222-3 CM told Clemenceau he'd only donate the Grand Decoration if two conditions were met: he could keep them until he died and he would have to approve the place where they would hang. And CM still working on more canvases. **In June CM complains of problems with eyesight, but he was conserving his forces and working constantly on the Grand Decoration “I'm at an age where I can't afford to lose a minute.” Felt he would die if he stopped painting — clearly he would be painting the Grand Decoration until the end.**

p. 225-6 CM claimed he'd give the Hotel Biron 12 of the large canvases if they built a room according to CM's plan. This would place the Musee Monet next to the Musee Rodin. Bonnier, who'd designed CM's second studio at Giverny, was hired to be architect.

p. 228 Bonnier concerned about the high cost of the pavilion because it was dependent on funding by the state. CM wanted it to oval in shape. He advised a circular room at a cost of 626,000 francs versus CM's elliptical shape at 790,000 francs. CM unhappy with the designs, even though oval. Newspapers now reporting CM's gift to the state. The Grand Decoration consisted of 45 - 50 panels making up 14 separate series. All 14 x 6.5' except for 3 that were 6.5 by 20 feet. (Grand Decoration stretched for more than 656 feet.) Barely a quarter of the paintings formed the donation to the state.

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p. 229 CM wanted a skylight high enough to add 9 panels of the wisteria festooned Japanese bridge above the ellipse canvases.

p. 231 Le Figaro reported that the State had acquired at 200,000 francs Monet's *Women in the Garden* (refused by the 1867 Salon) for the Luxembourg Museum, where it would join Manet's *Olympia*—in recognition of Monet's generosity in donating the Grand Decoration. In reaping such a large sum for a work once derided by officialdom, Monet had extracted a brutal, satisfying, and lucrative revenge on history.

p. 237 Plans for pavilion not going well — too circular. CM says donation more trouble than it's worth.

p. 238-41 In March, 1921, the Jeu de Paume and the Orangerie des Tuileries were now being considered instead. CM goes to Paris to inspect. The Orangerie still used to overwinter orange trees but also was used as a multipurpose space. At various times served as a studio for Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux (*Three Graces*), who gave lessons to Napoleon III's son. CM wants process expedited. CM not pleased with The Orangerie because the canvases would have to be adapted to the space. Three drawbacks: ceiling too low for wisteria panels, walls not rounded, too narrow to stand back far enough to properly view. So CM cancels donation. Was he bluffing?

p. 243 June of 1921. Twenty-year-old crown prince Hirohito arrives and tours Paris. Baron Kuroki and his wife had already visited Giverny and bought a painting from the 1907 *Paysages d'Eau* series. Steady stream of Japanese artists and collectors were welcomed at Giverny.

p. 244-7 Personal friend of Emperor, Kojiro Matsukata was a debonair shipyard tycoon planning to create a museum of modern western called the Art Pavilion of Pure Pleasure. Needed Monets so came with Clemenceau in 1921 to shop. Monet admired the the way Japanese prints saw beauty in simple vistas of their world, featuring pleasure and leisure rather than myth and history. Also Hiroshige's series *One Hundred Views of Edo* feature weeping willows, irises, and Japanese bridges with radical ways of composing the scene. He also did multiple views.

p. 248 CM's garden of course influenced by Japanese with Japanese Bridge, though he denied he'd been attempting to create a Japanese garden. Though some plants were common to both, he did not incorporate the tradition components.

p. 250 Matsukata paid a million francs —top dollar— for 14 canvases representing a comprehensive range of Monet' work. Included was one panel of the Grand Decoration: *The Water Lily Pond, Willow Reflections*.

p. 256-8 Bonnier removed as architect, LeFevre hired. By spring of 1922, things moving forward. Monet plans to expand gift to 22 panels; the number depending on the space with room for flexibility. Documents prepared and were signed April 22. CM to deliver 19 panels (8 compositions) for two oval rooms by April of 1924. CM stipulated he was donating them to a "Musée Claude Monet" and once in place the works were not be removed nor could other art be displayed. They also could never be varnished.



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p. 261 CM pleased with Gustave Geoffroy's 1925 book *Claude Monet: His Life, His Times, His Work*. He countered critics who claimed Monet's work was about surfaces, but about "the phenomena that last both an instant and an eternity.

p. 262 He also described Monet as a tortured genius whose painting plumbed the ineffable mysteries of life.

p. 272 Although periodically disturbed by cataracts since 1912, CM's eyesight had not caused him serious problems throughout his work on the Grand Decoration. By 1922 his vision began deteriorating. After April of 1922 his vision bad enough that working on the canvases seemed inadvisable. "Right now I'm almost blind and so must stop work," he said in May. He had ruined several canvases and felt compelled to destroy them. Marc Elder a short time later spotted canvases slashed by "an angry hand." Monet had instructed his staff to burn other canvases heaped beneath a table. Imprudently, CM continued to paint though out the summer. Joseph Durand-Ruel found this work "atrocious and violent."

p. 273 Monet's paintings of the summer of 1922 are truly some of the most remarkable paintings he produced, but hard to market. CM dramatically transformed the alley of roses into a giddy chaos of oranges, yellows and purples, added to the canvas in pyrotechnic swoops and squiggles. Dazzling eruptions of color in part due to his failing eyesight—he said he saw everything in a complete fog. But the disintegration of form into color was the result of a frantic intensity of vision that had everything to do with his determination to push the boundaries of painting. Some were failures, others at the top of his game.

p. 274 Matsukata arranged for Monet to select one of his paintings to be purchased for 800,00 francs. It most likely was *Water Lilies*, one of the grandes etudes at 6.5 feet square, even though originally part of the Grand Decoration. By September 1922 his eyesight was so bad he consulted an ophthalmologist, Dr. Coutela, in Paris. Coutela confirmed that he was legally blind in his right eye and had only 10% of his vision in the left. CM reluctant to undergo surgery. So he ordered eyedrops for the left eye to dilate the pupil. Results encouraging at first.

p. 275 CM resigned to cataract surgery for the right eye, scheduled for November, then backed out.

p. 279 By December his sight was so dim he agreed to the operation, scheduled for the 8th or 10th of January, 1923: an iridectomy (removal of part of iris in right eye) followed by an extra capsular cataract extraction a few weeks later. Cocaine injections to numb cornea for pain; required to lie still in bed in the clinic or 10 days in complete darkness with both eyes shaded and no pillow. Operation went according to plan though CM nauseated, vomited, and emotionally agitated.

p. 280-1 Immediately after the operation, CM saw colors with great intensity and saturation, relishing "the most beautiful rainbow one could imagine." Bandages removed for eye drops of and further injections of cocaine, though its toxicity begged extreme caution. Guards to ensure patient didn't become delirious and remove bandages. No guard the day Monet

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**ripped off his bandages. Blanche by his side most of the time. Stayed through end of the month when the cataract was removed, then more bed rest. Total of 38 days in clinic.**

p. 282 CM visited the Orangerie to see how work was progressing and how canvas should be affixed to the walls. Opted for “marouflage” — putting glue on the back of the canvas and fixed to the wall. Wanted to speak to the maroufleure to make sure the canvases would be properly affixed and so never removed, per his stipulations.

p. 283 **By April of 1923 Cm’s right eye had become clouded by a secondary cataract, a not uncommon complication. Not surprising with the pain, tearing, and sensitivity, CM entered a period of “discouragement, despair, and panic.”**

p. 284 **By the middle of June he was able to read 15 -20 pages a day but his distance vision remained poor, especially outdoors. Soon black dots began appearing before his eye. He’d begun losing faith in Dr. Coutela. He did visit the doctor and finally a second surgery was scheduled for July 18. Again CM suffered from nausea, faintness and vomiting. But he was up and walking in the garden the next day; Dr. Coutela pronounced the surgery a success in follow-up visit. He would prescribe remedial spectacles.**

p. 285 **The spectacles arrived in August but were a huge disappointment. Everything was distorted. Things improved a bit with use.**

p. 286 **Now he was dealing with severe color perception problems. He said “ the distortion and exaggerated colors ... absolutely terrify me.” He said “both nature and his paintings look hideous to me.” Left eye worse.**

p. 287 **CM worried about lack of distance vision and complained he saw only two colors: yellow and blue. Coutela said this was not uncommon following surgery and recommended tinted lenses. CM pessimistic after the earlier “lifesaver” spectacles. Coutela found CM’s claims about color distortion were ambiguous and sometimes contradictory. He concluded CM saw everything in yellow tones and diagnosed xanthopsia, a condition caused by the aging of the lens and often exacerbated by cataracts. But CM tells Clemenceau it was not yellow and green but yellow and blue, then later said to Coutela that he saw “yellow as green and everything else more or less blue.” The predominance of blue would more likely be cyanopsia, often the temporary side-effect of cataract surgery.**

p. 288 **Clemenceau became concerned about the fate of the Grand Decoration with the April 24 deadline fast approaching. He wrote to Coutela to ask if CM would be able to make revisions to the panels with vision in only one eye or would he need to have the left eye operation. (And would he recover in time or even consent.)**

p. 289 **Coutela believed the left eye definitely required surgery (but he did not want to deal with such a difficult patient). Monet refused to consider it. CM wrote to Paul-Albert Besnard (the father of the boy in Sargent’s The Birthday painting) who had had surgery. He explained he’d had three surgeries and faced the possibility of another and wanted to know if Besnard knew of any artist who’d regained his color perception.**

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p. 290 Besnard did not know of anyone. CM did know Mary Cassatt had had 5 operations for cataracts, all without the slightest improvement. **CM more determined to refuse the operation. CM received his new German spectacles in October and felt the results to be very good. "I can see green and red again and a feeble blue."** He began to work on the panels to meet his **April 1924 deadline.**

p. 291 In the middle of December Clemenceau and Coutela brought CM another pair of spectacles.

p. 296 In late February Monet frustrated with inability to paint and stressed by the approaching deadline. He became insufferable, especially with Blanche.

p. 297 By March the work on the Orangerie was finished. Monet was not; he failed to deliver the panels.

p. 298 **CM learns of a new Zeiss cataract lens, the Katral lens. Andre Barbier makes the arrangements with ophthalmic pathologist and professor at Institut Pasteur, Jacques Mawas, to take the measurements, which allowed for the asymmetry of the eyes and ensuring the lenses were centered on the pupils with their posterior faces at a defined distance from the top of the cornea. A recently invented instrument called a keratometer was used to measure the diameter of the cornea and the pupil.**

p. 300-1 **The manufacture of the lenses would take several months. But Mawas ordered him a new pair for the interim. They did help him to see properly but he was unhappy when he saw his blundering efforts with the paintbrush. CM didn't paint in the summer and autumn of 1924, but continued to throw furious temper tantrums. Late in 1924 or early 1925, CM write to Paul Leon saying he was canceling the donation.**

p. 302 CM had clearly reached a point of crisis surpassing the one precipitated by the terrible struggle with his landscape paintings almost two decades earlier (see p. 41) Back then he had been infuriated by the difficulties of painting vegetation such as lilies, shadows, and reflections on the surface of the water, as well as the barely fathoms, all unified by the fugitive effects of light glimpsed at particular hours of the day. He was dissolving the visible and materializing the invisible, and placing his vision of this "luminous abyss" before the spectator without perspective or frame, in what Gillet called "upside-down paintings."

Now with the Grand Decoration he was attempting all these same feats but on a much more ambitious scale. His paintings also needed to be site specific and mindful of the spatial dynamics and viewing angles — a complex yet coherent program of a sort he had never attempted before. All at a time when his health was faltering and his eyesight failing.

By his 84th birthday CM felt he had failed and not capable of painting anything worthwhile. No one contradicting him because no one allowed to see the panels during those dark years.

p. 303 **Various other visitors to Giverny were astounded by his work, including the recent efforts done while he was in the throes of despair and semi-blindness. Maurice Denis came**

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in February and said, “Astonishing series of water lilies... he can only see through one eye with a lens, the other is closed up. Yet his tones are more exact and more true than ever.” The artist-illustrator Henri Saulnier-Ciolkowski saw the paintings in 1922 and again in October 1924, the very moment CM was in greatest despair and starting to burn canvases. He wrote: “Far from having spoiled them, the old master has ... developed them further.”

Indeed the successive photographs reveal that in those worst years of visual disturbance CM somehow managed not only to harmonize his colors but also create ever more subtle effects of shadow and light.

Evidence that CM was painting and repainting his canvases comes from the fact that in places he applied no fewer than 15 layers of paint.

p. 303 In *Late Works by Great Masters* (1925), Albert Brinkmann argues that certain artists achieved powerful and distinct styles as they grew old, creating works markedly different from, and arguably more adventurous than, those of their youth or middle age. Donatello, Michelangelo, Titian, Poussin, Rubens, and Rembrandt all developed in their later years a “sublime style” that displayed a “deepening and broadening in form and idea” that compensated for “the natural uncertainty of vision caused by the decay of bodily forces.”

Characteristics of this sublime style included an increasing abstraction and an exuberantly expressive handling of paint, combined with “an astonishing vitality of touch,” according to Kenneth Clark. These innovating visions — often scenes of turmoil and even torture — were not always appreciated during the artists’ lifetimes: J.M.W. Turner’s late works were described by critics as the “outbreaks of a madman.” Rembrandt’s enormous *Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis* was considered too uncouth and disturbing to hang in the town hall and was returned promptly.

Over the previous decade CM’s paintings were undoubtedly affected by his deteriorating vision as well as by his fierce rage and gathering gloom. Larger, bolder, more experimental, visionary, and abstract, these canvases were manifestly different from the work of his youth and middle age, which had already been revolutionary. Arguably, only Michelangelo and Titian ever achieved as much, or developed as forcefully, as they worked in their ninth decades.

p. 305 His steady stream of visitors in 1924 indicates he was not shy about showing the Grand Decoration. Important critics like Barbier, Denis, and Saulnier-Ciolkowski all were freely admitted and all were sincerely impressed.

A large part of his crisis was he simply did not wish to relinquish his canvases while alive and had told Thiebault-Sisson as much in 1920.

p. 306 For the past ten years the Grand Decoration had given him a purpose in life — through the years following Alice’s death, the war years, the difficulties with his sight. Tellingly, the lower right corner of one of the huge canvases, *The Setting Sun*, remained untouched, a bare triangle of blank canvas that could have been filled in a few minutes of work. But he chose not

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to. Like Scheherazade's stories and Penelope's shroud, the Grand Decoration was something that must never reach its end.

**In the weeks before Christmas CM told Clemenceau that his sight had improved thanks to his latest pair of spectacles prescribed by Mawas and dispensed by Meyrowitz — not the special Katral lenses though, which had not arrived. With these new untinted lenses he saw colors “much better” and thus worked with more certainty.** Clemenceau learned later that CM had retracted his gift and was furious, saying it was grounds for ending their friendship.

p. 312 In February 1925 he was visited by the critic Florent Fels and Maurice Vlaminck (“I owe the first great enthusiasms and the first revolutionary certitudes of my twenties to Monet.”)

p. 313 **His eyesight was still poor. He told them “For two years I have been able to see only a sort of fog in which, from time to time, certain details appear more precisely. With my eyes as they are, it is useless for me to continue painting.” Yet he continued to paint... to bring his Grand Decoration to completion.**

To Pierre Bonnard he wrote that he was obsessed with his panels, that the date on which he had to deliver them was fast approaching, and he cursed the idea of donating them to the state. He did not mention to Vlaminck or Fels his intention to cancel the gift and the absence of letters to Leon and Clemenceau raises questions of whether he was entirely serious about abandoning the donation or whether his threatened cancellation was a plea for help, understanding and more time.

p. 314 Clemenceau could neither stay away from Giverny nor let the project die. He came in March, both agreeing not to discuss the status of the donation. **CM's new Zeiss lens had arrived. At first there as little improvement..., claiming they caused blurred vision, while the subtler colors were ‘fragmented and distorted.’** Then he lost a second step-daughter Marthe, who passed way suddenly at age 61 in May. By summer he knew Clemenceau's health was failing.

p. 316 Deaths of those closest to him often seemed to spring Monet into action at his easel. A short time after Suzanne Hoschede-Butler's death in 1899, after having not painted for a year because of his disillusionment over the Dreyfus Affair, he produced a dozen views of his Japanese Bridge and then scores of canvases of London. Likewise the Grand Decoration was conceived and started within months of his son Jean's funeral.

His most startling reaction with his paintbrush had been at the deathbed of his first wife Camille. She died at Vetheuil in September 1879, after horrendous suffering. “I found myself with my eyes fixed on her tragic brow, in the act of automatically studying the succession and duration of fading colors that death came to impose on her motionless face. Shades of blue, yellow, gray, what have you.” He began a rapid sketch of her postmortem features and the result was Camille Monet on Her Deathbed. If today this act seems callous, it must be put in the context of the time when families photographed themselves posing with their deceased loved ones, and when John James Audubon, early in his career, made money by painting deathbed

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portraits and , on one occasion, having his subject — a minister's son—exhumed for the purpose.

p. 317 **In May he rejoiced of his improved eyesight and renewed activity. His new Zeiss lenses undoubtedly had much to do with this well-nigh miraculous recovery, although the left eye was no better. "I've finally regained my true sight," he told Marc Elder, "and I have begun to work from life with a strange euphoria." He claimed he was working as never before on the Grand Decoration. By October he Elder he was putting the finishing touches on the paintings. "I don't want to lose a moment until I have delivered my panels." (spring 1926)**

p. 318 By the spring of 1926, CM was in worse health than Clemenceau, who visited in April, saying "He is stoical and even more cheerful at times. His panels are finished and will not be touched again, but he's unable to let them go. The best thing is to let him live day by day." CM had assured Clemenceau in 1925 that the donation would go forward, but it would be a posthumous one.

p. 319 In May Evan Charteris arrived to interview Monet for a book on John Singer Sargent. "His right eye, magnified behind the lens of powerful spectacles, seemed to possess some of the properties of a searchlight and be ready to seize on the innermost secrets of the visible world."

p. 321 By the summer of 1926 CM was rapidly losing weight as well as strength. During the summer he began coughing up blood. He was suffering from lung cancer. He died at noon on December 5, 1926, and the funeral was on the 8th.

p. 327 The Salon Monet was inaugurated in May, 1927.