



# Collecting Infinity

Takaya Awata and the Art of Lou Zhenggang

By Takaya Awata

Collecting Infinity

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1 — Lou Zhenggang, *Untitled*, 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 162 x 130 cm  
2 — Takaya Awata

“At times, it gives me courage. At other times, comfort. Art offers a power beyond words.”

— Takaya Awata

There are moments in life when a work of art does not simply move you — it changes your direction. For me, that moment arrived in 2022, on an early autumn afternoon in Izu. I had come to visit the calligrapher and painter **Lou Zhenggang**, whose work I had admired from afar. Her studio stood quietly above the sea, bathed in

a kind of stillness that seemed to contain the whole movement of the world. We spoke for hours, surrounded by brushes, canvases, and light. By the time I left, I knew that encounter had altered something fundamental in me. Since then, Lou's art has become a constant companion — a mirror, a teacher, and, in some ways, a compass.



3—Lou Zhenggang in the studio

6—Lou Zhenggang, *Untitled*, 2022, Acrylic on canvas, 162 x 130 cm

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**A LIFE SHAPED  
BY DISCIPLINE AND FREEDOM**

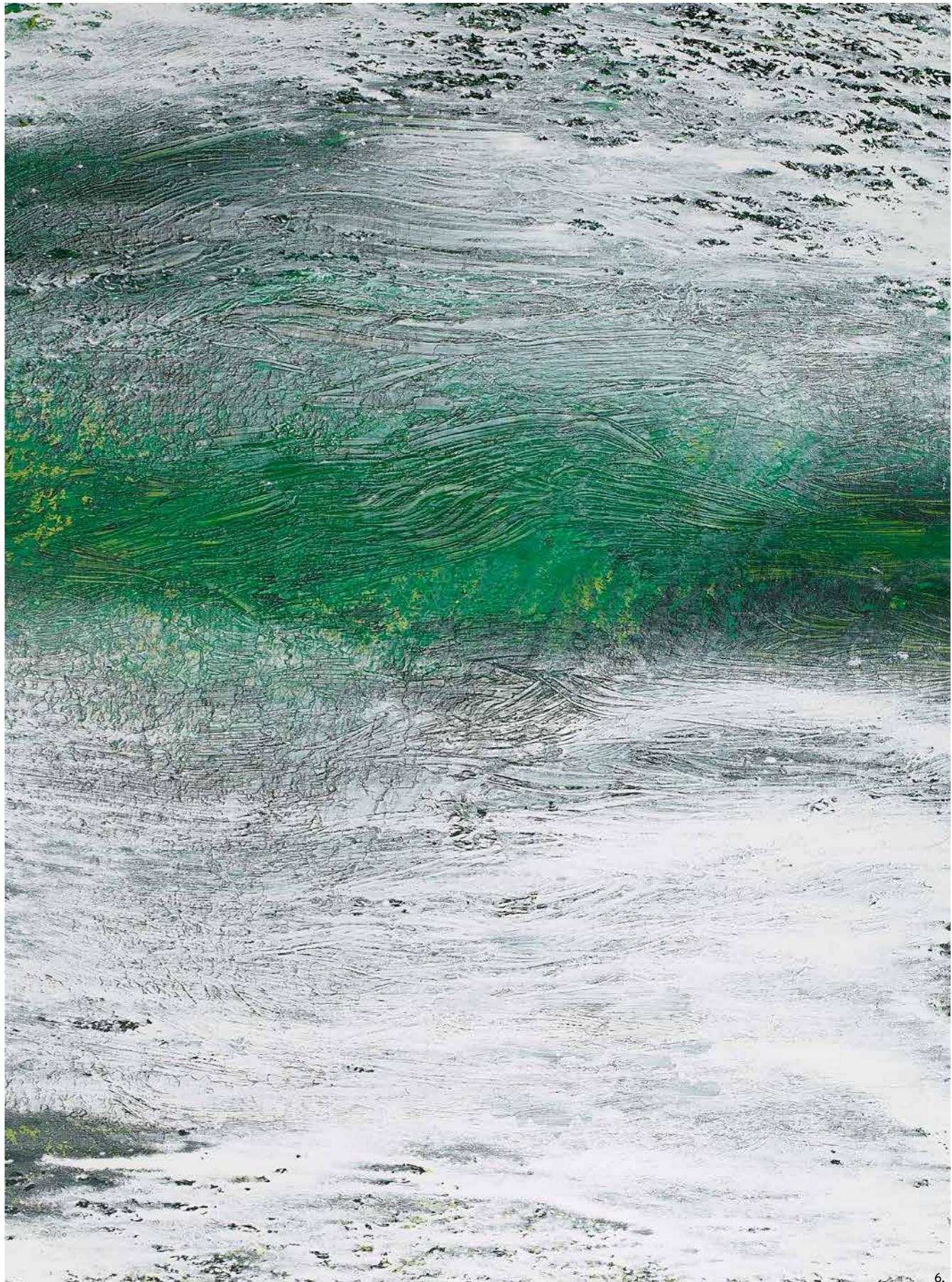
Born in Heilongjiang Province in 1966, Lou Zhenggang was a prodigy of calligraphy before she was even a teenager. Under her father's guidance, she mastered the brush — not as an instrument of obedience, but as a means of discovery. By her twenties, she had already earned wide recognition in China. But her ambitions reached further than praise. In 1986 she moved to Japan, a decision that freed her from the weight of expectation. There she began to unlearn, to question, to strip her art to its barest essence. Over the next three decades she would hold more than twenty-seven solo exhibitions across Asia and the United States, each tracing the contours of an evolving self.

Lou's work moves between precision and release — between the centuries-old rigor of calligraphy and the wild openness of abstraction. Her titles read almost like fragments of poetry: *Life and Love*, *Heart*, *Harmony*, *Vitality*, *Nature*. Each one gestures toward something elemental — the pulse of being itself. In recent years she has returned to painting with renewed intensity. From her studio in Izu, overlooking Sagami Bay, she created the *Untitled* series — vast, luminous abstractions that hover between silence and explosion. These works were featured in *Abstraction: The Genesis and Evolution of Abstract Painting* at Tokyo's Artizon Museum in 2023, a landmark exhibition that placed her among the great modern innovators of form and feeling.

The following year, her monumental folding screens were exhibited at Yakushiji Temple in Nara, a World Heritage site. To see her work within those ancient halls — sacred air mingling with contemporary paint — was to sense how art collapses time itself.

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7 — Lou Zhenggang, *Untitled*, 2025, Acrylic on canvas, 162 x 130 cm. Exhibition view at the AWATA COLLECTION, Tokyo

8 — Lou Zhenggang, *Untitled*, 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 145.5 x 145.5 cm

#### A COLLECTOR'S TURNING POINT

I had collected art before, but never like this. Encountering Lou's work was not a decision of intellect; it was something closer to necessity. Her paintings did not speak — they breathed. They asked questions without words: about energy, solitude, the discipline of creation. And they seemed to contain within them a vast, unmeasured space — one that felt deeply familiar. That experience led me to begin collecting her work in earnest, eventually forming what is now known as the **AWATA COLLECTION**. In 2024, I opened **Gallery L** in Hiroo, Tokyo — a private space dedicated entirely to Lou Zhenggang's art. Visitors who enter often describe a sense of suspension, as though the air itself were listening. From her early avant-garde calligraphic pieces to her recent acrylic paintings, the gallery holds the full arc of her journey. The centrepiece is a monumental work nearly ten meters tall — a painting that seems less like an object than an atmosphere. For me, each piece functions like a meditation — a way of clearing space inside the mind. "When I stand before her work," I often say, "my imagination expands without limit."

#### COLLECTING AS A FORM OF DIALOGUE

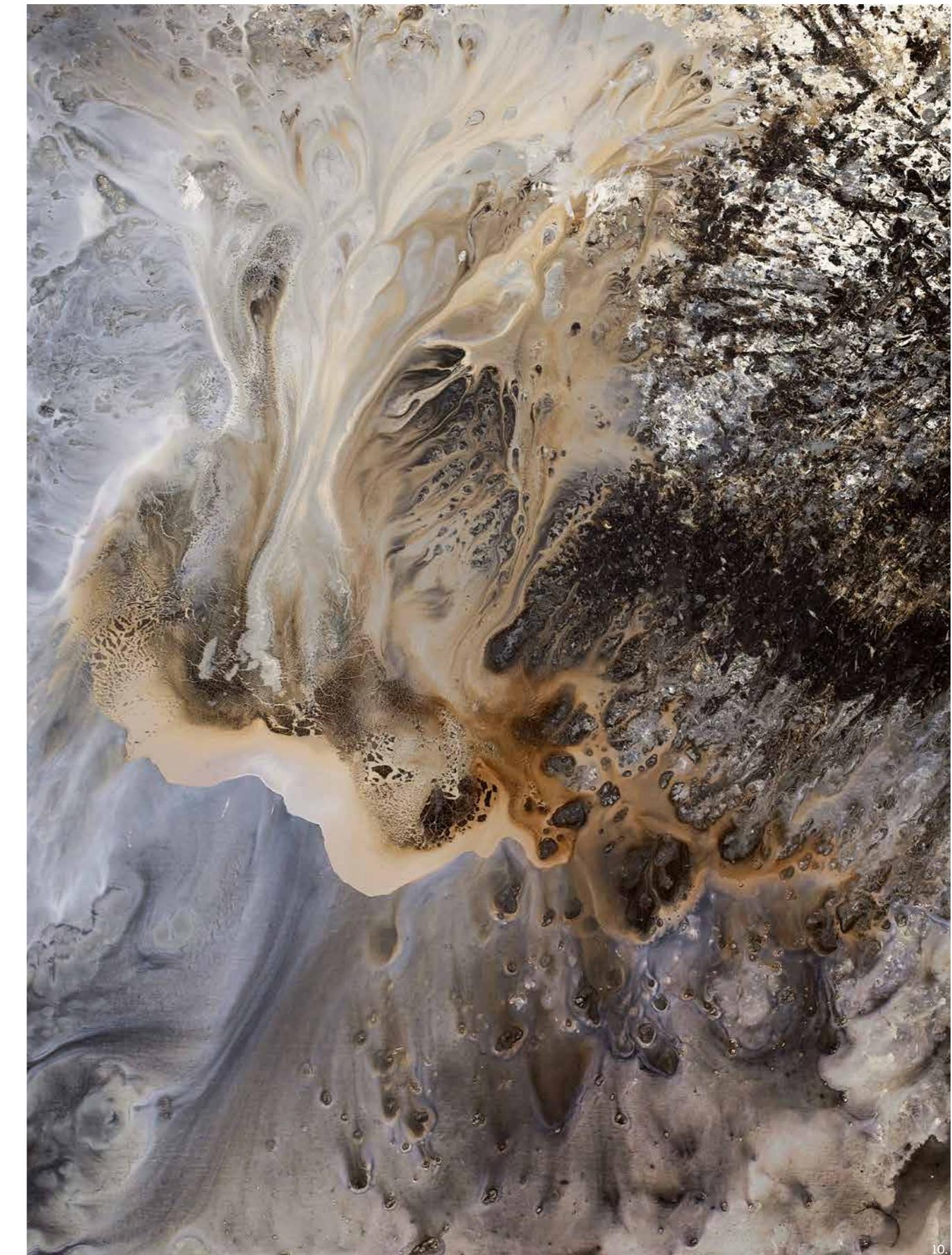
People sometimes ask why I collect only one artist. I suppose the answer is that I am not collecting *objects* at all — I am collecting a *conversation*. To devote oneself to a single artist requires patience and humility. It is not about ownership, but about listening. Over time, the act of collecting becomes a kind of apprenticeship in perception. You begin to sense shifts not only in the artist's evolution but in your own. In business, I have always believed that imagination determines scale. The larger your vision, the further your enterprise can grow. Lou's paintings embody that principle. They remind me that imagination is not an indulgence but a discipline — one that demands both rigor and faith. Entrepreneurship and art share this paradox. Each requires structure, yet both depend on the ability to leap beyond what can be measured. Lou's work reveals that balance perfectly — the coexistence of precision and freedom, of restraint and wildness.



#### THE NATURE OF SHIZEN

Lou often speaks of *shizen*, a Japanese word that translates as "nature," but also as "naturalness" or "spontaneity." In her art, *shizen* is not imitation — it is revelation. It is the state of allowing what is innately human to move through the brush. Her paintings might appear spontaneous, but each gesture is the result of tireless repetition, honed over decades. She once told me that the most difficult thing is to paint as if you were not painting — to reach a state where every stroke emerges from the body's memory rather than the mind's control. When I first stood before her *Shizen* series — later shown at Almine Rech in

London, in 2024, I understood what she meant. The works were alive with contradiction: disciplined yet free, intimate yet vast. They could be read as abstraction or as landscapes of emotion. They seemed to breathe with the same rhythm as the earth itself. For many in the West, that exhibition marked their first encounter with Lou Zhenggang. To them, her art felt both foreign and deeply familiar — an aesthetic language that transcends geography. Comparisons have been made to Zao Wou-Ki or Cy Twombly, but her voice is unmistakably her own: rooted in Asia's spiritual traditions, yet universal in its humanity.





9 — Lou Zhenggang, *Untitled*, 2022, Acrylic on canvas, 194 x 162 cm  
 10 — Lou Zhenggang, *Untitled*, 2018, Acrylic on canvas, 116.8 x 91 cm

11 — Lou Zhenggang, *Untitled*, 2022, Acrylic on canvas, 194 x 810 cm. Exhibition view at the AWATA COLLECTION, Tokyo

#### **A BRIDGE BETWEEN WORLDS**

Throughout Asia, Lou's art has long been embraced by major collectors and institutions, with her works appearing at China Guardian and Poly Auction. Yet her presence beyond Asia is still unfolding. In this sense, the AWATA COLLECTION acts as both archive and bridge — a record of her evolution and a gesture toward her future recognition. Each painting carries not only her touch but also the quiet dialogue between artist and collector, between imagination and belief. True collecting, I think, is an act of faith. It is not about accumulating value but about protecting a vision — preserving a certain way of seeing the world. When I stand inside Gallery L, surrounded by her works, I feel as if I'm inside that vision, inside a space where imagination and reality finally overlap.

#### **THE POWER OF IMAGINATION**

I often return to the idea that imagination has no limit. In both business and art, it is the invisible engine that transforms possibility into form. Without imagination, there is no creation; without faith, there is no continuation. Lou's paintings give form to that faith. They are, in a sense, visual meditations on what cannot be spoken. The brushstrokes move like breath — sudden, deliberate, alive. Sometimes they explode with colour; other times, they fade into silence. Standing before them, I find courage in their quiet intensity. I am reminded that every great endeavour — whether a painting or a company — begins as something unseen, a pulse within the mind that insists on becoming real.

#### **A PRIVATE DIALOGUE, SHARED PUBLICLY**

When people visit Gallery L, I tell them there is no need to interpret. Just stand and breathe. The works will do the rest. Collecting Lou Zhenggang has never been about display. It is about resonance — the vibration that occurs when imagination meets devotion. I consider the AWATA COLLECTION not an achievement but an ongoing conversation, one that continues to change me with each passing year. If this exhibition, or this story, leads others to encounter Lou's art for the first time, then perhaps it will serve its truest purpose: to open a door. Because art, at its core, is not about possession. It is about connection — the brief, luminous moment when one person's imagination ignites another's. And in that moment, the infinite becomes tangible. ♦



# The Monet Centenary: A Forgotten Scandal

By Marianne Mathieu

The Monet Centenary

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1 — Marianne Mathieu

2 — Claude Monet, *Water Lilies*, (detail), Installation view at the Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris

**2026 marks the centenary of Claude Monet's death. Celebrations abound, with exhibitions and publications paying tribute to this giant of French art—leader of Impressionism who, through the years and a singular evolution, became a precursor of abstract art.**

We tend to forget that Monet's death on December 5, 1926 was followed by an artistic thunderclap. Just after the painter passed away in Giverny, the *Water Lilies* at the Orangerie des Tuileries—the 'Grandes Décorations' that Monet had offered to the nation to celebrate the armistice of the First World War—were revealed in Paris for the first time. Yet their reception was met with some turmoil. A look back at a little-known scandal and a recent chapter in art history.

It is hard to forget the historic photographs of Monet posing proudly at Giverny. He stands in the studio-salon, near a bed of geraniums; another time, we see him at the edge of the lily pond or in front of the panels dedicated to them, which he executed in the studio built in 1914 and bearing their name. In Sacha Guitry's documentary—*Ceux de chez nous* filmed in 1915—the painter, who had his parasols

and easel installed at the pond's edge, allowed himself to be filmed while painting. We see the canvas taking shape, the flower becoming paint. So many testimonies that familiarized audiences with the great water lilies during their creation, often making today's admirers forget that they remained unpublished during the artist's lifetime. For after 1912, and the exhibition of his Venetian views at the Bernheim-Jeune gallery, Monet definitively ceased presenting his current work. Only a few privileged individuals admitted to his property knew of the paintings he made between 1914 and 1926. Over a quarter century, the body of work produced was impressive. The *catalogue raisonné* lists more than one hundred and eighty canvases. They constitute more or less the corpus of the great *Water Lilies* panels—the "flower-paintings" with which we identify Monet today.