

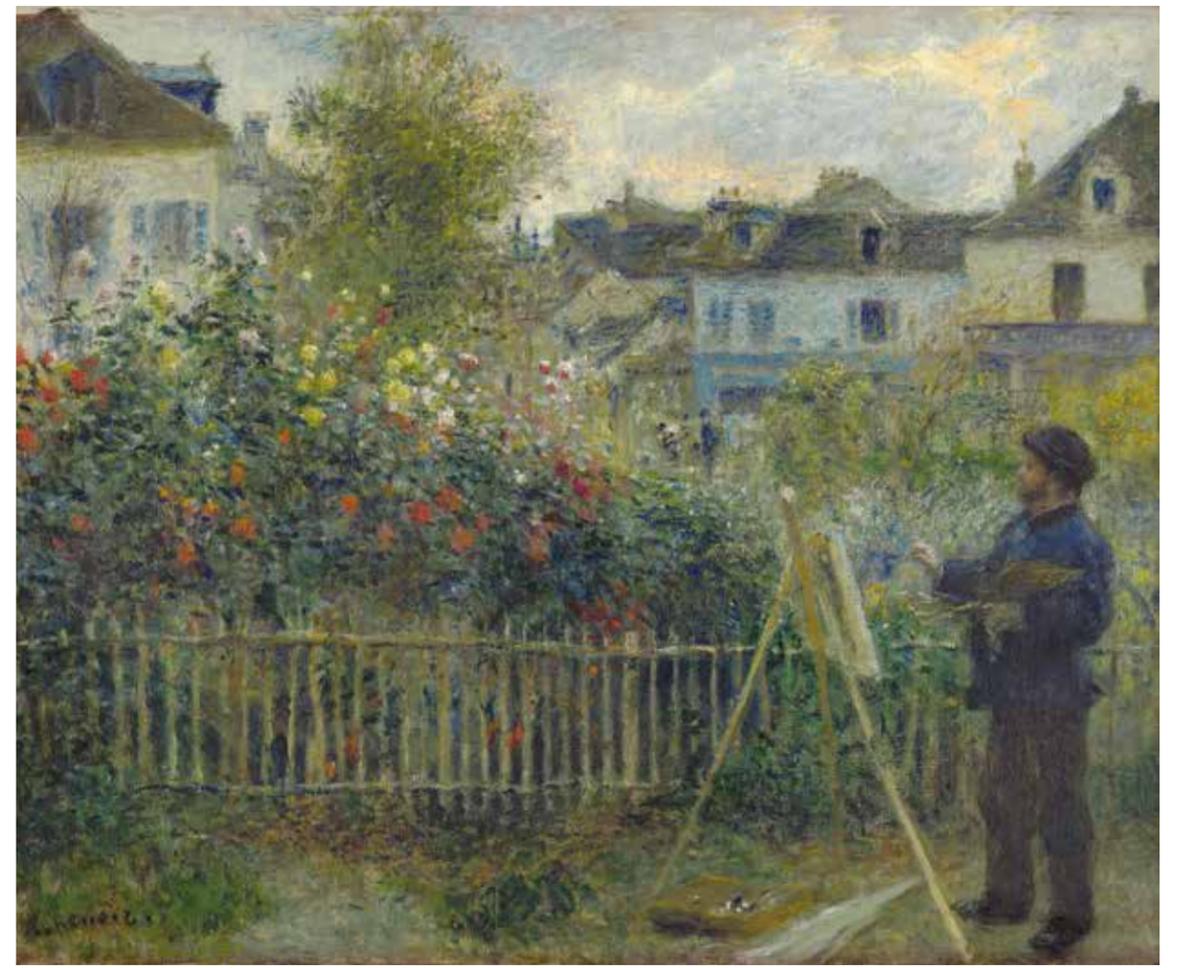
Painting the Modern Garden

A passion for gardening provided fertile ground for Monet and his contemporaries

Claude Monet in His Garden at Giverny 1921. Autochrome. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. © Droit Réservé-Photo Musée d'Orsay/RMN



Monet Painting in His Garden at Argenteuil 1873. Pierre-Auguste Renoir (French, 1841–1919). Oil on canvas; 46.7 x 59.7 cm. Bequest of Anne Parrish Titzell, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT



Louis Comfort Tiffany in His Garden 1911. Joaquín Sorolla (Spanish, 1863–1923). Oil on canvas; 150.5 x 225.5 cm. Hispanic Society of America, New York



“Gardening was something I learned in my youth when I was unhappy,” Claude Monet once observed. “I perhaps owe it to flowers that I became a painter.” Arguably the most important painter of gardens in the history of art, Monet was also an avid horticulturalist who cultivated gardens wherever he lived, from his early days at Sainte-Adresse, Argenteuil, and Vétheuil, to his final years at Giverny. A substantial number of his contemporaries shared his fascination with the subject. Many were inspired by the great horticultural movement of the 19th century, when floral displays became major attractions at international fairs. Greater leisure time also provided the growing middle class with new opportunities to garden for aesthetic pleasure, stimulating the growth of horticultural societies and popular gardening magazines. New plant species imported from Asia and the Americas, combined with advances in botanical science, led to the production of larger, more intensely colored hybrids with more varied shapes and sizes. This newly emergent floriculture inspired artists to explore innovative ways of depicting gardens. Gardens ignited their imaginations, sharpened their response to color sensations, and provided a fertile space for exploring a broad range of painterly and thematic issues.

Opening October 11, and on view until January 5, the exhibition *Painting the Modern Garden: Monet to Matisse*

Matisse examines the role of gardens in the paintings of Claude Monet and his contemporaries. Pierre-Auguste Renoir’s depiction of Monet painting the blossoming dahlias in his first garden at Argenteuil succinctly summarizes Monet’s lifelong devotion to gardening and painting. Many of Monet’s Impressionist colleagues, also passionate gardeners, were inspired to paint gardens as emblematic of the pursuit of modern, middle-class leisure. They were among the first artists to portray gardens observed directly from life, disconnected from historical, religious, or literary themes. Mounting enthusiasm for personal pleasure gardening and the rise of the artist-gardener became an international phenomenon that spread across Europe and America in concert with the vogue for outdoor painting. As the century drew to a close, Symbolists, Fauves, and German Expressionists embraced more subjective approaches by imagining gardens as visionary utopias; many turned to painting gardens to explore abstract color theory and decorative design. A parallel development occurred in Monet’s later years at Giverny, when his focus shifted toward greater expressive freedom and concern with conceptual invention.

The exhibition opens with Monet’s early Impressionist works of the 1860s and culminates with late paintings of his water garden at Giverny, highlighted by the reuniting of the great *Water Lilies (Agapanthus)* triptych of 1915–26. More than 100 works by a diverse

EXHIBITION Painting the Modern Garden: Monet to Matisse

October 11, 2015–
January 5, 2016
Kelvin and Eleanor
Smith Foundation
Hall and
Gallery



The Pond with Water Lilies, Harmony in Green
1899. Claude Monet (French, 1840–1926). Oil on canvas; 89.5 x 100 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, RF 2004. Photo: Hervé Lewandoski. © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, New York

range of artists have been carefully selected to reveal unexpected connections and poignant meanings even in familiar paintings. Considering these works in the context of what artists wrote in diaries and letters offers revealing insights into the importance and meaning of their garden paintings. Renoir painted roses to improve his rendering of flesh tones. Santiago Rusiñol painted evocative views of the gardens of Spain that allude to the cycle of life and the country's Islamic past. Joaquín Sorolla used a luxuriant garden to create a stunning setting for his portrait of Louis Comfort Tiffany. Vincent van Gogh studied flowers to more thoroughly understand color theory and painted imaginary gardens filled with symbolic allusions, as well

as others that pay homage to fellow artists. Wassily Kandinsky, Emile Nolde, and Paul Klee painted both real and imaginary gardens in their search for an authentic spirituality. “Whenever we returned from the big city and arrived at Utenwarf [the artist’s farm],” Nolde wrote in his diary, “I was soon overcome by an irresistible desire for artistic creation.” Klee expressed similar sentiments in a letter to his fiancée: “My mind is clearest and freshest, and I often experience the most captivating moods, even moments of great joy, when I am tending plants in my garden . . . when I feel like a plant myself.”

Gardens were a surprisingly important subject for Henri Matisse. By 1912, he had become devoted to devel-

oping his garden at Issy-les-Moulineaux. “Flowers provide me with chromatic impressions that remain indelibly branded on my retina, as if by a red-hot iron,” he told an interviewer. “So, the day I find myself, palette in hand, in front of a composition . . . that memory may suddenly spring within me and help me.” The gardens in Matisse’s paintings are not always easily recognized. Only a few elements from his personal garden—with its neatly arranged flower beds, gravel paths, and Mediterranean cypress trees—can be identified in *Garden at Issy* of 1917. The circular form at lower center suggests a waterless pool with a fountain, while the shed-like form directly above probably represents his studio at the far end of the garden. The restrained palette, compressed space, and severely reductive forms may reflect a difficult moment in Matisse’s fluctuating emotional state during the First World War, when his family endured food shortages and his mother remained trapped behind enemy lines.

A noticeable shift in style appears in Matisse’s postwar painting *Young Girls in the Garden* of 1919, which depicts the same garden but transitions to a more relaxed style and traditional perspective viewed at eye level. An attractive, reclining model greets the viewer in the foreground, coyly welcoming us into this idyllic gar-

den bursting with abundant life. The model forms a protective barrier in front of the artist’s daughter and wife, seen relaxing along a path that meanders past a fountain toward a distant wall glowing with warm sunlight. Filled with the pleasures of daily family life, Matisse’s garden now suggests a metaphor for the world restored to serenity and order, a paradise regained after the chaos and destruction of the war.

It may seem astonishing that so many leading modernists and avant-garde painters would continue to explore such an apparently conventional subject as gardens, and even more so that they would expand and enrich it. *Painting the Modern Garden* looks broadly and deeply into the issue of how these artists reinterpreted the garden theme by tracing its evolution from Impressionist visions of light and atmosphere, to Symbolist evocations of imagined realities, to sites for avant-garde experimentation with form and color, and ultimately to sanctuaries of refuge and healing during and after the First World War. Framing the paintings in the context of broad artistic movements, as well as social and political events, the exhibition offers unprecedented paths for understanding how gardens served as a universal, multifaceted source of inspiration for artists of the modern era. 

Garden in Auvers
1890. Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853–1890). Oil on canvas; 64 x 80 cm. Private collection

