

## ***TAKING LIBERTIES WITH MONET***

**By Michael Ventura**

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I was working as a typesetter on Sixth Avenue, in the basement of an immense building, several levels below the street level ... a huge windowless room, a room without night or day ... most of us lit cigarettes that fumed in metal ashtrays beside our typesetting machines, and we all had such fast fingers ... the furious clickety-clickety-clickety and the room gray with smoke ... sometimes I would think of that immensity above us, the huge building that rose out of this bottom level high into the sky, the weight of it pressing down on us, and I would think of the sun-flash on the windows and how that flashing skyline is the image of Manhattan to so many, the great buildings in the sun ... or working the night shift I would know the building was lit and what it was lit for: the cleaning people, mostly black and Puerto Rican, cleaning the offices, which is not what you think of when you see the glittering skyline in the movies, how all that hard ill-paid labor is used by the Woody Allens as an image of glamour ...

But when I worked the day shift, on my lunches I'd walk north a few blocks, then west half a block, to the Museum of Modern Art ... in those days the Modern's cafeteria was a humble affair, you could get a decent lunch for two dollars, and the cafeteria opened onto the sculpture garden, Rodin's Balzac and Picasso's goat and the Matisse plaques and Brancusi and Calder, each radiating to me one truth: that the spirit of life is freedom, and that freedom creates its own forms, anywhere, anytime, even here ...

I felt a silence in that garden, through the city's constant noise of traffic ... raising my eyes, looking up past the garden walls to the rising buildings all around, and the passing clouds ... then looking at all the different faces there with me, preoccupied and in their own world as I was ... and I felt, surrounding all, and permeating all, a great silence ... the stillness of an all-encompassing silence ... sitting in that garden, listening to the din of the city, and just beyond that din, the enormous silence ...

I would walk the halls of paintings day after day, and the paintings seemed so much stronger than the walls they hung on ... so much more depended on the paintings than on the walls ... Terribly aware, I was terribly aware, standing at arm's length before the paintings, that at just this distance within reach of the canvas, just *here*, where I was standing, had stood Monet, Picasso, Cézanne, Kandinsky, Matisse, Van Gogh ... they had stood at just this distance from *this* canvas, and closer, I would step closer, they had stood just here, not on the floor where I was standing but within the same sphere of the painting which now enclosed me ... so paintings seemed alive in a way that no page of print and no film was alive ... and I dreamed a dream of the walls crumbling and the paintings hovering by themselves, hovering and then floating off down the streets ...

When you grow up on those streets you're always afraid ... always ... you learn to walk tough to hide your fear ... you learn to do anything to hide your fear ... street sense isn't knowing the ins-and-outs of every scam ... street sense is knowing that from any shadow, any doorway, can come something that can kill you ... something, someone, absolutely willing to kill you, because that's the only way he has left to prove he's alive ... he's killing you out of fear, his bottomless fear, he's seeking to kill his own fear by killing you ... if you look afraid, he'll seek you out ... thus you learn that your own fear is your worst enemy, that to show fear can get you hurt, get you killed ... people who've lived

like this can no longer be killed by merely a look or a word, so I felt safe at the Museum of Modern Art, for here were mostly people who in their world killed by looks and words, and I was immune to cold looks and snide words ... Later, much later, I would enter a world of literati and critics who could afford to be snide, who would try to kill Art by insisting that theories about art were as important, more important, than art itself ... but I had seen the walls crumble while the paintings didn't, and I knew what the paintings stood for: that a city is made of what it isn't as much, and perhaps more than, of what it is. Money insists on itself so shrilly precisely because it knows its unimportance. The servants of money are only that: servants. Artists know that unless you love something more than your life, you've wasted your life.

That's what the paintings told me ... the free-floating colors of Kandinsky ... the eerie stillnesses of Cézanne ... the desperate joys of Van Gogh ... Said Picasso, "First I eat the apple, *then* I paint the apple."

The Modern is so different now ... they've hung the three huge Claude Monet *Water Lilies* in a large hall where there are always people walking and there are other paintings about, and statues, it's a blur ... but that spring when I was 23, it was difficult to find the *Water Lilies* ... I found them by chance, wandering, drunk on the soul-fragrant colors of all those paintings, wandering down a hallway, I thought I'd taken a wrong turn, but at the end of that hallway was a smallish entrance into a quiet, wonderful, chapel-like room ... three walls, but not at right angles ... three walls arranged like a triptych ... one great long canvas of *Water Lilies* to a wall, and the fourth wall was the darkly tinted window overlooking the sculpture garden below, and there were two cushioned benches by the windows ... sometimes there was a uniformed guard, sometimes not ... the room was so out-of-the-way, sometimes I had it to myself for 20 minutes and more ...

The *Water Lilies* were painted circa 1920, and that meant a great deal to me, for it meant that Monet had not been crushed by the horror of what they then called the Great War ... I had just read Randolph Bourne for the first time, the essays he'd written during that war, writings for which he'd been hounded out of print and into his grave by the government: *One keeps healthy in wartime by a vigorous assertion of values in which the war has no part* ... and now that the war never really ends, now that the culture itself has become a war of money against the soul, one keeps healthy by a vigorous assertion of values in which money has no part ... Monet, he was 80 in 1920, and I knew he shared that idea ... his eyesight was failing, and one can barely imagine what that means to such a painter, he had to fasten his brushes on long poles and paint, as it were, from a distance, yet there is no diminishment in intensity or skill ... and the paintings ... the *Water Lilies* ...

Those vast paintings ... to watch them is to lose yourself in light ... in forms as delicate and many-layered as mists moving slowly upon still water at dawn ... "Silence does not die," Hannah has said to me ... Monet's is the coloration of such silence, silence as a vessel full of light, and light so bound with color, with such sweetness of subtle color, you lose your bearings ... you do not know your name in such a world ... you do not need your name in such a world ... you're in the Garden before the naming of things, a Paradise without the Lord's command to Adam to name ... that command forgotten in a depthless realm of color ... of forms hardly forms ... forms in the moment of forming ... before a breath can swell into a word ... Monet returning to the beginning of legend, to such a seeing as was before the definition of the eye ... humanity is implied, but is not yet ... he went back that far for his *Water Lilies* ... yet stayed precisely where he was in his time ... and I had that place all to myself for many minutes on end, sometimes a timeless half an hour ... and somehow neither the guard nor anyone else came in when I danced.

I danced ... I didn't know what else to do in that place of the *Water Lilies*, except sometimes to dance, and I didn't care if anyone came in, and perhaps that's why no one surprised me at my dancing there, a few steps, a few gestures, fragments of dance, I danced and grew bolder ... sometimes, yes, I pressed my cheek against the canvas, very gently, feeling the rough ridges of the paint against my face, as even the bearded old Monet had never done ... I danced in that chapel-like room, and sometimes, almost in a swoon, pressed my cheek against the canvas, gently, its coolness surprised me, it was like the cool damp of morning, and no one ever came upon me, and I never told a soul for many years, and that room became for me the stillpoint of the city, of the country, of the world ...

And now that room is no more. There is no way to return. Except here, on the page.

And I would walk out of that room back to that lowest level of that immense building ... and so I learned that Time rips wide open at the exact place where you *are* ... but only if you're willing, recklessly sometimes, to *be* in the space ... and the days turn into weeks, and the weeks turn into months, and the months turn into years, every moment a rending of the fabric, the canvas, of Time, lit ... lit from within ... every moment lit from within itself.

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