

# Blanche Hoschedé: A Genius Hidden in the Gardens of Giverny.

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**Abstract.** The gardens of Giverny have inspired some of the most famous painters in art history, e.g. Claude Monet. The aim of this study was to investigate another female artist who also produced masterpieces in this sacred oasis. A thoughtful literature and document research was conducted to fully comprehend who this character was and what kind of artwork has she done. Her paintings were examined through the lens of important art history's research methods, such as Formalism, Biographical Interpretation and Feminism. The findings were shown to lead to an accurate determination of her spirit and confirmation of her artistic production. This indicated that there is a *brand new* impressionist artist whose life and work remain unexplored.

**Keywords.** Blanche Hoschedé, Impressionism, Women in art history, Giverny, Claude Monet.

## 1. Introduction

The gardens of Giverny have received much attention in recent years due to its unique charm and celestial atmosphere, which offered great inspiration to honoured impressionist painters. The artwork produced in this spot, by Claude Monet, is of great importance to the art history field and has also been thoroughly investigated by many authors. However, it has been found that Monet might not have been the only artist breathing in the air of this small French commune. The name of this artist was Blanche Hoschedé and very little is known about this interesting character.

Jean Pierre Hoschedé, in his book, presents his sister, Blanche, as a brilliant and creative soul, while Janine Burke, a renowned art historian, solely defined Hoschedé as Monet's most assiduous assistant. However, although these authors explored the figure of Blanche Hoschedé, little attention has been paid to her personal history and her own art production. The aim of this research was to answer who truly was Blanche Hoschedé and what she has done as an artist in her lifetime. During this investigation, a careful and thorough analysis of the literature and historical documents was carried out. This investigation approach led us to the conclusion that there was in fact another genius hidden in the gardens of Giverny.

## 2. Research Methods

The current investigation involved a review of the literature and documentary research to understand Blanche Hoschedé and analyse her work. The

articles, books, letters, and paintings selected for this research were found in local libraries, and online data basis, such as Google Scholar and Science Direct.

A total of 4 articles and 2 books were collected and then thoroughly interpreted to better understand the life of the artist. The articles provided a first look at her world, while the books delivered an intimate and detailed description of Blanche Hoschedé's heart and soul. The central form of examining these sources is the Biographical Interpretation developed by Fritz Schütze(1) in 1993.

Regarding documents, a total of 84 letters sent to Blanche Hoschedé throughout her lifetime were carefully translated and studied according to Lindsay Prior's theory of documentary research(2). This approach allowed this study to learn the relationship she nurtured with others and to collect powerful insight into who she was at her core. These letters were gathered by her brother Jean- Pierre Hoschedé in his book *Blanche Hoschedé-Monet: Peintre Impressionniste*(3).

Some of her paintings were also meticulously reviewed in this process, using well-known art-history standard methods such as Formalism, Biographic Interpretation, and Critical Theory, specifically Feminism. This unique combination of research methods guaranteed an elaborate and extensive perception of the pieces.

In addition, it is important to report that the bibliography on this subject is scarce and quite restricted, as in the case of J.P. Hoschedé's book,

available only in French. Most of the information supporting this present study can be found in three main research sources.

### 3. Results

Data obtained in previous studies primarily focused on Claude Monet, and Blanche Hoschedé was portrayed as a mere student to this professor. Although the duo had a very close relationship, Monet deeply disliked the use of the word Master, especially because he never gave her any kind of lessons (3). In our study, more in-depth information concerning Blanche Hoschedé and her personal life was uncovered and discoursed, in order to better understand who was the genius hidden in the gardens of Giverny.

#### 3.1 Who was Blanche Hoschedé?

Blanche Hoschedé- Monet was the daughter of Ernest Hoschedé and Alice Hoschedé. Later in life, she became, in fact, Claude Monet's stepdaughter and daughter-in-law(4). She was blonde, blue-eyed, joyful and also the only one, between her brothers and sisters, with artistic dreams(5).

Throughout her life, Blanche maintained a truly intimate and lovely relationship with painting, having Claude Monet as her main companion in her art journey. Hoschedé was also known for her great devotion to her father-in-law. In her youth, she had been a faithful chaperon helping him carry the easel and canvases in the field(5).

Georges Clemenceau, a French politician and close friend to Blanche-Hoschedé, referred to her as the *Blue Angel* because of the colour of her eyes and her kind and loving nature(3).

#### 3.2 Blanche Hoschedé's life story

Blanche Hoschedé was born on November 10, 1865 in Paris, France. Her father, Ernest Hoschedé, was an enterprising collector committed to modern art(4). In 1876, during an artist residence at their family mansion at Montgeron, Blanche had her first encounter with Claude Monet(3). Here is an extract of what she said about this event: "I was eleven years old, but I remember his arrival at my parents' house(3 p. 7). During this time, Blanche had the opportunity to see Monet's artistic abilities and the magic of painting. This experience culminated in an increase in her affection and curiosity about the art world.

Her mother, Alice Hoschedé, was abandoned by her husband after their family fortune crashed in 1878. At that time, Claude Monet and his then wife Camille Doncieux took pity on his former patrons(4) and invited Blanche Hoschedé, her mother, and her siblings to come live with them in the village of Vétheuil. In 1879, after Camille's death, Alice Hoschedé and Claude Monet married each other. The couple and their children moved to Poissy in 1881.

However, in 1882, the life of the Blue Angel changed

forever. She was at a holiday house, in Villa Juliette, in Pourville, only sixteen years old. The teenager took her palette and brushes in hand and made her first attempt at painting outdoors, in front of the motif(3). Up until this occasion, Hoschedé's painting dreams were only fantasies cultivated in her mind. After this day, Blanche decided to dedicate herself completely to art(4).

Blanche and her family first arrived at Giverny in 1883(5). This land was of great inspiration to numerous landscapes, including some of the most famous paintings in the world, the *Water Lilies*. The woman nurtured a passionate relationship with this environment. Gustave Geffroy, a French journalist and art critic, wrote: "I think about him often and about you in your Giverny"(2 p. 34), Giverny was hers as much as Monet's.

In 1897, she married Jean Monet, her stepbrother, and the couple moved to a place close to Rouen(4). Weekend trips to Giverny were very common. This granted Blanche Hoschedé the opportunity to recharge her artistic roots. During this phase of the painter's life, she continued to paint and explore unfamiliar scenarios outside of her beloved childhood home. In addition, she started exhibiting her work in notorious art salons, such as Salon de la Société des Artistes Rouennais and Salon des Indépendants in Paris(4).

During the following years, Jean Monet, her husband became very ill. Due to this unfortunate event, Blanche Hoschedé and Jean Monet returned to Giverny in 1913(5), where Claude Monet mourned the death of his wife Alice, who left him in 1911. Following the death of Jean, in 1914, Blanche-Hoschedé settled at Giverny(4), where she took over the management of the house and became Monet's faithful companion, renouncing painting altogether(3).

Whilst in charge of Giverny, Blanche was the negotiator and peacemaker of relevant affairs (4). Hoschedé said "it was a great joy for me to organise these gatherings of old friends"(5 p. 163). She also maintained deep-warm exchanges with her acquaintances, which can be seen in the numerous letters gathered by her brother Jean-Pierre. In these documents, you can see how much love and respect people showed her. For instance, Clemenceau wrote "My dear child", Geoffrey would refer to her as his *dear friend*, and Durand-Ruel, an acclaimed art dealer, trying to acquire paintings by Monet, plead "Believe, I beg you, dear Madam, in my most devoted sentiments"(3 p. 38, 52).

The Blue Angel did not go back to her brushes until her father-in-law died on December 5, 1926. In her memoir, Blanche said: "At midday, he left us forever. It was the soul of the house who left... Everything here was illuminated by him"(6). Nevertheless, after eleven years, she took on painting again, reclaiming the gardens of Giverny as her own(3). Not only did Blanche-Hoschedé, shortly after Monet's death, start painting again, she returned to living again(3).

In solitude, Blanche made short trips to Paris, summer vacations with her nephews, and visits to Clemenceau's cottage, quickly gaining back a zest for life after such a loss. Unfortunately, this blissful state, was interrupted by the arise of the Second World War in 1940. It was with great sorrow that Hoschedé decided to leave her precious residence and take refuge in Bourbonnais and Aix-en-Provence(3). Fortunately, as soon as possible, the artist returned to her treasured Giverny, and worked to rebuild herself, her well-being, and the safety of her home.

Our Angel continued to paint throughout all of those years, although in a slower pace due to her seniority. It was in Nice, where she died suddenly in December of 1947. She was eighty-three years old. Blanche Hoschedé-Monet left behind an enormous legacy of pure love, intense devotion, and the most magnificent shades that a soul could carry.

### 3.3 Blanche Hoschedé: an impressionist painter

As discussed previously, Blanche Hoschedé was always inclined to the artistic world. She came from a family of patrons, people who financially support artists, and was constantly surrounded by art. Hoschedé recalls: "We also saw each other a lot in Claude Monet's studio"(3 p. 8). According to J.P. Hoschedé, his big sister, was exposed to this revolutionary world from a very young age, and had the opportunity to visit famous painters' studios, such as Edouard Manet (3).

Nevertheless, it was only after her first encounter with Claude Monet in 1876 that the Blue Angel absolutely fell in love with painting. The mix of paints and the beauty of brushes touching the canvas was enough to make the eleven-year-old entirely mesmerised and magnetised. In her brother's words, it was as if a "magic wand" (3 p. 8) had touched her heart.

After moving in with the Monet family, Blanche could not even fence the idea of becoming a painter. The little girl was forced to constantly help her mother with household chores and take care of her younger brothers(3). However, she never stopped seeing her stepfather paint. During the above-mentioned sessions, Blanche would carefully observe his work, meticulously trying to comprehend the mechanics of that art.

Blanche Hoschedé's dreams of becoming a painter only came true in the summer of 1882(4), as formerly mentioned in this article. Armed with her previously obtained knowledge, Hoschedé bravely took her palette and brushes in hand and painted for the first time in her life(3). These first two attempts demonstrated a high level of artistic talent(3) and portrayed her natural abilities when it came to art. The most remarkable aspect about this event is that she did not have a single drawing or painting lesson throughout her life(3). All she knew came from observing the work of other artists and her strong creative intuition.

From the very start, Blanche Hoschedé could spontaneously comprehend and translate, contrast and geographical reliefs. Her shadows and colours were highly accurate(3). Those are exceptionally tough assignments for any painter, and an even harder tasks as a beginner. The fact that Blanche could effortlessly do this, is a true testament to how talented this artist was.

After this day, Claude Monet took his beloved daughter's ambitions seriously(4). The duo would take off to explore the most delightful landscapes and paint side by side, choosing distinct views. Blanche Hoschedé started going on these adventures on her own, feeling particularly attracted to the woods and its clearings, where Scottish pines often inspired her stunning paintings(3). This freedom was very uncommon for a woman, as Burke declared, "For women artists, *plein air* painting proved liberating"(4 p. 70), especially at a time when all other female impressionists could only paint their domestic environment due to social norms.

The year 1888 was a truly important year for Hoschedé's career. This date marked the moment the artist decided to apply to the Paris Salon (3) for the first time. Unfortunately, she was not accepted by the Salon. In Fig. 1, we can see a clear example of the type of art she was producing at the time of the rejection. In this depiction of a cold winter in Giverny, Blanche invites us to the warmth of her soul. Love vibrates on this canvas and accesses the heart of the observer. To the left it is possible to see a magnificent tree built through the layers of multiple brushstrokes in shades of green, blue, yellow and some magenta. Her talent was impeccable, and she drank directly from the source of Impressionism. Although still early in her career, this masterpiece shows off the high standards Blanche Hoschedé was capable of.



**Fig. 1-** Blanche Hoschedé, Snow-effect landscape, the Val near Giverny, 1888, oil on canvas, 65.2 x 92.2 cm, private collection(7)

After her marriage with Jean Monet in 1897, followed by their change to Rouen (5), a historical French city, our Angel had to find distinct locations to paint. Some of her chosen motifs were the Seine, the coast of Canteleu, a commune in France, Scottish pine trees from the green forest, and views from her garden(3). Hoschedé continued to explore the city of Rouen through her paintings for many years. However, as

stated before, due to her husband's illness, the couple found their way back to Giverny's gardens once again.

As we all know, during this period (1914-1926) Blanche-Hoschedé renounced painting altogether and devoted herself completely to her adored stepfather and *their* Giverny.

The women impressionist painter made her comeback only after Claude Monet's death in 1926. She would paint flowers, trees, and window views of her home(3). Following Clemenceau's advice "Hold fast to your brushes. That is the big deal. They will possess the virtue of making you forget this emptiness"(3 p. 50), Blanche-Hoschedé regained her light. After all those years, she agreed to exhibit her work in Paris. This happened in 1931, 1942 and 1947(3).

Rarely would she agree to little *getaways*, for example, when she visited her friend Clemenceau's house, *le bel Ebat*. During this trip, Hoschedé produced an adorable landscape canvas, which can be seen in Fig. 2. With this painting, Blanche Hoschedé gave us a portal into her world. Peeking through this window of time, the painting looks and feels like it is moving. Hoschedé's brush work is impeccable, in her brother's words, "it is smooth", a true reflection of her gentle and caring soul. To this work, one of her friends wrote in a letter: "The paintings you have sent him from Bel Ebat gave him so much happiness and calm in his heart" (3 p. 72), indicating the powerful effect Hoschedé's art had on other people.



**Fig. 2-** Blanche Hoschedé, *View of le bel Ébat*, [date unknown], oil on canvas, 60 x 73 cm, private collection(8).

At the end of this artist's life, she continued to paint, just as her younger self had imagined for so long. Even her age, eighty-two years old, could not separate the Blue Angel from her brushes. In bad weather, not wanting to remain without painting, she would work on still lifes(3). In Fig. 3 we can see one of Blanche Hoschedé's last works. In this painting, the artist captures the intimacy and passion she felt during all those years in Giverny. She makes great use of her impressionist roots, breaking down

her motifs in multiple brushstrokes. The objects portrayed in beautiful contrast of yellow, blue and purple shadows, are arranged in an organised manner(9) symbolising the inner peace of our beloved Angel.



**Fig. 3-** Blanche Hoschedé, *Monet's Dining Room in Giverny (Tea)*, 1947, oil on canvas, 38 x 46, collection Philippe Piguët(10), public domain.

Blanche Hoschedé-Monet is one of the most gracious painters of all time. Contrary to Janine Burke's opinions that "Blanche was not capable of such original and sophisticated strokes" (3 p. 76), the Blue Angel was capable of significantly more. Her ability to learn by simply observing others, without ever needing to attend any kind of artistic lesson, is one of the most impressive aspects of this character. Her artwork deciphers the most angelic form of love this author has ever seen. Her brushwork is deeply mesmerising and magnetic, and it is impossible to look away from it.

#### 4. Discussions

Previous work has documented the importance of the life of Blanche Hoschedé. Burke(4), for example, defends that Monet's "angel" actively participated in some of Monet's famous work. However, these few studies have either been short-term studies or have not focused on Blanche Hoschedé as an individual person, dissociated from the image of her stepfather. In this study we thoroughly investigated articles, books, paintings and 84 letters sent to Blanche-Hoschedé in her lifetime.

We found that Blanche Hoschedé-Monet was an extremely loving and caring person, with a great passion for artistic activities. Throughout her life, Hoschedé not only dedicated her own will to taking care of loved ones, but also gave her heart and soul to her wonderful art, creating divine paintings. These findings extend those of J.P. Hoschedé, confirming that Blanche Hoschedé was much more than an assistant, but rather a phenomenal artist herself. In addition, the improvements noted in our study give a clear understanding of who was Blanche Hoschedé and feature artworks never seen before in the field of research. Therefore, this study reinforces the status

of Hoschedé as a sensational artist, launching this painter to the same level as the great names in art history. Most notably, this is the first study to our knowledge to effectively discuss Blanche-Hoschedé's biography in detail and to highlight her individual work as an impressionist painter. Our results provide compelling evidence for stating the relevance of the Blue Angel and further research proof of her brilliant job as an artist. However, some limitations are worth noting. Although our hypotheses were supported by research, some new questions remain unanswered. Future work should therefore include follow-up work designed to evaluate why this painter was not recognised more.

## 5. Conclusions

The present study represents the first in-depth research paper on the notorious Blanche Hoschedé. Through careful analysis of previous work and relevant documents, we ultimately could understand who the Blue Angel was, what her life story was like, and what she had done as an artist. Previous studies often portrayed this artist as a mere companion to Claude Monet, briefly going through her character, not considering her own individuality. In contradiction to these studies, we took a close look into her history, from birth to death, and paid close attention to her artwork and technique. As a consequence, we could confirm that Blanche Hoschedé's role in art history was indeed much more relevant than acting as a great Master's assistant; she was, in fact, a Master herself, who produced masterpieces within and outside of her esteemed Giverny.

Accordingly, these research findings give Blanche Hoschedé the opportunity to be known, contemplated, and furthermore studied as one of the greatest impressionist painters this world has ever seen. Our dear angel proved herself to be not only a devoted and warmhearted human, but also a splendid artiste, who not only dreamed about her paintings, but also painted her dreams(11).

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kilometres of brushes(3 p. 57).

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