

Audio Guide Transcript

MONET/ MITCHELL  
Painting the French Landscape

March 25–June 25, 2023  
Ticketed Exhibition Galleries

SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

**STOP 1**  
**Taylor Hall**  
Introduction

**Speakers**

**Min Jung Kim**  
**Barbara B. Taylor Director**  
**Saint Louis Art Museum**

**Simon Kelly**  
**Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art**  
**Saint Louis Art Museum**

[Min]

Hello, I am Min Jung Kim, Barbara B. Taylor Director of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

I am delighted to welcome you to the audio guide for *Monet/Mitchell: Painting the French Landscape*. This is the first exhibition in the United States to explore the fascinating dialogue between the work of a leading French Impressionist painter, Claude Monet, and a preeminent American Abstract Expressionist, Joan Mitchell. The exhibition is a result of a wonderful partnership with the Musée Marmottan Monet and the Louis Vuitton Foundation. To tell you more, I would like to introduce the exhibition curator, Simon Kelly, curator of Modern and Contemporary art.

[Simon]

Thank you, Min. The group of paintings in this exhibition have been brought together to highlight the extraordinary ways in which Monet and Mitchell responded to the landscape of northern France, particularly the area around the river Seine to the northwest of Paris. As you will see, Monet was inspired by his famed gardens at Giverny and Mitchell by the nearby village of Vétheuil. Both artists explored similar subjects of earth, flowers, rivers, and water. Both were also inspired by their own gardens. In addition to the similarities of their subjects, the exhibition explores the intriguing parallels between their vibrant colors and equally vibrant brushwork.

This exhibition guide offers commentaries from several individuals. In addition to my voice, you will hear from other scholars, a horticulturalist, a composer of music, and a conservator, as well as an artist, Bill Scott, who was a friend of Joan Mitchell.

We encourage you to experience this guide in any order you like; you may follow it in numeric order or pick and choose. Each featured object can be located by following the floorplan on this webpage or by identifying the audio icon on the object's label in the exhibition. Whether you're listening from home or in the Museum's galleries, I hope you enjoy this audio guide and your visit to *Monet/Mitchell: Painting the French Landscape*.

**STOP 2**  
**Gardens and Trees**  
**Gallery 247**  
*Water Lilies*

**Speaker**

**Derek Lyle**  
**Senior Manager of the Nurseries and Greenhouses**  
**Missouri Botanical Garden**

Hello, I'm Derek Lyle, the senior manager of the nurseries and greenhouses at the Missouri Botanical Garden.

A historical relationship was created in the late 1800s when Claude Monet first witnessed hybridized, hardy water lilies by Joseph Bory Latour-Marliac. His hybrids were unique and revolutionary to the aquatic world of horticulture.

Recurrently, white water lilies provided the lone focal color of painted aquatic landscapes until Latour-Marliac introduced vibrant, colorful, and award-winning cultivars. He cross-pollinated yellow-, pink-, red-, and white-flowered North American water lily species with those from Europe. Cross-pollination occurs naturally in the wild, but only when receptive species are nearby. Latour-Marliac mechanically introduced new traits of water lilies from other continents, and as a result, his breakthroughs established him as a pioneer of water lily hybridization.

In 1894 Claude Monet began purchasing Latour-Marliac's hybrids for his personal water garden at Giverny. Commonly found hybrids in Monet's landscapes are *Nymphaea* 'Mexicana', *Nymphaea* 'Laydekeri Rosea', and *Nymphaea* 'Atropurpurea'. Hybrids such as these are still available for purchase from water gardening nurseries and are showcased in many public gardens, including the Missouri Botanical Garden.

**STOP 3**  
**Gardens and Trees**  
**Gallery 247**  
*Tilleul*

**Speaker**

**Simon Kelly**  
**Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art**  
**Saint Louis Art Museum**

*Tilleul*, the French word for a linden tree, is one of Mitchell's paintings that is most similar to nature. The ascending form of the trunk and branches is clearly evident in this impressive picture that speaks to Mitchell's veneration for trees. She once stated, in an interview of 1976, an excerpt from which is on view in this exhibition, that [quote] "I give gratitude to trees because they exist." [unquote]

*Tilleul* was one of a suite of pictures that Mitchell produced of a monumental linden tree that stood on the terrace outside her house. This tree overlooked the Seine as well as a cottage where Monet had lived from 1878 until 1881. Mitchell showed these linden pictures together in a 1978 exhibition in the Parisian gallery of her French art dealer, Jean Fournier. They evoke a wide range of colors, often autumnal in nature. The bare branches of this particular painting perhaps suggest winter. These pictures speak to Mitchell's interest in seriality, an interest that she shared with Monet, who was well known for his series paintings. Mitchell would have known Monet's famed *Haystacks* series, for example, from childhood visits to the Art Institute of Chicago.

## **STOP 4**

### **Gardens and Flowers**

#### **Gallery 246**

##### *Water Lilies and Agapanthus*

#### **Speaker**

**Lacy Murphy**

**The Mark S. Weil and Joan M. Hall Professional Development Fellow  
Saint Louis Art Museum**

Hello, I'm Lacy, the Mark S. Weil and Joan M. Hall Professional Development Fellow at the Saint Louis Art Museum.

At Giverny, Monet had complete control over his garden. When he first bought the property in 1890, he dug, planted, and weeded everything himself. But as Monet's gardens grew and he expanded his properties, he required help. According to civil records, by 1906 Monet employed at least three gardeners and two day laborers to keep his gardens pristine.

He was apparently quite a demanding employer, insisting that faded blossoms be pruned immediately. One gardener was even assigned the daily task of removing all debris from the surface of the pond so that nothing would detract from the beauty of the artist's prized water lilies.

Monet's creative vision and the practical concerns of the garden were often at odds. The daily discussions between Monet and his head gardener, Felix Breuil, sometimes became heated as the artist's concern for the relationships between color, density, and texture in the garden conflicted with Breuil's concerns for the quality of the soil and the spacing of the plants.

An understanding of Monet's relationship to his gardeners reveals how truly collaborative these painted canvases were. Although not visually evident, the lush, dreamy world that Monet depicted in paintings such as *Water Lilies and Agapanthus*, which offers a relaxing escape from the grind of everyday life, actually hinged on the physical labor of his gardeners, some of whom were local working-class people and to whom we owe a debt of gratitude for these works.

**STOP 5**  
**Gardens and Flowers**  
**Gallery 246**  
*Cypress*

**Speaker**

**Bill Scott**  
**Painter**  
**Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

Hello, my name is Bill Scott. I am a painter in Philadelphia, and I was a friend of Joan Mitchell's.

I first saw Joan's paintings in 1974 when I was 17, but it wasn't until 1980 that I met her. I was in Paris then when an artist friend told me the Galerie Jean Fournier was about to present an exhibition of her newest work.

Entering the gallery, *Cypress* was the first painting one saw. It stopped me in my tracks. I wasn't completely sure, but I recognized *Cypress* as being a landscape. It was contemplative, completely visual, and nonverbal. It projects a feeling of aliveness that I had rarely experienced before when looking at paintings.

Joan's paintings, to me, are parallel to how reading poetry or hearing music can conjure glimpses of imagery in one's mind's eye that are powerful, but which quickly vanish. In her painting, Joan was able to give this type of imagery a resilient permanence. Seeing *Cypress* took my breath away and inspired me to want to rush back home to paint.

The few times I've seen *Cypress* since then, I always feel I am seeing something new in it that I'd not noticed before. With each encounter, it's almost as if I am seeing it for the very first time.

I was lucky because without realizing it, I had walked into the Fournier gallery several days before Joan's exhibition was scheduled to open. Joan was there, orchestrating the placement of her paintings on the gallery walls. She saw me looking at *Cypress*, came over, and started talking with me. She was excited to see the paintings hanging in the gallery. Her studio, she said, was not large. The immense scale of certain works had prohibited her from being able to spread them out and to see them the way they now looked in the gallery.

## **STOP 6**

### **Fields, Water, and Reflections**

#### **Gallery 244**

##### *Plowed Field*

#### **Speaker**

##### **Christopher Stark**

##### **Composer and Associate Professor of Music Composition**

##### **Washington University in St. Louis**

My name is Christopher Stark, and I am a composer and associate professor of music composition at Washington University in St. Louis.

Joan Mitchell's *Plowed Field* can easily be read as music. The work is divided into three parts, like many symphonic compositions, and the beautiful colors that move from panel to panel could be seen as different musical characters, instrumental choirs, or timbre—or even a melody that develops throughout the course of a piece. This three-part division as well as the smaller rectangular divisions imply a sort of classicism in music in which there are complementary and perfect phrase structures that balance each other out over the course of a large symphonic work. The first composer that comes to mind is Mozart.

The other strong musical element of this piece is the earthy color palette. Many composers throughout history have been inspired by nature. *Plowed Field* immediately brings to mind works like Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony, or Jean Sibelius's *Finlandia*. But what's perhaps even more interesting is the improvisatory quality of the brushstrokes within the colorful cells. Within these earthy hues, we see a lot of subtle variation, which might imply improvisation or melodic inflection similar to that of free jazz pioneer Pharaoh Sanders, whose seminal album *Thembi* was released the same year as *Plowed Field*. It's this combination of classical balance and clarity, subtle, melodic inflection and improvisation, and a grand three-part form that gives this work a very musical quality. One can imagine repeating chord progressions, contrasting instrumental colors, and improvised melodies leaping forth from the canvas.



**STOP 7**  
**Fields, Water, and Reflections**  
**Gallery 244**  
*Wisteria*

**Speaker**

**Simon Kelly**  
**Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art**  
**Saint Louis Art Museum**

Monet's use of color in these two *Wisteria* panels not only evokes flowers and the sky but also suggests the use of pure paint as abstraction. One can easily imagine that such work would have been admired by Mitchell, and indeed, in an interview of 1972, she repeatedly encouraged her interviewer to visit the Monet collection at the Musée Marmottan Monet, the museum where the *Wisteria* panels are housed.

For much of his life, Monet was interested in the idea of art as decoration, and he originally planned these two panels as part of a decorative frieze. This was to be installed at the top of a pavilion to be specially built alongside what is now the Rodin Museum in Paris. Existing architectural plans enable us to reconstruct Monet's original intentions for his building, although the pavilion was never ultimately constructed. The *Wisteria* panels would actually have hung above the *Water Lilies* painting, also on view in this gallery. It is worth remembering that these panels were originally intended to be hung high and viewed from a distance. Today, however, it is possible to study the works close-up and see the way in which Monet applied color in rapid, gestural marks, sometimes as flecks of pink, blue, or purple, with primed white canvas showing through as an integral part of his compositions.

**STOP 8**  
**Color and Abstraction**  
**Gallery 243**  
*Beauvais*

**Speaker**

**Molly Moog**  
**Research Assistant for Modern and Contemporary Art**  
**Saint Louis Art Museum**

Hello, I'm Molly Moog, research assistant for Modern and Contemporary art at the Saint Louis Art Museum.

Joan Mitchell piled brushstrokes of indigo, marigold, and dark teal into vertical stacks that mirror one another across the two panels of *Beauvais*. The white paint she brushed along the edges counters the densely packed forms at the center of each panel.

Mitchell made this work in 1986 after seeing the Gothic Cathedral of Saint Peter of Beauvais in northern France with her friend the New York art dealer Xavier Fourcade. Fourcade was in France to receive an experimental treatment for AIDS, but by the time of the cathedral visit, it was clear that the treatment had been unsuccessful. Fourcade passed away the following year.

At Beauvais, Mitchell witnessed the cathedral's extreme height and complex organization, which reflect Catholic ideas of divine order and the aspiration to heaven after death. Her painting channels the verticality and symmetry of the cathedral and may suggest her own frequent reflections on mortality and loss at that time.

**STOP 9**  
**Color and Abstraction**  
**Gallery 243**  
*The Japanese Bridge*

**Speaker**

**Abby Yoder**  
**Research Assistant**  
**Saint Louis Art Museum**

Hello, I'm Abby Yoder, research assistant at the Saint Louis Art Museum.

One prominent feature of Claude Monet's water garden at Giverny was the wooden Japanese-style footbridge that crossed the pond from the north bank to the south. This bridge was built in the early 1890s and appeared in a few paintings around 1895, but it wasn't really until 1899 that it became a primary focus for Monet. That year he painted 12 canvases of the bridge and water lily pond, then added four more works in 1900. Nearly all of these are from the same view, looking east over the water with the bridge spanning from one side of the pond to the other. A good example of this series is *The Japanese Footbridge* from the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. In the 1899 painting you can clearly see Monet's attention to light and color. It creates a somewhat naturalistic view of the bridge and water lily pond but also plays with the space in interesting ways, blurring the boundaries between land and water. The bridge itself separates the viewer from the rest of the garden, further complicating the spatial orientation of the picture.

Almost two decades after painting this initial series of works, Monet returned to the subject of his Japanese bridge. Probably beginning in 1918 and continuing over the course of the next five or six years, he painted some 22 new canvases of the bridge, including this example, *The Japanese Bridge*. While these depict the same point of view as the earlier series, they are stylistically very different. Monet's painting style had become much more abstract by this time, evolving from the light, feathery brushstrokes of his earlier works to the very fluid, gestural strokes seen here. These later paintings resemble tangled vines of intense color. The background foliage is transformed into colorful swirls, while the water lilies are dashes of pigment, and often the bridge is nearly indistinguishable from the rest of the environment. In this painting the gently curving horizontal lines of the bridge are just visible due to the bright highlights on the

vines covering the handrail. Monet's increasingly abstract style anticipates the later generation of American Abstract Expressionist painters, including Joan Mitchell.

**STOP 10**  
**Experiments in Pictorial Space**  
**Gallery 242**  
*Water Lilies*

**Speaker**

**Simon Kelly**  
**Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art**  
**Saint Louis Art Museum**

When Monet first exhibited his *Water Lilies* paintings, they were seen as radical because of the absence of any horizon line and a resultant lack of spatial orientation. This particular *Water Lilies* picture is exceptional in Monet's output because of the degree of its abstraction. In fact, there is no clear consensus as to the correct orientation of the picture, particularly because it is unsigned. In this exhibition we argue that the bank of Monet's pond is at top left, with reflections of weeping willow branches to the bottom right. It is worth noting, however, that the picture has also been displayed and published in an inverted manner to this in the past.

When this *Water Lilies* was gifted to the Musée Marmottan Monet in 1966 as part of the bequest of Monet's son Michel, it was described simply as *Study*. Certainly, the picture highlights Monet's fascination with the painting of water and reflections, here represented in a kaleidoscopic range of colors. I would encourage you to compare Monet's approach in this painting to that of Mitchell in the nearby picture *River*. Both works highlight the two artists' parallel approaches to nature, abstraction, and space.

**STOP 11**  
**Experiments in Pictorial Space**  
**Gallery 242**

*Ici*

**Speaker**

**Melissa Gardner**  
**Paintings Conservator**  
**Saint Louis Art Museum**

Hello, I am Melissa Gardner, paintings conservator at the Saint Louis Art Museum.

When I look at Joan Mitchell's painting, I am immediately drawn to the bright colors and large gestures. At first glance it may appear to be a frenzied composition, but the more you learn about the paint itself, the story becomes more complex. I was able to identify the paints Mitchell used with a technique called X-ray fluorescence, which reveals the periodic elements present in each color. I can then relate those elements to known chemical formulas of artists' pigments.

For example, there are four distinct purple paints in this work. The lightest pinks are cobalt violet with zinc white, the lilac purple is a different formula of cobalt violet and lead white, the darker purple is a manganese violet, and the darkest mauve color is an organic paint such as aniline or quinacridone. All of these paint formulas contain synthetic pigments, which were invented beginning in the 19th century.

I am also able to identify additional components called extenders and driers that modern paint manufacturers include. Mitchell's paints are almost entirely used straight from the tube without mixing on her palette. The large gestures require a fluid paint for the brush to flow across the surface. There are many areas where you can see two colors of wet paint dragged into each other. At other times the paint does not mix. The extenders and driers are what allow for these working properties. Mitchell made very deliberate choices about her materials, which makes her large, expressive composition possible.