Q&A with Ross King, author of
*Mad Enchantment: Claude Monet and the Painting of the Water Lilies*

Where do Monet and the *Water Lilies* fit in with your previous subjects?

Most of my books have been studies of crucial and difficult moments in the lives of artists. I’m interested in drilling down deeply into the years when they struggle with the works that ultimately become their greatest achievements. I’m fascinated by how historical events and personal relationships have an impact on these masterpieces. *Mad Enchantment* is very much in this vein. I look at the twelve very difficult years when Monet painted his massive *Water Lily* canvases: a period that took him through the horrors of World War I as well as through many of his own personal battles. These beautiful paintings are the legacy of all that happened to him during those years.

What was the most surprising thing you learned as you were researching *Mad Enchantment*?

I was surprised to discover that in 1917, while he was working on the *Water Lilies*, Monet got a commission from the French government to paint the war-damaged cathedral of Reims. Monet was famous for his paintings of the cathedral in Rouen several decades earlier. So at the height of the war, the authorities were keen to use him as a political propagandist against the Germans. Monet was eager to do the work, although it would have been extremely hair-raising: Reims was under fierce bombardment at the time. I found evidence that he actually went to the city to scope it out, but in the end he never did the painting—perhaps fortunately, because he easily could have been killed in the line of duty.

How was Monet as a subject? What kind of person was he?

He was an amusing and endearing character. His paintings are famous for their serenity, but the great irony is that he was anything but serene as he painted them. He often worked himself into terrible rages if things weren’t going well or if the weather wasn’t cooperating. He sometimes slashed his canvases with a knife or stuck his foot through them. I think of him as the Basil Fawlty of painting. But he also knew how to relax. He was a great *bon vivant*, and his ability to put away food and drink amazed his friends. One friend said he ate enough for four people. But he certainly burned off a few calories before the easel.

Why do you think the *Water Lilies* are beloved around the world?

Monet’s large-scale *Water Lilies* give us something that few other easel paintings can hope to do: a fully immersive experience. Who wouldn’t want to stroll into the enchanted world of a Monet painting? He wanted these huge wraparound works to give us that chance—to transport us from our own world and into the magical atmosphere of his lily pond in Giverny.