

**If Objects Could Speak: Tales of Race and Empire at Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party***

**Elizabeth Heath  
Baruch College, City University of New York**



Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1880-1881), The Phillips Collection, Acquired 1923. (Public Domain)

Pierre-Auguste Renoir's impressionist masterpiece *The Luncheon of the Boating Party* (*Le Déjeuner des canotiers*) (1881) is an iconic image of metropolitan leisure and sociability in the early Third Republic. Viewers have long been drawn by the beauty of this carefree image of fashionably dressed friends enjoying an afternoon filled with food and drink on a balcony overlooking the Seine. At the center of the canvas, a woman drinking a glass of wine reciprocates the viewer's gaze as if to assure them that this moment is as delightful as it seems and to invite them to stop and enjoy the arresting scene. The *plein air* spirit of the painting,

which suggests that the festivities were captured on the spot as they really happened, further reinforces this immediacy. Critics have understandably expressed admiration for Renoir's ability to endow this piece, which he painted in his studio, with these charms. Art historians have equally praised the work for its composition and, above all, Renoir's ability to draw together the genres of landscape, figure painting, and still life. Through his use of color and light, Renoir succeeds in merging these elements seamlessly into a single style that would become his hallmark among Impressionist painters.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, analyses of *Luncheon of the Boating Party* have increasingly turned to social questions, mining the scene to explore the social relations that sustained and shaped Renoir's artistic production. In 2017 the Phillips Collection, where the painting has been housed since 1923, showcased the work in an exhibit entitled "Renoir and Friends." Drawing together forty different works of art as well as a technical analysis of the canvas, the exhibition aimed to "uncover the circumstances leading up to the painting's creation, the diverse and fascinating circle of friends who inspired it, and the complex evolution of the work itself."<sup>2</sup> Today, viewers can access features of this exhibit virtually on the museum's website. This online resource is complemented by an interactive tool available on Wikipedia, which allows one to click on any given figure to identify and learn more about the individual. Together these digital resources permit viewers to learn the names and read the biographies of the models, socialites, artists, and intellectuals who inhabited Renoir's circle of friends. These include Renoir's muse and future wife, Aline Charigot, fellow artist, Gustave Caillebotte, and the art critic and collector, Charles Ephrussi. The woman who meets the viewer's gaze while enjoying her sip of wine is Ellen Andrée who modeled for Édouard Manet and Edgar Degas as well as Renoir. She is seated across from Baron Raoul Barbier, the former mayor of Saigon. Other illustrative figures include the writer and poet Jules Lafargue, the artist Paul Lhote, and Jeanne Samary, famed for her performances at the Comédie Française. One is even able to identify Charigot's little dog by breed (an affenpinscher) though not by name.

Through these digital tools, the seemingly anonymous individuals who occupy Renoir's canvas are given substance and history. In addition, these online resources illuminate the context and background that brought these individuals together on the balcony of the Fournaise restaurant on a sunny afternoon in Chatou. As the biographies reveal, this group of friends ranged from models, muses, and love interests to artists, financial backers, and collectors. Each played an essential role in inspiring and supporting Renoir and his work through difficult years and buoyed him to success in the 1880s. By filling in the social and economic background of these individuals, the Phillips Collection enables one to understand the complex networks that sustained the painter as he developed and refined his style. These personal connections likewise offer insights into the women and heterosocial relations figured in Renoir's works. In addition, these biographies allow one to place Renoir and his cadre of *bon vivants* within a social and cultural milieu of aspiring artists and actors who defined the visual culture of the early Third Republic. In short, it is a tool that allows one to look beyond the frame and contextualize the

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<sup>1</sup> Rathbone et al., *Renoir and Friends*. Also useful are Néret, *Renoir*, Bailey, *Renoir Intimacy* and White, *Renoir*.

<sup>2</sup> The Phillips Collection, <https://www.phillipscollection.org/event/2017-10-06-renoir-and-friends-luncheon-boating-party>. Accessed January 25, 2022. A clickable image of Renoir's painting is available through Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:Renoir-BoatingParty-ImageMap>. Accessed January 25, 2022.

picture within a larger setting. From this perspective, the painting becomes a window into a much wider and more complex world of social and economic relations that enabled Impressionism to develop as an artistic movement and mode of visual representation and become a quintessential form of French art.

There is much to learn from the histories of the individuals who animate *Luncheon of the Boating Party* and give the painting its charm. In this short essay, however, I wish to turn the tables, so to speak, by asking what we might learn by shifting our focus away from the people and to the things with whom they share this scene. What do we gain by analyzing the material objects featured in the painting—the clothing, furniture, tableware, wine, and food—in a similar fashion? What kinds of stories would these objects tell about the paths they traveled before being immortalized in Renoir’s painting? What would the biographies of these objects reveal about the larger historical context in which this painting was created? The objects would probably ruminate on their origins, including reflections on their creators and the conditions under which these individuals lived and labored. Their stories would also likely include the circuitous processes that transferred them from one hand to another before arriving at this sociable gathering on this particular day.

Giving voice and biography to the inanimate material objects depicted in Renoir’s painting, I argue, is more than a playful exercise in applying the methods of commodity studies to the world of art history.<sup>3</sup> Similar to the analysis developed by the curators of the Philips Collection, this approach promises to deepen and broaden our perspective and ability to locate this seemingly quaint metropolitan scene within a wide range of imperial and global networks. It permits the viewer to break the neatly bounded frame created by Renoir and to situate the social relations he captured within a wider world of production, racialized labor systems, and extractive economies constitutive of nineteenth-century French capitalism. Asking the objects to tell their stories thus offers a way to contextualize this carefree scene within the imperial and global economic relations that helped produced the very forms of French sociability and leisure that *Luncheon of the Boating Party* idealizes and to uncover the multiple ways that racialized labor systems sustained this ideal.<sup>4</sup>

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If objects could speak, the ones depicted in *Luncheon of the Boating Party* would no doubt tell a diverse set of tales linking the French metropolitan and imperial economies, situating both within global circuits of goods and labor. In the early Third Republic when Renoir began the painting, the formal French empire was still quite small, comprising a smattering of territories located in the Caribbean, North Africa, West Africa, and Asia. Informal imperial connections tied the Republic to a much wider range of places in North Africa, the Middle East, Polynesia, the Indian Ocean, and Asia.<sup>5</sup> Many would be officially claimed as colonies and protectorates over the next

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<sup>3</sup> These methods are explored in greater detail in Appadurai, *Social Life of Things*, Brown, “Thing Theory,” Auslander, “Beyond Words,” Joyce and Gillespie eds., *Things in Motion*. Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, whose foundational insights into the lives of commodities inspired these talking tables and object tales. The essay also draws on the genre of object tales as discussed in Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures*, chapter three.

<sup>4</sup> Clark, *Painting of Modern Life*, chapter three and White, *Work and Leisure*, introduction and chapter three.

<sup>5</sup> Todd, *Velvet Empire*.

decade. Layered onto this formal and informal empire were a series of global networks sustained by racialized labor systems. The objects depicted in Renoir's painting would have spoken to the wide gamut of these networks and, in particular, the multiple forms of labor that brought them into being.



Detail of *The Luncheon of Boating Party*. Fellow painter Gustave Caillebotte with boater hat.

If presented with an opportunity and an interested ear, for instance, the boater hat that adorns Caillebotte's head might launch into a tale contemplating the racialization of migrant labor within Europe. The accessory might begin with its origins as sennit straw grown in the southwest of France and harvested by Italian or Spanish workers who migrated seasonally. Or it might tell tales of the humble hands who wove the straw or of the young woman who shaped this woven fiber into the iconic shape of a boater hat. Some of these milliners, the hat might note, had been immortalized by Renoir's contemporary, Edgar Degas. The grosgrain ribbon attached to the hat might tell a different tale of the weavers who labored over steam-powered looms to unite silk and wool into a strong and sturdy ribbon. Finally, the boater might boast of being a symbol of pleasure and leisure and its association with the bohemian culture of the artist crowd. Implicitly or explicitly, the hat might compare the good times it represented to the iconic symbol of staid bourgeois respectability embodied by the top hat worn by Charles Ephrussi depicted standing all the way in the back in Renoir's painting.



Detail of *Luncheon of Boating Party*. Aline Charigot in fashionable dress and hat with dog.

The dress and hat worn by Aline Charigot would no doubt have other tales to tell, namely about the global textile industry and its deep ties to slavery. It, too, would likely begin with the fibers from which it was made. Its story would change depending on whether it identified as a fine silk woven in Lyon or a cotton blend woven in Rouen from cotton fibers produced by Black sharecroppers in the post-emancipation southern United States.<sup>6</sup> Alternatively, the fabric might speak with an English accent, attesting to the fact that it had been woven in the cotton mills of Manchester. The dress might also draw attention to the synthetic dyes that had turned this cloth into a lustrous blue, noting that the new dyes were a scientific marvel that attested to the garment's modernity.<sup>7</sup> Invariably the dress would mention the seamstress—perhaps Charigot herself—who produced this garment. Depending on its origins, the dress might reflect on the ready-to-wear industry that had developed in Paris and placed metropolitan and immigrant, often Jewish, workers in competition that was framed in racial terms.<sup>8</sup> Reflecting on this labor, the dress would recount the long hours the seamstress, whatever her origins, had spent hunched over her needle and thread, or perhaps a sewing machine, to give this dress form and shape to fit the artist's muse.<sup>9</sup> Lest they be overlooked, the lace collar would add to the chatter while the mother of pearl buttons might tell yarns of their seaside origins and those who collected the shells.



Detail of *Luncheon of Boating Party*. Charigot's hat with flowers.

With a soft “ahem,” Charigot's hat might silence this prattle in order to recount its own tale with deep links to plantation labor. The story of sennit straw having been told, it might point to the (presumably) artificial flowers that adorned the straw. Crafted by women in Paris, the silk flowers were inspired by actual flowers like poppies, dahlias, peonies, and roses ubiquitous in Impressionist garden scenes. The real flowers on which they were modeled, and which appeared in Parisian flower shops, made the journey from the suburbs of Paris or the South of France by train.<sup>10</sup> More whimsical floral creations seen on other fashionable hats of the period drew inspiration from exotic flowers, like orchids grown in the Caribbean or French Polynesia. In the *vieilles colonies* of Guadeloupe and Martinique, the poorly-paid labor force that painstakingly

<sup>6</sup> See Reddy, *Rise of Market Culture*.

<sup>7</sup> See Kalba, *Color*, chapter one.

<sup>8</sup> See Green, Pletzl of Paris and Ready to Wear.

<sup>9</sup> See Coffin, *Politics of Women's Work*.

<sup>10</sup> Kalba, *Color*, chapter two and Vivier, “Was Horticulture,” 97-98.

tended the orchids descended from enslaved men and women emancipated in 1848. In Tahiti, which became a French colony the very year Renoir started *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, the emerging orchids plantations employed native men and women to care for the highly fragrant and profitable vanilla orchid. Most metropolitan French, though, would have associated the floral accessories not with colonial plantations, but with the seductive charms of flower-adorned women featured in images of island life popularized by Renoir's contemporaries, including Paul Gauguin.



Detail of *Luncheon of Boating Party*. Table, chairs, and tableware.

Not to be outdone by these fashionable garments and their global origins, the table and tableware would boldly interject their own stories, turning attention back to the economic changes underway in the French metropolitan provinces. The boisterous table might speak of its origins as a strapping pine from the Landes forests, attesting to the reforestation of the Gascon region and the demise of the pastoralist ways of its human inhabitants.<sup>11</sup> The table might also talk of the woodcutters who felled the tree from which it came and how this wood was transported to the workshop where it was cut and crafted into a sturdy table by a local artisan. The glassware might trace its origins to the furnaces of Carmaux and the speak of rising tensions between workers and the management.<sup>12</sup> The glassware might reflect that some of these tensions revolved around immigrant workers, just as they did elsewhere in other industrial centers like Longwy and in the Nord.<sup>13</sup>



Detail of *Luncheon of Boating Party*. Still life with wine and fruit.

<sup>11</sup> See Sahlins, *Forest Rites* and Whited, *Forests*.

<sup>12</sup> See Scott, *Glassworkers of Carmaux*.

<sup>13</sup> See Noiriel, *Immigration* and Camiscioli, *Reproducing the French Race*.

Finally, the food and drink would demand their turn to speak, noting their importance in animating this lively scene at the restaurant balcony. What tales these grapes and carafes of wine might tell! Though associated with sociability and frivolity, their narratives might offer a sobering account of destruction and upheaval. The grapes might recount the horror stories they've heard about the mysterious blight that had decimated neighboring vineyards and of French wine growers who had moved to Algeria in search of new land unaffected by phylloxera.<sup>14</sup> The wine might reveal in hushed tones that it is not exactly what it purported to be, but rather a blend created from multiple southern wines perhaps mixed with wine imported from Algeria. The wine produced in Algeria, it might note, was harvested by peasants who had been dispossessed of their land by French military forces and now worked the vineyards that had been planted by European settlers.<sup>15</sup> Renoir himself would observe some of these changes when he traveled to Algeria in 1881 and 1882 in search of health, warmer climates, and idyllic scenery.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the carafe of wine might shrug off these facts noting that its affordability had helped to reduce the cost of living for Parisians and allowed them to spend more money on leisure activities rather than necessities such as food and drink. This very scene was testament to the material gains that this imperial system offered residents in the metropole. As the carafe finished its tale, Charigot's dog might draw attention to the animated objects, forcing their return to the quiet befitting mere things.

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Thinking through things thus offers a way to place this painting and the scene it depicts within a wide range of global and imperial networks and racialized labor systems. This object-focused approach also invites us to consider why it might have been possible for historical viewers to read this painting as separate larger global economic and imperial context in the first place. The conviviality of the scene—and the interactions between people—are the obvious focus of Renoir's painting. As viewers, we want to know more about these amiable looking individuals and the adventures they've had boating and basking along the Seine. We want to join them and revel in their sociability, forgetting all other cares and concerns. In this way, the painting constructs an image of what it meant to be French, to live well, and to enjoy life in the early Third Republic. It does so without any obvious reference to empire or race.

This apparent absence is even more notable when the image is placed within the context of contemporary French visual culture. Empire was, of course, highly visible in other areas of French visual culture in the late nineteenth century. Graphic and vibrant images of the expanding empire in the illustrated press titillated readers. Metropolitan audiences routinely encountered advertisements that used racialized figures and exoticism to sell goods ranging from chocolate to bouillon cubes.<sup>17</sup> Orientalist paintings by Eugène Delacroix, Jean-Léon Gérôme, and Gustave Guillaumet likewise offered highly stylized images of racialized subjects. Renoir himself would contribute to this hypervisibility with his own attempts to paint in an Orientalist style. The year he completed *Luncheon*, Renoir followed in the footsteps of Claude Monet and travelled to Algeria. There he became preoccupied with the question of lighting and, above all, fascinated

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<sup>14</sup> Gale, *Dying on the Vine*, Heath, *Wine, Sugar, White, Blood of the Colony*, chapter two.

<sup>15</sup> White, *Blood of the Colony*, chapter two. Also Sessions, *By Sword and Plow* and Barthes, *Mythologies*.

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics*, 33-48.

<sup>17</sup> See Hale, *Races on Display* and Smalls, "'Race' as Spectacle."

with the complexities of the color white. He also experienced the frustrations of trying to find local models willing to sit for his painting. Stymied by the reluctance of native women to work the role of the racialized other, Renoir ultimately resorted to painting European models dressed in local garb.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to these images, which boldly emphasized race, empire, and exoticism, Renoir's *Luncheon* appears decidedly non-imperial and non-exotic.<sup>19</sup> It is, simply put, a snapshot of metropolitan culture. Yet, it is this apparent simplicity that requires questioning especially when placed within this larger visual culture in which empire and race were hypervisible. Seen in this context, it is worth considering how seemingly uncomplicated representations of metropolitan life like Renoir's tacitly reinforced the binary between metropole and colony—between French daily life and imperial life—all while naturalizing the metropole and Frenchness as white. Set against the images of empire that circulated in this period, images like Renoir's reinforced the idea that French metropolitan life could be divorced from the empire even while the quotidian economic and social practices depicted by these images suggest otherwise. The material objects that appear in Renoir's *Luncheon* speak to the fact that empire and imperial social relations were not absent from this convivial scene. They are simply overlooked. Indeed, some might argue, this is exactly the power of commodities: to obscure the social relations embedded within them.<sup>20</sup> Like Renoir's painting, colonial commodities helped to subsume and erase these social relations and render them, for lack of a better word, invisible.

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What material objects, like the ones analyzed here, offer the historian is a way to explore how empire, global networks, and racialized labor systems shaped and structured everyday life in modern France. If asked, the objects depicted in Renoir's *Luncheon* have stories to tell that expand the tightly bounded frame of the canvas and complicate the image of metropolitan leisure it depicts. Interrogating these objects and the social relations embedded in them enables viewers to contextualize this metropolitan scene within a larger framework structured by race and difference. Moreover, following these object stories offers insights into the ways that empire and race came to be hidden in plain sight in the visual culture of late nineteenth century France. This is essential for understanding both how empire was rendered invisible and French metropolitan space was naturalized as white.<sup>21</sup>

Some critics may reject this approach to the study of visual culture and material objects as going too far to assert the importance of empire and race to French metropolitan life. That, I think is to miss the fundamental point. Empire and race—like global capitalism—consciously or unconsciously structured the way that French metropolitan men and women thought about the world and lived their lives. In short, empire and race-thinking constituted part of a French metropolitan habitus and forms of subjectivity. These social relations shaped the way French

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<sup>18</sup> Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics*, 35.

<sup>19</sup> As Benjamin notes, the works Renoir produced during his two trips to Algeria are often viewed as distinct and separate from the rest of his work. Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics*,

<sup>20</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, chapter one.

<sup>21</sup> On race in metropolitan France see Peabody and Stovall, eds. *Color of Liberty*, Keaton, Sharpley-Whiting and Stovall, eds., *Black France*, Mitchell, *Vénus Noire*, and Stovall, *White Freedom*.

men and women in the metropole approached and thought about the world whether or not we wish to see it or listen to the stories that these objects have to tell.

**About the author:** Elizabeth Heath is an Associate Professor of History at Baruch College, City University of New York. She is currently completing a manuscript entitled *Invisible Empires: Colonial Commodities, Capitalism, and the Making of Modern French Self*, which explores the role that colonial territories, producers, and products played in the emergence of distinctive forms of perception and cognition that aided the development of French industrial capitalism between 1750 and 1970.

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