



Monet's 'Water Lilies' and The Ripple Effect

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This past year spent studying in France has been a race against the clock. Weeks, months, and semesters passed, and my shortening stay in Paris saw the magnets on my refrigerator room piling up. A basket of baguette on a red chequered cloth. The view of Notre-Dame from the banks of the Seine. A miniature blue street sign saying “6 e, Boulevard Saint-Michel”. The Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles. I was determined to take home as many small reminders of my life in Paris as I could. Amidst these images also resided a miniature of Monet's “Water Lilies”, one of France's iconic images that has gained prestige in both popular and critical culture.

Completed between 1903 and 1926, Monet's Les Nymphéas, series de paysage d'eau, the Studies, and the Grand Decorations residing in the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris have come to be recognised collectively as one of the most famous productions of Impressionist art. But it is their reproduction on cheaper merchandise that have made the lilies floating in an abstract blue background recognisable the world over.

Walter Benjamin famously criticised such reproduction of art in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935).

Tracing a history of developments in art in the modern era, Benjamin explains how the invention of lithography, photography, and filmmaking in the early 20th century not only invented new forms of art, but also facilitated their reach to a wider audience through mechanical reproduction. He argues,

however, that such mechanical reproduction destroys the “aura” of a work of art, diminishing in the process our experience in its presence. As someone who, like so many others, first met the 'Water Lilies' in reproduced forms, I wondered if Benjamin's ideas would hold true to my own experience with them. Did having a magnet of the 'Lilies' on my refrigerator mean I wouldn't enjoy seeing them in person? Did this magnet take something away from the uniqueness of the original paintings? Does



The 'Water Lilies' printed on pillowcases and tote bags in souvenir shops in France.

reproduction of art do disservice to its original? If not, what other purpose does it serve?

I wanted to find out for myself, and so I decided to 'experience' Monet's 'Water Lilies' in their different stages of reproduction—from the merchandise to the paintings to the flowers themselves. I found that each version of the lilies responded in a language of its own to Benjamin's criticism: that art's “aura” is

destroyed at the hands of its mechanical reproduction.

At the Paintings: The Agenda of Reproduction

Gift shops at Musée d'Orsay, Musée de l'Orangerie, Monet's estate in Giverny, and in countless spots across Paris sell prints of the water lilies on every kind of merchandise imaginable, from postcards, magnets, keychains, stationery, and framed prints to umbrellas, scarves, handbags, and jewellery. Benjamin believed that such reproduction tries to



“substitute a plurality of copies for a unique existence” that is only available at the artwork's original space and time. But it seems to me that the reproduced images try to serve an entirely different purpose.

They serve as a reminder. The prints were manufactured to remind visitors that Monet's lilies had existed, had bloomed in this part of this country, and that they continue to exist in natural and

painted form. The 'Lilies' themselves being devoid of geographical markers, seeing them in books, movies, and other media often makes us forget about their “place and time” of origin. Their presence in the streets of Paris and Giverny reminds us of this genesis. Instead of destroying the “aura” of the original, as Benjamin called it, and similar to a garden drawing in visitors by its scent, the souvenirs simply inform us that the more reproductions of the 'Lilies' that we see, the closer we get to where the originals reside.

The consumption of the reproductions offers a different kind of reminder. When I look at the 'Lilies' magnet on my refrigerator, I recall my trip to the Musée de l'Orangerie and to Monet's estate in Giverny. I remember that it was a hot day in Giverny but cool inside the museum in Paris. I remember the shuffle of feet and the click of the cameras in the exhibition; the croaking, chirruping, buzzing of life in the garden at Giverny. I think of the train ride, the food I ate, the clothes I wore, the people I met. These elements make up an integral part of my experience with Monet's work, especially because it's through these trivial details that I will later recall my response to the art that I went to see. The magnet on my refrigerator preserves the aura of these experiences. It waits, and when noticed by me and by others who visit my room, it releases an essence of that aura—of my experience with Monet's art—through the reminiscences that follow.