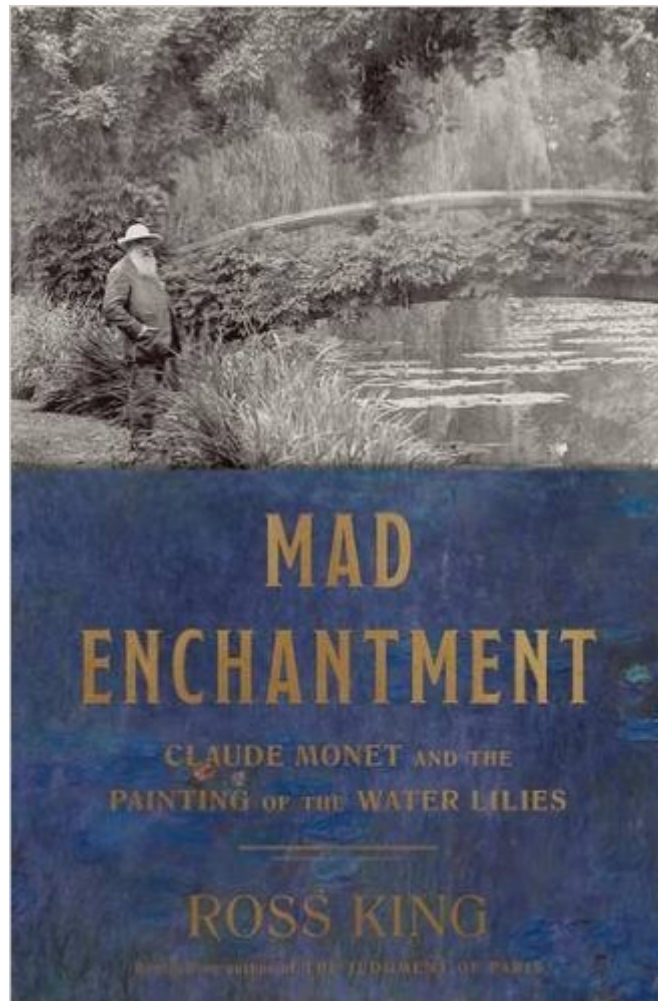


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Mad Enchantment: Claude Monet And The Painting Of The Water Lilies



Synopsis

Claude Monet is perhaps the world's most beloved artist, and among all his creations, the paintings of the water lilies in his garden at Giverny are most famous. Seeing them in museums around the world, viewers are transported by the power of Monet's brush into a peaceful world of harmonious nature. Monet himself intended them to provide a serene asylum of peaceful meditation. Yet, as Ross King reveals in his magisterial chronicle of both artist and masterpiece, these beautiful canvases belie the intense frustration Monet experienced at the difficulties of capturing the fugitive effects of light, water, and color. They also reflect the terrible personal torments Monet suffered in the last dozen years of his life. *Mad Enchantment* tells the full story behind the creation of the Water Lilies, as the horrors of World War I came ever closer to Paris and Giverny, and a new generation of younger artists, led by Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, were challenging the achievements of Impressionism. By early 1914, French newspapers were reporting that Monet, by then 73 and one of the world's wealthiest, most celebrated painters, had retired his brushes. He had lost his beloved wife, Alice, and his eldest son, Jean. His famously acute vision--what Paul Cezanne called "the most prodigious eye in the history of painting"--was threatened by cataracts. And yet, despite ill health, self-doubt, and advancing age, Monet began painting again on a more ambitious scale than ever before. Linking great artistic achievement to the personal and historical dramas unfolding around it, Ross King presents the most intimate and revealing portrait of an iconic figure in world culture--from his lavish lifestyle and tempestuous personality to his close friendship with the fiery war leader Georges Clemenceau, who regarded the Water Lilies as one of the highest expressions of the human spirit.

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Customer Reviews

Make no mistake. This book is more about history than art. (Or the history of art, as I was taught it in college, where images cannot be separated from the artist and the times that produced them.) As someone who majored in art history in college, I found its blend of art, context and personality utterly compelling. But if you're looking for lavish illustrations of Monet's celebrated water lily paintings, as one reviewer lamented, you won't find them. (The Internet has scads of images of them, of course.) If, however, you're interested in a detailed, comprehensive and incisive account of Monet the man and the circumstances that led him to create his water lily paintings, or Grande Decoration, as he envisioned them, you'll find that in spades. And in my book, it's the only way they have any real meaning, and why I found the book so interesting. Author Ross King is a skilled, fluent writer, who brings the people and their era to life. He's done so much research that much of the book reads almost like fiction, with strongly defined characters and the kinds of details that grab your attention. (Monet's fondness for food, for instance, and the famous lunches he'd serve his guests.) The horrors of World War I, which was the backdrop behind many of Monet's water lily paintings (they helped serve as a distraction for him) are vividly depicted. And Monet's beloved home in Giverny is as much a character as his close friend, the statesman and journalist Georges Clemenceau and his family members, especially his stepdaughter, daughter-in-law and helpmate, Blanche.

Over the past decade or so we have seen a few works of historical fiction with Claude Monet as the subject. Usually they focus on his early career, and his first wife Camille figures prominently. The starving artist with the beautiful young but frail bride - that will get you a lot of readers. The young Monet was driven to paint, did not question himself, and did not hesitate to beg for money from anyone who would listen. I have to say, although he is my favorite artist, I would not want to spend much time in his company. He was not what I would call a people person. Mad Enchantment is decidedly nonfiction. (If you love footnotes, you will love this book.) It takes place in the early years of the 20th century. Camille has passed away. Monet is living comfortably with his second wife Alice and their combined family in Giverny. He is arguably the most famous artist in the world. As France heads toward war with Germany, Monet paints scenes from his garden (the most amazing garden - if it's not on your bucket list, it should be.) As the war progresses, Monet paints. Eventually he hatches a plan to donate a large installment of paintings of water lilies and other garden features to

the French government. This is a great simplification of the storyline. Monet had strong, nonnegotiable conditions for the space where his art would hang. If the painting was not going well, he destroyed canvases - hundreds of them in his lifetime. The negotiations with the government as well as the design and construction of the space were marked by plenty of turmoil. At least once, Monet formally withdrew his offer to donate the paintings. All the while he was creating these masterpieces, Monet's health was failing. He was 60 years old at the turn of the century and would live to 86.

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