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Review of *Monet in the 20th Century*, by Paul Tucker

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Review of *Monet in the 20th Century*, by Paul Tucker (exhibition catalogue), Yale University Press, 1997. 310 pp.; 130 color ill.; 25 b/w ill. \$50.00 (0300077491)

Exhibition Schedule: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, September 23, 1998–January 3, 1999; Royal Academy of Arts in London, opened January 21, 1999.

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This morning I drank my green tea from my lavender Monet-signature mug. This same autographic logo is reproduced as the first word of the title of *Monet in the 20th Century*, the catalogue of a major exhibition seen in the fall at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and appearing this spring at the Royal Academy of Arts, London. I wasn't able to join the international throng of visitors who saw the show in Boston and London, but I am nonetheless grateful to the guest curator, Paul Hayes Tucker of the University of Massachusetts, Boston, whose formidable curatorial capacities also brought us the exhibition *Monet in the 90s: The Series Paintings* a decade ago.

Indemnified by the governments of the United Kingdom and the United States, and sponsored by the Fleet Financial Group in Boston and by Ernst & Young in London, *Monet in the 20th Century* will have made a lot of money in 1998 and 1999 for its host institutions and collaborating corporations here and abroad. The tremendous on-site sale of tickets, audio-tours, catalogues, and postcards will have paled before the still more tremendous income generated for airlines, hotels, restaurants, taxis, and shops not only in the actual venues of Boston and London, but still more in the virtual spaces of telephone, fax, and online shopping in which the manual productivity of one French artisan will have been vastly overmatched by the worldwide production and consumption of Monet stuff of all manner and kind. These pixellated signifiers that you are presently processing into lexical signifieds are precisely one further such commodity, for in my career Monet has been very, very good to me, so I can scarcely wax critical of the profits of the purveyors of Monet aprons, bracelets, calendars, dolls, earrings, flashlights, glasses, jewelry, kaleidoscopes, lamps, magnets, napkins, ornaments, placemats, rugs, scarves, trivets, umbrellas, votives, and Water Lily Barbie. Via the commercial media perhaps we get the cliché of Monet that we deserve, but we may also glimpse other versions of the painter and his paintings in the reconstructive scholarship of Tucker and his art-historical and curatorial colleagues. My way here will be to take you along one quite particular deconstructive byway through the pages of their book that goes by the sign of *Monet's Modernism*.

Terrence Murray, chairman of Fleet Financial, invokes in the catalogue's preface "nature's dual qualities of permanence and change" that Monet's late serial paintings are said to reflect. The two-hundred-year-old financial impulses of Fleet are similarly said to consist in "the expansion and development of the [Boston] region" (p. vi), as though in correspondence to the serial expansion and commercial development of Monet's pictorial motifs in the gardens of Giverny. The question of Monet's alleged complicity with the logic of the capitalist economy has been a vexed one ever since the 1890s when the painter's series were already seen by some as the commercial manufacture of a signature-product of relatively constant material specifications and speculative monetary value. It's not for nothing that I was once asked by a wealthy collector whether I had enjoyed the gardens of Givenchy.

The exhibition catalogue brings together sixty-seven paintings of Monet's extensive floral and aquatic gardens, ranging in date from 1900 to 1926 and in size from standard easel paintings of about a meter across to life-size canvases of two meters by six that were not ultimately included in the posthumous

installation of Monet's *Water Lilies* in two huge rooms of the Orangerie Museum in the Tuileries Garden in Paris. Along with sixteen paintings of the Thames at London and a further ten of the canals and lagoon of Venice, all the exhibited works are reproduced in the catalogue in color, a dozen in double and triple foldout-spreads and more than two dozen in superb, full-page and full-scale details. I know of no other book that so vividly restages the perceptual and affectual experience of the slow, close-up scanning of the smeared and slashed surfaces of Monet's large-scale works. Much better in quality than the digitized images of the exhibition website, these close-ups usher us into the age of the art book as simulacrum when the pilgrimage to view the relics of the artist-saint will take not the dusty road to Santiago but rather the information superhighway to Border's, Barnes and Noble, and Amazon.com.

In the opening essay of the catalogue John House, of the Courtauld Institute of Art, London, and author of *Monet: Nature into Art* (Yale University Press, 1986), asks the question "Monet: The Last Impressionist?" His task is to provide an introductory context for relating Monet's work in the exhibition from after 1900 to the familiar Impressionist and series paintings from the earlier decades of the painter's career. Referring to *The Railway Bridge at Argenteuil* of 1873 (reproduced in color along with all but twenty of the eighty-five, sometimes quite small figures in the text), House introduces to the discussion the terms modern, modernization, modernity, and modernism, much as do his British colleagues from The Open University in their widely used text, *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (Yale University Press, 1993). For House, Monet's painting of the machinery of mass transport speeding across the once-tranquil riverscape of scattered strollers and boaters represents a "quintessential modern scene" in an age of "modernization and technological change" (p. 2). Arguing that Monet lends equal pictorial weight to each of the disparate and even discordant elements in his perceptual field, House identifies this "indiscriminate vision" with "the essence of modernity," and in particular of "Monet's modernity." In this way House seeks to distinguish his view "from the critical perspective of post-Second World War modernism," which tended to disregard the painter's perceptual act in favor of the painting's "purely pictorial qualities—the painted mark on the two-dimensional canvas" (pp. 4-5).

If House opposes a nineteenth-century modernity of optical perception to a twentieth-century modernism of aesthetic conception, Tucker, in his essay "The Revolution in the Garden: Monet in the Twentieth Century," claims Monet's art after 1900 is "a model of how modernism could revitalize past practices and provide aesthetic leadership" (p. 30). Whether painting "modern urban life" atop and beneath the bridges of London or the apparently "non-modern" motifs of his garden at home (pp. 18, 28), Monet expressively exploited the "modern space" of the studio and thereby came to offer his viewers "a quintessentially modern mixture of contradictory sensations" (pp. 67, 76).

Tucker interestingly speculates that Monet's later garden paintings may have come to seem too individualistic and thus "anti-modern" in light of the collectivist ideologies of World War I and its aftermath. Here the story is taken up by Romy Golan, of the City University of New York, in her essay "Oceanic Sensations: Monet's Grandes Décorations and Mural Painting in France from 1927 to 1952." Golan provocatively interprets the Orangerie installation not only as a commemorative museum of Monet's work (the "mostly ahistorical" account she finds in my *Monet, Narcissus, and Self-Reflection: The Modernist Myth of the Self* [University of Chicago Press, 1994]), but also as a collective mausoleum of the nation's war-dead, even a cryptlike "war bunker," in the anxiously dismissive words of a critic in 1931. Few critics took the trouble to seek out Monet's murals, however, and when it was proposed in 1937 that they be moved to the much more accessible venue of the new Musée de l'Art Moderne on the Trocadéro, "it was the obstinacy of Monet's family," according to Golan's documentation, "that appears to have prevented the late decorative panels from being secured as a fountainhead in the master narrative of modernism" (p. 93).

This celebration of Monet's interwar murals was deferred until after World War II when Clement Greenberg's essay "The Later Monet" (1957), among other texts, sought to insert Monet's final *Water Lilies* into "the teleology of modernism" (p. 88). Michael Leja, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, takes up such "modernist genealogies for Abstract Expressionism" (p. 98) in his stimulating essay "The Monet Revival and New York School Abstraction." Wishing to be "worthy successors of the great French modernists," Monet's "young modernist descendants" came to inscribe both his work and theirs "in the history of modernist abstraction" (pp. 101-103). For Leja, however, the postwar vogue for Monet ultimately came to serve the allegedly conservative political and aesthetic agendas of second-generation New York painters such as Philip Guston, Joan Mitchell, Nell Blaine, and Sam Francis, whose *Big Red* he reproduces alongside its illustration in an article on the "Old Master's Modern Heirs" in a 1957 issue of *Life* magazine. Dubbed Abstract Impressionism, this Eisenhowerish art of America in the 1950s offered anxious postwar audiences a reassuringly easy-to-like "juste milieu" or "populist form of modernism" (pp. 106-107).

And thus, the conservative American aesthetic modernism of the late twentieth century has retroactively come to define and delimit the radical French cultural modernism that Claude Monet anxiously practiced until 1926 when he died in his eighty-sixth year. But just what that *modernisme* may have consisted in remains to be seen.

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