Bridge Over a Pool of Water Lilies
By Claude Monet
(1840-1926)
Oil on canvas 1899

ABOUT THE ARTIST:

One of the most renowned and talented artists, Claude Monet and his fellow Impressionists revolutionized French painting in the second half of the 19th century. Born in Paris, November 14, 1840, Monet became one of the leading figures of the Impressionist movement. His experiments with light, color and paint would form the groundwork for abstract art in the 20th century.

In 1845 Monet’s family moved to Normandy on the coast of France. His father wanted Monet to continue in the family grocery business but even at a young age Monet knew he wanted to become an artist. Monet was not the only creative member in his family his mother was a singer.

Entering Le Havre secondary school of the arts in 1851 and recognized by locals for his charcoal caricatures, Monet’s artistic career was established at a young age when he sold the caricatures for ten to twenty francs. It was on the beaches of Normandy in 1856-1857 where Monet met fellow artist Eugène Boudin. Boudin proved greatly influential in Monet’s artistic development. Not only did he teach Monet how to use oil paints but the “en plein air” (outdoor) approach for painting as well.

Monet’s mother died in 1857 and at that point he left school at sixteen to live with his aunt. He traveled to Paris and visited the Louvre where he observed painters copying from the Old Masters. We see a glimpse of the landscapist Monet would become as he would sit by the window at the Louvre and paint what he saw instead of replicating the Old Masters’ works. He was in Paris for several years when he met some of the other young painters who would become the Impressionists. One of these influential figures was the famous Édouard Manet.

In 1861 Monet joined the 1st Regiment of African Light Calvary in Algeria, a seven year commitment, but left after two years due to typhoid fever. Monet’s aunt convinced him to leave and attend art school. It was at this point Monet became discouraged with the traditional art taught there. Monet then became a student of Charles Glèyre in Paris. This was where he met artists Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Frédéric Bazille and Alfred Sisley all of whom shared new methods with regard to art. They painted the effects of light “en plein air” with “broken color and rapid brushstrokes”. This new style in art would later become Impressionism.

At the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War July 19, 1870 Monet moved to England where he studied works of art by the famous artists John Constable, Joseph Mallard and William Turner. Their landscapes motivated Monet’s study of color. Sadly in the spring
of 1871, Monet’s works of art would be rejected for inclusion in the Royal Academy exhibition.

Following in the path of the Barbizon painters, a group that was part of the Realism movement, Monet studied his subjects with an aim to depict them in as close to a natural manner as possible. Monet differed from the Barbizons by often working directly on large-scale canvases outdoors. He would then rework them and complete them in his studio where the Barbizon group painted the initial sketches and then completed “en plein air”.

Leaving London in 1871 he moved to the Netherlands and then to Argenteuil, France from 1871-1878. Located on the right bank of the Seine near Paris the village of Argenteuil was a popular Sunday destination for Parisians as well as a center for artistic activity. It was during this period where Monet painted some of his best works. His home became a popular gathering place for fellow Impressionists such as Édouard Manet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Alfred Sisley. Around this period Monet married and had two children Jean in 1867 and Michel in 1878, sadly his wife Camille died of tuberculosis at the age of 32 in 1879.

Around 1890 Monet began his fascination with painting series which continued for the rest of his career. He would observe and paint a subject under various light and atmospheric conditions at different times of day or season. Bridge Over a Pool of Water Lilies is part of a series of 18 views of the Japanese footbridge in his garden at Giverny 1899-1900. He worked on other Water Lilies series without the footbridge as well where the pond surface takes up the entire canvas. Those paintings exhibit an “endlessly fascinating interplay of reflection and reality”.

IMPRESSIONISM

The term Impressionism was first used in 1874 by the art critic, Louis Leroy, ridiculing Monet’s landscape Impressionism: Sunrise. Originating with Monet’s group of colleagues in Paris their independent exhibitions of art brought them distinction during the 1870’s and 1880’s despite criticism from the traditional French art community. They focused on landscapes and scenes from everyday life maintaining a distance from religious, historic or romantic themes.

The Impressionism movement moved away from Realism and supplied the foundation for the beginning of 20th century exploration of expression, color cubism and abstraction. The original Impressionists were less interested in scientific theories of light and color than in the simple experience of the natural world seen in all various light conditions throughout the day, weather and seasons. Aiding these artists in their quest to paint the variety of colors found in nature, scientific studies of light and the invention of chemical pigments provided new colors with which to work. By 1870’s it was also easy for artists to paint “en plein air” as painters no longer needed to grind their own paints but were able to bring portable tubes of paint.
By studying outdoor light the true color of an object is usually produced by the “quality of light in which it is seen by reflections from other objects and by effects produced by juxtaposed colors”. Impressionists recorded their own sensations of color and Monet liked to paint objects as shapes not as what they were. Monet focused primarily on landscapes to which he “subordinated his figures” and is purported to have said to the American painter Lila Cabot Perry “every leaf on the tree is as important as the features of your model”.

**GIVERNY**

Monet settled in Giverny, a village forty miles northwest of Paris, in 1883 until his death in 1926. He loved its landscape and proximity to the small town of Vernon where his children attended school. Devoted to his family, Monet had two sons with his first wife and six stepchildren with his second wife, Alice Hoschedé. Due to his increasing affluence Monet was still able to maintain his “artistic conscience” yet push himself to be prolific and sell his works providing for his large family and staff. Before he moved to Giverny Monet lived and worked in places particularly known to the history of Impressionism. He travelled extensively to Normandy, Riviera, Rouen, London and Venice in search of more challenging subjects, however, many scenes he painted were within a two-mile radius either walking or boating distance from his home in Giverny. He knew most intimately this landscape through every season and weather condition. Due to this accessibility it made it possible to work on his multiple series.

Monet became interested in reflections and two-dimensional imagery. His desire to correctly depict nature caused him to move away from European practice with respect to composition, color and perspective. Japanese woodblock prints played a role in influencing Monet’s abandonment of symmetrical composition which accentuated the two dimensional surfaces by doing away with linear perspective and three dimensional representation. Monet brought an intensity of color to the work of art by prepping his canvases with a light-colored primer instead of a traditional dark layer and by using pure color adding an assortment of tones.

**ABOUT THE PAINTING:**

Depicting Monet’s water garden at Giverny, this painting portrays the view which became the primary focus of the last thirty years of his life. Monet built the Japanese wooden bridge for this water garden which provided many “pictorial possibilities” and became a subject painted over and over again until his death.

The paintings from the later Water Lily series are on display worldwide and in the 1920’s France built a pair of oval rooms at the Musee de l’Orangerie to house eight of them. In 1899 he began a series of eighteen views of the Japanese wooden footbridge over the pond- he completed twelve. The vertical format which was unusual in his scenes gives prominence to the water lilies and their reflections in the pond. The water lilies, grasses and water materialize from Monet’s broad brushstrokes and layered textures of color.
The first series was painted in the summers of 1899 and 1900. Monet reflected the constant variations of light across the surface of the water of the lily pond. The greens, reds, yellows and whites resonate with color.

As mentioned previously the garden played such a prominent role in each work. Monet was a master gardener and wanted to design the space where he would paint so he determined what was planted and where it would grow. Monet’s world grew smaller as the years passed and he did not leave his immediate surroundings. He was so familiar with the garden and water lily pond from its design and years of study. When his eyes started to fail, due to cataracts, he could still paint from memory.

Late in 1900 Monet exhibited the first pictures of the lily pond. In the dozen paintings shown, dated 1899 and 1900, the water is strewn with water lilies, and the curve of the Japanese footbridge rises against the lush greenery. The bridge is centered in this work of art suggesting its prominence. There are other images where it has been painted to the right, to the left and at times is absent. Eventually Monet will add a terrace growing wisteria in 1901. The paintings were exhibited and received success however the critics’ remark was that Monet had not varied his point of view.

The last paintings of the water garden in the 1920’s were a “mastery of abstraction as a means of personal expression”. Monet’s paintings at Giverny serve as a link between Impressionism and 20th century painting.
QUESTIONS TO ASK:

• Is this a painting? Or a photograph? It is painted with brushstrokes of rich blues, greens, reds and whites.

• Many Impressionist paintings were criticized as “unintelligible” yet when viewed far away everything melded into a cohesive whole. The characteristic short, choppy strokes brought an intensity of light and color. What do you think? Does this painting look like dabs of color up close and then form a picture far away? Do the colors look bright?

• Monet painted many versions of the water lily pond and footbridge. As mentioned previously he liked to create series by painting at different times of the day and recording the light. There is a story that Monet quickly led his guests to his water lily pond, "because the water lilies close before five o'clock." What time of day do you think he painted this? What time of year?

• This view of the bridge over the water lily pond appears cropped. If the painting was larger and the bridge expanded what do you think we would see?

• Monet loved to paint scenes of water and with this series he depicts beautifully the lily pads with shimmery, luminous colors. He also painted their reflection- what part of the picture shows the actual lily pad and what shows the reflection?

• Monet wanted to record the effects of sunlight on the water and worked from a “boat-turned studio” years before this painting. Do you think Monet had a really good understanding of how the sunlight is portrayed on the water garden? How did he demonstrate this understanding? Where is the light source? What gives you that idea?

• Does this picture look three dimensional? Or does it feel flat- two dimensional? By discarding the “rules of composition” Monet did not paint traditional three dimension and perspective but instead painted what he saw in nature.

• Can you tell where the pond ends and the garden begins? What types of flowers and trees do you see?

• What is the mood of this painting? How does it make you feel?