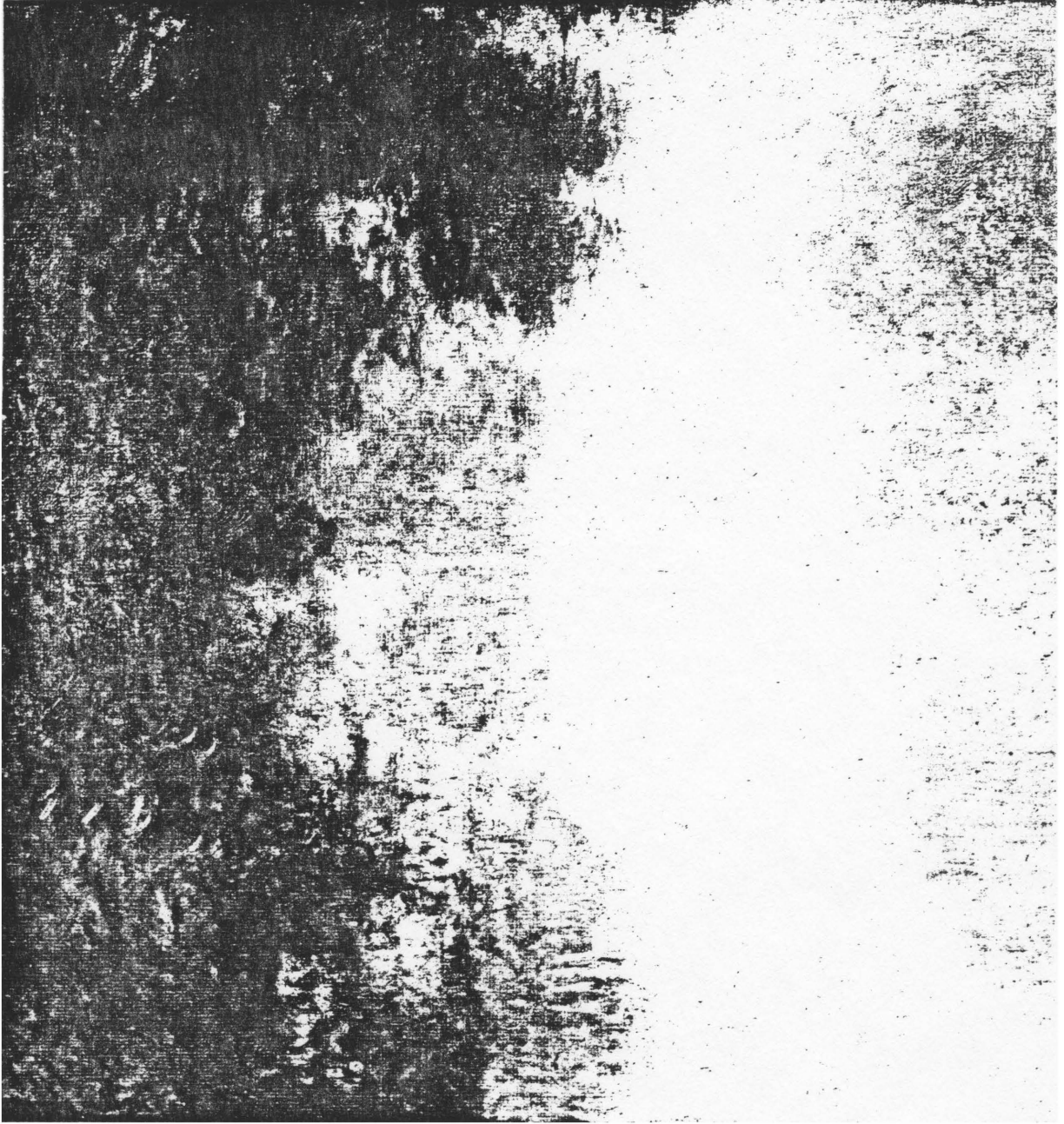


Monet: His Symbols of Transformation

The work of art is born of the artist in a mysterious and secret way. From him it gains life and being. Nor is its existence casual and inconsequent, but it has a definite and purposeful strength, alike in its material and spiritual life. It exists and has power to create spiritual atmosphere; and from this inner standpoint one judges whether it is a good work of art or a bad one... It is only well painted if its spiritual value is complete and satisfying. (Kandinsky 53)

According to Wassily Kandinsky, in his book Concerning the Spiritual in Art, the value of art lies in the "spiritual values" of the art itself. I agree. In my conversations with other artists and in my readings of Claude Monet biographies, I am constantly bewildered by the fact that the spiritual aspects of Monet's work are rarely, if ever mentioned. At the very least Monet is passed off as an Impressionist--a painter of pretty pictures. A painter of serene harmony is the most he is ever given credit for.

It is my intention in this essay to show that not only was Monet a painter of spiritual values, but also to prove that Monet was a Man of Knowledge, a mystic on the path of Enlightenment. The paintings he left behind are the records of his journey and the symbols of his transformation.



1. Morning on the Seine, Giverny 1897

First let us look at one of Monet's paintings from the Morning on the Seine, Giverny series of 1897, (plate 1). Immediately we are lulled into a mood of tranquility. The water and distant horizon suggest that we have embarked on a journey by boat, and the radial asymmetrical composition has a mandala effect which draws us into the heart of the image, the center where we see a foggy, dreamy landscape. The hazy horizon cuts us short of continuing on to infinity. This wall of mist and light does not stop us however, it only serves to turn our attention inward. It is here that we realize the trip we are on is no mere riverboat excursion; the journey ahead is of a spiritual nature. The sensations of water, mist, and light become metaphysical symbols of a deeper reality and the division of the composition into two equal halves, one reflecting the other, becomes a device for illustrating a dualistic model of the universe. Here is the germination of Monet's quest for the truth about the nature of reality. In these paintings we can see that he has gone beyond "impressions" of light and atmosphere and has begun to search for metaphors of transcendence. As Chuang-tzu says:

When water is still, it is like a mirror, reflecting the beard and the eyebrows. It gives the accuracy of the water level, and the philosopher makes it his model. And if water thus derives lucidity from stillness, how much more the faculties of the mind? The mind of the Sage being in repose becomes the mirror of the universe, the speculum of all creation.
(qutd. in Watts 47)

The most obvious symbol in this image is that of water. According to Carl Jung, water has always been a symbol of the unconscious (Archetypes 18). Looking at Morning on the Seine, Giverny we realize that Monet was aware of the symbolic nature of water, and uses it to display his speculations.

If water is the symbol of the unconscious, the instinctual, and the irrational side of man, then what is above water must represent all that is known, the logical, and the rational side of man. What Monet is asking here is where does the unconscious and the conscious unite and become one?

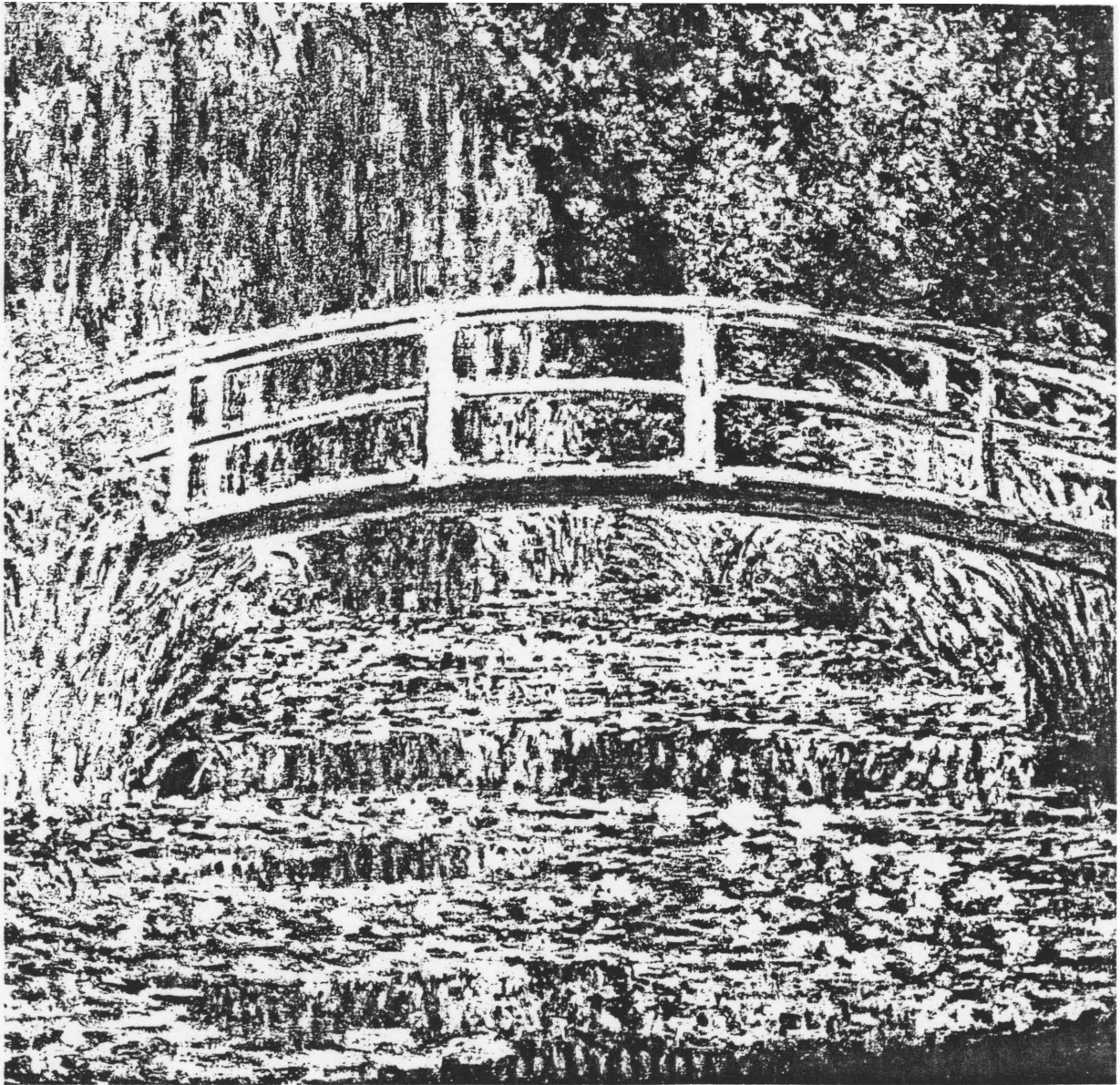
The earth's horizon divides our consciousness (the celestial sphere) into what we can see (the light and our consciousness) and what is obscured by the earth (the dark and our unconscious). The completed sphere is our source and goal; The model of our fully realized consciousness. Until this still point is reached, everything is cyclic movement around this sphere, between its polarities. (Purce 118)

We, as participants and viewers, are overwhelmed by the sense of harmony and oneness of this paintings dynamic equilibrium, but not without seeing that this world we have entered (Monet's world) is one of polar opposites; the water is reflecting the sky (and vice verse). What is reality and what is illusion? "As above, so below" the ancient maxim goes, and thus is the philisophical dichotomy in which we find ourselves. This dichotomy between subject and object is where Monet found himself, too, but he was not content to stop there. Monet's freind and critic, Gustave Geffroy, once said, "Monet paints our distance to things" (Impressionism 254) and he couldn't have been more correct. It was in this distance to things, the space between subject and object that Monet found the inspiration to continue his quest.

...The duplication of the One is simply THE ONE LOOKING AT ITSELF, AND IN SO DOING BECOMING SUBJECT AND OBJECT: This is the duality by which all is known... Keeping this dual picture in mind, we now have a RELATION. This distance between subject and object is knowledge... On the Cabalistic Tree of Life this space is actually called Knowledge, and is the invisible point on the central axis between the Crown (Kether), I AM, and the TRUTH (Tepheret), I AM. It is understood as the link: EHEIEH ASHER EHIEH: I AM (subject) THAT I AM (object). This third principle is the mirror of consciousness by which pure being looks at itself. (Purce 11)

In other words, it is knowledge--whether it be logical, intuitive, or both--that connects subjects and objects, which leads to the Truth.

But this kind of knowledge doesn't come easy, this is the kind of truth that the mystics and sages spend their entire lives searching for. This knowledge can't be taught by books or in a classroom. It must be learned and experienced all by ones self. It is my opinion that Monet hadn't come to this kind of knowledge yet, but he had discovered where to look for it. It is in this series of paintings of the Seine that Monet divulges to us his personal journey, his quest for the true nature of reality.



2. The Japanese Footbridge and the Water Lily Pool, Giverny 1899

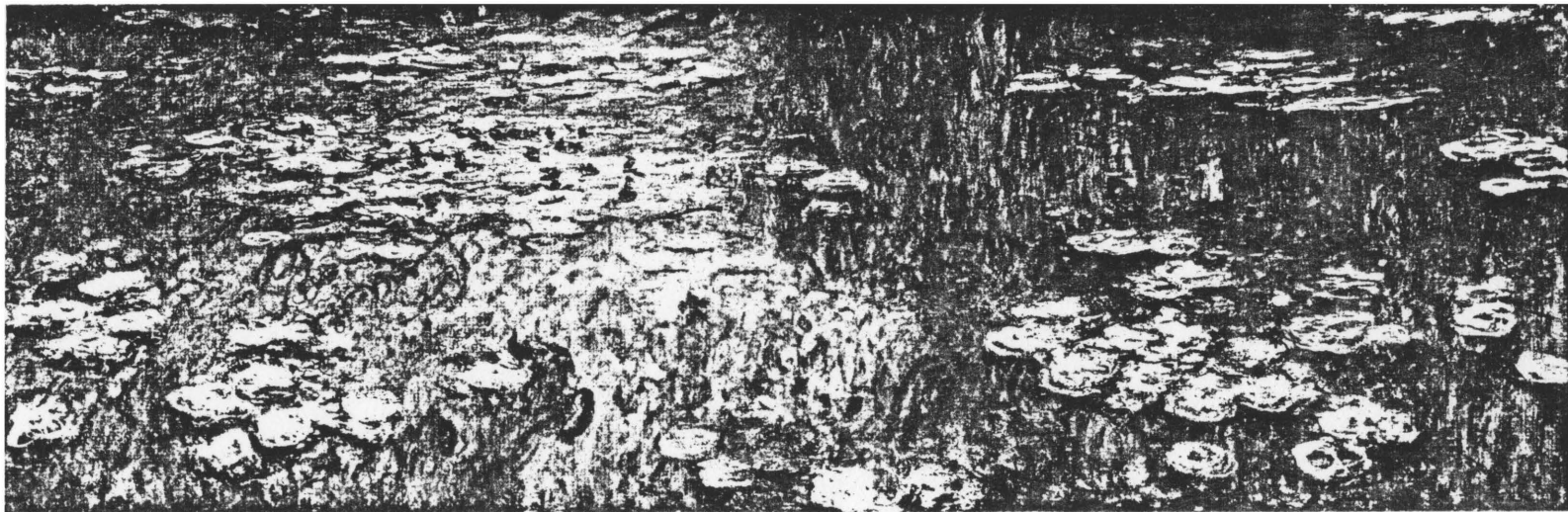
As viewer-participants in this watery travelogue, we can't help but be confronted by the symbolic significance of the bridge in one of Monet's Japanese Footbridge series, (plate 2). This bridge becomes a symbol for a host of possible metaphysical meanings. It could be a symbol for the future, of Becoming, of linear time. People throughout history have crossed over water (usually on bridges) to "freedom". It could symbolize death and a spiritual rebirth. I believe the most significant meaning is that of the bridge representing MAN himself. In the previous works, the presence of man is only suggested by the viewer and the viewer's imaginative ability to put himself in the composition. In the Japanese Footbridge paintings, the bridge becomes a symbol of man,s creations being in harmony with nature. the arc of the bridge echoes the curvature of the earth and becomes a metaphor of the circular nature of man's total consciousness. In essence, the bridge is a symbol of man in general, and for Monet, a symbol of the artist himself. Thomas Mann says:

He it is who may owe his bond to the world of images and appearances--be sensually, voluptuously, sinfully bound to them, yet be aware at the same time that he belongs no less to the world of the idea and the spirit, as the magician who makes the appearance transparent that the idea and spirit may shine through. Here is exhibited the artist's mediating task, his hermetic and magical role as broker between the upper and the lower world, between idea and phenomenon, spirit and sense. Here, in fact, we have what I may call the cosmic position of art; her unique mission in the world, the high dignity--which flings dignity away--of her functioning, can be defined or explained in no other way.

Thomas Mann

Monet took it upon himself to become that bridge, that "broker between the upper and the lower world". He made it his task to travel that distance between the subjective and the objective world.

If we focus our attentions on the center of the bridge, we become a part of that connection between the two worlds. We become one with the bridge as it links the two opposite sides, but the bridge is also suspended between two other opposites, the sky and the water. So here we find ourselves hovering in a sort of never-never land, neither here nor there. And as we shall see, in Monet's last great series of paintings, that is exactly where he wants us to be.



3. Water Lilies 1915-1925

After decades of incorporating waterlilies in his paintings, Monet, in his final series, entitled The Water Lilies, reaches the climax of his career as a painter, and it is my belief that he found the secret knowledge of which I spoke earlier.

Let's look at one of the waterlily paintings from 1915-1925, (plate 3). Symbolically, I see the waterlilies as the living link between the upper and the lower world, their roots and bodies growing underwater and their leaves and blossoms resting on the surface. They need both worlds--one water, one air--to become whole, and due to their perfect integration, they render the duality of the situation meaningless. The waterlilies themselves transcend the space between the two polar opposite worlds and become one with the universe.

We, the viewer-participants, have not been abandoned on Monet's bridge of never-never land. Being on the bridge only prepares us for an invitation to enter this world of water. Due to the gigantic scale and the absence of any horizon line, the idea of three dimensionality disappears. These grand paintings persuade us to shed our preconceived notions about the nature of reality and become baptized, and hence transformed in the world of the waterlilies. Here is where all opposites unite, and the unity of all things and all people become one with nature.

Ultimately, of course, it is not really a matter of oneself, on the one hand, trusting nature on the other. It is a matter of realizing that oneself and nature are one and the same process, which is the Tao.

(Watts 32)

In L. Pauwels' and J. Bergier's book The Morning of the Magicians, they describe the activities of the alchemist. Briefly, an alchemist spends years of study; keeping a record of his own, reading other

alchemical texts, and conducting highly specialized experiments. Through these experiments the alchemist discovers the hidden laws of matter and energy. His external goal is the "transmutation" of base metals into gold. And his internal goal is the transmutation of himself.

For the alchemist, it must never be forgotten that power over matter and energy is only a secondary reality. The real aim of the alchemist's activities...is the transformation of the alchemist himself, his accession to a higher state of consciousness. The material results are only a pledge of the final result, which is spiritual. Everything is oriented towards the transmutation of man himself, towards his deification, his fusion with the divine energy, the fixed centre from which all material energies emanate.

(Pauwels, Bergier 73)

If we compare Monet to the alchemist, and all of Monet's previous paintings to the alchemist's notebook, then in these images of waterlilies we discover the alchemist's gold, the proof that not only can metals be transformed, but that men--in this case Monet--can be transformed, too. I'm convinced that due to the inspiration of water and his persistent search for the truth, Monet found the answers to his questions. The waterlilies series is Monet's proof that he ultimately gained transcendental knowledge which allowed him to become one with the universe.

Water is the blood of the Earth, and flows through its muscles and veins. Therefore it is said that water is something that has complete faculties...

Hence the solution for the Sage who would transform the world lies in water. Therefore when water is uncontaminated, men's hearts are upright. When water is pure, the people's hearts are at ease. Men's hearts being upright, their desires do not become dissolute. The people's hearts being upright, their conduct is without evil. Hence, the Sage, when he rules the world, does not teach men one by one, or house by house, but takes water as his key.

Kuan-tzu (qtd. in Watts 49)

As we have seen, Monet was no mere painter of pretty pictures, but a Man of Knowledge, a Sage, an Alchemist in every sense of the word. His search was personal but by no means was it private. Monet was aware of the fact that individuality is inseparable from community, and the way he shared his knowledge was through his paintings. From the very beginning of his search for truth, through the recognition of his task as the "link", and throughout his experience of transformation, Monet has left the record of his life, his symbols of transformation for all to share. We, as viewers can participate--if only for a few brief moments--in Monet's magical transcendence.

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