

# Class 3 : Incandescence

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## A. Water and Light

### 1. Section title A (Monet: *Nymphéas*)

**Claude Monet** (1840–1926), as you know, participated in the first Impressionist Exhibition in 1874; it was his harbor scene, *Impression, Sunrise*, that gave the movement its title. Monet took part in five of the group's shows up to 1884, but by 1890 he had begun to go his own way.

### 2. Monet: *Grainstacks* (1890)

### 3. Monet: *Rouen Cathedral* (1894)

By this time, Monet had begun to paint pictures in series: numerous depictions of the same subject, differing only by season and time of day. Two of these are shown here: the *Grainstacks* he did in 1890 and 1891, and the *Rouen Cathedral* series he embarked on in 1894. This approach makes it clear that the true subject of these later paintings is not the permanent scene or object but the transitory effect of light playing upon it.

### 4. Monet's garden at Giverny (purchased 1890, when he was 50)

But the series that outweighs all the other put together, both in time-span (38 years) and in the sheer number of paintings (around 250), were the *Water Lilies* in his own garden at **Giverny**, 40 miles from the center of Paris. He had been renting the place for a few years, but bought it in 1890, when he was fifty. Although his paintings of the garden are works of art, so is the garden itself. Monet designed it, added to it, added again, directed the seven gardeners, and sourced the imported plants. I found a video online that shows how flowers floating on water got turned into paint on canvas. Here is a little bit of it. I have replaced the semi-pop music of the original by a snatch from the *Sonata for Violin and Cello* (1922), by **Maurice Ravel** (1875–1937).

### 5. *Monet's Water Lilies* (video with Ravel music)

### 6. Monet *Water Lilies* in the Orangerie

I was going to put music to the rest of that video and leave it at that. But then I realized that this would omit Monet's true Late Harvest: the series of huge panels that was put up in the Orangerie in Paris shortly after his death in 1926, and painted by him in his eighties. So I found another video, in a YouTube series called "**Great Art Explained.**" I was going to take clips from that and make its points in my own way, until I realized that there was nothing I wanted to cut out, and that the whole thing handled the subject better than I could do myself. So I am going to do something I generally try to avoid: outsource a significant part of the class to a virtual guest lecturer: **James Payne**.

7. *Monet's Water Lilies (James Payne)*

8. *Monet Water Lilies in the Orangerie, detail*

There is a lot there, much of which I did not know. Do you have any questions? Was it worthwhile my showing the video rather than talking myself (I won't be offended)?

9. *Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947): Self Portraits at 22 and 78*

There is another French artist whom I included in my syllabus, and who also ended his life obsessed with light and color and I suppose water. This is **Pierre Bonnard** (1867–1947), born a generation after Monet, and whose principal artistic influence was **Gauguin**. Here are two *Self-Portraits*. How did this dapper young man of 22 turn into the walking skeleton of 78? What did this old man have to enrich his life? Well, the picture itself should give one clue: he had color.

10. *Bonnard: Marthe de Méligny*

He also had the woman shown here at a younger age, **Marthe de Méligny**, his model and lover for almost 50 years, and his legal wife for the last 17 of them. Although Bonnard had at least two serious affairs in the years before their marriage, it is clear that he loved Marthe, or at least was obsessed with her. She is the subject of most of his later paintings, clothed, nude, and in various rooms of the house, but especially in the bathroom. Marthe may have suffered from some skin condition which necessitated her spending long hours each day in the bath. Or maybe it was largely neurotic or psychological; it is at least an irony that one of the women Pierre had been having an affair with killed herself in her own bath a few days after he married Marthe. A couple of years ago, I put together a montage of Marthe pictures for another class that I will show again here; the music is by **Claude Debussy** (1862–1918), a late and similarly highly colored orchestration of an earlier piano piece. Although my selection starts when Bonnard was in his middle years, it moves into the *LateStyle* obsessiveness of the bath pictures of his later ones. In addition to reveling in paint and color, look for examples of Bonnard's unusual approach to composition, his interest in intimate rather than public moments, and his distortions of form.

11. *At Home with Marthe*

12. *Monet and Bonnard compared*

Perhaps we can compare one of the more highly-colored of Monet's *Water Lilies* with this late Bonnard of *Marthe in her bath*. One difference should be obvious: Bonnard's pictures almost all contain people; Monet's seldom do. The rest I can leave to you.

## B. A Caribbean Colorist

13. Section title 2 (Peter Walcott: *Derek Walcott Painting*)

14. — the same without title

Here is a painting that might almost be of Bonnard at work. It is more orderly and the surroundings are more updated, but the intimate-casual subject and the rich color are the same. It is in fact painted by the son of the artist shown here, and here is one of the father's paintings: an outdoor subject, this time.

15. Derek Walcott: [boat picture, title not known]

If you have read your handout, you will know, of course, that the artist is much more famous as a poet than a painter. In fact, it is **Sir Derek Walcott** (1930–2017), the winner of the 1992 Nobel Prize in Literature, and the glory of his native island, Saint Lucia in the Caribbean. This picture is on the cover of his 1990 Homeric epic, *Omeros*, a long work which I nonetheless recommend to your attention.

16. Derek Walcott: [street picture, title not known]

I included Walcott in this class because my topic is Incandescence—color and light—and there is hardly a poet I can think of who is so steeped in color. Listen to this brief excerpt from his 1997 collection *The Bounty*, and you will see what I mean; he writes like a painter!

17. Walcott: excerpt from *The Bounty*

18. — text of the above

But while color may be the theme of the class, the theme of the *course* is **late work**, and I want to read you two of Walcott's very last poems, written when he was 83. But to set them up, I need to give you first a relatively early poem (1976), but one of his most famous, "Love After Love." The reader is **Tom Hiddleston**.

19. Walcott: *Love after Love*

20. — text of the above

I'll contrast this with two poems from his last years. In one, he meets again a woman he had sighed for as a young man, sixty years before. In the other, he faces up to the fact that his poetic inspiration is no longer what it once was. I shall have to read both of them myself.

21. Walcott: *Sixty Years After*

22. Walcott: "Be happy now at Cap"

But I would not want to leave Sir Derek without his color, so I'll follow that with the trailer to a film made when he was clearly already an old man, *Poetry is an Island*. And you will hear that he too goes back to that early poem, *Love After Love*.

23. *Poetry is an Island*, trailer

## C. Flowers and Angels

### 24. Section title 3 (Flowers and Angels)

I know that most of the second hour will be music, but I want to get in a couple of other late musical works here. You will see the significance of my title in a moment.

### 25. Arvo Pärt

The Estonian composer **Arvo Pärt** (b.1935) is still with us, but since he is in his eighties, I think we can talk about *LateStyle*. It is not a matter of sudden shifts, though; ever since the late 1970s he has been composing in what has been called a “**Holy Minimalist**” style, using very few chords and a shimmering effect he calls “**tintinnabulation**” to achieve a sense of spiritual mystery. You can hear this in the opening of his *Fourth Symphony* (2008), subtitled *Los Angeles*. It is called this for the obvious reason that it was commissioned by the Los Angeles Symphony, but also because it is actually about angels. I tried putting the opening together with some angels in a ceiling by **Bernini**, but there was a cognitive discord between the baroque sculptures and the modern music. Then I realized I could find angel-like forms much closer to home. With another day and a half, I could have made this a more professional-looking video, but I don’t have that time, so you’ll have to be content with what I could manage!

### 26. Pärt: *Symphony 4, Los Angeles, opening*

### 27. Frank Gehry: Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles, 2003

I hope you see the relevance of the **Disney Concert Hall** in Los Angeles to the symphony you have just heard. The metallic sculptural forms of architect **Frank Gehry** (b.1929) appear to my eye to articulate the surrounding air quite as much as they define the spaces within. The Los Angeles hall is an extension of the manner he first used for the **Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao** in 1997, but since he was almost 70 at the time, I think we can talk of it as late style.

### 28. Ludwig Fahrenkrog: *Parsifal and the Flower Maidens* (1900)

*Parsifal* (1882), the last opera of **Richard Wagner** (1813–83), has some claim to being a *LateStyle* work. It moves into a new mystical dimension, it was reserved for performance in Wagner’s own theater, and it involves an expansion of time to which the audience must submit. But my subjects today are light and color, and in the second act of the opera Wagner wrote his most highly colored music to date. The name Parsifal means “pure fool,” and he begins the opera as a totally innocent young man. In order to frustrate his quest to reclaim the Holy Spear and bring new life to the knights of the Holy Grail—whom he will eventually rule as their King—the villain Klingsor must set his team of **Flower Maidens** to seduce him. Their music is like overripe fruit, over the top even by Wagner’s standards, almost Kitschy. I will show you the scene in an old video whose sound is not the best. But the production by the composer’s grandson **Wolfgang** is as close as you’ll get to what Wagner intended. Parsifal is **Siegfried Jerusalem**.

### 29. Wagner: *Parsifal, Act II, Flower Maidens scene* (could shorten this)

### 30. Ca' Vendramin, Venice; where Wagner died in 1883

After the 1882 Bayreuth Festival at which *Parsifal* was premiered, Wagner journeyed with his family to spend the winter in Venice, in this building, **Ca' Vendramin**, now the Venice Casino. And it was there, in February 1883, that he died. I very much like the contrast between the still splendid building and the crumbling brick wall that holds his memorial plaque. Death, decay, and Venice will be the subject of my second hour.

## D. City of Light and Death

### 31. Section title 4 (Monet: *Venice, Sunset*, 1908)

**Claude Monet** was only one among many artists drawn to Venice, fascinated by the way that the combination of light and water makes even solid buildings dissolve. Its lack of solidity, its changeability, its teetering on the brink of destruction, makes Venice as a city the epitome of *LateStyle*. It is a place of art that also understands that art is ephemeral. It is the city that invented the Carnival, recycling the fragments of its own history, using them to construct the fragile fantasy that is Venice.

### 32. Guardi: Venetian scenes

You can see it in work of Venetian artists as well as foreigners. I have already mentioned **Titian**; I could as well show you **Tintoretto**. The pristine crispness of **Canaletto**, whose painting of the Ca' Vendramin we saw before the break, was followed by the work of **Francesco Guardi** (1712–93). Even his normal views of Venice seem to emphasize its haphazard, less permanent qualities. He also painted a lot of *Capriccios* such as the one on the right, using Venetian motifs to create an atmosphere of impermanence and ruin. And when disasters occurred in real life, as in this fire at the city's oil storage facility at bottom left, he was right there painting it.

### 33. Turner: *Santa Maria della Salute* (1844, Tate)

### 34. Whistler: *Blue and Gold; St. Mark's, Venice* (1880, Cardiff)

**JMW Turner** (1775–1850), who has cropped up in all our classes so far, made three visits to Venice, but it was the last, in 1840 when he was 65, that provided the inspiration for a good number of the paintings of his last decade; this one from 1844 is actually one that shows some solid objects; many of the others contain nothing *but* light. And the American **James Abbott McNeill Whistler** (1834–1903), also traveling to Venice from London, repeats that same lack of solidity in a spookier key.

### 35. John Piper: Venetian scenes

Here is one more visitor from England, the painter and printmaker **John Piper** (1903–92). I will have more to say about him in a moment, but I'm showing him now because I think he captures the association of Venice with Death better than any other artist; the right-hand print here is part of a series

called *Death in Venice*. After the novella by **Thomas Mann** (1875–1955), of course. But it is the *Liebestod* quality of Venice, death in love, that makes Mann’s choice of location such an brilliant marriage of place and theme. Even from just hearing his title, anyone who knows Venice knows exactly what he means.

### 36. Mann and covers of *Death in Venice*

Mann was only 37 when he published his novella in 1912, so there is no way it can be classified as a literal late work. Yet it has many *LateStyle* features. It flirts with a subject hitherto outside conventional norms. It is a book about an aging writer fearing the waning of his talents. And it is a *meta-novel*, a book about the process and aesthetics of writing, that refers back to **Socrates** and **Nietzsche**. Looking through book covers, I found plenty showing Monet or Turner like the two in the middle, but I was taken aback by the one on the right. But then I thought again—no; what is **Gustav von Aschenbach’s** quest about? It is not simply the obsession of an aging pederast; in the beginning, at least, it is the cultured man’s pursuit of the Platonic ideal of beauty.

### 37. Visconti: *Death in Venice*, 1971

We looked last week at *The Leopard* (1963) by **Luchino Visconti** (1906–76), which inaugurated his rather long last period. His film of *Death in Venice* comes from 1971, when the director was 65, which makes it chronologically at least a *LateStyle* work. His scenes with the beach and the sea are as flooded with light as you might expect, but what strikes me most about the film is how well Visconti captures the darkness and death. Here is a long sequence in which **Aschenbach**, newly rejuvenated by the hotel barber, pursues the boy **Tadzio** through the streets of Venice, the walls plastered by notices about the cholera epidemic, and the streets filled with bonfires to keep away the contagion. It has almost no dialogue, but is accompanied instead by the *Adagietto* from the *Fifth Symphony* of **Gustav Mahler** (1860–1911), who was one of Mann’s sources in creating the character. Visconti actually makes him a composer rather than a writer; he is played by the English actor **Dirk Bogarde**.

### 38. Visconti: *Death in Venice*, excerpt

## E. Britten’s Swansong

### 39. Section title 5 (Britten’s Swansong)

So to the opera by **Benjamin Britten** (1918–76). Premiered in 1973, it was his last work for the stage. He was only 55 at the time, but he had a serious heart condition and knew that he was dying, so I think it qualifies as a *LateStyle* work. It certainly has all the qualities: his choice of the Mann novella, for one thing; the very unusual form of the work, which has only one major role (written for his partner **Peter Pears**), plus a gallery of others all sung by the same singer (my friend and late colleague, John Shirley-Quirk); and his decision to give the roles of Tadzio and his family to dancers only. Britten had been advised by Warner Brothers and the Mann estate not to see the Visconti film, which had just come out,

for fear of unintended copyright infringement, and the decision to avoid making Tadzio a singing role might have had to do with avoiding the quite clear homoerotic implications in the film. Britten himself was also sailing quite close to the wind. He was in a longstanding same-sex relationship with Pears, but it appears that his own attraction tended more towards adolescent boys. There is no evidence that he ever acted them out, but plenty that he sublimated them into any number of operas and vocal works. But it certainly would account for the curious tension between passion and abstraction in this one.

#### 40. Myfanwy and John Piper; Benjamin Britten

Britten's brilliant librettist was the Welsh poet **Myfanwy Piper** (1911–97), one of the great librettists of the century, who had already created brilliant adaptations of **Henry James** in *The Turn of the Screw* (1954) and *Owen Wingrave* (1971). She was the wife of John Piper, some of whose Venice paintings we have already seen; he designed the first performances of this and virtually all the Britten operas.

#### 41. Tony Palmer: *Death in Venice* film (1981), storyboard

I am not going to show the opera in a stage production, though. Because the theme of this hour has as much to do with Venice itself as with Britten's opera, I am going to show the 1981 film by Tony Palmer. Peter Pears was too ill to reprise his original role, so that is sung and acted by the otherwise little-known Australian tenor **Robert Gard**. John Shirley-Quirk repeats his gallery of roles—the Gondolier, the Hotel Manager, the Barber and so on—all of which are different aspects of Fate or Death, facilitating Aschenbach's approach to his end. I shall show you four scenes, or groups of scenes: Aschenbach's arrival in Venice, his first sight of the boy Tazio in the hotel dining room then the next day on the beach, his decision to abandon his plans to leave Venice, and the final sequence of the opera. I shall pause after each for discussion. In the first sequence, listen for the different pictures of Venice created by Britten in the music and by Palmer with his camera; do they work in parallel or in counterpoint with one another?

#### 42. Britten/Palmer: *Death in Venice*, arrival

#### 43. — still from the above

What did you think: do the composer and cameraman work together or in counterpoint? Or do they not go together at all? My next section consists of two clips, one in the dining room and the other on the beach. In the latter, especially, how well does it work to use the children's games to create the fatal spark of attraction?

#### 44. Britten/Palmer: *Death in Venice*, dining-room

#### 45. Britten/Palmer: *Death in Venice*, first beach scene

#### 46. — still from the above

Did you think the children's games worked? The closing scene of Act I consists of a more formal series of games—racing, wrestling, discus throwing, and so on—narrated by the chorus, mimed by the dancers, and called the Games of Apollo. These are too much of an abstract construct for my taste, and I don't think they work so well, so I am cutting to the very end of it. Aschenbach had been intending to leave Venice, but his luggage had been put on the wrong train, so he returns to the hotel. Seeing Tadzio again,

he is glad that he has done so. As you have probably gathered by now, a lot of the opera takes the form of soliloquies for this central character. How well does this work for you, and how well does Palmer handle it?

47. Britten/Palmer: *Death in Venice*, end of Act I

48. — still from the above

So did you think the soliloquies worked? On the stage, the act would have had a definite curtain, but Tony Palmer elides this into the next, so my own cut point was arbitrary. Now I want to end with the final scene of the opera, where Aschenbach sees Tadzio on the beach as the “pale summoner of death.” It is here, I think, that Palmer’s cinematography really comes into its own, fully matching Britten’s music in a shimmer of light. If time, I will precede this scene with one from the Hotel Manager.

49. Britten/Palmer: *Death in Venice*, Hotel Manager scene

50. Britten/Palmer: *Death in Venice*, end of Act II

51. — still from the above