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PRIVATE COLLECTION, SWITZERLAND

Giverny Blooms in the Bronx

KEN JOHNSON

ART REVIEW

The market for Claude Monet's paintings faltered in the 1880s but came back the following decade, when he started producing series like the haystacks and the Rouen Cathedral facades. He began to make a lot of money, enough to finance his own private utopia in Giverny in northern France, where he devoted himself to flower gardening with as much industry and creativity as he did to painting. From 1883 to the end of his life in 1926, initially as a renter, he presided over his aesthetic Eden, his paradise for the innocent eye, and there created some of the most adventurous works on canvas of the early 20th century: the enveloping, hallucinatory paintings of lily pads floating on the surface of the pond he excavated for them.

In multitudes of old photographs he appears as a figure of Tolstoyan rusticity in baggy work clothes, wide-brimmed hat and voluminous beard, along with members of his extensive family, his staff of five gardeners and guests who came from all over the world to see his gardens and pay obeisance to his transcendental greatness.

Monet's Garden, *at the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, is a living approximation of gardens the artist created. Left, his "Irises," about 1915.*

After Monet died, his gardens and home at Giverny fell into disrepair despite the efforts of his family to keep them up. But in the late 1970s, the estate underwent a full restoration and is now a mecca for nature painters and tourists, who visit at a rate of 500,000 a year.

If you have never been there and do not plan a trip anytime soon, you might consider a jaunt to the Bronx to take in "Monet's Garden" at the New York Botanical Garden for a taste of what you are missing. Organized by Paul Hayes Tucker, the Monet scholar, it is not a painting show, though it does include two representative garden-inspired Monet canvases.

The main attraction is a living abbre-

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY LIBRADO ROMERO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

A reproduction of the famous green bridge that arches over the lily pond at Giverny and a re-creation of the Grand Allée can be seen at the New York Botanical Garden's Monet exhibition.

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viated approximation of the two major gardens that Monet created, one in traditional, orderly French style, the other a Japanese-inspired fantasia of water, blooming lily pads and weeping willows.

The first step in is a stunner. Doors to a wing of the Enid A. Haupt Conservatory, the botanical garden's great Victorian glass house, open onto an indoor recreation of the Grand Allée at Giverny, a straight walkway with riotously colorful banks of flowers blossoming on either side. Overhead, on green metal arches, roses are beginning to climb, on course to flower in full in the coming months. More than 150 varieties of annuals and perennials are represented here, all known to have been planted by Monet himself, who kept detailed accounts of his horticultural activities.

Here you have an idea of how he experimented with color in real life, using flowers as paint to create walk-in environments of

MUSÉE MARMOTTAN MONET, PARIS/GIRAUDON, THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

chromatic bliss. As the seasons change, so will the flowers, as the Garden's crew replaces them with later-blooming kinds. Now there are irises, foxgloves and delphiniums; later there will be dahlias, nasturtiums and zinnias; and the fall will bring sunflowers, asters and goldenrods. By the end, more than 600 varieties will have had their day in the sun.

The Grand Allée leads to a green gate swung open between square, neo-Classical-style columns framing the view of a reproduction of the famous green bridge that arches over the lily pond at Giverny. Here historical accuracy gives way a bit to present circumstances.

The bridge is oriented perpendicularly to the Grand Allée sightline, rather than in line with it, as it is at Giverny, and the pond is smaller than a putting green. Like the real one, it is surrounded by weeping willows, wisteria and clusters of bamboo, but nothing floats on its surface: Waterlilies do not do well indoors.

They will be abundantly displayed, however, outdoors in the Conservatory Courtyard's Hardy Pool, a rectangular, basketball-court size body bordered by paving stones. Only some of the about 50 varieties — many directly descended from Monet's — are beginning to bloom now, but as time goes by, they should produce a symphony of color all together.

"Monet's Garden" runs from Saturday through Oct. 21 at the New York Botanical Garden, Bronx River Parkway (Exit 7W) and Fordham Road, Bedford Park, the Bronx; (718) 817-8700, nybg.org.

YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY, COLLECTION OF MR. AND MRS. PAUL MELLON

Left, a model of an entrance to Monet's house at Giverny. Below center, left, his "Artist's Garden in Giverny," and right, photos of Giverny. Bottom, flowers planted for chromatic bliss. Inset: Monet's wooden palette.

The two paintings on view in the library offer another, thought-provoking perspective on the parallel trajectories of Monet's painting and his gardening.

Painted around 1900 and now owned by the Yale University Art Gallery, "The Artist's Garden in Giverny" is a conventionally Impressionistic view of the formal, European-style garden. The mostly green, light-dappled scene shows a path through a field of irises and other flowers past a few trees with wiggly trunks into a verdant haze in the distance.

In the other canvas, "Irises," from about 1915, on loan from a private Swiss collector, the world has gone dark. Five purple blossoms made of thick, crusty paint emerge from an impulsively painted welter of deep blue and green strokes in a composition that tips the balance from sunny realism to expressionist angst.

It is an intriguing juxtaposition. In 1900, though Monet was wealthy and famous, his days as an innovator would have been thought long past, eclipsed by Cézanne, van Gogh and other Post-Impressionists, and soon to be pushed further back by Fauvism and Cubism. In 1915, with war raging all over Europe, few would have singled out Monet's painting as particularly relevant to the art historical or sociopolitical moment.

But war was on his mind. In June 1918, then 77, he wrote in a letter to one of his dealers: "What an unnerving life we are all living. I sometimes wonder what I would do if the enemy suddenly attacked. I think that it would be necessary to leave everything like everyone else."

Then, a week later, he wrote another of his dealers, "I do not want to believe that I would ever be obliged to leave Giverny, as I have written; I would much rather die here in the middle of what I have done."

These quotations evoke a mood like that of "Irises": a mix of anxiety, depression and determination, now and then punctuated by moments of visionary exultation. Decades later, the Abstract Expressionists of New York would take a similar spirit of existentialist despair and defiance and run with it. He was, after all, ahead of his time.