

Claude Monet & Monsieur Latour-Marliac

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ON MY RECENT VISIT TO SOUTH-WEST FRANCE I MADE a most exciting discovery: I found the source for Claude Monet's famous water lily paintings. It is a long way from Robertson, but many of us from the Southern Highlands will have visited Monet's gardens at Giverny, visited L'Orangerie in Paris to see his amazing huge panels of water lilies, or maybe visited the recent fabulous exhibition from the Parisian Musée Marmottan at the National Gallery of Victoria.

But have we ever considered how Monet's interest in water lilies began? What was his inspiration? How did it happen? It happened in 1889 when Monsieur Joseph Latour-Marliac decided that his collection of water lilies was sufficiently good enough to exhibit at the World Fair in Paris. His new plants were unveiled at the same time as the Eiffel Tower! These new hybrids were a sensation as, until that time, the only hardy water lilies in Europe were white. Soon after this Monet bought his property at Giverny, which until that time he had been renting, and he then began to

build the gardens we all love today, especially his jardin d'eau or water garden. It is only in recent times that Latour-Marliac's role and connection with Monet has been mentioned.

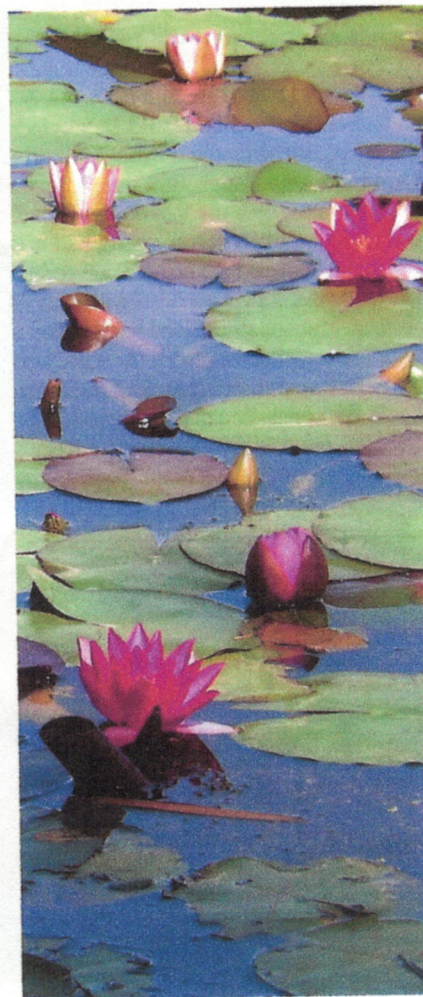
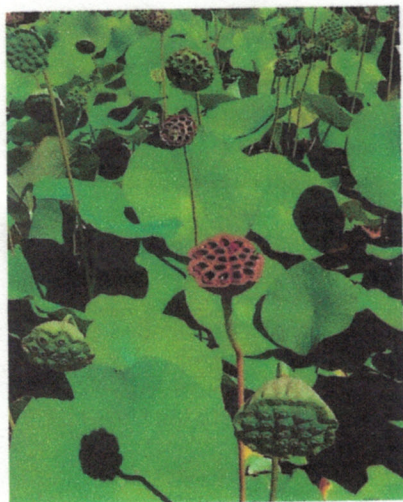
In 1875, at his nursery at Le Temple-sur-Lot in Lot-et-Garonne, in south-west France, Joseph Bory Latour-Marliac found a way to cross the white variety with coloured varieties that he obtained from North America and other countries, thus developing a palette of colours through a process that still remains mysterious. These exquisite new varieties ranged from the palest yellow through pink and fuschia, to the deepest red. They are so magnificent to see as one strolls around the ponds filled with their colourful flowers, and with so many ducks constantly dipping and diving for food between the leaves.

The marvellous and exciting thing is that today we can still visit his water gardens where his 65 cultivation pools, in their Art Nouveau style, remain just as they were in the 19th century, after being carefully restored in 2008. Today the nursery covers

four hectares with one hectare of cultivation ponds and over a quarter of a million plants. One approaches these amazing gardens by walking along an avenue of giant bamboo on one side and the start of the historic ponds on the other side.

What a delight it is to lunch looking down across the rolling lawns to the white swans in their stately progress across the lake; across to the statue of Monsieur Latour-Marliac; or beside the ponds with the ducks constantly ducking under the water lilies; or even perhaps under the shade in the grape vine terrace. The current entrance price of seven euro is deducted from the price of lunch if you do decide to dine on the delicious menu du jour. The aged, rustic terracotta pots lining the edges of the ponds are used

Joseph Latour-Marliac was born in 1830 in Lot-et-Garonne, south-east of Bordeaux, and studied law in Paris until his studies were disrupted by the revolution in 1848. He then returned home to supervise the family properties and turned his attention to horticulture. He developed the largest collection of bamboo in Europe, two varieties of which still bear his name. In 1893 he was elected mayor of Le Temple-sur-Lot, the location of these water gardens. He worked on the hybridisation of "Nymphaeas" for 40 years before dying, aged 80, in January 1911. Obituaries were recorded for this dedicated and revered horticulturist in the prestigious gardening magazines and throughout the European press. His son and descendants carried on his work at the



to multiply and maintain the water lilies. They are typical of the pots used in previous times to make and store cassoulet, and one artisan has now been commissioned to make the reproductions found in the sales boutique. They are certainly a unique attraction for local visitors to take home, but unfortunately too large for those of us from far places.

Monet was captivated by these new coloured water lilies, ordering large quantities and we can still view these orders in the Museum at the Gardens, along with documentation of the life's work of Monsieur Latour-Marliac. The museum is housed in what is the oldest intact plum drying oven in Lot-et-Garonne. The French national water lily collection is also found here, with nearly 300 varieties including tropical water lilies such as the famous "blue lotus" of Egypt, in the glass houses. More than 200 varieties are still grown in exactly the same manner as they were in the 19th century. It is estimated that 70 per cent of water lilies sold on the world market today are Marliac varieties, originally created at this nursery.

nursery until 1991, when it was sold. It is currently owned by Professor Robert Sheldon who spends winter in Paris, and summer in Le Temple-sur-Lot among the water lilies, along with a dedicated management team.

The seasonal opening times are from April 15 through to October 15, from 10am to 5pm, with Restaurant Marliacea open from May 1 to September 30. Each month from April to September one finds a variety of plants flowering to enjoy including hardy water lilies, Japanese iris, roses, wisteria, giant water lilies, tropical water lilies, lotus and the Victoria giant water lily (July to October).

The Latour-Marliac garden was named "Jardin Remarquable" in 2004 in recognition of the site's physical beauty and historical significance. A visit to this beautiful and unique garden is an absolute and total joy, and a trip to south-west France for all garden lovers, or lovers of Monet's beautiful paintings, would be incomplete without a visit here. 