

Around Monet's *Water Lilies*: positive or negative impacts of eye disease on artists?

Xinyue Mei

The University of Edinburgh, Old College, South Bridge, Edinburgh, UK

s2650468@ed.ac.uk

Abstract. Claude Monet's later works, particularly his *Water Lilies* series, underwent significant stylistic changes as his vision deteriorated due to cataracts. This article explores the impact of eye diseases on artists, focusing on how visual impairments influence artistic perception, techniques, and conceptual approaches. As Monet's eyesight declined, his colour perception shifted, and his brushstrokes became broader and more expressive, contributing to a more abstract style. While vision loss posed considerable emotional and practical challenges, it also led to artistic innovation, pushing these painters toward new modes of expression. The study highlights how Monet's boundaryless composition and emphasis on atmosphere rather than fine detail played a crucial role in the emergence of abstract art. These findings suggest that artistic resilience in the face of adversity can drive the evolution of artistic styles. Further research could explore how contemporary technologies assist visually impaired artists in maintaining their practice and whether such adaptations contribute to novel artistic developments.

Keywords: Monet, cataracts, impressionism, painting style mutation, eye disease

1. Introduction

Claude Monet (1840-1926) is one of the founders and the most influential Impressionist in art history. Throughout his life, Monet created many renowned paintings, such as *Sunrise* and *Haystacks* [1]. In particular, the *Water Lilies* series is one of the most famous of his masterpieces. However, few people are aware that some of these artworks were created while Monet suffered from cataracts (a medical condition in which the lens of the eye becomes increasingly opaque, resulting in blurred vision) because he was accustomed to painting outdoors [2]. Compared to Monet's earlier works, the *Water Lilies* series employs a richer palette and broader brushstrokes, creating a dreamy atmosphere. The boundless composition breaks the traditional painting framework, offering viewers a more immersive experience. While some critics believe that Monet's eye condition lowered the quality of his work, in my opinion, it gave the artist a new perspective and opened the door to abstract art. With this in mind, this article will discuss the impact of eye diseases on artists from three aspects: visual perception, creative methods, media and artistic concepts.

2. Results

2.1. Methods of changing visual perception and creation

Eye diseases can significantly hinder an artist's ability to distinguish colours and perceive fine details, often compelling them to adopt more generalised brushstrokes and bolder colours. Eyesight is crucial for artists, yet we seldom consider its significance [3]. This challenge, while daunting, has forced artists to adapt their creative processes, leading to both struggles and new opportunities. A French critic noted the impact of cataracts on Monet, stating that, 'the colored symphony became more and more monochromatic for blues and yellows' [4] (pp. 394-399). As Monet's vision deteriorated due to conditions such as cataracts, his ability to differentiate colours like purple and yellow - a hallmark of his earlier work - became increasingly impaired. This loss of precision required him to spend more time on his paintings [5]. Moreover, the impact of vision loss on an artist's mental health cannot be underestimated; losing such a critical tool can be profoundly distressing. As noted by Marmor, Monet experienced significant dissatisfaction with his art while he suffered from cataracts [6]. This manifested in feelings of anxiety, depression and a loss of confidence [7].

However, these challenges also highlight a crucial aspect of artistic resilience: the ability to adapt and innovate. To cope with his visual limitations, Monet began to use short, broad and thick brushstrokes, relying more on his imagination to fill in the details [5]. This shift not only reflects a practical response to his condition but also demonstrates how his impaired vision led to a more abstract and expressive style. For instance, the heavy presence of yellow and brown tones in his *Water Lilies* series represents a new artistic exploration; he no longer just depicted the colours reflected by light on objects but paid more attention to the expression of inner emotions and the rendering of atmosphere. Thus, Monet's experience underscores a central argument that while visual impairments alter the visual perception of painters causing anxiety, depression, loss of confidence and reduced productivity, this still provided opportunities for artists to explore new painting methods and creative styles.

2.2. Artist's adaptation and innovation to eye disease

Eye diseases often prompt artists to explore new techniques in their creative processes, as these conditions force them to adapt to new limitations. This adaptability is crucial in understanding how visual impairments can drive innovation in art. For example, to conquer the adverse effects of the disease, Monet took a series of measures, such as categorising his paints and having companions help, to ensure the appropriate use of colours [8]. This approach allowed him to continue his work despite his condition. Similarly, Camille Pissarro (1830-1903), who was the sole member of the Impressionist group to participate in all eight exhibitions held between 1874 and 1886, was forced to adapt his creative processes during the last 15 years of his life when recurrent infections around his right eye made his work increasingly difficult. To improve the situation, Pissarro had to give up painting outdoors and instead observed the scenery from indoors through a window to avoid the harmful effects of direct sunlight on his eyes.

Another example is Mary Cassatt (1844-1926), an outstanding Impressionist American woman painter. She frequently participated in exhibitions with Impressionist painters. Unfortunately, her vision suddenly deteriorated in 1911. Her cataracts gradually worsened over the ensuing years, making it difficult to capture colour variations in objects. Consequently, her paintings became increasingly rough. In her later works, she no longer focused on the details of objects but instead used fewer colours to convey the overall atmosphere [9]. Cassatt switched to using pastels instead of paint to better meet her artistic needs, whereas Pissarro adapted by observing his surroundings through a window [10]. Eye diseases did not lead these artists to despair; instead, they optimistically adapted by changing their tools, altering their creative environments and persistently continuing their artistic pursuits. As a result, they achieved higher levels in their art. Indeed, research suggests that changes in the creative environment and the tools used are necessary for artists with vision impairment. For instance, Cho described how artists with visual impairments change their materials and approach as a result of losing their sight, which results in new forms of art [11]. In the same vein, Cavazos Quero et al. highlighted how the need to adapt to diminished visual abilities means that artists must try out different media and contexts, which in turn fundamentally changes their art [12].



Figure 1. *Water Lilies* (1895-1900). Created when Monet was in good health

2.3. Innovation in artistic concept and style

Eye diseases challenge artists' artistic concepts and often promote the innovation of their artistic styles. This phenomenon was particularly evident in the case of Claude Monet, whose experience with cataracts led to significant changes in his work. This observation is supported by a comparison of two paintings in Monet's *Water Lilies* series, which illustrate his transformation in colour perception from 1906 to 1922. As his cataracts worsened, the colours he could see shifted from blue, green and pink to brown, yellow and red [13] (see Figure 1 and 2). The paintings he produced between 1915 and 1922 reveal an obvious brown tone and a weakened ability to perceive slight colour variations [14]. Furthermore, Monet abandoned the depiction of fine details in favour of emphasising overall colour and light effects [15]. This shift led his work to focus more on expressing internal emotions and atmosphere rather than specific objects and forms.

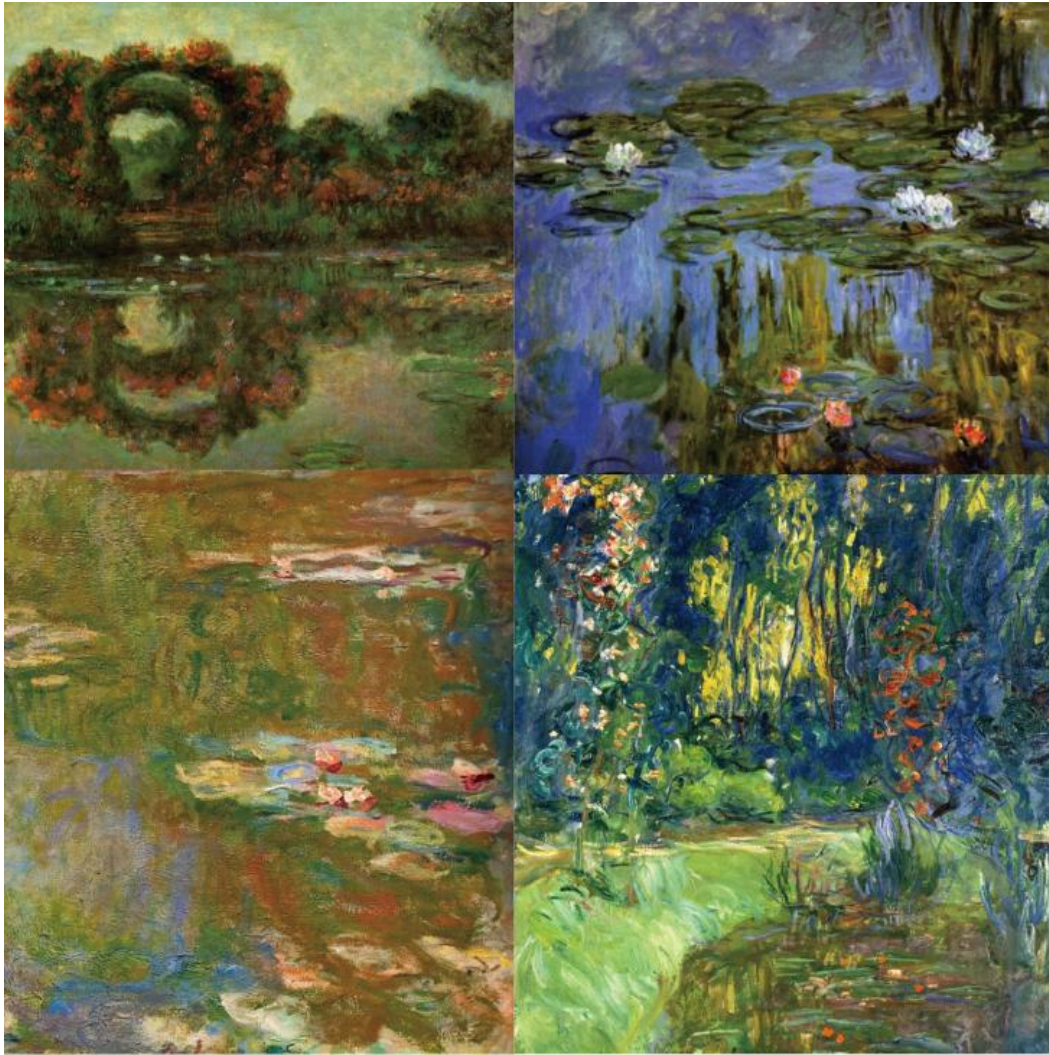


Figure 2. *Water Lilies* (1913-1926). Created when Monet was suffering from cataracts

Additionally, the use of brown and yellow hues may render the shapes within the painting more ambiguous, requiring viewers to interpret the work through the interaction of colours and the overall composition rather than relying on clear details and colour contrasts. These techniques are key characteristics of abstract art. Monet's passion for meditation and his desire to blur the boundaries between heaven and earth led him to merge all elements, thereby breaking away from traditional compositional structures. The boundaryless composition he employed made his artwork appear freer and more open, allowing the audience to feel immersed in the painting and become one with nature [4].

Traditional paintings typically have defined boundaries and focal points, with elements within the composition constrained by the edges of the canvas, guiding the viewer's attention to specific areas. However, boundaryless composition breaks this limitation, allowing elements to 'spill over' the edges of the canvas, creating a sense of infinite extension. This approach disrupts traditional compositional rules and introduces a novel visual experience. Monet's later works show a significant change in style, possibly due to his cataracts or simply due to ageing. He no longer focused on the precise outlines and minute details of objects; instead, his attention shifted more towards conveying atmosphere and expressing tonal variations. These blurred forms and unusual colour choices pioneered stunning creative vistas that would be unimaginable with normal vision, contributing significantly to the development of Abstract art. These paintings are marked by their unique approach to capturing light and colour and are admired for their innovative qualities, influencing countless future artists. Thus, Monet's struggle with his vision inadvertently broke the boundaries of traditional art, opening new avenues for artistic expression.

3. Conclusion

Overall, eye disease has had a twofold impact on artists. The cases discussed demonstrate that when artists effectively address their conditions and persist in exploring new techniques, they can innovate in artistic styles and even achieve greater artistic

accomplishments. The central issues explored reveal how Impressionist artists were influenced by eye diseases and how they transformed challenges into opportunities, fostering innovation in art styles and contributing to the development of abstract art. This transformation from adversity to creative triumph exemplifies the true spirit of art and humanity. I believe that future research could further investigate how artists adapt their techniques and styles in response to visual impairments. Moreover, studies could focus on how contemporary technologies can help artists compensate for vision loss and explore whether these methods can inspire new artistic styles [16]. By providing more specific guidance for contemporary artists, such research could assist them in advancing artistic innovation, even when faced with similar challenges.

References

- [1] Yao, G., & Abindinhazir, Z. (2023). Study And Appreciation Of Claude Monet's Artistic Creation And Life Experience. *Ideology*, 8(2).
- [2] Sousa, C.D.J., Oliveira, M.L.C.D., & Gomes, L.O. (2019). Cataract and chromatic expression in Monet's work. *Revista Brasileira de Oftalmologia*, 78, pp.304-309.
- [3] Nagy, Z.Z. (2018). Painting and the eye. *Dev. Health Sci.*, 1(1), pp.2-9.
- [4] Seiberling, G. (1981). *Monet's series*. (No Title)
- [5] Goh, E., & Teo, W.L. (2007). Art and the eye: the impact of ocular pathology on their artistic legacy. *Annals-Academy of Medicine Singapore*, 36(10), p.S61.
- [6] Marmor, M.F. (2006). Ophthalmology and art: simulation of Monet's cataracts and Degas' retinal disease. *Archives of Ophthalmology*, 124(12), pp.1764-1769.
- [7] Zhou, A. (2008). Cataracts and the late style of Monet's painting. *Proceedings of the 17th Annual History of Medicine Days*, 43-51.
- [8] Steele, M., & O'Leary, J.P. (2001). Monet's cataract surgery. *The American Surgeon*, 67(2), pp.196-198.
- [9] Ravin, J.G. (1994). Eye Disease Among the Impressionists: Monet, Cassatt, Degas. *J. Ophthalmic Nurs. Technol.*, 13(5).
- [10] (Kareliotis et al., n.d)
- [11] Cho, J.D. (2021). A study of multi-sensory experience and color recognition in visual arts appreciation of people with visual impairment. *Electronics*, 10(4), p.470.
- [12] Cavazos Quero, L., Iranzo Bartolomé, J., & Cho, J. (2021). Accessible visual artworks for blind and visually impaired people: comparing a multimodal approach with tactile graphics. *Electronics*, 10(3), p.297.
- [13] Bryś, M., Krześlak, A., Laskowska, M., Jóźwiak, P., & Forma, E. (2012). Ophthalmic diseases among the impressionist painters. *Folia Medica Lodziensia*, 1(39), pp.21-37.
- [14] Bogdănici, C.M., Niagu, I.A., & Andronic, D.G. (2021). The influence of ophthalmological diseases on the vision quality of famous painters. *Rom. J. Ophthalmol.*, 65(4), p.330.
- [15] Weale, R.A. (2006). Painters and their eyes: Age and other handicaps. *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 69(H. 3), pp.402-410.
- [16] (Han, 2022)