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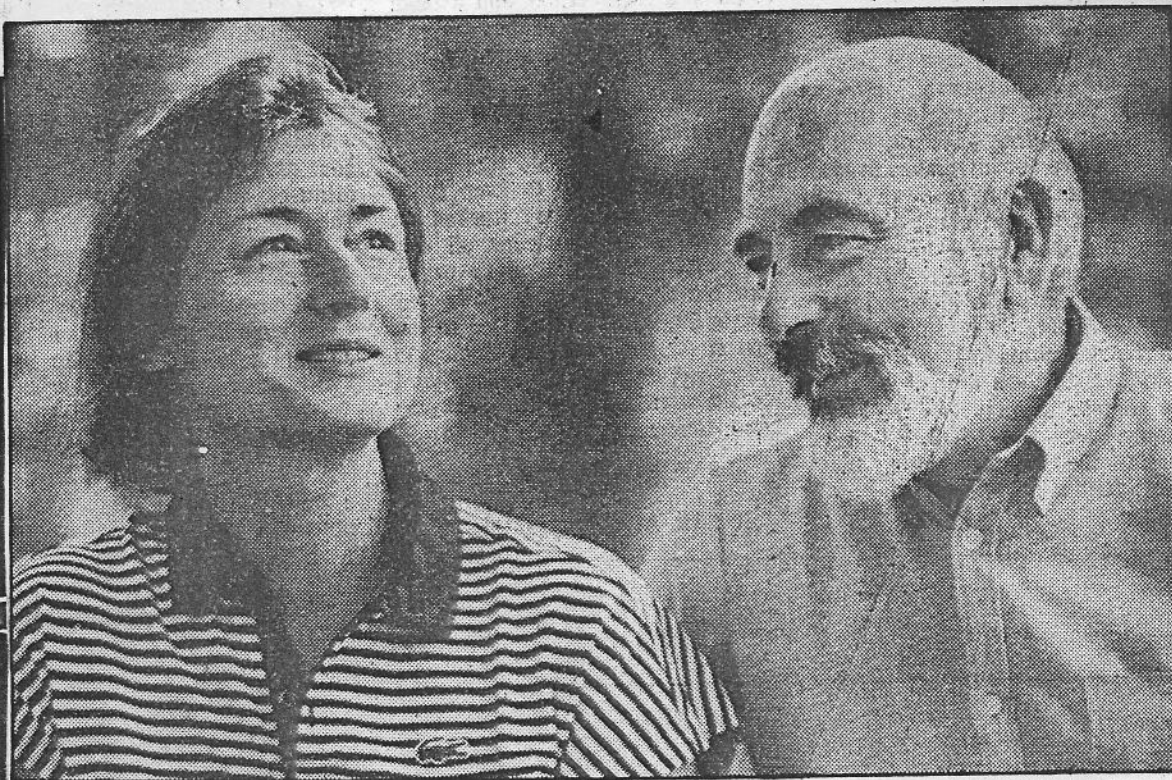
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THE ATLANTA CONSTITUTION

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LANNA SWINDLER/Staff

Claire Joyes and her husband, Jean-Marie Toulgouat, step-great-grandson of Claude Monet.

Monet made a big Impression on his step-great-grandson

By Keith Graham
Staff Writer

All youth is impressionable, but you might say Jean-Marie Toulgouat's was more Impressionable than most.

After all, the painter — currently Oglethorpe University's artist in residence — is the step-great-grandson of none other than Claude Monet, the father of Impressionism, and he grew up barely a hundred meters from Monet's home in Giverny, France.

Sitting in the Oglethorpe Art Gallery surrounded by an exhibit of photos of his famed relative, Toulgouat — who normally paints with oils — proves that he is adept at creating with words, too, as he verbally draws the picture of his youth.

"It was like growing up in a museum," says the artist, a balding, bearded man of 58 wearing a cowboy handkerchief as an ascot.

Monet, who bought a pink, green-shuttered house in Giverny in 1889, died just before Toulgouat's birth, but the family still gathered for meals in the brilliant yellow dining room where the master Impressionist entertained friends like Pissarro and Renoir, Matisse and Sisley, Cezanne and Rodin. Afterward, Toulgouat and his relatives would sip coffee in

the artist's studio, then filled with more than 300 paintings that are now in the world's great collections.

Rising to point to the photographs — some 60 rare, unpublished pictures dating from 1890 to 1926 — Toulgouat says, "I had these photos in my home." He and his wife, Claire Joyes — a 45-year-old writer who is an expert on Monet in her own right — have about 250 more like them.

Stopping at a photo of Blanche Hoschede, the stepdaughter who cared for Monet in his declining years, Toulgouat recalls taking art lessons from her.

His best friend, he says, was the son of Monet's cook, and they conducted chemistry experiments in the great artist's darkroom.

"They could have blown up all the paintings," says Ms. Joyes, raising her eyebrows in feigned horror.

Laughing, Toulgouat continues, talking of the hours he played in the great artist's flower gardens and around the Japanese lily ponds, where Monet transformed art into life and life into art.

"For me, it was just normal," Toulgouat says.

See GIVERNY. Page 4-B

Giverny

From Page 1-B

"When you are a child, you cannot imagine having to live another way." In fact, he adds, noting that he is beginning to sweat in the stuffy gallery, "I need a lily pond now. I need to jump in a lily pond."

No lily pond being handy, Toulgouat and his wife suggest going outside to sit in the shade.

Toulgouat and Ms. Joyes married 21 years ago in Paris. But they have lived together in Giverny since the late 1960s, and Monet has become almost as important a part of her life as of her husband's.

A former interior decorator educated in art and law, she frequently lectures on the artist and is the immediate past president of an organization devoted to his memory, the Friends of Claude Monet.

Her 1975 book, "Claude Monet: Life at Giverny," has been re-issued this fall by Vendome Press in New York. And she talks of Monet as though she had known — but not necessarily liked — him.

"Monet was like a child sometimes," she says with a laugh as she takes a seat on a bench near the university library. "He needed to be scolded. He required a lot of himself, and he was very exacting of others."

Artists, she admits, must be egocentric, but Monet may have been a bit too much so. "I don't like very much his personality sometimes," she says. "I like him when I read the letters and he is speaking about his work in the garden. But I think he is not very generous and thankful. Maybe he was too obsessed."

Toulgouat agrees: "He could be marvelous with his friends, but very tough with others."

Of course, Ms. Joyes says, "The moment you have something to do with creativity, it is difficult." Painters especially, she adds, with a glance at Toulgouat, "are horrible to live with." For example, her husband makes too much noise when he is working in his studio.

"What do you mean? I make noise?" Toulgouat says. "Oh, only when things are going bad. Then I shout."

However noisy he may be, Toulgouat surprised no one in his family by becoming a painter.

"It was really always my vision," he says.

Though born at Giverny, his mother, Lily Butler, studied painting in New York in her youth. His father, an eccentric Oxford-educated poultry farmer named Teddi Toulgouat, dabbled in furniture design.

And even before Toulgouat began studying under Blanche Hoschede — the sister of his grandmother, Suzanne, and the daughter of Alice, Monet's second wife — he had been taught by another outstanding teacher: his grandfather, the American Impressionist Theodore Butler. Butler, who also settled at Giverny, made his grandson a small easel and began to encourage the boy to paint at age 6.

Already well schooled in art, Toulgouat left Giverny after World War II to study first classical drawing at a provincial art academy in Nice, then architecture at the University of Paris.

"To survive," he says, he worked 15 years as a town planner for a major Paris architectural firm. But when he reached the age of 40, Toulgouat began laying plans to leave his home in Paris' Latin Quarter and return to Giverny to do what he was meant to do.

For Ms. Joyes, the move meant



Claude Monet is considered to be the father of Impressionism.

a chance to devote all of her time to writing the fiction that had already begun to fill the drawers of her home. But her attention turned to writing on Monet when she discovered many people in the village still remembered the painter, who had died in 1926.

The Monet house had not been occupied since the death of Blanche Hoschede in 1940 and, through the will of the artist's last son, Michel, had become the property of the French Academie des Beaux-Arts in 1966. Efforts began in 1977 to renovate it and open it as a museum, and both Ms. Joyes and Toulgouat contributed research and advice.

Open since 1981, the painter's home now attracts 140,000 visitors annually, but the restoration has been a mixed blessing, both say.

The restorationists, Ms. Joyes says, "made plenty of mistakes. They are not very interested in accuracy."

And Toulgouat says he feels some emotional pangs when he sees the crowds flocking into the house. "It was a little bit difficult for me when it opened, because to me it was not a museum," he says. "It was the family home."

Not that either has much time to worry about such things.

Ms. Joyes — whose father was a Paris doctor — is currently at work on a book not on Monet but on her own family. Her relatives were pretty eccentric and complicated, too, she confides.

Toulgouat, meanwhile, has established an international reputation for his semi-abstract landscapes. Included in collections in England, Holland and France, they have been exhibited in shows throughout the United States and Europe, and 20 will be displayed at the Oglethorpe Gallery starting Nov. 4.

Influenced by 1950s abstract painters, Toulgouat is decidedly not an Impressionist — "I was born one century too late," he explains — but he still uses the colors of the Impressionists' palette with very little brown and no black.

A day after the exhibit's Dec. 10 closing, Toulgouat and his wife end their three-month stay in Atlanta and return to their home, which they left in the care of "a hippie cousin."

There, they hope to resume an uninterrupted schedule devoted to their work. But right now, Toulgouat suggests, how about driving over to the Cafe Intermezzo at Park Place, which bills itself as a "true European cafe"?

"I will take an iced tea," he says with a chuckle, "because it is typical here."

■ Claude Monet at Giverny, Family Photographs, 1890-1926. Oglethorpe University Art Gallery. Through Oct. 31. Paintings of Jean-Marie Toulgouat. Nov. 4-Dec. 10. Mondays-Thursdays, 10 a.m.-8 p.m.; Fridays-Saturdays, 11-4 p.m.; and Sundays, 2-8 p.m. 261-1441.