A Luminous Homage to the Past The Art of Monique Frydman

Farah Nayeri

The *Borgo San Sepolcro Altarpiece* (1437–1444) is one of the undisputed wonders of the early Italian Renaissance. It is the masterwork of the greatest Sienese painter of the first half of the fifteenth century, a man who was as celebrated in his day as he was spurned after his death. Universally known by his eighteenth-century nickname of Sassetta, the artist Stefano di Giovanni (1392–1450) delivered the monumental polyptych to the friars of San Francesco in 1444. Five metres high and six metres wide, it was composed of 60 individual panels. On the front, it depicted the Virgin and Child, Saints John the Baptist, John the Evangelist, and Anthony of Padua; and on the reverse, Saint Francis surrounded by scenes from his life.

In the five and a half centuries since Sassetta's death, his glorious altarpiece has suffered irreparable dismemberment and dispersal: today, only 27 of its panels are known to have survived, making it impossible to reconstruct the original masterpiece. It was pulled down from the high altar of San Francesco during the Counter Reformation (1545–1563), taken apart, and each of its panels placed on other altars inside the church. Later, with the Napoleonic invasion, the panels were put on the market, and the two-sided ones sawn in half so they could be sold separately. Pieces of Sassetta's masterwork wound up in collections in Italy and France, then in the United States, Britain, Germany and Russia. Today, five of the surviving panels – including the Virgin and Child and two saints – are in the Musée du Louvre in Paris. Several are also on permanent display at the National Gallery in London.

In 2013, the Louvre's majestic Salon Carré hosted an unexpected *hommage* to the Sienese master: a contemporary artwork of the same format and dimensions, completed 570 years after his. The double-sided *Polyptyque Sassetta*, 2012–13, [pp.92–109] by the French artist Monique Frydman, depicted no figures at all: it featured fuzzy quadrilaterals painted in blazes of iridescent colour. These quivering masses of blue, red and green, some set against a shimmering gold background, were purely abstract. Yet, like silent spirits or sacred ghosts, they conjured up visions of bygone beings.

For reasons that she cannot explain, Frydman was always fascinated by Sassetta. She kept a reproduction of one of his paintings on the work table in her atelier, gazing at it every day. The painting showed Saint Martin on horseback sharing his cloak with a trembling beggar. In Sassetta's depiction, the focal point was the saint's cape, which was painted in a rich, dark shade of crimson that captured the eye quicker than anything else.

Frydman's fascination with Sassetta led her one day to approach Henri Loyrette (then director of the Louvre) with a bold proposition: would he allow her to produce a *réplique*, or response, to the Sassetta altarpiece? Loyrette agreed, and to Frydman's lingering amazement, he suggested that the work be displayed in the Salon Carré – in the midst of Italian Renaissance masterpieces by the likes of Giotto, Fra Angelico, Cimabue, Filippo Lippi, and Paolo Uccello.[1]

To live up to what seemed an impossible challenge, Frydman spent almost two years with Sassetta, immersing herself in his oeuvre. She met the Louvre's curators of Italian art, and had the privilege of seeing the Sassetta panels close up – including the majestic Virgin and Child centrepiece, which was undergoing restoration. Her polyptych is the product of that long and meticulous process. It is undeniably an ode to painting and colour. But it is also, and much more importantly, a profound meditation on loss, disappearance, and remembrance.

Sassetta, *Saint Martin and the Poor*, 1433
Banca Monte dei Paschi di Siena
Collection Chigi-Saracini
36 × 34.5 cm (14¼ × 13¾ in)
Photograph by Lensini foto, Siena

As she explains in the monograph *Monique Frydman* by Camille Morineau (Editions du Regard, Paris, 2013):

I am deeply moved by the dismembering of this seminal work. What was once an untouchable, invulnerable masterpiece was brutally torn away from its sacred home and partially destroyed – a fragility that is integral to our own experience [as human beings]. Disappearance and reappearance in fragments. Destruction and permanence. The circle of time in loss and resurgence.

What drives me in my work is not the aesthetics of remains or ruins, of massacre or of murder, but the desire to represent the incandescence of memory, its traces, the transmission of that which painting allows us to see and to bring out from within us.

Polyptyque Sassetta is unquestionably one of the works for which Monique Frydman will be most remembered. Its fetching splashes of scarlet, lapis lazuli and emerald are a spectacle in and of themselves. Yet they also invite you to look beyond them. In the work's very absence of representation, there is a powerful suggestion of the human presence. Few works of abstraction are so singularly spiritual, so evocative of saintliness.

In person, the artist Monique Frydman is soft-spoken and unaffected. Her art is as understated as she is herself, never a literal display of her personal life and inner demons. Frydman plots a quiet, subtle course, delivering non-narrative canvases filled with colour, joy and light that offer a respite from the horrors of the world, not a reminder of them.

Frydman was born into a loving family, and her childhood in Toulouse, southern France, was happy and comfortable. Yet fate could easily have decided otherwise. Her parents were Jews, and by the time of Monique's birth in 1943, southern France had come under German Nazi occupation. Jewish families who had taken refuge in what was previously the Free Zone were regularly being rounded up and dispatched to death camps.

As a result, little Monique was born in hiding. She owes her birth and the survival of her family to the valour of the mayor and inhabitants of the village of Nages, who secretly sheltered the family until the war was over. In the early to mid-1990s, Frydman remembered the heroic village women in a series entitled *Les Dames de Nages*, 1995, [pp.37, 39]: darkly coloured paintings covered with patterns that were created by taking an impression, on unstretched canvas, of randomly thrown-down pieces of rope.

Frydman is understandably reluctant to dwell on her family past, and still more reluctant to picture it in her art. At the same time, she is acutely conscious of the miracle of her existence – aware that circumstances could easily have been different, and that the miracle of life could have passed her by. That awareness has never left her, and it inevitably infuses her art.

It is difficult for artists to pinpoint the exact moment when their vocation was revealed to them. In Frydman's case, she decided at the age of 12 or 13 that she wanted to become a painter. Drawing was something that she loved to do as a child, though by her own reckoning, she was not particularly good at it. It was a mental space in which she happily lost herself. Painting was the logical next step.

Monique went on to attend the Ecole des Beaux Arts de Toulouse, graduating in three years instead of four, and in the early 1960s moved to Paris. There, she met her future husband, René Frydman (a gynaecologist and obstetrician who later pioneered *in vitro* fertilization in France).

In the early stages of her career, Frydman was very much an *artiste engagée*. This was, after all, the Paris of the mid- to late 1960s, a capital city in rebellion against war, authority and oppression. There was tremendous pressure on artists to be political. So, for a time, Frydman placed her art at the service of politics. She painted billboards and posters, produced large-scale responses to current events.

However, it soon became clear to her that this strand of art-making was thoroughly uninteresting. It was tantamount to propaganda, and very much alien to her understanding of what art should be. So she hung up her tools, closed her atelier, and gave up painting.

Not until the late 1970s did Frydman resume her artistic career. Stimulated by the example of a group of women artists, she embarked on a fiercely figurative phase, making frank, sexual paintings of women's bodies. These were rendered in black, grey, white, and earthy tones. As she explained to me in a lengthy interview for this publication, colour felt beyond reach at that point.

Monique Frydman, *Le Pavement jaune*, 1989
Pigments and binding agent on cotton canvas
380 × 380 cm (149¾ × 149¾ in) overall
190 × 190 cm (75 × 75 in) each of 4 panels

It's as if I were banned from working in colour. Beneath the artistic inspiration was a sense of loss – something to do with the Holocaust, something that stopped me from moving towards colour. It wasn't deliberate, I simply couldn't manage it. Colour was synonymous with joy and with great big effusions. It was the gateway to a place of happiness in the metaphysical sense of the word.[2]

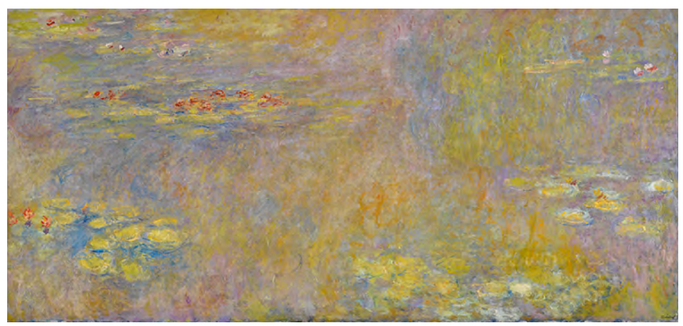
Colour only started to seep into Frydman's work in the early 1980s. At first, her palette consisted of deep, dark reds and blues, tones which she used to depict loosely figurative shapes. Gradually, as the years went by, she let herself and her canvas be washed over by spectacularly bright waves of colour. By the late 1980s, the conversion was complete: she was producing blindingly luminous works such as *Le Pavement jaune*, 1989, a four-part abstract canvas in bright yellow with isolated patches of pale pink.

As her style became ever more affirmed and her palette ever more luminescent, Frydman began to pay homage to the artists who meant the most to her: Henri Matisse, Claude Monet, Pierre Bonnard.[3] Her art could never be mistaken for theirs. It had a voice, a confidence and a beauty all its own, and there was no emulation or copying going on. Yet you could see traces of those masters in her art, and with time, the tributes became more and more explicit.

L'Absinthe, 1989, [p.24] is a monumental triptych with large expanses of blue-green juxtaposed with patches of yellow, white and pale pink. There are no identifiable flowers, or shrubs, or weeping willows anywhere on the canvas. Yet through its dimensions, its hazy aquatic atmosphere, and its title (a reference to the alcoholic drink favoured by the Impressionists), the work inevitably evokes the wondrous atmosphere of Monet's *Water-Lilies* series. It is, in short, a stunning homage to the Impressionist master.

Matisse has been another source of lifelong inspiration. In 1996, Frydman paid tribute to him in a solo show at the Musée Matisse in Nice, and again in 2006, at the Musée Matisse in Le Cateau-Cambrésis.

A decade or so ago, Frydman started a series dedicated to another of her heroes: Pierre Bonnard. She spent two years studying his work. Frydman dismisses common perceptions of Bonnard as a painter of quaint bourgeois scenes. In her mind, his paintings are forerunners of abstraction; hence his enduring appeal to American abstract artists of the postwar period. Frydman sees paintings by Bonnard as well-structured and highly organized series of planes. Chessboards, tiles and tablecloths are the devices he uses to divide up his compositions in an orderly way.



Claude Monet, *Water-Lilies*, after 1916
Oil on canvas
201 × 427 cm (79 × 168 in)

The Frydman series devoted to Bonnard, entitled *Des saisons avec Bonnard* [pp.63–75], consists of overlapping planes of differing colours. In these abstract canvases there is, naturally, not the faintest hint of a cat or teapot or human head or any of the other elements that populate the domestic environments of the Post-Impressionist master. Yet, through Frydman's soft meshing of pinks, blues, greens and violets, Bonnard is unquestionably present.

Ultimately, Frydman's art may well be very contemporary, abstract and current, yet it never ceases to evoke the past. Reaching back to long-forgotten times she recalls, through her own studied applications of colour, Sassetta's heavenly saints, Monet's dreamy pond and Bonnard's sunlit interiors. There is a depth to her work that recalls that giant of twentieth-century abstraction, Mark Rothko,[4] who she also greatly admires.

Meanwhile, humankind continues to breed violence, hatred, war and conflict. Centuries of human progress and the terrors of the recent past seem not yet to have been enough of a lasting lesson. Despite the pogroms of the Soviet era, the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust, the genocides committed in Cambodia and Rwanda, and the massacres in former Yugoslavia, humankind is still inflicting brutality and terror on a large scale. In Syria alone, more than 400,000 people have lost their life since 2011, and the historic city of Aleppo, once the country's largest, is now reminiscent of the ruination of Guernica or Dresden.

Frydman finds these realities plainly unacceptable. It boggles the mind that mass killings and destruction on such a scale should still be happening in the twenty-first century. The world she lives in is a constant source of pain.

Her solution is to remove herself as far as possible from any prosaic illustration of tragedy and of the enduring agonies of humankind. Instead, she lets colour prevail over all else – a soothing, soulful colour that is imbued with empathy and poetry, and that reminds us all of what it means to be human. Her *Polyptyque Sassetta* is a perfect illustration. It is the work of a secular artist, yet carries with it a universal and quasi-sacred message: that we are defined by those who came before, that their loss is ours too, and that we should remember them. As the artist herself explains:

Faced with barbarity – because I believe that we are clearly experiencing barbarity in the world at the present time – you have two possibilities. Either you reproduce the signs of barbarity in the painting, or you take the viewer elsewhere: to a place that is the opposite of this barbarity, meaning life itself, where sensation can be taken to an extreme, where it can be exalted, and where it can lead to another place.

Notes

Farah Nayeri, a culture writer based in London, writes for *The New York Times*.

1
Giotto di Bondone (c.1266–1337), Italian painter, architect; Fra Angelico (1395–1455), Early Renaissance painter; Cimabue (Cenni de Pepo, c.1240–1302), Florentine painter; Fra Filippo Lippi (c.1406–1496), Italian painter; Paolo Uccello (1337–1475), Italian painter, mathematician.

2
Monique Frydman in conversation with Farah Nayeri, Paris, 2016.

3
French artists: Henri Matisse (1869–1954); Claude Monet (1840–1926); Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947).

4
Mark Rothko (1903–1970), Russian-American Abstract Expressionist, Colour Field painter.