

Of Summer Flowers and Autumn Leaves: An Appreciation of Claude Monet's *La Japonaise* and *Camille sur son lit de mort*

“Let life be beautiful like summer flowers and death like autumn leaves,” wrote Nobel Prize-winning Bengali poet and novelist, Rabindranath Tagore, who expresses these contrasting phases as juxtaposed images. Life vigorously blooms, and death peacefully rests.

Life, full of brilliant colors, presents the richness of sensory experience, in contrast to the withering and passing of death. The poet's vivid imagery conveys intense emotions in the same way a painter creates a connection with the audience on an emotional level. If they were to be translated into paint, Tagore's poetic contrasts would be typical of the Impressionist style, which seeks to capture a sense of the truth of the subject, as opposed to a realistic presentation of it. Famed for his Water Lilies series of paintings, Claude Monet also dealt with the theme of life and death through two oil paintings based on the same subject, his wife Camille.

Claude Monet met Camille Doncieux in 1865, when she modeled for him. The two married in 1870 and Camille continued to model for Claude's oil paintings. In many ways, Camille was Claude's muse, as Mary Mathews Gedo suggests in “Monet and His Muse: Camille Monet in the Artist's Life.” During their time together, Claude painted Camille in various styles, including *Camille Monet on a Garden Bench*, 1873; *Woman in the Green Dress*, 1866, featuring Camille in a green promenade dress, which Stephanie Cowell's post “*My search for Monet's great love Camille*” tells us had Paris newspapers calling her the Parisian Queen; in *Women in the Garden*, 1867, in which Camille was the model for all four figures; and in *La Japonaise*, 1876, with its exotic Asian influence. Tragically, after nine years of marriage, Camille contracted tuberculosis and passed away, leaving Claude Monet bereft and compelled to paint her one last time, capturing the dying Camille in a painting called *Camille Monet on Her Deathbed* (*Camille sur son lit de mort*), 1879.

*La Japonaise* and *Camille Monet on Her Deathbed*, portray the same subject in life and death. Using different colors, brushstrokes, and styles to convey their contrasting themes, these paintings reveal the essential truths of life and death and the contrasting emotions these evoke.

Monet's *La Japonaise* was inspired by a popular trend during the 19th-century, Japonisme, a French word that points to the prominent influence of Japanese culture in the Western world at that time. Monet was one of the artists inspired by Japonisme who incorporated aspects of Japanese culture into his paintings, and specifically in this painting the kimono, a traditional dress, and Japanese fans painted with landscapes. Although Monet is famous for his Impressionistic style, focusing on the shifting of light and capturing the essence of the moment, *La Japonaise* is painted in an entirely different style. *La Japonaise* is painted in conscientious detail, from the decoration on the kimono robe to the fans hanging on the wall. The dazzling kimono that Camille wears shows a fierce samurai, an honorable figure from the military nobility, towards the bottom of the dress, conveying a sense of seriousness through the delicate representation of his muscular body and the knitting of his brow, which contrasts with the calm and delightful atmosphere of the surrounding decoration. Above the Samurai, maple leaves are traced with golden textiles, bringing a sense of the sun to further enliven the rich colors—the sun which also symbolizes the divine. These threads are echoed at the edge of the robe, where gradient

colors fuse from cerulean blue, cadmium yellow, to vermilion red, offsetting the texture of the velvet. Camille smiles broadly at the audience, holding a folding fan that lends the scene a feminine softness through the gentle curve of the contour of the fan, decorated with light lotus red pigment contrasting with the vivid blue, almost purple of the diagonal shading to the lower left. In the background, myriad fans hang on the wall. These typical Japanese designs are painted with a red-crowned crane, a geisha, koi, and some with Japanese natural landscapes. The detailed, realistic style of this painting is far removed from that of Impressionism. While Impressionist oil paintings are often painted with evident brushstrokes and blurry, imprecise depictions of their subjects, for *La Japonaise* Monet painted every section in great detail, creating a scene that is full of vibrant joy. From Camille's delighted smile, her blond hair piled high atop her tilted head, to the jubilant reds and golds, this is a painting that captures the blooming of life. This is a painting that illustrates life as an expression of beauty "like summer flowers." This is also a painting that was very deliberately composed. Camille's hair was dark, Monet wanted to emphasize the fact that this was a western woman in an oriental dress and surroundings, aspects of the painting that were all clearly staged. In other words, in *La Japonaise* Monet creates a frame for Camille to draw attention to the fact that she has become a symbol of life by representing the fashionable obsession of the time.

Unlike the vivid colors of Japonisme that we see in *La Japonaise*, the painting Claude made of his wife in death, *Camille Monet on Her Deathbed*, is filled with muted tones and slight contrasts in color. The exquisite pastels and powerful colors of Monet's prior paintings of Camille are abandoned to capture this mournful scene. "You cannot know," [Monet] said to a friend about painting the picture, "the obsession, the joy, the torment of my days...I was at the deathbed of a lady who had been, and still was very dear to me...I found myself staring at [her] tragic countenance, automatically trying to identify" things like "the proportions of light" (Knapp, "Camille on..."). Consumed by grief, the artist was still bound to his muse and spoke to her one last time as only an artist can.

Though painting the same subject, Monet's palette for *Camille on Her Deathbed* leaves behind the vivid colors of *La Japonisme*, a painting filled with life, in favor of dim, quieter tones, with contrasting greys and colors that recall the fading of life, passing into the dulled cold of winter. This is a painting that reflects Monet's abysmal sorrow at seeing his loved one's suffering, knowing he is unable to save her. Camille wrapped in sheets occupies the entire canvas, the painting rendered in clear brushstrokes that capture the shifting of light. Camille's mouth is gently open, her last breaths being taken while her eyes close. The colors here gradually blend from a saturated heather violet into lavender violet expressing the darkness of the feelings that Monet needed to capture. The brushstrokes coordinating with the dark pigments highlight the wrinkles of the sheets, suggesting the sense of Camille symbolically sinking into another world. Nevertheless, there is the illumination of a warming orange on the right side of the bed and towards the bottom of the canvas, a light source providing a sense of hope and love that echoes Monet's wish to find life even in death. Like *La Japonaise*, the subject is wrapped, but here, she is wrapped in greys directly opposing the vibrant kimono of *La Japonaise*. The contrast could not be more pronounced.

The analysis of art will always prove fruitful. However, the purpose of art is to engage. Art is a unique language that conveys meanings universally to different races, genders, and religions without shared agreement on a general approach, revealing the world in various forms with profound understanding below every surface. Even if art achieves the

goal of expressing an engaging scene, the way in which an audience may respond to the work will introduce various perspectives, countless interpretations. Since life and death are the most significant subjects we can contemplate, the expression of these in art will inspire interpretations that come to form the conversation which surrounds the work — a conversation that acts to preserve the work, immortalizing it by making it continually relevant. This is the great achievement of art: to speak to us all as individuals, offering us the opportunity to become a part of the work by engaging with it in the act of interpretation:

La Japonaise, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

*Two parts of the painting especially strike me. The abundant use of the color red calls out and overwhelms me. It is unlike the usual paintings that would be appreciated in the Salon in France, where Monet could gain his reputation and become known to people. However, regardless of all the oddities, I am shocked that the red in another way appears to be harmonious with the entire painting. The reason is probably because of the appearance of the figure in the middle in a kimono dress that instantly appeals to the audience. Camille Monet, as the central figure, is for me the most startling part of La Japonaise. Her expression is captivating because it conveys a sense of bizarre innocence and cheerful enjoyment. The ease of Camille's smile contrasts significantly with the expressions of contemporary Japanese women in paintings, who are oftentimes solemn and dignified according to their traditions. Besides, the expression in Camille's eyes, the way she is tilting her head back is almost coquettish, presenting herself for the audience to adore. I was truly stunned by Camille's expression and the sense of life this painting brings. From gazing and pondering at this painting, it is truly as if we are seeing Claude Monet painting his beloved wife and at the same time seeing the love of life that Camille is expressing which, unlike a photograph, truly captures a living human being and demands all your attention. The extensive application of the color red serves as the further foil for Camille that refuses to let us look away from this beauty who is just "...like the summer flower".*

Camille sur son lit de mort, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

*There are no brilliant colors here. There is no joy to be found. As soon as I see this, I am instantly reminded of "death like autumn leaves." The contrasts in this painting make me fall into it. The heavy and clear brushstrokes towards the bottom of the bed sheets appear to me as if Camille is rushing me out of her world. But just as I decide to leave, I glimpse her face and, suddenly, I sense that she is comforting me, that all is well. I pause because I feel the bizarre tranquility and serenity that flow from her. I would never have guessed she was lying on her deathbed, no longer going to be cheerful or spirited again. I feel the immediate sorrow of the loss of a Muse, of a cheerful figure who brought light into our lives. And the possessions on her sheets, or possibly her clothes from the vague depictions, are begging me to stay, to be with Camille for the last moments of her life. The violet purple, lavender blue, and ultimate black evoke the mourning that is being born deep inside me. I have no intention of leaving her, nor am I willing to walk away. She is so pale. But I believe there is still hope, when I see the light orange on the top part of her pillow. Isolated, but warming. Yet this only shows the cold more clearly. Even when we see autumn give way to the desolate cold of winter we know we have the gentle spring to look forward to. But, here, there will be no rebirth in the spring. Camille is lost to us.*

It is hard to express the powerful emotions people experience while living and when facing death. But art can capture these. Too often, we think of art instead of feeling it, we come to a painting and appreciate the thoughtful use of color or the perfect arrangement of

the subjects depicted, but we forget that art is meant to be experienced on a personal and emotional level, open to our interpretations — interpretations which will keep it alive and present to us. For art shows us what it means to exist as “...the summer flowers”, and what it means to forever disappear as “...the autumn leaves”.

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