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book review of

*Monet and His Muse: Camille Monet in the Artist's Life* by Mary Mathews Gedo

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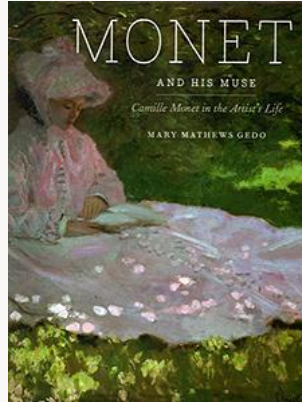
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Mary Mathews Gedo,  
*Monet and His Muse: Camille Monet in the Artist's Life*.  
Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010.  
289 pp.; 51 color illus.; 65 b/w illus.; index.  
\$55.00  
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In the last year, Claude Monet has been the subject of both a major retrospective exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris, accompanied by an exhibition catalogue edited by Guy Cogeval, and a new publication by Mary Mathews Gedo examining the artist's life during the years when he was associated with Camille Doncieux Monet. Also on view last summer was a series of exhibitions in northern France under the collective title of *Normandie impressioniste*, which included a variety of Monet material at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rouen, the Musée Eugène Boudin at Honfleur, and the Musée des Impressionnistes, Giverny. Such abundant attention might reasonably be expected to produce new scholarship and insight into the work of such a seminal figure in the history of modernism. (For a perspective on the Monet retrospective at the Grand Palais, see the review by Katie Hornsteirn and Caty Telfair elsewhere in this issue; for an overview of *Normandie impressioniste*, see the Travelogue by James Rubin.)

Mary Mathews Gedo's book, *Monet and His Muse: Camille Monet in the Artist's Life*, is distinguished by a clearly defined time frame of 1865–1879, and by the author's unique combination of clinical psychology with art history. As Gedo notes in her Preface, "I have combined the data and skills of the two disciplines in which I have been trained, clinical psychology and art history. Consequently, I have paid particular attention to Monet's background, especially his childhood and adolescent dependence on his mother and a paternal aunt" (xi). Gedo thus opens the book by acknowledging her interdisciplinary approach and offering the reader a straightforward indication of how she will analyze Monet's life and work.

The Prologue lives up to Gedo's expressed objective; it consists entirely of an essay on "Monet's Character" that attempts to establish a psychological frame of reference for the foundation of the artist's actions and attitudes throughout his life. Monet's loss of his mother at age sixteen is

presented as the determining factor in his wish to be buried in a buoy so that he could always be on the sea. Gedo perceives this widely repeated sentiment as a "...description of the intrauterine life of the fetus, who floats suspended like a buoy within the mother's womb, that dark, watery world in which all needs are fulfilled. Did Monet, as a bereaved youth, turn to the sea—*la mer*—as a substitute for the lost mother, *la mère*?" (7). While this type of analysis of Monet's character seems consistent with an archetypal concept of the sea, some of Gedo's other interpretations seem unnecessarily critical of what might be considered youthful misbehavior. A case in point is Monet's recollection of his adventure in taking an army mule for an 'unauthorized' ride in Algeria during his military service, which Gedo presents as self-aggrandizing hyperbole even though she acknowledges that there is "...very little information of any kind about Monet's army stint" (12).

More troubling is Gedo's interpretation of a story related by René Gimpel, in *Diary of Art Dealer*, about a 1927 conversation he had with Durand-Ruel; during this exchange, Gimpel reported that Durand-Ruel recalled a story that his grandfather had told about Monet many decades earlier. The gist of the reminiscence was that during his years in Algeria, Monet "...needing money, had done a kind of fake Fromentin, but he had failed to sell it and had signed it later on." [1] When Paul Durand-Ruel [the *grandfather* of Gimpel's companion] presented the signed piece to Monet, he initially denied having painted it, but then decided to purchase it instead. In Gedo's assessment, this indicates that Monet must have "...wished to get rid of this embarrassing evidence of lack of scruple, and must have destroyed it as soon as he regained control of the canvas" (13). In contrast, Gimpel's *Diary* presents it as an amusing tale of youthful indiscretion. By interpreting Monet's behavior—assuming that it was accurately reported in Gimpel's *Diary*—as indicative of a permanent character trait, Gedo implies that Monet was fundamentally dishonest and unscrupulous. Without more solid and well-documented evidence of such serious accusations, it seems overly harsh to condemn a young, bored and cash-strapped artist for a vaguely possible misdemeanor; especially as there is no verifiable evidence that the "Fromentin" existed, much less that Monet attempted to sell it under false pretenses. The author's presentation of this alleged event highlights a troubling issue in application of a psychological approach to art history when the subjects in question are long dead. Without clearly documented facts about Monet's "Fromentin" painting, for example, there can only be speculation about the meaning of the incident as an indicator of psychological characteristics.

The primary subject of Gedo's book is Camille Doncieux Monet's role as the artist's muse and model from about 1865 until her premature death from cancer in 1879. The singular challenge of such a subject is the paucity of information about Camille herself, which Gedo fully acknowledges (20). The responsibility for this lack of documentation, according to the author, is "...in large part Monet's shameful surrender to the unreasonable demands of Alice Hoschedé (1846–1911), Camille's successor in his affections, that he destroy every memento attesting not only to Camille's role in his life but to her very existence. Every shred of his late wife's correspondence, her photographs, and any documents that might have illuminated her relationship with her family of origin—all were sacrificed to appease Mme. Hoschedé's pathological jealousy" (20). The few bits and pieces of factual background on Camille can only be cobbled together by scattered and infrequent references in letters from Monet's friends and patrons. Like all contemporary art historians, Gedo depends on the foundational work done by Daniel Wildenstein in his four-volume catalogue raisonné of Monet's work, and on the

scholarship of Paul Hayes Tucker and Charles F. Stuckey, but primary source materials related to Camille have yet to surface.[\[2\]](#)

The book is organized into three sections following the Prologue on "Monet's Character." Part One addresses "The Youth of the Artist, the Art of His Youth"; Part Two focuses on "The Argenteuil Years"; and Part Three deals with "Camille and Argenteuil in Decline." There is then an Epilogue entitled "The Memorial Garden of Claude Monet." This broad organization allows the author to examine individual paintings from each period in detail, and to offer the reader psychological evaluations of the artist as he moves through these phases of his career. Each chapter within the three overarching sections is fairly short and amply illustrated with beautifully reproduced color images.

Part One begins with "The Perils of Young Love, Monet's Magnificent Failure" which provides a thorough discussion of Monet's 1865 painting, *Luncheon on the Grass* (Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow). The artist's desire to undertake such an ambitious work is ascribed to ... "his desire to compete with and triumph over these leaders [*i.e.*, Edouard Manet and Gustave Courbet] of the artistic avant-garde" but Gedo also points out that Camille's role in this endeavor has been "largely overlooked" (26). As she notes, "The artist's burgeoning love affair with this beautiful young woman lent wings to his ambition, inspiring him to new levels of daring. (Such competitiveness is often stimulated by a youth's initial success in winning a desirable woman)" (26).

This is followed by a chapter about the 1866 Salon success—and scandal—of Monet's painting, *Camille (Woman in a Green Dress)* (Kunsthalle Bremen). The painting itself was not only accepted at the Salon exhibition, but also well received by many critics. The scandalous nature of the painting concerned the title, which revealed Camille's identity as the model, and made her relationship with Monet public knowledge. Gedo's sympathy for the predicament of the young model is evident in her analysis of the situation: "The young woman, who came from a conventional, albeit modest, background, obviously understood the implication of this public proclamation of her identity and questionable status—a revelation she must have found extremely discomfiting"(45). The question that is neither posed nor answered about this situation is whether Camille herself was aware of the title of the painting before it was sent to the Salon. Instead, Monet is presumed to have made a conscious decision that "...tacitly proclaimed his assessment of his mistress as his social inferior" by revealing "the nature of their relationship to the general public" (46).

"Camille as Flora" defines the next chapter with an informative discussion about Mademoiselle Doncieux's role as all four of the models in *Women in a Garden*, (1866, Musée d'Orsay, Paris). Although Monet's behavior continues to be interpreted as self-serving, Gedo's explication of what's involved in modeling is very intriguing; and for the first time, Camille begins to emerge as a person in her own right with specific talents that made her a skillful partner for the painter. Chapter four, "Painted Metaphors for the Absent Woman" covers 1867, the year when Camille became pregnant and was eventually unable to model while she awaited the birth of her son. During this time, Monet "abandoned" Camille in Paris while he returned to his father's home in Normandy, presumably to try to earn some money or beg his father to give him a loan. Gedo interprets a reference in one of Monet's letters to Frédéric Bazille as indicating that he had "...pressured his mistress into agreeing to surrender her baby (to a foundling home?)

following its birth," but again, this is only one of many possible ways to understand what even the author admits is an "enigmatic passage" (62). The development of this interpretation, however, leads Gedo to analyze Monet's temporary blindness that summer of 1867 as being "a classic example of conversion hysteria" that "originated in his psyche, not his physiology" (62). The chapter closes with a careful analysis of the compositional development of *Jeanne-Marguerite Lecadre in the Garden* (1867, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia), and all of the permutations that Monet explored as he added and subtracted various figures, including that of his father. It would be an excellent elucidation of the painting were it not for Gedo's insistence on a psychological summation: "Did Monet, unwittingly following the plot of Sophocles' drama *Oedipus the King*, "blind" himself as punishment for this symbolic patricide?" (71).

Chapter five, "Ariadne on the Grande Ile", changes course slightly to focus on an extended exploration of the 1868 painting, *On the Banks of the Seine, Benecourt (The River)*, (Art Institute of Chicago). As in chapter four, the discussion of Monet's method in developing his composition is carefully and thoughtfully presented. Particularly useful for Monet scholars is the reconstruction of the painting's multiple re-workings, courtesy of contemporary artist, William Conger who worked in collaboration with the author to investigate this particular painting. This information provides a welcome opportunity to examine the artist's process as he struggled to organize the composition in order to create the sense of "instantaneity" that will later become a hallmark of Impressionism. This chapter also covers Monet's personal hardships in dealing with creditors and finances; his frequent pleas for money from his friends reveal an individual who is both desperate and often annoying in his demands for assistance. This material has been included in many previous books on Monet, but Gedo offers a psychological analysis based on the assumption that Monet was ambivalent about his responsibilities for Camille and their infant son, Jean. She is skeptical about the sincerity of the artist's suicide attempt in the spring of 1868, and proposes instead that it "...constituted an unconscious act of symbolic expiation in advance for the sin about to be committed: abandonment of his mistress and child in a desperate situation" (85).

Part One of the book closes with two chapters about Monet's modest success in "The Myth of the Bourgeois Family" and his marriage to Camille in "Honeymoon and Exile". Included here are excellent examinations of the paintings at La Grenouille and the seaside images of Camille at Trouville. Part Two opens with "Argenteuil, 1872-1873" and a lengthy exploration of many classic Impressionist works. Of particular note is Gedo's discussion of the 1873 painting, *Camille and Jean Monet in the Garden at Argenteuil* (Private collection). This rarely reproduced piece depicts Camille standing in the garden at their home in Argenteuil with her arms raised behind her head, and young Jean lying on the grass nearby. The effect is both intimate and erotic, and in this case, Gedo's psychological interpretation seems more closely aligned with the visual content of the painting. "The composition impresses one as a very private work, and it is not surprising that Monet retained it in his personal collection, unexhibited, throughout his lifetime. It was certainly unique in his entire oeuvre" (122).

Chapter nine, "Camille as Collective Muse" is one of the most notable in the book. Because it concentrates on Camille as a model for her husband's friends and colleagues, the reader has the chance to see her through the eyes of Edouard Manet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir. During the summer of 1874, when all three artists worked in close proximity to each other, Camille

most often posed for Manet and Renoir rather than her husband. Two paintings, one by Manet and one by Renoir, done simultaneously on a summer afternoon, capture a moment of peaceful calm in the Monet's garden. Manet's image, *The Monet Family in Their Garden at Argenteuil* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) shows not only Camille and Jean settled peaceably beneath a tree, but also Monet tending to his geraniums on the left side of the painting. In contrast, Renoir portrayed a close-up view of only Camille and Jean beneath the tree in *Madame Monet and Her Son* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.). The discussion of Camille's work for Manet and Renoir grants her credibility as a professional model, and to this reader, further suggests that Camille did indeed possess ideas and aesthetic standards of her own. Not only does this create a more vibrant picture of who she was, but also it infers that perhaps she was not quite the passive participant in Monet's life that she is often assumed to have been.

The next two chapters provide in-depth analyses of the major figural paintings of the mid-1870s including *Woman with a Parasol—Madame Monet and her Son* (1875, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.) and *La Japonaise* (1876, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). Both paintings are examined in the context of the Monet's personal life with accompanying psychological commentary. Chapter twelve, "The Muse of the Past, The Muse of the Future" wraps up Camille's story in a narrative about her final years fighting a losing battle with cancer. During this period, Monet also encounters Alice Hoschedé, wife of his patron Ernest Hoschedé, who will ultimately become his second wife. Although there has been much speculation about whether the two became lovers in 1876, Gedo concurs with Paul Hayes Tucker's assessment that Madame Hoschedé's religious beliefs would have forbidden such behavior (185).

The final section of the book, Part Three, "Camille and Argenteuil in Decline" explains the growing financial woes of the Monet family, the bankruptcy of the Hoschedé family, the birth of Michel Monet, and Camille's increasing illness and death on September 5, 1879 at the age of thirty-two. Although Gedo presents this material in clear, concise language, it is nonetheless standard fare. The author adds an Epilogue in which she sums up her psychological analysis of Monet: "I believe that Monet's preoccupation with watery reflections sprang from his reaction to his mother's death and his ensuing fantasy that he would float forever in the form of a buoy on the surface of the mother/sea. Obsessed by his beautiful water garden, Monet substituted his pond for the sea and the water lilies for his fantasized buoy; the water garden, then, would function as his own symbolic tomb, as well as that of his beloved dead women—his mother, Aunt Lecadre, Camille, and eventually Alice" (223–224).

Ultimately, the question of why the University of Chicago Press chose to publish the book deserves consideration. Although it is beautifully produced, and the discussion of individual paintings are often insightful, the basic premise of psychological analysis at such a historical distance is substantially speculative. Gedo's assumption that an artist can be understood by a close examination of his or her biography certainly can be a valid approach, but it is also rife with pitfalls when dealing with historical figures about whom our knowledge is limited. Gedo's earlier excellent book *Picasso, Art as Autobiography* exemplifies the success of this method when there is ample, even excessive, documentation about the artist's life. In *Monet and His Muse*, this method works much less successfully because so much is based—out of necessity—on pure speculation. Monet's letters are incomplete; they show us his irritating, nagging pleas for money, and his occasionally melodramatic exaggerations of financial misery. Nonetheless, this

is a common affliction, as anyone who has faced desperate money problems can attest, and such unappealing behavior was surely not the way that Monet usually interacted with the world. If it had been, it seems unlikely that he would have been able to maintain the life-long friendships that he did. Likewise, the lack of information about Camille poses very substantial barriers to understanding her as an individual. To her credit, Gedo has tried to flush out Camille's work as a model, but she remains a shadowy figure with little personality of her own. For better or worse, we know her almost exclusively through Monet's paintings. Barring the discovery of new materials on Camille, any psychological analysis of the relationship between her and Monet is inherently dependent on the perspective he has created.

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### Notes

[1] See René Gimpel, *Diary of an Art Dealer*, translated by John Rosenberg (New York: Universe Books, 1966), 339.

[2] What is unfortunately still missing from Monet scholarship is the full publication of Alice Hoschedé-Monet's diary, which might shed further light on many unanswered questions.