

Review: *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting*

by Ruth E. Iskin

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Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting transports us to possibly the most exciting period of Paris's cultural history – the final decades of the nineteenth century – when conspicuous consumerism became a new sport for anyone who could afford it, and Impressionist painters stalked streets and theatres, parks and dancehalls to capture 'Le Flaneur' and 'La Parisienne' in their urban habitat. Ruth E. Iskin explores the complicated relationship between Impressionist paintings and the burgeoning Parisian consumer culture in which they were created, writing about fine artists and their fascination with the mass-made object. She charts the evolution of a symbiotic relationship between commercial and fine art, in which we can also situate Marcel DuChamp's readymades of the 1910s, and which arguably reached its ultimate conclusion in Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* paintings of the early 1960s.

Iskin challenges us to find new ways of understanding Impressionist paintings and in particular the complex relationship between women and consumer culture that they construct. She reassesses old ideas about the 'gendered gaze' in relation to women in Impressionist paintings and proves that women were actively rather than passively involved on every level of consumer society. As the author puts it, women are 'cultural consumers who are agents in their own display and in their looking, and who negotiate the tensions of their position in public space' (4). Iskin splits the text into six thematic chapters. The introductory chapter, 'Impressionism, Consumer Culture and Modern Women' broadly sets out her aims, and is followed by one of the strongest chapters in

the book, 'Selling Seduction and Soliciting the Eye'. Here remarkably, Iskin manages to offer a fresh look at Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, abandoning the clichéd idea of the barmaid as the subject of a (male) gendered gaze, and instead positing the view that the way 'the gaze' works within this familiar painting is actually far more complicated. In chapter 3, 'Degas's Dazzling Hat Shops and Artisanal Ateliers: Consumers, Milliners and Saleswomen, 1882-c. 1910', Iskin analyses Degas' Millinery paintings to further her exploration of issues of gender and class hierarchy within Parisian consumer culture. In Chapter 4, 'Inconspicuous Subversion: Parisian Consumer Culture in 1870s City Views' she tackles the urban landscape of 1870's city views and argues that even in these landscape paintings there is a subtle ambivalence of painters to the consumer culture which has flooded their city. Chapter 5, 'Nature and Marketplace: Zola, Pissarro and Caillebotte' refers to literature and paintings about markets and kitchen gardens, exploring the juxtaposition of rural and urban life, home-grown and processed food. Finally, in the sixth chapter, 'The Chic Parisienne: A National Brand of French Fashion and Femininity', Iskin shows how consumer culture, and in particular female fashion, became an integral part in this period not only of the city's identity, but of French national identity also.

Iskin sets out clearly the questions shaping her study in the introductory chapter, as she speculates:

What was the relationship between the avant-garde painting of Manet and the Impressionists and Parisian consumer culture? Was it merely a cultural, chronological and geographical coincidence, or was there a meaningful link? Did the painting of Manet and the Impressionists criticize or approve of Parisian consumer culture, or was it detached from this crucial aspect of modernity? These were the initial questions that motivated this study (2).

In choosing her examples Iskin includes some very well-known paintings, but where this book really succeeds is in the juxtaposition of these paintings with lesser-known Impressionist works, and contemporary commercial artworks. In this way we are made aware of the wider context in which the Impressionists worked, where commercialism shouted out from poster billboards, brightly-lit shop windows and flashing signs around the city. She uses an interdisciplinary approach which allows her to draw on literary

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examples from contemporary fiction and contemporary art criticism. Interestingly these contemporary critics seem to have been far more aware (and enraged by) the influence of consumer culture in these paintings than we, as advertising-saturated modern consumers, might.

Iskin ambitiously aims to apply new arguments within a well-trodden area of art history – and on the whole she manages, adding new insight to the analysis of well-known works, and drawing on many new and unusual sources. She answers the questions posed in her introduction with varying success in each of her chapters. The book covers a period in which the ‘high’ art of paintings conflicted with the ‘low’ art of advertising, although Iskin proves that each was inspired by the other. Impressionist artists such as Renoir and Degas moved away from the traditional depiction of upper classes (formal portraits commissioned by patrons) and rural landscapes into the urban landscape of the modern city, and with it the portrayal of everyone who peopled those streets, from upper-class shoppers to lower-class shopkeepers and assistants. The third chapter on Degas’s millinery paintings vividly demonstrates the female bias of this new consumer society. In these paintings although Degas himself arguably occupies the position of a male voyeur, the consumers and the shop assistants are women. In her careful analysis of these paintings Iskin demonstrates that this is an entirely feminine world of ribbons and flowers, bonnets and dresses, where women occupy every level of a hierarchy, from rich customer and experienced artisan to the young girls learning their trade.

This book is truly successful in the moments when Iskin challenges the oversimplistic (and some might argue over-enthusiastic) application of the ‘gendered gaze’ to Impressionist paintings. The concept of the gendered gaze originated in film theory, and Iskin proves that it cannot be crudely utilized to deconstruct Impressionist art, as the position of the spectator and the subject in Impressionist paintings of consumer culture are dictated by a far more subtle and complicated web of gendered positions than those constructed by Laura Mulvey in her original ‘male gaze’ thesis.¹ Whereas previously Mulvey’s theory has been used to identify a wholly male point of view which intrudes on the passive female, Iskin uses her second and third chapters in

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particular to point out that in these paintings of consumer culture, women are themselves consumers (as well as beings who are consumed), taking an active role in the real life which is portrayed:

By considering modern women's roles not only as passive icons that sell commodities but also as active producers, consumers and sellers, I argue that certain paintings by Manet and the Impressionists represent modern women's agency and inclusion rather than passivity and exclusion from the public spaces of modern Paris (23).

'The Chic Parisienne' is another chapter in which Iskin powerfully backs up her idea of an active and influential female role in consumer culture. She paints a portrait of a consumer society in which women are active and important at every level, from production through to consumption. She successfully argues the point that the modern, fashionable woman, known internationally as 'La Parisienne', in her guise as a consumer and displayer of French goods became not only the subject of many Impressionist paintings, but also a symbol of France as a nation.

Iskin's subject matter and examples are never less than interesting, but it is still true to say that in relation to this potentially vast subject some relevant and interesting dichotomies remain relatively unexplored. For example there is never really any discussion of the relationships between mass-made and hand-made objects, public space and domestic personal space in paintings, or disposable (commercial) art in relation to collectable (fine) art. The analysis of the contrast between the ready-made accessibility of consumer goods and the unique and (potentially) valuable Impressionist paintings which document them, remains underdeveloped.

While Iskin draws on diverse sources outside of Impressionist art in order to back up her arguments, there are some glaring omissions also. Why for example, is Toulouse-Lautrec mentioned only very fleetingly? While he is strictly part of the Post-Impressionist school, his art is the logical extension of the work started by the Impressionists themselves. He is one of the most obvious artists to truly straddle the line between fine art and commercial art. Iskin mentions in passing that Manet produced some lithographs and posters, but she never really explores the crossover that occurred between fine art and commercial art which Toulouse-Lautrec typified (48). He

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embraced consumer culture with both arms by designing posters which advertised every consumer good Paris had to offer. Toulouse-Lautrec himself also verifies Iskin's argument that these paintings made a leap from the depiction of the idealised subject to the portrayal of real, modern life (he famously said, 'I have tried to depict the true and not the ideal').ⁱⁱ Another artist very relevant to Iskin's arguments is Tissot – yet he is barely mentioned. He was outside of the Impressionist movement (as of course were many of the other sources Iskin draws), but in relation to 'La Parisienne' his paintings of coquettish young women in painstakingly detailed fashionable dresses were internationally popular and must have been as important in establishing this feminine 'type' as any painting by Manet or Degas.

By attempting to cover quite so much, Iskin risks not doing justice to some of the paintings and literature she analyses. This is apparent in chapter 5 for example, where under the title 'Nature and Marketplace' she looks at a book by Zola, and paintings by Manet, Pissaro, and Caillbottle. Chapter 5 is for me the least successful because Iskin strays too far from her title. Whilst there is an interesting dichotomy between urban and rural whereby the rural – in the shape of kitchen gardens and markets which invade the urban space of the city – it is not really enough about the city, or modern women either to fit smoothly into the wider themes of the book. Generally Iskin backs her arguments up with detailed analyses of interesting and diverse source material. However there are places where the argument seems stretched a little too far: for example, when attempting to establish the possible influence of Degas's Millinery paintings on Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*. Iskin writes that 'while working on *A Bar at the Folies-Bergere*, he may well have seen Degas's pastel depicting two fashionable consumers seated behind a luscious display of hats [...]' (my italics, 97). She continues with a string of 'might haves', 'could haves' and 'it is possible thats' to finish with the slightly spurious observation that 'between 1882 and 1886, however, he [Degas] undertook a large oil painting, *The Millinery Shop*. The dimensions of the painting [...] were not far off from those of *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*' (98).

This book would be of interest to anyone interested in or studying art history, social history, or gender issues in the nineteenth century. Iskin succeeds in adding new

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angles to the discussion in an already-crowded area of academic discourse. However, for a book which covers such a fascinating period of Parisian history, it sometimes lacks energy. The absence of colour illustrations and the visually-restrained presentation mean that we never really fall in love and engage with the paintings in the way Iskin clearly wants us to – relying on her description of vibrant colours and details just isn't enough. Restricted by its publishing format (a problem faced by both art historians and, increasingly, scholars from other disciplines drawing on examples from the visual arts) Iskin's monograph is impeded somewhat by the quality of its image reproduction, which may limit its appeal to the wider (non-academic) readership its interesting subject matter might easily otherwise attract. However, Iskin's study excels in making us rethink traditional gender paradigms of the late-nineteenth-century Parisian visual market.

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ⁱ See Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).

ⁱⁱ 'Henry deToulouse-Lautrec', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*

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