

The Kimbell Art Museum

Monet: The Late Years

An Acoustiguide Tour

As Recorded Script

Notes:

- total word count now: 3710 = approx 25 minutes

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500. DIRECTOR'S INTRODUCTION

ERIC LEE:

Hello, and welcome to the exhibition *Monet: The Late Years*. I'm Eric Lee, Director of the Kimbell Art Museum.

In 2016, the Kimbell hosted an exhibition of Monet's early work. This exhibition is a kind of sequel—and a very exciting one at that. It's the first show in more than twenty years to focus on the extraordinary paintings Monet created during the final phase of his life and career.

During this period, Monet remained close to home. Every painting you'll see today depicts his beloved garden at Giverny, outside of Paris—including, of course, his famous water lily pond.

These late years weren't easy ones for Monet. World War I was raging. He was gradually losing his sight. And he was still recovering from the deaths of his wife and son. Still, he chose not to rein in his ambition. Here's George Shackelford, Deputy Director of the Kimbell and Curator of this exhibition—he'll be your primary guide on this tour.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

In the years between 1914 and 1926, Monet deliberately changes the way his paintings look. He enters a brand-new phase in which everything becomes more vivid, more intense, more adventuresome, really, than ever before. And we're charting the ways in which as a man in his eighties, he set out to reinvent his art.

ERIC LEE:

It was during this period of reinvention that Monet created his famous murals, the immersive, panoramic paintings of water lilies now mostly at the Orangerie in Paris. In this exhibition, you'll encounter the classic images of Monet's pond, but you'll also discover far less familiar examples of the artist's late work.

We hope you enjoy the show.

NARRATOR:

This is an Acoustiguide production.

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501. WATER LILIES, REFLECTIONS OF TALL GRASSES, 1897. PRIVATE COLLECTION (CAT. 1) AND GROUP OF 5 (CAT. 4-8)

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

This unusually large painting is from the first group of paintings that Monet devoted to the surface of the water lily pond. One of the things that's particular about this is the glassy surface of the water. How it's almost completely undisturbed by any sort of ripple, allowing the curving leaves of the water grasses at the top of the canvas to be reflected like a mirror in the placid plane of the water itself.

NARRATOR:

Monet probably painted this canvas in 1896 or seven, just a few years after he'd created his water garden at Giverny. Curator George Shackelford:

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

He erected an arching Japanese bridge over one end of the pond and proceeded to plant aquatic flowers, reeds and then water lily plants. And as the garden matured, it became the most important subject for his art.

NARRATOR:

Along the wall to your right are five other paintings of the water lily pond. You might start with the painting at the far left, which is the earliest. Here, we see Monet looking across the pond. Along the top of the canvas is a bank lined with trees and reeds.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

Moving down the canvas from that is the actual surface of the water, in which we see reflected the trees, the foliage and even the sky that are beyond our view, above the frame of the canvas. Against this receding surface are the horizontal stripings and sort of island formations of water lily pads and flowers receding into the distance and getting smaller and closer together as they move up the canvas.

NARRATOR:

If you like, take a look at the other four paintings along this wall. In some of them, the horizontal water lily groupings are less dominant. Instead, Monet emphasizes the vertical reflections created by the weeping willow leaves on the water's surface.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

There's always a very interesting balance and a kind of marvelous play with our perceptions of what it is that we're actually looking at.

[word count: 316]

**502. WATER LILIES, C. 1914–17. FINE ARTS MUSEUMS OF SAN FRANCISCO
(CAT. 11)**

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

In the summer of 1914, Monet had a kind of epiphany and suddenly, in May, he began to work feverishly.

NARRATOR:

The preceding years were difficult ones for Monet. His wife Alice died of Leukemia in 1911. In 1912, he was diagnosed with cataracts in both eyes. And in 1914, just as a World War was brewing, he lost his eldest son. Yet just a few months after that final blow, Monet returned to painting with a renewed sense of determination.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

We believe that this painting dates from that important breakthrough summer of 1914. And everything about it is different from what you've seen before. The painting is about four times as big as the vertical water lily paintings you've just looked at in the previous room. And it's not only four times bigger in terms of surface, but all the brushstrokes are four times bigger. It's four times more energetic, in a way; four times more intense.

The strokes are bigger and more fluid and more vigorous, really, all over the canvas. There's something about this intensity of mark-making that really does convey to us 100 years later the excitement that the artist brought to this new phase of painting. And we think that Monet is coming back to painting these pictures with such relief at the sheer ability that he has to paint, that the joy is all over the canvases.

NARRATOR:

Monet was in his seventies, but he was not slowing down. He described his attitude towards aging and art-making as follows:

MONET (ACTOR):

My sensitivity, far from diminishing, has been sharpened by age, which holds no fears for me so long as unbroken communication with the outside world continues to fuel my curiosity, so long as my hand remains a ready and faithful interpreter of my perception.

[word count: 296]

503. *WATER LILIES*, 1915–17. FONDATION BEYELER, BASEL, SWITZERLAND (CAT. 14); *WEeping WILLOW AND WATER-LILY POND*, 1916–19, PRIVATE COLLECTION; *WATER LILIES*, 1915–17. MUSÉE MARMOTTAN MONET, PARIS (CAT. 15)

NARRATOR:

Taken as a whole, the three paintings on this wall create a kind of panorama, or continuous image. At left, we see the water lily pond. At center, the weeping willow tree that stood on its bank. And at right, another painting of the pond's surface, with the weeping willow branches just visible at top but more prominent as reflections at bottom.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

Notice how the painting on the left here is much lighter in color and overall more bright in tonality than the one on the right. The painting shows more of the sky, more clouds reflected in the surface of the water. And just a tiny bit of the tree that must have been very near Monet when he was painting.

NARRATOR:

In order to depict the pond scene as it appeared at different times of day, Monet often switched quickly from one in-progress painting to another. Since these canvases were taller than he was, help was required.

NARRATOR:

These paintings would be carried by his assistants from the studio that he built about 1915, down to the pond, across the garden, across the road, across the railroad track, through the gates, and down to the surface of the water lily pond. There, Monet would work on the canvases in front of the motif, looking directly at nature and painting what he saw onto these extra-large canvases.

When enough of these paintings were assembled in the studio, Monet was then able to line them up as you see these three here.

NARRATOR:

This was a crucial step on the way toward the truly panoramic murals--known as the *Grandes Décorations*--that Monet was already envisioning. You'll see a remarkable example of those later on in the exhibition.

[word count: 284]

504. *IRISES*, c. 1914–17. THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON (CAT. 17);
YELLOW IRISES, c. 1914–17. THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF WESTERN ART,
 TOKYO (CAT. 18)

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

Along with water lilies, Monet was fascinated by irises. He was a fanatic about irises, in fact.

NARRATOR:

Monet was one of the most important sponsors of the First International Conference on Irises, held in 1922, and one variety was even named after his wife. He planted them throughout his garden, both in the flower beds around the house and down by the water lily pond, on the banks.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

At the left, the larger painting shows a wonderful pathway meandering through the beds of purple iris.

NARRATOR:

In turn-of-the-century France, irises were associated with the Far East and Japan.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

Monet had been influenced by Japanese art since the 1860s, and what he liked about it was the way in which particularly Japanese prints seemed to push the background up to the foreground, to tilt the whole world forward so that you would be seeing everything as if on one plane. Everything seemed to be happening on one surface. And that's really what you see in the path through the iris here at left, where the top of the canvas seems actually to be just as close to you as the bottom.

NARRATOR:

In the painting at the right, in which the yellow blooms stand out against a deep green ground, we see the same flat, decorative quality. The vertical format may be a reference to Japanese folding screens.

Water lilies were Monet's primary fixation, but he also painted large-scale studies of many other flowers from his garden. In addition to these paintings of irises, look out for the studies of day lilies, roses, and agapanthus nearby.

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505. *WATER-LILY POND*, 1917–19. PRIVATE COLLECTION. COURTESY OF BENJAMIN DOLLER, NEW YORK (CAT. 25); *WATER LILIES*, 1917/19. HONOLULU MUSEUM OF ART (CAT. 26); *WATER-LILY POND*, 1917/19. THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO (CAT. 27)

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

One of the most beautiful and exciting groupings amongst Monet's late paintings are these canvases that measure some six-and-a-half feet in width. The three displayed along this wall are all taken from pretty much the same point of view. We're looking across the surface of the pond towards a point where two trees are reflected in the distance, which create dark shadows on either side of the canvas. In between those shadows seems to flow a kind of river of light that creates a gentle curve down the middle of the composition.

NARRATOR:

While these canvases all treat the same theme, the differences between them are important. In some, the brushwork is bold, almost expressionistic. In others, it's softer and more opalescent.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

So Monet tries on different manners of treating the same subject, exploring the different ways in which he might render the effects that he's seeing as the light and atmosphere change moment by moment across the span of a day.

NARRATOR:

Monet described his working method to the art dealer René Gimpel:

MONET (ACTOR):

I work on the paintings all day...In the atmosphere a color reappears that I had found and sketched on one of the canvases yesterday. Quickly I am passed the painting and I try my best to put down this vision definitively, but usually it disappears as quickly as it came into view to make room for another color already rendered several days before on another study which is almost instantly placed before me...and so on all the day.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

In these paintings, he's headed towards the kind of panoramic format that was to dominate the large-scale mural paintings that he was working on simultaneously. He wants us to sense the kind of all-encompassing and all-surrounding width of the canvas. That we can go close to it and feel as if our vision is entirely occupied by the surface of the water lily pond itself.

[word count: 315]

506. *WATER LILIES*, c. 1921–22. TOLEDO MUSEUM OF ART, OHIO (CAT.16)

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

I hope you can remember the very first painting we looked at together at the beginning of the exhibition. That glassy surface of water, and the placid view of water lilies floating on top of an almost mirror-like surface. Look how different this painting is. It's the same theme. But how different Monet's technique has become in the intervening 25 years.

Here we have Monet at his most experimental, using paint in this kind of beautiful liquid way. Using outlines, for instance, to suggest the shapes of leaves, to create shadows beneath them. Using highlights of white, yellow or pink to energize the otherwise cool tonality of blue, green and purple.

There's no place on the surface of the canvas that you aren't aware of Monet actually working. That you aren't aware of the touch of his brush.

There's a kind of sensation of movement present everywhere here, and this was the overwhelming effect that he was going to achieve as his paintings got bigger and bigger and bigger, moving towards the great decorations on a really massive scale that were to become the goal of this large-scale painting project.

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507. **WATER LILIES (AGAPANTHUS), C. 1915–26. SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM (CAT. 28); WISTERIA, 1919–20. MUSÉE MARMOTTAN MONET, PARIS (CAT. 29); WISTERIA, 1919–20. MUSÉE MARMOTTAN MONET, PARIS (CAT. 30)**

NARRATOR:

This extraordinary painting is the largest in the exhibition. It's a fully-realized demonstration of the effects Monet was striving for with all the works he created at this stage.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

It's as if you can, in a way, step into his body and look through his eyes at the world. This overwhelming scale, this sense of being able to lose yourself in the composition, gave to these works the intense power of subjectivity, of emotion; gave you that sense of transport into an emotional world of dreams that Monet was aiming for.

NARRATOR:

Still, that dream world was always grounded in Monet's observation of the world around him. While he painted canvases of this scale in his studio, he was able to reconstruct from memory the effects he'd observed firsthand in the garden.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

Everything about this is based on his belief in the motif in nature as being the most important thing. Throughout his art, we are meant to be aware of the power of the natural world. And that's what we see here, literally reflected in this painting.

NARRATOR:

We know that this canvas was well under way by 1917. But we also know that Monet returned to it repeatedly, repainting and transforming the surface in stages as late as 1926, the year of his death.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

Monet was constantly working and reworking these large paintings. Trying to figure out which ones would go into the large cycle of decorations that he was working on at this important period in his late career.

NARRATOR:

In fact, this canvas was originally intended to be the central panel of a set of *Grandes Décorations* lining a circular pavilion. That scheme was never realized, but you can see a rendering of the original plan elsewhere in this gallery. The two other paintings in this room, of wisteria growing in Monet's garden, were part of the same decorative scheme. In the end, Monet chose a different group of panels for his final installation, and these remained in his studio until after World War II.

[word count: 306]

**508. CORNER OF THE WATER-LILY POND, 1918–19. PRIVATE COLLECTION
(CAT. 31)**

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

This painting announces a new direction in Monet’s art that we’re going to explore in the last gallery of the exhibition, devoted to the very last years of Monet’s career.

NARRATOR:

Perhaps you’ve already noticed now much smaller this painting is than the ones you just looked at. At the same time that Monet was working on his over-scale painting projects, he also returned to more normally-sized easel paintings like this one.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

We’re looking at the corner of the pond, the russet orange pathway, a tree covered with vines that rises up at the left-hand side, and then a standard rosebush, a clump of roses growing high on a stem, showing up vivid red and pink at the very center of the canvas.

NARRATOR:

Here, and in Monet’s other late easel paintings, we see a marked shift in perspective: Monet is no longer looking down onto the surface of the pond. Instead, he’s looking up and across, at the rest of his garden. It’s a classic perspective, with a clear horizon line.

Importantly, though, this painting—with its expressive brushwork and vibrant colors—has the same exciting, experimental quality as the large-scale studies. But we know that Monet considered it a finished work of art, one that he was happy to send out into the world.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

In fact, this painting is one of a very few that you’ll see in this part of the exhibition, that was signed by Monet, given a date and sold to a dealer in Monet’s lifetime.

[word count: 248]

509. GROUP OF JAPANESE BRIDGE PAINTINGS

NARRATOR:

Around 1918, Monet returned to the subject you see here: his Japanese bridge. Look at your screen now **[INSERT IMAGE]** to compare these bridge paintings to the one you saw in the first room of the exhibition, painted twenty years previously.

Monet's style has evolved, but so has the bridge itself. Sometime before 1905, Monet added the second arch you can see in these later paintings. It's a pergola or trellis on which he grew wisteria.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

This motif served him for a whole group of canvases, of which seven are exhibited here.

The largest ones are dominated by strong vertical strokes that relate to the weeping willow tree that grew very near the bridge itself. In others, we're much more aware of the curling tendrils of the vines of the wisteria plants that had grown on the bridge. And above all, we're aware of Monet's changing color palette, as he approaches the composition over the course of several years.

NARRATOR:

It's tempting to attribute some of Monet's more extreme color choices to the changes in his vision. By 1922, Monet's cataracts had thickened, and he was barely able to see. In 1923, he had cataract surgery, and for a while, he saw things more blue one day, and more red or yellow the next. Do the wide variations in color across these bridge paintings reflect what Monet was really seeing, or was he making deliberate choices?

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

We're not able to pin this down with certainty. It's really difficult to pinpoint when these paintings were made. We don't know exactly which follows which, in what order they were created. But we're sure that we are seeing Monet doing his best to counteract the changes in his vision that we know are taking place.

If you ask me, Monet is able here to triumph over the challenges that his vision imposes. He's evolving a way of working in which he can create something that is wholly successful, in spite of the cataracts that are changing his vision year by year.

[word count: 340]

510. GROUP OF *WEeping Willow* PAINTINGS, ENDING WITH *WEeping Willow*, 1918–19. KIMBELL ART MUSEUM, FORT WORTH (CAT. 44)

NARRATOR:

Around 1918, Monet began a series of weeping willow tree paintings. In the five canvases on view, we can see that the willow is no longer just one motif within a water lily pond scene. Instead, it's the central motif.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

The particular tree that Monet chose to paint stood on the north bank of his pond, and was remarkable for the craggy, curling almost wicked witch-like branches that it had. And these, I think we see in all of the paintings that we show here.

NARRATOR:

Take a look at the painting farthest to the right on this wall. It belongs to the Kimbell.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

It's a painting that we know Monet particularly admired because he sold it to one of his best collectors, a man named Kōjirō Matsukata. And it is, I believe, one of the most expressive and beautiful of all these paintings. It's particularly notable for the beautiful sensation of light falling through the leaves of the tree. And isolating the trunk, giving it a sense of monumentality and almost a personality.

In fact, I think one thing that's true of all of these paintings is the great sense that the tree stands in for Monet. The tree stands for the artist himself, who, increasingly beset by the frailties of age, nonetheless manages to withstand the forces of time with great nobility and pathos.

NARRATOR:

For Monet, the willow tree may have had an additional layer of symbolism.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

When Monet begins this series in 1918, it's against the backdrop of the continuing strife of World War I. Monet's son and his stepson are both away in the army, and he is incredibly aware of the toll that the war is taking on his country and on the people that he lives among in Giverny. Monet is very aware of the sick, the wounded, the dying. And the willow tree, specifically the weeping willow tree, is a symbol in every Western culture, of mourning, of loss and of sorrow.

[word count: 328]

511. GROUP OF 2-3 *WEEPING WILLOW* PAINTINGS, ESP. *WEEPING WILLOW*, 1920–22. MUSÉE D'ORSAY, PARIS (CAT. 46)

NARRATOR:

The two paintings in this grouping, both from museums in Paris, have rarely been exhibited in the United States. They often surprise contemporary viewers...perhaps they're surprising to you, too.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

For any of us in 2019, it's hard to look at a painting like this by Monet, painted 100 years ago, and not think of the kinds of paintings that were made in America particularly, in the years just after World War II. In other words, abstract painting, what we would call 'Abstract Expressionism,' as exemplified most often by the still controversial figure of Jackson Pollock.

But look closely at these canvases and you'll see that they are based on the notion of the willow tree as seen from across the pond. So that the horizontal strokes at the bottom reflect the pathway or the surface of the water lily pond, and the curving, writhing strokes of paint that seem to mean nothing are, in fact, indicative of the branches of the tree falling down across the earth below.

NARRATOR:

Monet's paintings always depicted the world he saw around him.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

And it's Monet's intention that we should respond to the gestures that he makes on the surface of the canvas as evidence of what he has seen with his eyes. The eye looking at the moving branches of the tree, and his hands recreating on the surface of the canvas that movement that he perceived in the natural world. That, then, the movement, the color, the light, is the subject matter of these paintings, profoundly based in nature, but seeming to us almost completely abstract.

[word count: 263]

512. GROUP OF *THE ARTIST'S HOUSE SEEN FROM THE ROSE GARDEN* PAINTINGS

NARRATOR:

Monet made this group of paintings, all of which depict his house, during the last few years of his life.

At first, these canvases can be hard to make sense of. Pick any painting from this group to look at more closely—they're all variations on the same theme.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

At the left side of every one of these paintings is the house itself. You may be able to spot the chimneys at the top, on the roofline. At the right side is a massive tree in the distance. And at the foreground of every one of these, at the center, at the bottom, you see jumbles of brushstrokes that are meant to represent the flowerbeds installed in front of the house at the top of the garden. Monet filled these beds with roses, with geraniums, with nasturtiums, the flowers changing every summer.

I find these works incredibly intense. There's joy in them, yes; and yet there's a sense of tension in them as well. Because we see Monet really struggling. Here he is, 84, 85 years old. He's struggling with the problem of getting his paints to behave for him, in order to render what he sees of his house and his garden onto these canvases that we think are among the very last ones he worked on.

NARRATOR:

These paintings represent struggle, but they also represent victory. Because even here, at the very end of his life, Monet is creating works of art as radical as anything he'd painted previously.

In 1874, Monet participated in the groundbreaking first exhibition of Impressionist art. Here, some 50 years later, he is still innovating, still reinventing his art—not to keep up with the times, but rather for himself, and on his own terms.

[word count: 292]

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