Beat: Arts

P.M SEBASTIEN LECORNU MAKES HIS 1st CULTURAL TRIP TO MUSEUM OF IMPRESSIONISTS

UNVEILS THE CENTENARY GIVERNY PROGRAMME

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USPA NEWS - PRIME MINISTER SEBASTIEN LECORNU'S 1st CULTURAL JOURNEY BACK HOME IN GIVERNY/VERNON
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This report is written by our accredited senior cultural and geopolitical correspondent, a wheelchair journalist who has worked with French institutions to improve accessibility for disabled professionals and visitors. It is reported on the ground in Giverny, alongside Prime Minister Sebastien Lecornu, and Minister of Culture Catherine Pegard, and draws on his public remarks, those of museum officials and historical material on Monet and the American colony in Normandy.

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A PRIVILEGED VIEW FROM INSIDE A RARE MONET GATHERING
As a journalist, I felt genuinely privileged to stand in this small museum for what is, in essence, a once in a lifetime gathering of early Giverny canvases: haystacks, poplar trees, riverbanks and village slopes on loan from collections in France, the United States, Japan and Scotland. The light and shimmering colours of these works remain strikingly contemporary in 2026. They create an atmosphere that seems to have crossed the decades intact, all the more so because the museum itself has finally been brought up to the level of its ambitions: fully accessible to wheelchair users, with ramps, lifts and adapted facilities, free admission for disabled visitors and reduced fares for their companions.

UNIQUE PRIME MINISTER WHO TURNS LOCAL ROOTS INTO NATIONAL STAKES
For Prime Minister Sebastien Lecornu, who has been personally involved in restoring and modernising the museum for some seventeen years, the evening was both a political signal and an almost intimate detour. It allowed the head of government to reconnect with "his" territory just days after the comfortable first round victory of his "Generations Vernon" list in the March 2026 local (municipal) elections, while using Monet's village flagship of French impressionism to project a narrative of soft power along the Seine corridor from Paris to Le Havre. It also underlined a deeper transatlantic story: from the late nineteenth century onwards, American artists and collectors were among the first to buy Monet's paintings and to give his work international visibility, helping pull him out of precariousness and laying the foundations for the global success and reputation that the centenary now celebrates.

For Prime Minister Sebastien Lecornu,, politics has always started in Vernon, the small Norman town where he learnt to cultivate mayors, manage budgets and read the anxieties of ordinary voters long before entering national headlines. His rise from local councillor and mayor to prime minister now allows him to turn those deeply rooted municipal reflexes into national stakes, exporting a village level sense of responsibility to the whole country.

SEBASTIEN LECORNU, AN UNCANNY STORYTELLER OF MONET'S LIFE WITHOUT NOTES

In his short but relaxed speech, delivered without notes to around 400 guests gathered in the museum's auditorium, Prime Minister Sebastien Lecornu mixed local pride, cultural policy and electoral subtext. He began by greeting the mayors of Giverny and Vernon, representatives of the Monet Foundation and the Académie des Beaux Arts, before recalling the long gestation of the project. In a convivial aside, he paid tribute to the irony of Monet's own trajectory, reminding the audience that the painter was once so poor he could not even afford a train ticket back to Poissy and therefore stayed on in Giverny for seven years working as a landscape painter, long before later success allowed him to buy the house outright.

P.M Lecornu then thanked the elected officials present, including Normandy (Seine Maritime) senator Catherine Morin Desailly, and teasingly turned to Eure prefect Charles Giusti, in full ceremonial uniform. There was a time, he joked, when Claude Monet had serious conflicts with the prefect of the day, who refused to let him dig in his own garden to create the now famous water lily pond; today's prefect, by contrast, is helping to renovate and enhance this magnificent site. Caught at the end of the ceremony, Charles Giusti confirmed the point: "As prefect, it matters to me to authorise the works needed to preserve and showcase our rich French heritage, whose emblematic sites are scattered across the country, and the prefecture now closely supervises these projects so that they are better protected."

"Giverny is a village of 430 inhabitants and more than one million visitors a year," the Prime Minister insisted. "That is both an immense local responsibility and an extraordinary international showcase. Here, in a few streets and a few fields, you have the whole story of how impressionism was born and how it then travelled to the rest of the world." He presented the new exhibition "Before the Water Lilies, Monet Discovers Giverny" as the first chapter in a wider centenary program which, over the coming months, will connect the Seine valley from these meadows to the port of Le Havre, through a series of cultural and tourism initiatives.

17 YEARS OF POLITICAL INVESTMENT IN A SINGLE EVENING

Turning to the newly appointed Culture Minister Catherine Pegard, standing to his left, rime Minister Sebastien Lecornu, entrusted her with the task of carrying this Seine strategy forward, not without a touch of humour: "Catherine knows better than anyone what Le Havre means in the history of modern painting," he said, reminding the room that she was born there. He also cited the 2025 tally of around 140,000 visitors over 208 opening days as evidence that the "small galaxy" around Monet remains a powerful magnet, before thanking local authorities, the prefect, the Académie des Beaux Arts and the museum's patrons for supporting what he called "a promise of centenary celebrations worthy of Monet's place in our collective memory".

CYRILLE SCIAMA ON A "JOYFUL" PROJECT IN A TROUBLED WORLD

After the Prime Minister, it was up to Cyrille Sciama, director general and chief curator of the Musée des Impressionnismes, to speak. He began by acknowledging the paradox of designing an exhibition program around the centenary of a death. "We wanted to imagine a joyful project," he said, "which is not easy when you are commemorating someone's passing. So we tried to look at unknown angles and everyday moments, to show Monet discovering Giverny rather than Monet already entombed by glory."

Cyrille Sciama reminded the audience that the exhibition brings together 26 works from all over the world, some of which may never return to France because of geopolitical tensions. "There are paintings that should have come from Russia but could not travel because of the war in Ukraine," he said. In contrast, he thanked lenders in the United States, Japan and Scotland for agreeing to part with key works, as well as French institutions such as the Musée d'Orsay and the Monet Foundation in Giverny.

He detailed the role of patrons and sponsors, from the Caisse d'Epargne to individual collectors, and highlighted the museum's growing permanent collection: "When we started, there were 99 works in the collection. Today there are 235, including a dragonfly sculpture by the Japanese artist Feng J. placed in dialogue with Monet's Water Lilies with Willow Branches." Cyrille Sciama also announced the launch of a subscription campaign to acquire Les Trois Mats (1872) by Eugène Boudin, underlining that "Monet's story cannot be told without Boudin, who opened his eyes to the sky and the sea."

GIVERNY AND THE AMERICAN IMPRESSIONIST COLONY HAVE STRONG BONDS

From the late nineteenth century onwards, Giverny was not only Monet's refuge but also the heart of a transatlantic story. While Paris remained the magnet for thousands of American art students attracted by less rigid teaching and the prestige of the French salons, many soon felt the need to leave the city in summer and to test impressionist colour in the open air. The villages around Paris welcomed groups of painters who shared similar artistic concerns and wanted to paint fields, rivers and light rather than boulevards and cafés. The most durable of these colonies was Giverny, which quickly became a pole of attraction for American artists exploring the possibilities of impressionism in an atmosphere of friendly emulation.

TWO WAVES OF AMERICAN PAINTERS ON THE EPTE, EURE/NORMANDY

The Giverny colony dates back to 1887, when a handful of painters among them Willard Metcalf, Louis Ritter, Theodore Wendel and John Leslie Breck "discovered" the village. They already knew Monet's work from exhibitions in Paris and the United States and were drawn to the place where he had settled in 1883. More Americans followed, returning year after year beyond the summer months. Monet at first greeted them with a benevolent eye before tiring of what he sometimes called an "invasion", yet his presence alone ensured the steady growth of the colony and brought a new luminosity and richness of colour into their canvases.

Two distinct waves of American painters came before the First World War. An early group approached impressionism cautiously, often maintaining strong academic drawing and composition, while a later generation became more attentive to domestic scenes and, in particular, to women painted in gardens and interiors. The Epte, the small tributary of the Seine that runs through the village, the slopes above Giverny and the fields with their monumental haystacks became favorite motifs, alongside evenings lit by Japanese lanterns and tennis games on the nearby court. Most American impressionists in Giverny blended French methods with their own sensibilities, building solid structures and then using them as a base to experiment enthusiastically with light, color and brushwork. Their purchases later followed by American collectors and foundations such as Daniel J. Terra's Terra Foundation were decisive in giving Monet's work visibility and market value abroad, pulling him out of financial precariousness and anchoring a lasting Franco American relationship around Giverny, impressionism and cultural patronage.

CLAUDE MONET THE FAMILY MAN AND THE BIRTH OF A MYTH

The exhibition "Before the Water Lilies" focuses on the years 1883 1890, when Monet arrived in Giverny with his large blended family and rented the house that he would eventually buy in 1890. He was looking for a place close enough to Paris to keep in touch with dealers and critics, but rural and affordable enough to raise eight children in a garden setting

LETTERS, FAMILY WALKS AND A PAINTER IN LOVE WITH GIVERNY

Letters from the period show a painter falling in love with the landscape. "I am in raptures; Giverny is a splendid country for me," he wrote to his friend Theodore Duret in 1883. The canvases on display confirm it: poppy fields, rows of poplars, haystacks and snowy roofs, all composed with a rigorous sense of structure but increasingly bathed in atmosphere and vibration. Monet roamed the countryside with his children, who helped carry his equipment; Guy de Maupassant famously described the painter and his little ones trudging towards the cliffs of Etretat. Correspondence also reveals a demanding but playful father, an excellent swimmer who dived into the Seine, played hide and seek and tennis, and took his family on Sunday excursions to landscapes he sometimes did not even paint.

1890: FROM TENANT TO OWNER, AND THE BIRTH OF THE GARDEN MYTH

In 1890, thanks to rising sales and his growing international reputation largely fuelled by American collectors Monet was able to buy the house he had rented for seven years and to create the gardens that would dominate his late work. The exhibition ends by hinting at these future water lilies while remaining rooted in the earlier, more fragile years when nothing was guaranteed. Monet died in this house on 5 December 1926 and was buried in the village cemetery. During the funeral, his friend Georges Clemenceau (Former French President of the Peace Council in 1917) the "father of Victory", also called " the Tiger" refused the traditional black pall and demanded a white cloth instead, declaring that there would be "no black for Monet".

POLITICS, FRANCO AMERICAN PATRONAGE & A MODERNISED MUSEUM: GIVERNY THE IMPRESSIONISTS

This inauguration at Giverny is more than a pleasant evening for a Prime Minister returning to familiar ground; it crystallizes several layers of French soft power. On one level, it showcases a small village that receives more than a million visitors a year and whose

name has become synonymous with impressionism, probably the most known French Museum, after the Louvre, y the painting lovers. On another, it quietly reminds observers that American artists and collectors from the Giverny colony of the 1880s to modern foundations like Terra were the ones who first bought Claude Monet in depth, helping him escape precariousness and turning his Norman refuge into a global reference point.

From the vantage point of a wheelchair journalist present in the room, the evening also marked a discreet but real step forward for accessibility: a major French museum that is finally fully navigable in a wheelchair, with ramps, lifts and adapted facilities, free admission for disabled visitors and reduced fares for their companions. This editorial does not claim to exhaust the meaning of “Before the Water Lilies”, nor to settle the debate on how governments should use culture in times of geopolitical tension. It offers one informed reading, grounded in official speeches, curatorial work and lived experience on site, in the hope of showing how, in a single place Giverny politics, art history, Franco American patronage and the long, unfinished fight for inclusion can briefly come into focus.../

This report is based on on?the?ground coverage of Prime Minister Sebastien Lecornu’s trip from Matignon Paris PM office to Giverny, combining official speeches, curatorial material and direct observations inside the Musée des Impressionnismes. It is written by our accredited senior cultural and geopolitical correspondent, a wheelchair journalist reporting from the field and assessing both the political messaging and the concrete accessibility of the event.

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