

Claude Monet in Viet Nam . . .

... in late 2009, with a small digital camera, and having made the decision not to perform any subsequent editing of the images. Monet would be aghast at the absence of good taste and traditional Indochina charm in contemporary urban Viet Nam. Ha Noi, Ho Chi Minh City (Sai Gon), and even the much smaller Da Nang and Hué, abound in polluted air, rubbish, and dense crowds of people and scooters, not to mention the incessant noise emanating from a seemingly infinite number of sources. (However, Monet – like the parochial American psychologists of my acquaintance – would be surprised that despite an inordinate amount of stress, no one ever acts angry on the streets of Viet Nam.) But if Monet were to visit almost any rural region, he would not emerge again.

So much of the countryside remains pristine, with a delicate, deeply moving beauty.

The landscapes take one's breath away by their subtlety, timelessness, and occasional otherworldliness of the kind that cannot be found in northern France. The ubiquity of water supplies a magical serenity.

Monet – one of the deservedly pre-eminent plein-air painters – would remain secluded in some watery corner of Viet Nam indefinitely … … painting that little corner compulsively in all kinds of weather from his “studio boat”, as he did the Seine at Argenteuil, and as he painted the silhouettes, at dawn, of the trees on its banks at Giverny (the region of Haute-Normandie) in the Mornings on the Seine series. Near Ninh Binh, for instance, he would undoubtedly create a series longer than the 250 oil paintings of his Water Lilies (Nymphaeas in French) series – lilies in his pond at Giverny. Paddy fields would do even better.

Every trendy woman, with an image of Monet's water lilies on her tote bag, and every visitor to a dentist's waiting room, is familiar with Monet's sophisticated and pacific palette of watery greens and lavenders, and with the hazy uncertainty of edges of the objects he painted. One sees and senses his cautious escape from the late realism of Corot, Courbet, and Manet into virtual abstraction in the fusing of material things with their shadows and reflections. Cynics and medically oriented art theoreticians would attribute it all to the “work” of Monet's cataracts. If so, these cataracts managed strongly to influence many other fine painters, beginning at least with Monet's Impression, soleil levant (Impression, Sunrise; 1872, painted at the port of Le Havre).

Monet worked hard in his garden and eventually employed half a dozen gardeners at Giverny. He would deeply respect, and perhaps pay homage to, the backbreaking toil one witnesses in Viet Nam. It is true that noisy machines sometimes break the profound rural silence . . . … but Monet would perhaps render the machine thus … … and combine impressionism with the futurism of Marinetti. Or Monet would resist, as he resisted cubism and absolute abstraction in the first decades of the 20th century, and remain faithful to what he would have loved best in Viet Nam … Vladimir Kone ni , early February, 2010

Self-portrait in an element of the balustrade on the bridge over river Han in Da Nang, Viet Nam