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Monet's 'Water Lilies' gets high-tech treatment at Nelson-Atkins Museum

ALICE THORSON, The Kansas City Star

In 1979, Kansas Citians flocked to see a **Monet** "Water Lilies" exhibit at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in which the museum reunited its 14-foot canvas with its companions from the St. Louis Art Museum and the Cleveland Museum of Art.

A black and white photograph of the exhibit from the museum's archives shows the three individually framed paintings hung together at one end of a large gallery with a polished floor and a grouping of planters with flowering trees.

Fast forward to 2011 as the museum prepares to reunite the three panels in an exhibition opening this weekend to members and April 9 to the public.

It's a different world and a different museum with a different director.

This time around, the buzzword is "interactive," and under director Julian Zugazagoitia the museum has emphasized ways for viewers to experience the 42-foot-long "Water Lilies" triptych as never before.

Installed in the state-of-the-art Bloch Building, this 21st century "Water Lilies" exhibit offers a chance to "get inside" the painting through X-rays, photographs, computers and microscopic views.

Bound to be a big hit is a touch-screen paint program, where visitors can create their own water lilies paintings with virtual brushes and colors and email the finished works to their home computers and to an online gallery on the Nelson's website.

But the exhibit's main attraction is the three paintings, which get the star treatment.

Unlike the Nelson's 1979 presentation, this time the three paintings will be exhibited in a single frame as **Monet** intended, and in a setting calculated to make viewers gasp.

The panels shimmer in a muted, contemplative setting of gray walls and carpeting that includes three organically shaped seating islands offering different perspectives on the mural-scaled work.

"I think we've doubled the amount of time people will spend," said lead exhibit designer Steve Waterman. "They can get comfortable, get lost in it."

And he hopes they'll return to the painting after absorbing the information in the final gallery, devoted to "A closer look."

Here's where the "new" interactive Nelson really soars.

After seeing early plans for a ho-hum final gallery featuring photographs and texts, Zugazagoitia called for a large table and chairs and encouraged the staff to make the gallery more engaging for viewers.

And so they did.

When the show opens, it will not only have X-rays and that touch-screen paint program, it will also have books and a "touchable" version of the "Water Lilies," created by associate conservator of painting Mary Schafer.

Schafer's 20-by-60-inch canvas, loosely divided into vertical strips, provides a chronological account of the way **Monet** built his canvas from the white ground to thick applications of pigment for the water lilies to the thin washes he applied over them.

Viewers will be encouraged to feel the surface texture of Schafer's painting, which she fully expects will get dirty over the course of the show.

Later in the exhibit's run, she plans to lead a conservation session with schoolchildren who will clean the painting with cotton swabs. Besides introducing students to the art of conservation, the exercise offers a telling demonstration of why museums don't let visitors touch the artworks on view.

Monet worked on the "Water Lilies" for 11 years and made compositional changes, which can also be traced through displays on the gallery walls.

X-rays of areas of the Cleveland and Nelson panels show how **Monet** took big groups of water lilies and diffused or painted them out. A section devoted to paint chip analysis begins with a tiny speck encased in a resin block.

The speck shows the microscopic size of the chips that conservators analyze. Accompanying photographs reveal the layers of color the chips contain, from the bright, saturated colors **Monet** started out with to the toned-down pastels of the finished work.

Another wall panel enables viewers to compare early studies for the panels with the final versions, showing how the artist's initial naturalistic representations in bright colors gave way to an atmospheric abstraction.

Visitors can return to the computers on the table to see dramatic close-ups of brushstrokes and views through a microscope of the pigments **Monet** used.

The present show brings many discoveries to bear on the paintings since they were last shown together in Kansas City 32 years ago. And the museum is eager for feedback.

At the end of the exhibit, visitors are invited to type their responses into a touch screen, and in a final interactive flourish, a "tag cloud" of projected words culled by computer from these entries appears on the wall.

The projection also reflects points of consensus. Was the exhibit dramatic? Spiritual? Uplifting? The larger the word appears on the wall, the more frequently it appears in visitor comments.

Coming Sunday For a detailed look at the "Water Lilies" exhibit, see The Kansas City Star Magazine on Sunday.

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