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Response to [Hollis Clayson's review](#) of **Ruth E. Iskin's** *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xiv + 283 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-521-84080-4.

Response by Ruth E. Iskin, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

I would like to thank H-France for inviting me to write a response to Hollis Clayson's review of my book, *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting*. Clayson states repeatedly that the field of Impressionist painting is a "well-tilled terrain" that has attracted "formidable analytic energy;" and that "dozens of art historians" "have conducted their work under the elastic banner, "the social history of Impressionism," yet leaves readers in the dark about the book's place and significance in this broader scholarly context. Furthermore, the main arguments of the book are not clearly presented and some are not even touched upon. I will address these issues in my response, leaving it to H-France readers to judge for themselves the merits of my arguments.

Clayson acknowledges that "the book will change the way one thinks about the pictures discussed," but does not adequately explain how it achieves this new thinking. She only briefly remarks that the book "moves forward on two conjoined battle fronts: that of consumer culture and female agency." She also scants new findings in the book by not referring to prior scholarship, including — surprisingly — her own. For example, Chapter Three, "Degas's Dazzling Hat Shops and Artisanal Ateliers: Consumers, Milliners and Saleswomen, 1882 - c. 1910," discusses a theme that has been ignored by many scholars. It interprets Degas's works on the millinery theme in the context of Parisian fashion consumption, departing from earlier interpretations by Clayson and Eunice Lipton of Degas's milliners as clandestine prostitutes.[1] Clayson fails to note this shift from prostitution to fashion consumption in understanding Degas's millinery works. The chapter further advances the discussion by demonstrating that Degas depicts three interconnected themes in these works: milliners at work; displays of decorated hats as fashion commodities; and middle-class women shopping attended by saleswomen. Clayson singles out my discussion of the sites of consumption (boutiques, elite designer salon, alcoves in department stores) as one of the "most original points," concluding that if this is the case, "then the whole series is much less anachronistic than it has seemed hitherto." However, this statement makes little sense to those not familiar with earlier interpretations, leaving readers in the dark about what is new in the chapter.

Similarly, Clayson's comments about the second chapter, on Edouard Manet's 1882 painting, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, do not explain what the chapter adds to prior scholarship. Earlier interpretation of this painting, considered a masterpiece in the art historical canon, did not pay much attention to the prominent "still-life" on the counter — a display of glittering bottles of alcoholic beverages positioned in the

forefront of the painting, next to the woman selling drinks.[1] I link Manet's representation to new practices of commodity display as they are described in textual and visual sources of the time. As I further argue, Manet draws an analogy between the depicted display and the conditions of modern artists by signing and dating his painting inside a label on one of the bottles.

Clayson's criticism of the chapter turns on my comment: "If we ask whether *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* was critical of mass consumption, was complicit with it, or even celebrated it, an argument could be made in favor of each of these possibilities, though it would be misleading to cast the debate in such 'either/or' terms. Avant-garde painting was both immersed in the contemporaneous scene of mass consumption and an agent in it" (p. 58). My objection to the "either/or" model is deemed open-ended, "puzzling and unhelpful," suggesting that Clayson prefers the binary model of either criticizing or celebrating a denigrated consumer culture. However, the book shows that the Impressionists' response to consumer culture was far more complex.[3] Chapter five, for example, "Nature and Marketplace: Zola, Pissarro and Caillebotte," analyzes three distinct modernist responses to markets. In it, I demonstrate that the Impressionists differed from Zola's failed avant-garde painter, Claude Lantier, who in *Le ventre de Paris* sarcastically critiques consumer culture in a short-lived "heroic" oppositional act by rearranging the shop window of a Parisian charcuterie to evoke disgust instead of desire. Individual chapters discuss the Impressionist artists' diverse strategies, distinguishing the 1870s from the early 1880s and changed attitudes in the 1890s.

The review confusedly conflates my analysis in chapter four of the artists' ambivalence about consumer culture with my own supposedly "ambivalent interpretation," citing my statement that "[m]odernist painters insisted on the ubiquitous presence of the material signs of the culture of consumption, yet kept them at a distance" (p. 147). There is nothing ambivalent about my position. Throughout the chapter I argue that during the 1870s, the Impressionists (except Renoir) depicted city views of Paris that expressed ambivalence towards consumer culture by including its traces yet carefully controlling its presence. Furthermore, in contrasting their representations with advertising images of this period, I show rather clearly that they refrained from celebrating consumer culture.

The review fails to note how chapter four reopens central questions about whether Impressionist paintings project an innocence of the colonization of daily life by capital, as T. J. Clark concludes, or are complicit with Haussmannization, as Robert L. Herbert proposes.[4] I demonstrate that the Impressionists' 1870s city views included stores, window displays, advertising signs, a huge wall advertisement for a department store, a poster, and Morris columns. Most of these have not been noticed or discussed despite many in-depth analyses of representations of Paris in the Impressionist oeuvre. I argue that the Impressionists mounted an inconspicuous subversion through their representational strategies, using a variety of visual means to control the presence of signs of consumer culture.

The reviewer objects to my analysis of Caillebotte's *Interior* (1880), which focuses on the large gold-lettered street sign seen through a window. I argue that Caillebotte draws attention to the sign qua generic sign by fragmenting its words to make it incomprehensible. Referring to contemporary discourses and practices about advertising, I demonstrate that Caillebotte represents the intrusiveness of the street and advertising. Although Clayson admits the "undeniable prominence" of this sign, she charges that "the discovery" of it "apparently discouraged the author from

pursuing the significance of the flash point of the painting's mise-en-scène: the inquisitive female subject's concentration upon the exposed triangle of a neighbor's curtained apartment window." Not elaborating on this minute, barely legible detail (first noticed by Kirk Varnedoe)[5] is not blocked awareness or a "methodological problem," as Clayson claims. Since the woman's back is turned to the viewer, it is impossible to know what she is concentrating on; certainly the possibility that she is looking at her neighbor is irrelevant to my focus on the material culture of consumption.

To give an example of Clayson's not elucidating the main arguments of the book, consider the statement: "Departing from the orthodox feminist reading, Iskin argues that the picture [Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*] represents a plurality of gazes at a site of consumption ..." Readers are not informed what this departs from. Since first developed in art history by Griselda Pollock, the binary model of a "male gaze" vs. woman as sexualized passive object has become an unquestioned assumption for many in the field.[6] I recognize the importance of this work, but see it as fitting only certain images. My book proposes a different model, which can be useful for other kinds of images and for an alternative reading of some of the same images. It also adds complexity, demonstrating that some paintings represent women's strategies of coping with gender/power tensions within public spaces (chapters one and six). The related overall argument — that Impressionist paintings represent women's inclusion in modernity and its public spaces — is not discussed in the review. Clayson's cryptic comment essentially leaves readers in the dark about the revisionist contribution that the book makes to the dialogue in the field on these issues.[7]

The reviewer's criticisms of chapter six, "The Chic Parisienne: A National Brand of French Fashion and Femininity," do not engage with the central argument. The chapter interprets the Impressionists' depictions of the fashionable Parisienne within the visual culture of consumption (advertisements for fashion journals; fashion plates; posters and sales-catalogues of department stores; a monumental sculpture made for a mass audience). I demonstrate that Impressionist paintings consciously refer to this "type" as constituted in images in print media of the time. By this I do not mean, as Clayson says, "an across-the-board wish" of the artists "to emulate" the media type, which is deemed "not entirely satisfactory as a general proposition." Clayson's own interest in caricatures leads her to elaborate on her view about their ideological functions and to criticize their not being included in the chapter. Caricatures (however worthy of study) did not suit my method here, which gives priority to visual culture images promoting feminine fashions such as fashion plates and posters. It would have been more to the point to engage with the main argument of the chapter, namely that visual representations of the chic Parisienne formulated a stereotype of French fashion and femininity that supported the fashion industry and a French identity of cultural superiority. The latter is discussed in the analysis of the monumental sculpture *La Parisienne* installed above the main gate of the 1900 *exposition universelle*. I argue (and Clayson agrees) that the monument was used to promote the Parisian fashion industry while projecting colonial superiority.

Some of the criticisms in the review are puzzling.[8] The accusation of a "recurrent reluctance" to define "consumer culture," for example, is belied by the discussion at the beginning of chapter one, where I refer to mass production and mass consumption, the replacement of a bartering subsistence economy and artisanal

craftsmanship, and to the distancing of consumption from production (p. 2); and by extensive analysis in the section on the visual culture of consumption (pp. 14-21).

Equally puzzling is Clayson's objection to my using the argument developed by historians who broadened the definition of consumer culture beyond shopping to include numerous activities such as reading newspapers and visiting tourist resorts (p. 3).[9] Her claim that "[t]his generalization thwarts the historian's interest in the historicity of the dynamic consumer cultures of modern Paris..." actually denies the broader historicity of consumer culture. Indeed, building on scholarship by historians of nineteenth century France, my book carefully historicizes Impressionist paintings within Parisian consumer culture, using textual and visual sources of the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Clayson seems to have the mistaken impression that my "motivation" was "[my] predecessors' ignorance and neglect of what [my] research brought to light," when in fact I fully acknowledge my debt to earlier studies of a field I hope to advance by asking new questions. Building on prior scholarship, my book proposes new directions to interpret art works in the context of Parisian consumption and the shifting position of modern women.[10] I hope it will contribute to an ongoing dialogue in this dynamic field.

NOTES

[1] Clayson's *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art and the Impressionist Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) was based on her 1984 UCLA PhD dissertation. Lipton, *Looking into Degas: Uneasy Images of Women and Modern Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 151-195.

[2] The most extensive analysis was made in T. J. Clark's *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), chapter four. After my study "Selling, Seduction and Soliciting the Eye, *Manet's Bar at the Folies-Bergère*" was published in *The Art Bulletin* vol. LXXVII, no. 1, (Spring 1995): 25-44, more interpretations appeared in Bradford R. Collins, ed., *Twelve Views of Manet's Bar* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[3] Edouard Manet is included under the rubric "Impressionists" in this response.

[4] T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, Ch. 1; Robert L. Herbert, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988), chapter one.

[5] Varnedoe tentatively mentions this detail in his interpretation of *Interior* as expressing the marital alienation of the couple; see his in *Gustave Caillebotte* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000 [1987]), p. 126.

[6] See Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 50-90.

[7] On the exclusion of women from modernity, see Pollock, *ibid.* On increasing interest in women's agency in art history, see Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, eds.,

Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History after Postmodernism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[8] The complaint about the lack of color reproductions disregards the fact that today scholarly books published by university presses, including a good amount of color reproductions are an exception rather than the norm.

[9] First proposed in the path-breaking book by Neil McKendrick, John Brewster and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982). Lisa Tiersten discusses this development in "Redefining Consumer Culture: Recent Literature on Consumer Culture in Western Europe," *Radical History Review* 57 (1993): 116-59.

[10] To correct an inaccuracy — my book is only partially based on the dissertation; over half of it is new material.

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