

CLAUDE MONET

Le Bassin aux Nymphéas

Date: 1919

Size: 39.38 x 40.88 inches (100.03 x 103.84 cm)

Oil on Canvas

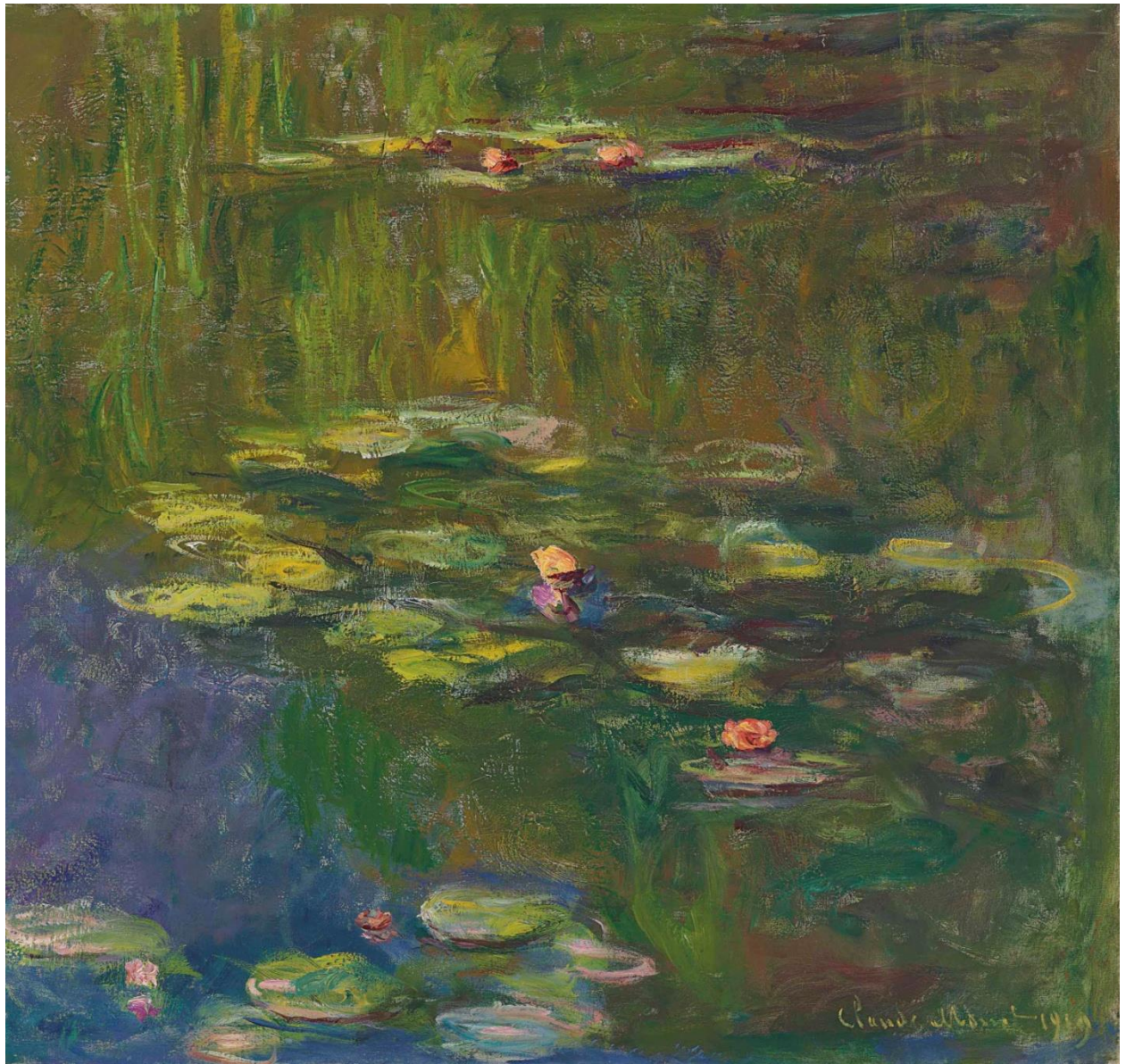
Signed and dated

Provenance:

Galerie Bernheim-Jeune et Cie, Paris, acquired from the artist November, 1919
Galerie Bernheim-Jeune et Cie and Galerie Durand Ruel et Cie, Paris (Acquired from the above in 1921)
Henri Cannone, Paris (acquired from the above c. 1928)
Private Collection, France (circa 1926)
Ross Collection
Galerie Beyeler, Basel
Gallery Nichido, Tokyo. Acquired from the above
Acquired from the above by the present owner March 1996
Sale, May 12, 2016, Christies, New York (Lot 27C)
Estimate: \$25,000,000 - \$35,000,000) Realized: \$27,045.
Private Collection, Acquired from the above

Literature:

F. Thiebaut-Sisson, Une exposition: *Claude Monet – Le Temps*, 7 January, 1928, p. 4.
A. Alexander, *La Collection Canonne: Une histoire en action de l'Impressionisme et dixes suites*, Paris 1930, pp. 47-48
D. Rouart, J. D. Rey and R. Maillard, *Monet Nymphéas ou les miroirs du temps*, Paris 1972, p. 174 (illustrated as part of a larger canvas)
R. Gordon and C.F. Stuckey, "Blossoms and Blunders: Monet in the State". *Art and America*, 1979, p. 110.
Daniel Wildenstein, *Claude Monet: Biographie et Catalogue Raisonné*, Lausanne, 1985, Vol. IV, p. 288, No. 1893b and p. 432, letter no. 300 (illustrated p. 289) illustrated as part of a larger canvas, p. 288 dated 1917-1919.
Daniel Wildenstein, *Claude Monet Catalogue Raisonné*, Cologne 1996, Vol. IV, p. 900, no. 1893/2 (illustrated p. 899,) illustrated as part of a larger canvas, p. 898,
J. D. Rey and D. Rouart, *Monet Water Lilies: The Complete Series*, Paris, 2008, p. 140)illustrated as part of a larger canvas)





Notes:

Le Bassin Aux Nymphéas is one of the great rarities of Impressionist Art: a painting of Monet's beloved waterlilies from his later years, that was signed, dated and sold by the artist along with three other paintings from the same series shortly after their completion. The original painting was cut in two, prior to 1944 when the two parts entered different collections. The present *Le Bassin Aux Nymphéas* is the right side of the painting, which bears the original signature and date.

In its reduced format, the painting recalls Monet's square compositions of the mid 1900s that were exhibited in the pivotal 1909 exhibition *Nymphéas: Séries de Paysages d'Eau* at Galerie Durand-Ruel to great acclaim. However, the loose, bold brushstrokes and heavy impasto of *Le Bassin Aux Nymphéas* reveal the painting to be a preeminent example of Monet's later career.

Begun shortly before the end of the First World War, the series of paintings including *Le Bassin Aux Nymphéas* forms a crucial part of the creative process of the *Grandes Décorations*: a concept envisioned by the artist as early as 1897 in which his paintings of the waterlily pond would form a large scale decorative ensemble. From 1914 to 1923 Monet painted over two-hundred canvases, culminating in twenty-two large monumental works of the waterlily pond now on display in the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris.

Nymphéas hung in the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris.

Claude Monet - Le Bassin Aux Nymphéas

"I have painted these water lilies a great deal, modifying my viewpoint each time. The effect varies constantly, not only from one season to the next, but from one minute to the next, since the water-flowers themselves are far from being the whole scene; really, they are just the accompaniment. The essence of the motif is the mirror of water, whose appearance alters at every moment, thanks to the patches of sky that are reflected in it, and give it its light and movement. So many factors, undetectable to the uninitiated eye, transform the coloring and distort the planes of water" (quoted in P. Tucker, *Monet in the Twentieth Century*, exh. cat., Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1998, p. 11). So Monet told the journalist François Thiébaud-Sisson near the end of his life, more than two decades after the water garden at Giverny had become almost the exclusive subject of his art.

Over the course of this great valedictory period, Monet created some two hundred paintings of his lily pond, an extraordinary outpouring of creativity that stands as the culminating achievement of his long and visionary career, they did so in a pictorial language that was utterly novel and transformative even by the standards of the new century.

Monet was France's most acclaimed living artist by this time, venerated as a founding father of the modern movement; the *Nymphéas* re-established his place at the very forefront of the avant-garde, demonstrating that his art had not lost its vital, revolutionary character.

Monet probably began the present *Bassin aux nymphéas* in mid-1918, when after nearly four years of fighting the outcome of the First World War still hung precariously in the balance; he completed and signed it the next year, after the Allies had achieved victory. Reveling in freedom and experimentation, in nuanced color harmonies and expressive brushwork, in the shifting and incalculable world of nature, the painting seems to eschew the "call to order" that gripped the avant-garde during and after the war.

Yet Monet saw his *Nymphéas*, with their compelling mixture of poetry and urgency, as deeply interwoven with the collective efforts of the nation. "I am on the verge of finishing two decorative panels that I want to sign on the day of the Victory and I am going to ask you to offer them to the State," he wrote to Prime Minister Clémenceau in November 1918. "It's not much, but it is the only way I have of taking part in the victory" (quoted in *ibid.*, p. 77).

"Elusive and mysterious, though fully measurable and humane, these paintings assert that Monet's physical remove to Giverny did not mean a relaxation of his intellectual and aesthetic powers," Paul Tucker has explained. "On the contrary, the time he spent observing his flowers, trees, and pond engendered a profound refocusing of those strengths, largely in response to the pressures of the very contemporaneity he appeared to have abandoned. For while they may seem to be about nothing other than the beauty he found in his own backyard, these pictures were actually created in the midst of conflict and turmoil—the death of family members, his own threatened blindness, the perceived erosion of aesthetic principles in French art, the abandonment of nature, and worst of all perhaps, the horrors of the First World War. They encapsulate an entire era as seen and felt by an individual who by 1900 had become one of the world's most celebrated painters" (*ibid.*, p. 14).

The artist and his family settled at Giverny in 1883, a tiny rural hamlet some forty miles northwest of Paris at the confluence of the Seine and the Epte. Monet found a large house to rent there on two acres of land; when the property came up for sale in 1890, he hastened to buy it at the asking price, "certain of never finding a better situation or more beautiful countryside," as he wrote to Durand-Ruel (quoted in P. Tucker, *Monet: Life and Art*, New Haven, 1995, p.175).

A passionate gardener all his life, Monet's first priority upon purchasing the estate was to replace the vegetable plots in front of the house with flower beds. Three years later, he acquired an adjacent piece of land beside the river Ru and applied to the local government for permission "to install a *prise d'eau* to provide enough water to refresh the pond that I am going to dig for the purpose of cultivating aquatic plants" (quoted in *ibid.*, p. 176).

By autumn, he had converted nearly a thousand square meters into a lily pond, ringed by an artful arrangement of flowers, bushes, and trees. Although Monet created the pond in part to fulfill his passion for gardening, he also

intended it as a source of artistic inspiration. In his petition to the Department Prefect, Monet specified that the water garden would serve “for the pleasure of the eyes and also for the purpose of having subjects to paint” (quoted in *Claude Monet: Late Work*, exh. cat., Gagosian Gallery, New York, 2010, p. 23). And this it did, ultimately surpassing the more conventional flower garden in Monet’s hierarchy of subjects.

“That Monet would have preferred the water garden over the flower garden is understandable,” Tucker has written. “It offered him the ultimate in variety: an infinite array of color; constantly changing reflections; continual tensions between surface and depth, near and far, stability and the unknown, with everything bathed in an endlessly shifting but ever-present light” (*op. cit.*, 1998, p. 41).

Monet did not begin work on his water-lily series immediately, however. “It took me some time to understand my water lilies,” he recalled. “A landscape takes more than a day to get under your skin. And then all at once, I had the revelation—how wonderful my pond was—and reached for my palette. I’ve hardly had any other subject since that moment” (quoted in *Claude Monet*, exh. cat., Österreichische Galerie, Vienna, 1996, p. 146).

This revelation occurred in 1904, following the enormously successful exhibition of Monet’s paintings from London and a campaign of renovations to the lily pond. Over the next five years, he worked with almost unbroken intensity, producing more than sixty paintings of the plane of the water, which together comprise a dazzling and radically destabilized vision of shifting surfaces and disintegrating forms. When these canvases were exhibited at Durand-Ruel in May 1909, they met with unprecedented acclaim. Critics marveled at how novel and nearly abstract the pictures appeared, even by comparison with Picasso and Braque’s latest Cubist experiments.

“His vision increasingly is simplifying itself, limiting itself to the minimum of tangible realities in order to amplify, to magnify the impression of the imponderable,” Jean Morgan wrote in the *periodical Le Gaulois* (quoted in *op. cit.*, 2010, p. 29). Monet could not have hoped for a better response. Yet following the close of the exhibition, there followed nearly five years in which the artist—exhausted from the intense work leading up to the show, and then suffering from a sequence of personal tragedies—barely picked up his brushes.

It was not until the spring of 1914 that he returned to his beloved water garden in earnest. “I have thrown myself back into work,” he wrote to Durand-Ruel in June, “and when I do that, I do it seriously, so much so that I am getting up at four a.m. and am grinding away all day long” (quoted in *op. cit.*, 1995, p. 204). When he began work anew, a very specific goal fired his prodigious creativity. Seventeen years earlier, in 1897, he had described to the journalist Maurice Guillemot his vision of an enclosed space lined with mural-sized paintings of the lily pond that would transport the viewer into realms of aesthetic reverie. Now, at long last, he set out to make this encompassing ensemble—the *Grandes décorations*—a reality.

Between 1914 and 1917, Monet completed a series of some sixty *Nymphéas*, in which he tested out pictorial ideas and visual effects for his decorative program on a scale that he had never before attempted.

During the summer of 1915, he began construction on a huge studio to house the project; he occupied the building in late October and began work on the murals themselves at that time. By November 1917, he considered the panels sufficiently advanced that he permitted Durand-Ruel to photograph them in progress at Giverny.

The present *Bassin aux nymphéas* enters the story at this important juncture. On 30 April 1918—“prompted by conversations with his visitors,” Tucker has suggested, “by the result of strides he had made on his project”—Monet ordered a large quantity of pre-stretched canvases measuring 1 meter high by 2 meters wide (*op. cit.*, 1998, p. 74). As soon as they were delivered, he set up his easel at the pond’s edge and began work on a new and compositionally unified group of *Nymphéas*, with lily pads clustered towards the lateral edges of the canvas and a stream of sunlight in the center. He would eventually complete fourteen paintings in this format, plus an additional five on a slightly different scale (1.3 x 2 meters; the full group is Wildenstein, nos. 1883-1901).

At some point before 1944, one of the canvases was divided down the middle to create two separate paintings, each one meter square; the right-hand composition is the present *Bassin aux nymphéas*, and the left-hand pendant is housed today in the Tel Aviv Museum.

In comparison with the emphatically elongated canvases from this suite, the present painting is much more classically balanced in composition, harking back to the authoritative *Nymphéas* of the Durand-Ruel show. The lilies are grouped in three large clusters, one near the bottom, one near the top, and one almost centered on the square canvas. Conventional spatial recession, indicated by the diminishing scale of the floating blossoms and lily pads, is played against the flat surface of the picture, which Monet has emphasized through vigorous, textural brushwork. The horizontal islands of lilies, seen directly, contrast with the vertical reflections of foliage, seen as if in a mirror; the entangled vegetation has an undulating, striated quality, and its deep green tones, mysterious and impenetrable, form a striking backdrop for the lighter hues of the lily pads on the water's surface.

The blossoms themselves are rendered with the most impasto to give them a sculptural presence, affirming their position on the top of the pond. Sunlight now enters the canvas at the bottom left corner of the canvas, creating a dynamic wedge of reflected blue sky that energizes the relatively stable composition.

Monet had explored the effects of stream of light in a group of canvases from 1907, among the most daring and dramatic of the *Nymphéas* that he showed at Durand-Ruel (Wildenstein nos. 1703-1716); here, the looser, more instinctive handling only heightens this effect. "In contrast to the earlier 1907 pictures, the newer canvases have a physical and emotional expansiveness that allow them to breathe in a bolder, fuller fashion," Tucker has written, "even though each of them depicts a greater number of plants and has a more heavily worked surface" (*ibid.*, p. 74).

Monet was exceptionally pleased with this new suite of paintings. Unlike the *Nymphéas* from 1914-1917, which he evidently considered as a private exploratory enterprise and neither exhibited nor sold, he conceived of the canvases that he began in 1918 as independent, finished works.

In November 1919, he signed and dated four of them—including the present example, in its original format—and released them to Bernheim-Jeune; it was the first time that he had parted with a sizable number of recent works since 1912, when he sold his Venetian views to the same dealer. In 1922, he donated another painting from the sequence to the Société des Amis du Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes. "It is possible that Monet saw the finished canvases as forerunners in the public domain of the late Water Lily *Grandes Décorations*," Tucker has proposed (*ibid.*, p. 218).

The artist's strong feelings about these paintings may also reflect the decisive historical moment at which he created them. In the first months of 1918, shortly before Monet inaugurated the series, the Germans had mounted their most intense and frightening offensive against France. They broke through British defenses in the Somme valley in March and pressed on to capture Amiens, only 37 kilometers from Giverny

The lily blossoms in the present painting are fully open, suggesting that Monet started the canvas in summer, by which time the Germans appeared to have assumed complete control of the war. "I do not have long to live, and I must dedicate all my time to painting," Monet wrote to Georges Bernheim-Jeune at that time. "I do not want to believe that I would ever be obliged to leave Giverny; I would rather die here in the middle of what I have done" (quoted in *op. cit.*, 1995, p. 212).

In the fall of 1918, however, the tide of the war suddenly changed. The Allies mounted a counter-offensive in September, and by early November the Germans had been pushed out of France and forced to the peace table.

Monet was immensely relieved, and terribly proud as well of what France had endured and accomplished. In a moving patriotic gesture, he wrote to Clemenceau, as cited above, and offered two "*panneaux décoratifs*" to the State. He very likely intended one or both of these to be from the *Bassin aux nymphéas* sequence, which was his primary focus of attention at the time, along with a group of weeping willows.

Clemenceau and Gustave Geffroy convinced Monet to expand his offer, however, and the entire cycle of *Grandes décorations* was soon officially earmarked for the State.

Monet completed the twenty-two mural-sized canvases, totaling more than ninety meters in length, just months before his death in December 1926. In May 1927, the Musée de l'Orangerie, newly remodeled to house this extraordinary bequest, opened to great fanfare.

The present *Bassin aux nymphéas* belonged jointly to Bernheim-Jeune and Durand-Ruel at this time; the very next year, in 1928, it entered the collection of Henri Canonne, a Parisian pharmaceutical tycoon who acquired a total of seventeen *Nymphéas* over the course of the 1920s—a veritable *Grandes décorations* of his own. This exquisite painting remained in Canonne's collection until the mid-1940s, by which time Monet's late *Nymphéas* had come to be revered as authoritative and visionary among the young American avant-garde.

"In the past decade," the critic Thomas Hess wrote in 1956, "paintings by such artists as Pollock, Rothko, Still, Reinhardt, and Tobey have made us see in Monet's huge late pictures a purity of image and concept of pictorial space that we now can recognize as greatly daring poetry". (quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 100-101).

Detailed of Le bassin aux nymphéas

