



Impressionist Decorations:

Tracing the Roots of Monet's *Waterlilies*

Claude Monet,
Chrysanthemums (detail), 1897
Private collection

March 2 – July 11, 2022
Musée de l'Orangerie

"It has been my lifelong dream to paint walls."

(Edgar Degas, in Ambroise Vollard, *En écoutant Cézanne, Degas, Renoir*, 1938)

Throughout their careers the Impressionists produced decorations. Of various nature and status, these works were intended to create a harmonious effect within domestic spaces. Whether commissions from clients and patrons, or formal experiments executed on a variety of supports, these artworks range from large-scale mural paintings to small objects, fans and dinner plates. All demonstrate the Impressionists' ongoing interest in decoration and their remarkable creativity in this field.

Exploring a hitherto little-known aspect of Impressionism, this exhibition brings together for the first time a selection of

decorative works created by these artists: from early, experimental paintings and objects, to the largest and most ambitious of all Impressionist decorations - Monet's *Waterlilies*, which the artist called his "grandes décorations", installed at the Orangerie almost a hundred years ago and visible on its main floor.

Depicting scenes from modern life, luminous landscapes or gardens brimming with flowers, revisiting earlier models or inventing new ones, these Impressionist decorations invite us to reassess our views of a much-loved artistic movement, and to enjoy it afresh.

Chronologie

About 1861-1862 until 1870

Paul Cézanne embarks on painting decorations in the salon of the Jas de Bouffan, the family house near Aix.

1871-1872

Pissarro receives his first private commissions for decorations.

1874

First Impressionist exhibition. Some critics dismiss the work of these artists as “decorative”.

1876

Renoir completes decorative commissions for the Charpentiers' mansion in Paris. During the summer, Monet works on a commission in Montgeron for the château of the Hoschedés.

18th century

From the 1850s, the art of the 18th century – as epitomised by François Boucher, Jean-Honoré Fragonard or Antoine Watteau – is back in vogue, hailed by collectors and artists, and celebrated in the writings of scholars and critics. The Impressionists admire the clarity, luminosity and freedom of execution characteristic of the work of their predecessors. Having produced numerous decorative schemes, 18th century painters also represent a time when easel painting and ornament were not contradictory, and when, as Renoir wrote, the term ‘decorator’ was not pejorative. Besides, the Ancien Régime was also a time when objects were created “by a mind and by a hand”, rather than “by a machine”. Renoir values this approach more than anything else and becomes one of its most vocal exponents.

Commissions

Independence was one of the Impressionists' guiding principles – both in their creative process, and in the promotion of their art through self-organised exhibitions. Yet these artists also produced works on request, responding to clients' commissions. From the very start of their careers they get asked by friends, relatives or rich amateurs to paint ornamental works destined for the walls of their homes. These commissions are often deemed demeaning, and incompatible with the Impressionists' idea of creative freedom. Yet the constraints of commissions sometimes trigger their inspiration, while guaranteeing a much-needed source of income. Pissarro, Renoir and Monet all work for wealthy clients. The latter, like Caillebotte, tries to obtain commissions by including decorative works in the Impressionist exhibitions, as examples of the kind of art they could produce for the walls of private homes. However, commissions for large-scale official decorations always eluded them.

Public décors

In the last decades of the 19th century, urban expansion and the construction of public facilities – whether state buildings, places of worship, education or leisure – leads to an unprecedented demand for decorative paintings and sculptures. Some Impressionists such as Renoir and Monet, or their friend Édouard Manet, attempt to secure such commissions that would bring them visibility and recognition. While enjoying the support of well-connected figures in France's Third Republic, these artists will never be invited to decorate the Nation's monuments. Critics such as Félix Fénéon deplores the fact that these commissions are instead allocated to “manufacturers with diplomas in decorative painting”: “if not some Impressionists, who are the painters capable of capturing the sensation of outdoor city life?” Only Mary Cassatt will be commissioned to work on a monumental public decoration, for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, far from France. The Impressionists' absence from the walls of official buildings no doubt contributed to their interest in decoration being subsequently forgotten.

Fans

With their many connotations – fashion accessories, tools of seduction – fans are in the second half of the 19th century much in fashion, drawing considerable interest from artists and sparking their creativity. Indissociable from hispanolism, and from the taste for 18th-century aesthetics, fans are also linked to Japanese culture, a powerful source of inspiration for the Impressionists and their work in the field of decoration. The fan's characteristic half-circle shape (also found in the architectural repertoire) spurs the imagination of these painters, inviting them to invent new compositions. On that support – whether on paper or textile – they depict motifs drawn from modern life, or bright landscapes, light-filled and radiant. Over twenty fans by Degas and Pissarro, among others, were included in the Fourth Impressionist exhibition held in 1879 – another indication of the avant-garde status of this decorative object.

1877
Renoir writes on the topic of architecture and the decorative arts. Renoir and Caillebotte register a patent for a 'cement-marble' to be used in decorations.

1878
At the Paris World's Fair, Marie Bracquemond exhibits *The Muses of the Arts*, a large decoration made of ceramic tiles.

1879
The 4th Impressionist exhibition (10 April – 11 May) includes 17 fans by Pissarro and Degas. Marie Bracquemond exhibits a faience dish – the first time a ceramic

object is shown in an Impressionist exhibition. At the Château de Wargemont near Dieppe, Renoir spends the summer painting decorations for Paul Berard.

1880
Pissarro creates around 30 ceramic tiles.



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1
Claude Monet,
The Turkeys. Unfinished decoration, also known as The Turkeys, 1877
Paris, Musée d'Orsay

2
Camille Pissarro,
Coteaux de Chaponval, fan, circa 1882
Paris, Musée d'Orsay
Legs Antonin Personnaz, 1937

3
Camille Pissarro,
Summer, also known as *The Four Seasons: Summer*, 1872-1873
Private collection

1881
Manet begins a decorative cycle on the theme of the four seasons.

1882
Art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel commissions Monet to decorate door panels for his Parisian apartment.

1883
Pissarro executes four ceramic panels for a rectangular plant pot, adorned with rural scenes.

1884
Renoir plans to create a "Society of Irregularists", advocating asymmetry in art and promoting imperfection as found in the natural world. Morisot commissions a decoration from Monet

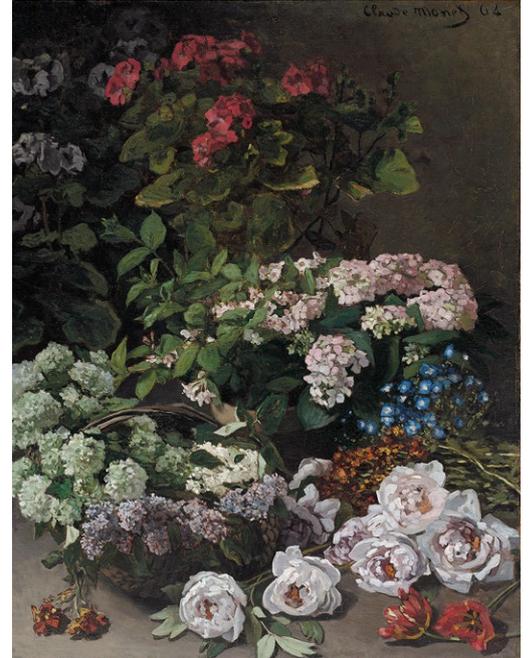
for her new Paris apartment; he paints the *Villas at Bordighera*.

Impressionist exhibitions

Between 1874 and 1886 the Impressionists hold eight exhibitions entirely independent from the official Salon – the large, State-sponsored, juried exhibition which could launch an artist' career. These independent exhibitions provide the Impressionists with an opportunity to draw attention to the range of their abilities as painters. They include landscapes and portraits, as well as what they call "decorative panels", or "decorations". These works are intended to promote that particular aspect of their work, while also proclaiming their modern approach to decoration.

Flowers

Infinitely varied, flowers and bouquets form without doubt a quintessentially decorative motif; they feature extensively in 19th century handbooks or repertoires for the training of artists and architects. With their skill for capturing the ephemeral beauty of nature, the Impressionists excel at depicting flowers – a widely-spread practice, yet a sometimes discredited genre (Charles Baudelaire derisively called these pictures "dining-room paintings"). Many decorative works produced by the Impressionists are covered in colourful bouquets. These paintings sometimes result from commissions for clients, like the door panels created by Monet for his dealer Paul Durand-Ruel in the early 1880s.



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1887

Renoir exhibits for the first time his important painting *Essai de peinture décorative*, also known as *Bathers*.

1890

Cézanne starts painting two overdoor panels for the Parisian townhouse of collector Victor Chocquet.

1892

Caillebotte undertakes the decoration of the drawing-dining room of his house at Petit-Gennevilliers, a project cut short by his death in 1894.

Monet is shortlisted but not appointed to decorate Paris' town hall, the Hôtel de Ville.

1893

Mary Cassatt paints a monumental decoration for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. In his garden at Giverny, Monet creates a pond with waterlilies.

Japan

As early as the 1860s, the future Impressionists show great enthusiasm for Japanese prints, fans, ceramics and screens. These can be found in Paris shops and galleries, and are exhibited in its World's Fairs. Impressionist artists are enchanted as well as inspired by those decorative pieces: faithful depictions of nature, true to its very essence (fundamentally "irregular", as Renoir put it) and quintessential asymmetry. Imitating the Japanese artists, Monet, Renoir, Degas, Gustave Caillebotte and Berthe Morisot all introduce off-centre motifs, distorted perspectives and close-up effects into their decorative paintings and their fans.

Gardens

For Caillebotte and Monet, gardening and decoration stem from the same creative impulse. At home, flowers and plants form part of the décor: for his house at Petit-Gennevilliers near Paris, Caillebotte adorns two dining-room doors with a profusion of greenhouse flowers, and conceives a large decorative panel showing a patch of grass strewn with daisies. The Impressionists bring a fresh dimension to ornamental flower painting, an approach also revitalised by their interest in Japanese art. The latter's ground-breaking impact can be seen in the flower arrangements adorning their canvases or dinner plates: closely observed, freely scattered, or assembled in carpets of colours. Transformed by these new modes of representation, flowers are turned into pure ornament, evolving towards an Impressionist décor, immersive and radical.



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Claude Monet,
Spring Flowers, 1864
Cleveland, The Cleveland
Museum of Art

5

Japon, Rinpa School,
Summer and Autumn Flowers,
two-panel screen by Choyodo
Yukoku, second half of
the 18th century
Paris, Musée national des arts
asiatiques - Guimet

6

Gustave Caillebotte,
four panels for a dining-room
door, *Orchids (cattleya and
anthurium)*, *Cattleya and
anthurium*, *White orchids*,
*Cattleya and red flowering
plants*, 1893
Private collection

1906

Renoir and Cassatt decorate vases for art dealer Ambroise Vollard.

1911

The Manufacture des Gobelins in Paris commissions the weaving of three rugs based on *Waterlilies* by Monet.

1918

On 12 November Monet decides to present the French State with two decorative panels, which he wants to “sign with the date of the Victory.”

1922

On 12 April Monet signs a deed of donation giving the French State 19 *Waterlilies* panels. Collaborating with architect Camille Lefèvre, he starts making plans for their display at

the Orangerie.

The painter would continue to work on these paintings until his death.

“Water, waterlilies, plants, but on a very large surface.”
(Claude Monet)

Waterlilies

The word *nymphéa*, referring to a specific variety of waterlily, is the term used by Monet – a particularly keen and precise gardener – to describe the aquatic plants he starts growing in the garden pond at his home in Giverny, Normandy. His waterlilies or *nymphéas* are highly desirable flowers; a new and expensive tropical hybrid sold around the world. These vibrant yellow, pink and red flowers are a tour de force, due to the efforts of horticulturalist and entrepreneur Latour-Marliac whose plant creations had caused a sensation at the 1889 Paris World’s Fair: until then, only white waterlilies had been available in Europe. From about 1900 Monet focusses his attention almost entirely on his *nymphéas*; they become an “obsession”, as well as the principal motif of his “grande décoration” which would evolve into the Orangerie cycle.

The Orangerie

Built in 1852, under Emperor Napoleon III, to house the orange trees of the (since-destroyed) Tuileries Palace, the Orangerie would 75 years later become home to Monet’s *Waterlilies* cycle. In 1921, statesman Georges Clemenceau proposes that his friend Monet’s “grandes décorations” be installed in that building; but this large-scale decorative ensemble, started by the artist more than five years earlier, was not actually conceived to fit into that space. Monet continues to work on his *Waterlilies* until the very end of his life. Collaborating closely with architect Camille Lefèvre, he starts making plans for their installation in the Orangerie building; a few months after his death, the works are delivered and mounted on the walls following with his instructions. The “grandes décorations” of the Orangerie create the “illusion of an endless whole”, and the “refuge for peaceful meditation” that Monet had started to imagine as early as 1909.

Mural painting

One of the earliest and best-known technique for mural painting is the *a fresco* method; yet this was hardly ever used in 19th-Century France. In 1911 Renoir, who may have experimented with it while in Italy in the early 1880s, writes the preface for a French translation of an early Renaissance text describing this technique: *A Treatise on Painting* (circa 1390-1437) by Florentine painter Cennino Cennini. The vast majority of Impressionist decorations are paintings in oil, executed on canvas. Sometimes painters try to achieve a fresco-like matte finish, as does Renoir with his *Bathers* or *Grandes baigneuses* (1884-1887). He and Pissarro also experiment with painting on cement. As a young artist, Paul Cézanne paints directly on the plaster walls of the large salon at the Jas de Bouffan. Yet these attempts remain rare and exceptional.

Modern life

In 1863, poet Charles Baudelaire urged artists to paint “modern life”. With great attention to the major social and cultural changes at work in France in the second half of the 19th century, the Impressionists draw inspiration from their own time, capturing these transformations and incorporating them into their decorative works: ‘modern’ themes such as the development of leisure activities, the faster pace of life through travel, or the growing influence of fashion.

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Gustave Caillebotte,
Canoes. Decorative panel,
also called *Canoes on*
the River Yerres, 1878
Rennes, musée des Beaux-Arts

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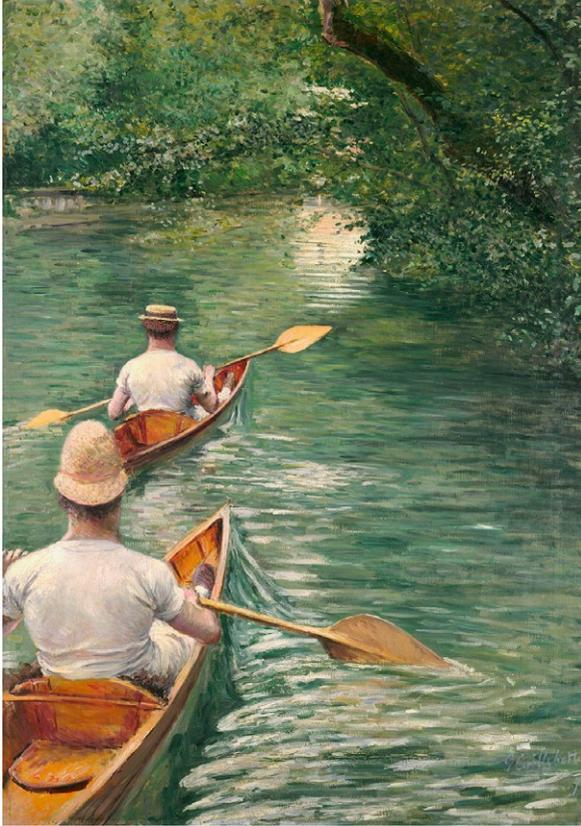
Claude Monet,
Waterlilies, 1908
Vernon, musée Alphonse-
Georges-Poulain

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Paul Cézanne,
The Four Seasons: Spring,
about 1860-1861
Paris, Petit Palais – musée des
Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris

1926

Monet dies on 6 December; he never saw his *Waterlilies* installed in their new home. The museum was inaugurated on 17 May 1927.



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Contemporary Counterpoint #8
Ange Leccia
 (D')Après Monet, 2020
 March 2 – September 5, 2022

Video and sound installation (original soundtrack by Julien Perez)
 Running time: 36 minutes

In response to an invitation from the Musée de l'Orangerie, Ange Leccia has designed a video arrangement offering a reading of the many meanings of Monet's *Waterlilies*, from the genesis of this masterful work, and its relationship with Giverny, light, and seasons.

As an acknowledged pioneer of video art in France, Ange Leccia explores moving images. Thanks to editing techniques, he juxtaposes pictorial language and cinematographic vocabulary in close relationship with the history of art. Reflecting on Monet's work focused on the waterlilies pond which he created as a motif for painting, Leccia observes: "His impressionist practice was an opportunity to assert both the dissolving of the motif and the materiality of paint. My aim is, therefore, to capture these characteristics in moving images. This entails filming the gardens at Giverny using a DV (Digital Video) format from the 1990s to bring texture to an image reminiscent of the pictorial liquidity of Monet's works".

After a degree in visual arts in the mid-1970s and a fellowship at the Académie de France in Rome – Villa Médicis from 1981 to 1983, Ange Leccia has taught at several art schools. Since 2001 and for nearly twenty years now, he has been the Director of Le Pavillon, an artist residency programme and creative laboratory at the Palais de Tokyo, pursuing his desire to teach as an integral part of his artistic approach.

With generous support from the American Friends Musée d'Orsay.



Exhibition 'Impressionist Decorations: Tracing the Roots of Monet's *Waterlilies*'

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Exhibition organized jointly by the Musée d'Orsay and the Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris

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Events in connection with
 'Impressionist Decorations:
 Tracing the Roots of Monet's
Waterlilies'

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Audioguides (French, English)
 For all audiences, 5 €

**Guided tours led by experts
 (90 minutes)**

March 7 to July 2, 2022

Every day except Sunday, 4:00pm

Online events

On the museum website,
 the Petits M'O kids' website

**Dive deeper into Impressionist
 masterpieces**

During the entire run of
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 Tracing the Roots of Monet's
Waterlilies' (March 2 to July 11,
 2022) a discount will be offered
 on admission tickets to the Musée
 d'Orsay during the 15 days following
 your visit to the 'Impressionist
 Decorations' exhibition, on
 presentation of your exhibition
 ticket.

Programme and bookings

musee-orangerie.fr



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