



**Claude Monet** (1840-1926)

*Le bassin aux nymphéas*

stamped with signature 'Claude Monet' (Lugt 1819b; lower left); stamped again with signature 'Claude Monet' (Lugt 1819b; on the reverse)

oil on canvas

39  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 79 in. (100.7 x 200.8 cm.)

Painted in 1917-1919

#### PROVENANCE

Michel Monet, Giverny (by descent from the artist).

Katia Granoff, Paris (acquired from the above).

Fairweather-Harding Gallery, Chicago (by 1959).

Grant J. Pick, Chicago (1959).

The Art Institute of Chicago, as the Midwestern Educational Institution, Chicago (bequest from the Estate of the above, 1963); sale, Parke-Bernet Inc., New York, 15 April 1965, lot 84.

Mr. and Mrs. David Lloyd Kreeger, Washington, D.C. (acquired at the above sale).

Galerie Beyeler, Basel (acquired from the above, 1976).

Private collection, Switzerland; sale, Christie's, New York, 8 May 2000, lot 33.

Private collection.

Acquavella Galleries, Inc., New York (acquired from the above).

Acquired from the above by present owner, 2002.

Acquired from Christie's sale 11 nov. 2018.

## LITERATURE

H. Dorra, Kreeger Collection, Washington, D.C., 1970, pp. 10-11 and 45 (illustrated, p. 44; dated 1907-1917).

D. Rouart, *Monet: Nymphéas, ou les miroirs du temps*, Paris, 1972 (illustrated; titled *Nymphéas* and dated circa 1916-1922).

M.P. Sharpe, ed., *The Collection of Mr. and Mrs. David Lloyd Kreeger*, Richmond, 1976, p. 176 (illustrated in color; and dated 1917).

D. Wildenstein, *Claude Monet: Biographie et Catalogue raisonné*, Lausanne, 1985, vol. IV, p. 286, no. 1887 (illustrated).

D. Wildenstein, *Monet: Catalogue raisonné*, Cologne, 1996, vol. IV, p. 896, no. 1887 (illustrated in color).

J.-D. Rey and D. Rouart, *Monet Water Lilies: The Complete Series*, Paris, 2008, p. 139 (illustrated in color).

## EXHIBITED

New York, M. Knoedler & Co., Inc., *Seven Decades: Cross Currents in Modern Art 1895-1965*, April-May 1966, p. 54, no. 80 (illustrated in color; titled *Nymphéas*, dated 1913(?)).

New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Summer Loan Exhibition*, Summer 1966, p. 11, no. 114.

Basel, Galerie Beyeler, *Manet, Degas, Monet, Cézanne, Bonnard: Œuvres tardives*, June-September 1977, no. 21 (illustrated in color).

Kunstmuseum Basel, *Claude Monet: Nymphéas Impression, Vision*, July-October 1986, p. 84, no. 46 (illustrated in color).

Munich, Kunsthalle der Hypo-Kulturstiftung, *Monet and Modernism*, November 2001-March 2002, p. 94 (illustrated in color).

## SALE ROOM NOTICE

Please note the amended provenance:

Michel Monet, Giverny (by descent from the artist).

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Please note that this painting has been requested by The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth for their exhibition *Monet: The Late Years* which will be shown February 16–May 27, 2019, at the de Young Museum, and June 16–September 15, 2019, at the Kimbell Art Museum.

In mid-1918, when Monet likely began the present *Le bassin aux nymphéas*, the outcome of the First World War hung precariously in the balance after four years of devastating, all-out combat. This exquisitely delicate, contemplative rendering of his celebrated water-lily pond at rural Giverny—of the mysterious and elusive beauty that he found in his own garden—seems at first glance entirely removed from the catastrophic events of the day. Yet Monet himself 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 Clemenceau on 12 November 1918, the day after the Armistice. “It’s not much, but it is the only way I have of taking part in the victory” (quoted in *ibid*, 1998, p. 77).

A passionate gardener all his life, Monet had begun to cultivate his aquatic fantasia a full quarter-century earlier—in 1893, shortly after purchasing the property at Giverny that he had rented for the previous decade. It was not until the new century, though, that the pond became the almost exclusive subject of his art, inspiring an extraordinary outpouring of creativity that represents the valedictory achievement of his long, visionary career. Between 1904 and 1909, Monet painted more than sixty views of the pond, capturing the constantly shifting relationships among water, reflections, and light that transformed its surface with each passing moment. When these now-iconic paintings were exhibited at Durand-Ruel in May 1909, critics marveled at how novel and nearly abstract they appeared, even by comparison with Picasso and Braque’s latest cubist experiments. “His vision increasingly is limiting itself to the minimum of tangible realities in order to amplify, to magnify the impression of the imponderable,” Jean Morgan wrote in *Le Gaulois* (quoted in *Claude Monet: Late Work*, exh. cat., Gagosian Gallery, New York, 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. His wife Alice and son Jean both took ill and died during this time, and Monet learned that he had a cataract in one eye that threatened his vision. Less grave but still distressing, flooding of the Seine and Epte caused substantial damage to his gardens. It was not until the spring of 1914 while France was steeling itself for war that he returned to his beloved lily pond 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 P.H. Tucker, *Monet: Life and Art*, New Haven, 1995, p. 204). Monet was 73 years old by then, well beyond the life expectancy for men of his generation. The mere fact that he resumed work on the *Nymphéas* series with such vigor is extraordinary. Rather than simply retreading his previous success, moreover, he set himself a wholly new challenge. In 1897, he had described to a journalist 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 last, he set out to make this encompassing ensemble the *Grandes décorations* a reality. "It was not just his personal travails that drove him back to the studio, but a burning desire to do something that would move beyond his early *Nymphéas*," Paul Tucker has proposed. "In the first decade of the century, their beauty and inventiveness might have been an apt summation of his life's efforts. But the second decade called for something more formidable, because everyone knew that a cataclysmic conflict was imminent in Europe" (exh. cat., op. cit., 2010, p. 30). Between 1914 and 1917, Monet completed a series of some sixty *Nymphéas*, in which he tested out pictorial ideas and visual effects for the *Grandes décorations* 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 new building in October and began work on the actual murals at that time. By November of 1917, he considered the panels sufficiently advanced that he permitted Durand-Ruel to photograph them in progress at Giverny. François Thiébault-Sisson was justifiably impressed when he saw the paintings at an even more advanced stage in February 1918, and so were the Bernheim-Jeune brothers, who visited Giverny in March.

The present *Bassin aux nymphéas* enters the story at this important juncture. On 30 April 1918, perhaps prompted by conversations with his visitors and 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—the same elongated, horizontal format as the *Grandes décorations*, at roughly half the scale. 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, including the present canvas, plus an additional five on a slightly different scale (1.3 x 2 meters; the full sequence is Wildenstein, nos. 1883-1901, three of which have been cut in two). One of the 1 x 2 meter paintings (no. 1886) is dated

'1917' in Monet's hand, suggesting that the artist may have initiated the sequence in that year; Tucker has proposed that the 1.3 x 2 meter canvases are the earliest in the group, and that Monet appended the earlier date to no. 1886 after its completion to signal the conception of the group as a whole (*ibid*, p. 218).

These paintings are all structured around three irregularly shaped areas of light and shadow, created by a single vertical band of reflected sky that pushes through darker sections of mirrored foliage spreading out horizontally on either side. The central cascade of light – a motif that Monet had first developed in a group of *Nymphéas* he completed during 1907 – descends from the top of the scene, wending its way between competing reflections and lily pads before spilling out into a broad pool. In some canvases, Monet used strongly contrasting hues and sweeping, graphic brushwork to stake out the constituent parts of the image; in others, including the present *Bassin aux nymphéas*, he unified the ensemble through diaphanous veils of color laid down with a lighter, more transparent touch, emphasizing the spatial breadth of the composition. “In contrast to the earlier 1907 pictures,” Tucker has written, “the newer canvases have a physical and emotional expansiveness that allow them to breathe in a bolder, fuller fashion” (*exh. cat.*, *op. cit.*, 1998, p. 74).

Work on the new canvases proceeded rapidly. In August 1918, the dealer René Gimpel called on Monet at Giverny along with Georges Bernheim and reported seeing a large quantity of six-foot-wide *Nymphéas* in the studio. Monet staged a special exhibition of these recent works for his visitors, arranging them in a circle on the floor to create a simulacrum of the lily pond, rather than positioning them upright on easels. “In its infinity, the water and the sky had neither beginning nor end,” Gimpel recounted. “It was as though we were present at one of the first hours of the birth of the world. It was mysterious, poetic, deliciously unreal” (quoted in R. King, *Mad Enchantment: Claude Monet and the Painting of the Water Lilies*, New York, 2016, p. 179).

Monet himself 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 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 (*exh. cat.*, *op. cit.*, 1998, 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 an intense and frightening offensive against France, their desperate, last-ditch effort to win the war. 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 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 P.H. Tucker, *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 22 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 majority of Monet’s late *Nymphéas*, however, remained with his descendants for another quarter-century, unknown outside a select coterie. It was only after the Second World War that contemporary audiences, schooled in Abstract Expressionism, came to recognize the greatly daring poetry of these huge, valedictory paintings. The present canvas is part of an important cache of *Nymphéas* that the Parisian dealer Katia Granoff selected from Monet’s studio beginning in 1955; it subsequently passed to Grant J. Pick, a major benefactor of The Art Institute of Chicago at that time.

\* Information from the Christie’s sale 2018