

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Glasgow (UofG)		
Unit of Assessment: 32 Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory		
Title of case study: Using art-historical research to help shape highly successful public exhibitions on the relationship between Impressionist/Modern art and gardens		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2015–present		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Professor Clare Willsdon	Professor of the History of Western Art	1983–present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015–present		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Linking art history with insights from botany, literary studies, anthropology, geography, and neuroscience, Willsdon's pioneering research has enhanced understanding of gallery and associated media professionals on the importance of nature, gardens, and landscape in Impressionist and 'Modern' art. Willsdon's curatorial and interpretation contributions formed the research basis of two major international exhibitions, attracting 800,000+ visitors; three associated exhibition publications; a film (cinema version seen by 110,000+), audio-guide (taken by 63,421 visitors) and two podcasts. Public lectures and interpretative study days, some via the Royal Academy of Arts education outreach programme, attracted diverse audiences of 700+ including scientists, children and teenagers.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>The research was undertaken at UofG by Willsdon as Senior Lecturer (3.1), Reader (3.2, 3.3), and Professor (3.4, 3.5, 3.6). The research methodology was interdisciplinary, including collaboration with botanists (3.2; 3.6). The research for (3.1-3.3) led to Willsdon being invited by major international galleries to undertake research for (3.4-3.6), and therefore these outputs represent new research that also formed an integral part of her curatorial/advisory work.</p> <p>Key insights that underpinned Willsdon's curatorial consultancy for the <i>Painting the Modern Garden</i> exhibition, and her book sections for the <i>Monet</i> and <i>Whistler and Nature</i> exhibitions, included her finding that cultivated nature was important to a much wider range of Impressionist and Modern artists, and more important specifically to Monet, than hitherto realised (Figure 1). The 'artist's garden' formed a key 'laboratory' for aesthetic experiment, depiction of human activities, and expression of utopian or visionary ideals (3.1–3.4; 3.6). Another significant insight was that late 19th and early 20th century imagery of the natural environment was profoundly influenced by the 'great horticultural movement' – the influx to the West of exotic plants through trade, Empire, exploration, the invention of the greenhouse, discovery of hybridisation, and the ensuing popularity of gardens and parks. Willsdon's research brought horticultural history into relationship with Impressionist/Modern art for the first time, uncovering hitherto neglected networks of artists, writers, horticulturalists, and botanists (3.1-3.4; 3.6); this influenced the motifs and methods of Monet, Whistler, Caillebotte and others, as well as Monet's creation of 'my most beautiful work of art', his garden at Giverny.</p> <p>Through collaboration with botanists, Willsdon also identified specific plants in many Impressionist and Modern images, and showed the important role they play in the artists' concerns with decoration, colour, and structure. This in turn enabled previously unappreciated social, political, national, and personal meaning to be recognised in artworks when studied in the context of historical and cultural developments (rebuilding of Paris by Haussmann, the Franco-Prussian War, Paris Commune, and First World War), and period literature (Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Zola, and Hofmannsthal) (3.1–3.4; 3.6). Willsdon's analysis of surviving evidence of</p>		

Impressionist gardens/sites (Monet's garden at Giverny, Liebermann's at Wannsee), period photographs and correspondence, and horticultural/botanical publications showed that many Impressionist images of the natural environment were far less 'truthful' than traditionally assumed (3.1–3.6). For example, in Monet's *Artist's Garden* in Argenteuil (Figure 1) Willsdon identified a new form of giant dahlia, and the garden as part of wider social/national renewal aims in contemporary France, identifying evidence that Monet manipulated the height and abundance of dahlias to emphasise the garden's seclusion.



Figure 1: Claude Monet, [*The Artist's Garden in Argenteuil \(A Corner of the Garden with Dahlias\)*](#), 1873, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (*Painting the Modern Garden*)

In her contribution to the *Monet* exhibition, Willsdon showed that late Impressionist 'serial' techniques of painting were not just a means to capture transitory effects of light and weather, but also had affinities with the period utopian ideal of the 'series' (3.5). Underpinning Willsdon's contribution to the *Whistler and Nature* exhibition was the insight that Whistler's natural environment images were not merely 'decorative', or 'art for art's sake', as popularly believed, but charged with deeper meaning. She provided new understanding, for example, by linking them with Darwin's theories, and discoveries by neuroscientists and geographers today that 'border' spaces evoke heightened emotive responses.

3. References to the research

- 3.1 Willsdon, C. 2004 (2nd edition 2016) *In the Gardens of Impressionism*. Thames & Hudson, ISBN 0-500-51147-0, with French, two German, one US edition, 2004–2005 and a Korean edition, 2016) [Available from HEI]
- 3.2 Willsdon, C. 2010. *Impressionist Gardens*. 2 edns, Thames & Hudson and National Gallery of Scotland, ISBN 9781906270285. Willsdon was Academic Adviser for both versions of

the related exhibition National Gallery of Scotland and Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, 2010–2011). [Available from HEI]

- 3.3 Willsdon, C. 2012. *Country Gardens: John Singer Sargent, RA, Alfred Parsons, RA, and their Contemporaries*, Broadway Arts Festival Trust, UK, ISBN 9780957272507 (catalogue for exhibition curated by Willsdon). [Available from HEI]
- 3.4 Willsdon, C. 2015. 'Making the Modern Garden', 'Impressionist Gardens' and 'Chronology' – sections in *Painting the Modern Garden: Monet to Matisse* (ed. A. Dumas and W. Robinson), 2015, RA Publications, London, ISBN 9781910350027 (catalogue for Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio and Royal Academy of Arts, London (or 'RA') exhibition, 2015–2016, for which Willsdon was a Curatorial Consultant. These three sections amount to approx. one quarter to one third of the entire catalogue. Related to this, Willsdon gave a public lecture/podcast, and contributed to the exhibition audio-guide (Antenna International) and film (Exhibition on Screen). [Available from HEI]
- 3.5 Willsdon, C. 2015. 'Late Impressionism' – chapter in *Monet: Lost in Translation* (ed. S. Grueb), pub. Hirmer Verlag with English edition. by Chicago UP, ISBN 9783777424286 (book for exhibition at ARoS Kunstmuseum, Aarhus, 2015–2016). Willsdon's contribution amounts to approximately one fifth of the book. [Available from HEI]
- 3.6 Willsdon, C. 2018. 'Nature on the Margins: parks, gardens, and coasts in Whistler's work of the 1880s and 90s', 13,500-word chapter in *Whistler and Nature* (ed. S. Parissien), pub. Paul Holberton, London (book for Hunterian travelling exhibition, 2018–2020, of which Willsdon's chapter amounts to approximately one third). [Available from HEI]

Quality: the body of work is expected to meet or exceed the 2* threshold.

4. Details of the impact

4.1 Shaping the curatorial content of highly successful exhibitions

Painting the Modern Garden (Royal Academy London and Cleveland Museum, Ohio, 2015–2016 [3.4]), was a highly successful exhibition which attracted over half a million visitors, for which Willsdon was the only academic adviser, sought out for her specialism in art-garden relationships. Willsdon advised on the Impressionist and documentary exhibits, wrote key interpretation labels, and co-authored the exhibition catalogue, contributing also to the audio-guide, film, and lecture programme. This work shaped the curators' understanding of the paintings included in the exhibition, and provided fundamental support for the exhibition's thesis that artists' knowledge of and engagement with 19th–20th century horticulture and botany impacted on their art; this expanded the exhibition's public appeal. The RA (Royal Academy) Curator [5.1], commented that: '*Clare's profound knowledge of the history of horticulture in the nineteenth century, its resonance with social history and with art, was of immense importance to our exhibition. ... Clare's guidance ... added greatly to the interest of the show ... audience attendance was greatly enhanced because of the exhibition's appeal to gardeners and horticulturalists, both professional and amateur, as well as the art-loving public.*'

The Cleveland Curator commented to Willsdon that neither the exhibition nor its catalogue '*would have been the same without your involvement and insightful essay. Your generosity in sharing your vast knowledge contributed greatly to the project*' [5.2]. The editor of the catalogue said: '*Clare's contributions were invaluable in that they brought to the exhibition catalogue a deep, scholarly understanding of late nineteenth-century horticultural discoveries and developments ... Without Clare, 'Painting the Modern Garden' would undoubtedly have gone down well with mainstream art-lovers who enjoy gardens and gardening mostly as an amateur, leisure activity. But with her, the book's appeal to specialist, professional horticultural historians and those with expert knowledge of plants was assured*' [5.3].



Figure 2: Claude Monet, [Les Nymphéas](#), 1908 Musée de Vernon (*Monet Aarhus*)

For the exhibition *Monet: Lost in Translation* at the ARoS Kunstmuseum, Aarhus, Denmark, 2015–2016), Willsdon used her research findings to advise staff on key exhibits (e.g. *Waterlilies*, *Les Nymphéas* – *Figure 2*) and she also wrote the final essay in the exhibition book. This essay was the expert basis for the exhibition’s argument that Monet’s work helped shape 21st century art, intended to appeal to the Kunstmuseum’s usually more modern art-focused audience. The exhibition organiser [5.4] was ‘thrilled’ by Willsdon’s ‘*absolutely excellent text ... a very valuable contribution*’ [3.5] to the exhibition.

Illustrating how these contributions have been valued by museums, Willsdon was invited in 2018–19 to create a *Whistler, Nature and Science* public study day at the Fitzwilliam Museum, for the *Whistler and Nature* exhibition (attended by a capacity audience of 90 with overwhelmingly positive feedback), and her research helped inspire the exhibition *Public Parks, Private Gardens* (Metropolitan Museum, New York, 2018). Willsdon was also invited to write a key section of the *Whistler and Nature* book, plus another for the 2021 *Monet* exhibition catalogue at the Munch Museum, Oslo; and to advise on the *Monet* learning programme [5.5].

4.2 Impact on audience experience, learning and diversity

Painting the Modern Garden attracted 548,250 visitors ranging from artists, art historians, art lovers and students, to botany enthusiasts, and children [5.6]. [The Art Newspaper](#) noted that it ‘*was the most-attended paying exhibition in London*’ with ‘*around 5,100 visitors a day to the Royal Academy of Arts, which makes it the UK institution’s fourth most popular show since we began our survey nearly two decades ago*’. *Apollo* magazine (18 April 2016) regarded it as ‘*one of the most astonishing exhibitions of our time*’, while *The Times* (23 January 2016) commented that it was ‘*a show that feels as intellectually invigorating as it is visually delightful*’. [Curating the Contemporary](#) stated ‘*this exhibition will captivate both your eyes and your mind from the very first second you walk into it*’ [5.7].

The RA’s Assistant Curator noted that there was an unprecedented degree of media preview coverage [5.8]. 24% of all visitors had not previously visited the RA, according to the RA’s Evaluation Report [5.6]. 80% of visitors agreed that the exhibition had ‘broadened my understanding of art’ (a higher percentage than all but one comparator exhibition, *Ai Weiwei*), and that ‘*Visitors on 10% of visits were “blown away” by their experience: double the proportion compared to Ai Weiwei (5%) and the Summer Exhibition 2015 (4%)*’. The report also noted the exhibition attracted wider audiences for the RA in that it ‘*attracted a higher proportion of 16-40 [age-group] visit[ors]s compared to Manet [another 2013 Impressionism exhibition at the RA]*’.

A few examples of visitor comments from the RA exhibition indicate strongly positive public responses: ‘*expanded our knowledge of different painters*’, ‘*amazing exhibition and worth the hassle to get... to London*’, ‘*an excellent exhibition and audioguide*’, ‘*a truly inspiring and excellently coordinated exhibition*’ and ‘*you’ve excelled yourselves*’ [5.8]. The audioguide featured Willsdon as one of its three primary narrators, and the only academic or specialist. The audioguide producer [5.9] commented: ‘*when visitors hear first hand from an interesting, knowledgeable source about objects in a museum, those objects come alive and connect to*

people's daily lives and interests. This is what Clare gave us with her deep dive into the spirit of place revealed in this exhibition.'

An exceptional 35,000 copies of the *Painting the Modern Garden* catalogue were sold by August 2016 [5.8], and it was Amazon's second-top-selling 'Art-landscape' book for most of 2016. The exhibition audio-guide tour was taken by 63,421 visitors [5.9] and the film screened to 110,000 viewers in cinemas across 53 countries, with an estimated TV audience of 3 million and DVD sales of c.10,000 [5.10]. The film also attracted 60,000 viewers on [Facebook](#).

Willsdon's research additionally informed the RA's associated programme of 290 learning activities and workshops; these included British Sign Language and audio-tours, dedicated events for disabled groups, adults experiencing mental health issues, school-children with special education needs, Gallery Friends, teachers, and PGCE Primary Education students, and attracted record participation (9,661) [5.11]. One of the workshops led in turn to a cross-community exhibition of garden paintings at the Grosvenor Chapel in Mayfair, in partnership with young artists and a local primary school and businesses, with an opening attended by homeless centre staff, Royal Academicians, and teachers. The exhibition also '*attracted a large number of new families to workshops*' [5.6, 5.8].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1 Emails and letter in support of Willsdon's nomination for a Knowledge Exchange prize at UofG, from the Curator, RA, London (curator of the RA exhibition). [PDF]
- 5.2 Unsolicited email, Curator, Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio, USA (curator of the exhibition in Cleveland) [PDF], corroborating impact of exhibition in Cleveland, benefits and quality of Willsdon's contribution as Curatorial Consultant and catalogue contributor.
- 5.3 Testimonial letter, editor of the exhibition catalogue at RA Publications; corroborating claims about sales of catalogue and quality/benefits of Willsdon's contribution to it [PDF]
- 5.4 Email from Director of the Art Centre Basel, which mounted the exhibition in association with the Aarhus Kunstmuseum, Aarhus, Denmark [PDF], corroborating claims about quality and benefit of Willsdon's contributions.
- 5.5 Testimonial letter, Curator, Munch Museum, Oslo [PDF], corroborating impact of Willsdon's research on *Monet: the Wild and the Tamed* exhibition there, 2021, and related public engagement programme.
- 5.6 RA report 'Summative Exhibition Evaluation' for *Painting the Modern Garden*, produced for RA by Morris, Hargreaves MacIntyre, May 2016 [PDF], corroborating the impact of the exhibition on audiences, visitor numbers and demographic data.
- 5.7 Examples of media coverage [collated PDF]
 - a. The Art Newspaper, 28th March 2017
 - b. Apollo Magazine, 18th April 2016
 - c. Curating the Contemporary, 11th April 2016
- 5.8 Emails from Assistant Curator, RA [PDF], corroborating claims about contribution of research via Willsdon's role as Curatorial Consultant and catalogue contributor, public response, educational, and other engagement activities.
- 5.9 Testimonial letter, producer for Antenna International of the audio-guide [PDF], corroborating the benefit of Willsdon's contribution to this.
- 5.10 Testimonial letter and emails, producer at Exhibition on Screen and executive production co-ordinator at Seventh Art Productions who produced the *Painting the Modern Garden* cinema film and DVD [PDF], corroborating the impact of the film and Willsdon's role in it.
- 5.11 RA Learning Programme Report for *Painting the Modern Garden*