

UWCNY MARCH 2025 SPEAKER
JOHN OTA
CLAUDE MONET'S SPECIAL HOME

John spoke with joy about the home and gardens of French Impressionist artist Claude Monet (1840-1926) at Giverny, a rustic, historic village fifty miles northwest of Paris where Monet lived for 43 years until his death. During his final 20 years he solely did impressionistic paintings of his gardens. "He was very knowledgeable about gardening and regarded his gardens as his greatest work of art," John said. John visited the home for his book *The Kitchen: A Journey Through History In Search Of The Perfect Kitchen*, published in 2020. His book on dining rooms he finds interesting will be published next year.

John is a retired architect. He headed a wide range of both new and revitalization projects in Canada and elsewhere. He's a member of Culinary Historians of Canada. It was his undertaking of the refresh of his own kitchen and dining room, still in progress, that led to his going to the kitchens of celebrities including Julia Child, Elvis Presley, and Louis Armstrong and dining rooms of Jackie Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. to write about them. Like Monet's, each has a distinctive personality.

John relived his Monet home and gardens experience for us. "On arrival I right away enjoyed the flower-scented atmosphere and the narrow pathways through a lush garden of cascades of flowers, a harmony of colours and scents. This garden was influenced by English gardening. Formal pathways and loose, informal plantings. Monet was very knowledgeable about gardening. I see a similarity between the *tarte tatin*, an upside-down caramelized apple tart, a Monet food favourite that I learned to make in his honour while in Paris on my trip, and this garden. It's not a flawless pastry like other French pasties; it drips and the apple slices can slip, it's modest, not sophisticated, and it's wonderful. This garden of Monet's looks a little bit messy, it's not geometric like Versailles' gardens, but it gives happiness, pleasure, a good feeling, it's friendly."

John told us that Monet had many tribulations. He was in financial difficulty until the public came to appreciate and buy Impressionist paintings. "He slashed, stamped on, and burnt paintings out of rage and depression. He tried to drown himself in the Seine. His first wife died young. His second wife and his eldest son predeceased him as well. Aware that the Japanese regard water-lily ponds as a soothing influence, he created his own at Giverny with a historic Japanese-style bridge and a neighbouring willow tree. The effect is therapeutic; there's a calming effect that welcomes peaceful meditation."

John said that the pink-painted stucco over the stone exterior of the house and green-painted shutters were intended to blend in with the gardens' colours. Moving indoors, John focused on the blue-toned kitchen with its window view of the flower garden and the yellow-toned dining room, "the most stunning room in the house, all the furnishings in glowing, warm yellow, the most important room, the heart of the home. Two sets of dishes— blue and white Japanese and yellow with blue trim Limoges. Yellow with Impressionists was more than a pretty colour; it was a connection to nature, light, and the sun, a fusion of light and colour." Food was self-supplied: home-grown vegetables, chickens, ducks, fish from a nearby river, apple trees."

Monet hosted other Impressionists. "He even had paintings by his friends in his bedroom. I was an architect and can't imagine an architect doing this for fellow architects," John laughed.

Susan Goldenberg