

Hollis Clayson, *Illuminated Paris: Essays on Art and Lighting in the Belle Époque*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019. 248 pp. 107 figures. \$55.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN-13: 978-0-226-59386-9

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Hollis Clayson's *Illuminated Paris* casts the art of late nineteenth-century France in a new light. Shifting the art historical spotlight away from the sunlit landscapes of Impressionist painting, the text focuses instead on representations of Parisian lighting, of gas and electric *éclairage*. In six enlightening essays, Clayson elucidates the ways French photographers, printmakers, and caricaturists, as well as American and Norwegian painters depicted the new technology and visuality of artificial light. In these dark times, when obscurity and gaslighting have cast their gloomy shadows on public discourse, her book is a delightful example of research-based historical analysis. It also illuminates some challenges and prospects in the sub-field of nineteenth century art history.

If readers have not already noted the translucent metaphors in my first paragraph, they will surely be familiar with the analogous metaphoric weight attached to Paris, the City of Light, *la Ville Lumière*. The sobriquet predates the nineteenth century, but as Clayson reminds us, it took on special significance as gas and electric lights shifted the name from a largely metaphorical to a literal one. The literature on this history is large, but it has had surprisingly little impact on art history. Accounts of nineteenth-century French painting obviously give enormous privilege to light and its representation, but in the form of what Clayson usefully defines as *lumière* as opposed to *éclairage*. Impressionism was, in one definition, the painting of light (“*lumière*”). At the same time, there were other artists more concerned with lighting (“*éclairage*”). Most of them, however, were either not French or not working with paint. Although *Illuminated Paris* is bookended by two paintings by Édouard Manet, Clayson's main concern is with other forms of visual representation and with non-French painters. Chapters on Charles Marville's photography, the American painter John Singer Sargent, as well as Charles Courtney Curran and Childe Hassam, the prints of Mary Cassatt and Edgar Degas, caricaturists in the Parisian press, and the Norwegian Edvard Munch demonstrate the wider iconographic concerns of the art of this period.

With her selection of subjects, Clayson widens the scope of traditional art historical inquiry. She moves from French painting to an expansive notion of “visual culture” and a transnational purview. While the book is anchored in the social history of art, of which Clayson is arguably the standard-bearer, it floats on the rising tide of visual culture studies and the global or “transregional” nineteenth century. Anchored boats run risks in rising tides, however, and some of the deeper interests of this book have to do with the productive tensions between Clayson's method and subject matter. At the core of the problem is what I have previously called in a 2017 issue of *H-France Salon* the “limits of context.”[1] Are works of art to be interpreted within what Clayson calls a “philosophical and visual matrix” (p. 3) or are they only a means of accessing and understanding this historical context? Do they intervene within historical circumstances, playing an active role in historical developments and the production of ideology, or do they merely record or interpret a pre-existing “social iconography”?[2] Can the

circumstances of their creation, for that matter, tell us anything at all about their interest for us now?

Clayson has previously addressed some of these questions. In the same issue of *H-France Salon*, she insisted, for example, on “the differences between the aesthetic and the social,” also stating that “the documentation of subject matter is merely the first step on the road to interpretation.”[3] While her object of inquiry may shift, that is, from Impressionist painting to intaglio prints, the context of prostitution or lighting remains a means to an interpretative end. In the same issue of *H-France Salon*, however, Laura Anne Kalba asserted that “Clayson’s interests fall midway between object-based art history and visual culture, between an opportunity to reinterpret key formal concepts” and an understanding of “economic, technological, and aesthetic forms of everyday life.”[4] And Kalba offered the then-forthcoming *Illuminated Paris* as a case in point. [5] Is the book, thus, a continuation of a social historical method, mobilizing context for the purposes of the interpretation and evaluation of art objects? Or does it embrace a flattening of aesthetic hierarchy in favor of cultural histories that reverse the interpretative current flowing from the social to the aesthetic? The strength of Clayson’s writing, I would contend, is its ability not simply to straddle but rather to move productively between poles of inquiry, to-ing and fro-ing between the “social” and the “aesthetic.” Like any good social history of art, *Illuminated Paris* maintains a dialectical interplay between a research-based project of historical recovery and a self-conscious attentiveness to the concerns presented by the object of inquiry in the present. Focusing an analytic beam on some of the book’s chapters should reveal how this plays out.

The core social history of the illumination of Paris comes in the book’s introduction. Here Clayson outlines an account of the expansion of gaslight in the early and mid-nineteenth century. By 1852, we learn, Paris already had 13,733 gas streetlamps, called *réverbères*. (The name is an earlier one, referring to the use of reflective material inside a lamp to maximize the reverberation of light).[6] The Second Empire increased this number, and by 1894, 53,000 gaslights flickered in the capital. The last went dark in 1962. In between, Paris became electric. The city was one of the first to install electric streetlights, and the introduction of new electric arc lamps – so-called Jablochhoff candles – especially from 1878, made it “La Capitale Électrique” by the time of the 1881 Exposition Internationale de l’Électricité. For various reasons, the wider electrification of Paris slowed in the decades that followed, leaving a curious, and visually appealing, mixture of different modes of *éclairage*. In tandem with this technological transformation of the experience of night in the French capital, an “illumination discourse” emerged (p. 3). Critics found Pavel Jablochhoff’s carbon arc lights too intense and unpleasant. Thomas Edison’s incandescent lights were seen as more “civilized” (p. 11), but many disliked them just the same. Chapter Three elaborates the response of caricaturists and critics to this cultural debate, but the bulk of the book is given over to case studies of the artistic response to and intervention within the contemporary illumination discourse.

Mary Cassatt is arguably the most interesting instance. She resisted electric light until the 1920s, and Clayson makes clear her longstanding interest in gas light and other alternative forms of artificial illumination. Chapter Four focuses on her revival of etchings in the late 1870s and 1880s, a project pursued in close dialogue with Edgar Degas. For both artists, an iconography of artificial lighting seemed a necessary component of their turn to prints as a parallel manifestation

of the New Painting. For Cassatt, the challenge lay in representing both the appealing interior lighting, such as the colza oil-fueled moderator lamps that appear in several of her drawings and prints, and the unpleasantly glaring lights of other forms of *éclairage*. Her pictures of artificially illuminated theaters and bourgeois interiors thus have a critical relation to the broader transformation of lighting in France. As Clayson puts it, “the prints emerged from an intensely aesthetic project” but “they were steeped in the artist’s awareness of the topicality and disputed valences of industrialized light” (p. 126). This dialectical criticality lies at the heart of Clayson’s overarching account. The “convergence of technology and discourse” is the context, or “matrix,” in which the pictures of Cassatt and Degas can be understood (p. 3). At the same time, however, their art intervenes within this context. The visual interest of the works derives from the interplay of the two sides and the ways its ambiguity might still speak to our own mixed feelings about similar new technologies

The convergence of visual ideology and representation also lies at the center of the first chapter. In documenting the transformation of Paris under the massive urbanization scheme of Baron Georges Haussmann, Charles Marville photographed a range of new and old *éclairages* in the 1860s and 1870s. By necessity, he captured the lampposts of Paris in bright daylight, thus emphasizing their character as furniture-like objects in the city – they were part of “le mobilier urbain” (p. 17) – rather than their function as illumination. In Clayson’s careful description of these photographs, the objects take on an almost anthropomorphic, portrait-like quality. This aesthetic effect harmonized in some respects with the Haussmannian project, which sought a human scale to the new lighting. As such the photographs illustrate “one of the great convergences in nineteenth-century Parisian visual culture” (p. 20). Haussmann famously transformed the look of Paris and, more profoundly, the way one looks at Paris; Marville found a means of visualizing that transformation. In this process, “Marville’s representations disenchant, but also critically demystify” (p. 24).

For a few decades now, the question of the critical demystification of Haussmann’s Paris has been most closely associated with the painting of Gustave Caillebotte. It is not surprising, then, that Clayson turns at the end of the first chapter to a brief analysis of his famous *Paris Street; Rainy Day* of 1877, now in the Art Institute of Chicago. Like Marville, Caillebotte shows the centrality of lighting in Haussmann’s new city: he places a streetlamp smack-dab in the middle of his composition. But as Kirk Varnedoe pointed out long ago, the lamppost here is an old one, an “anachronism,” a design from 1830, not one of the newer Oudry lamps that began to appear in 1865.[7] The tension between old and new is consequently a central aspect of the picture and its way of presenting an image of modernity. As Clayson acknowledges, Varnedoe is a key source for the standard reading of Caillebotte’s critical revelation of the “anomie” of modern city life (p. 27). Yet Caillebotte does not stand alone. An equally famous representation of *anomie* and the lamppost can be found in Vincent van Gogh’s *Outskirts of Paris* of 1886, now in the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. In Clayson’s analysis “Van Gogh’s lamp is the harbinger of a future, while Caillebotte’s *réverbère* is a lone survivor of a past quickly becoming a ruin overtaken by thrusting new development” (p. 32). Within the tradition of French painting, the two works stand out in their engagement with the iconography of outdoor *éclairage*, if only as unilluminated objects in the modern city. Clayson’s analysis of them explicitly engages the art history of T. J. Clark, insisting ultimately on the critical capacity of pictures – paintings and photographs – to reveal and demystify dominant ideologies and visualities. For some of us, Marville and

Caillebotte might remain more complicit than critical, but Clayson establishes a recognizable frame of interpretation that could rightly be called ideology critique.

For non-French painters like Sargent, Curran, Hassam, and Munch, Paris was equally a city of contradictions. In ways that Caillebotte or even Manet did not fully explore, these painters zeroed in on the multivalence and ambiguities offered by an artificially illuminated Paris. The city offered them a “Janus-faced modernity,” both “modern and traditional” (p. 153). The painted nocturnes they produced in France speak to the unsettled quality of the new lighting technologies. Sargent and Curran insisted on including multiple types of nighttime illumination, including gas and electric streetlights, moonlight, stars, cigarettes, oil lamps, and candles. Clayson’s compelling analysis of the multiplicity of light sources and their cultural significance allows us to see the richness of Sargent’s *In the Luxembourg Gardens* and Curran’s *Paris at Night*. It also alerts us to their critical engagement with the understanding of the light technologies of the time.

At first glance, the melancholic effect of Munch’s *Night in Saint-Cloud* would seem to play into this critical effect as well. We can only appreciate the painting’s evocation and evasion of the city, its spatial and ideological occupation of a threshold between inside and out, at the end of a deep dive into the “philosophical and visual matrix” of illuminated Paris. No one has fully explained the depth of Munch’s engagement with the tradition of French painting, but *Illuminated Paris* makes a strong case for his belonging to it. It is striking, nonetheless, how much his nocturne differs from Sargent and Curran. The change of motif, from Paris to the nearby town of Saint-Cloud, does not wholly explain the difference. *Night in Saint-Cloud* offers a vision of artificial illumination at night in a different aesthetic key, one removed from any critical demystification of the visual ideology of Haussmann’s Paris. Ultimately, this begs certain kinds of questions: if context leads to interpretation, what context matters for the explanation of any given work of art? Is the context really the same for Sargent and Munch? In what light, that is, should we place the art produced in nineteenth-century France?

In *Illuminated Paris*, Clayson herself hints at other matrices overlapping and interweaving the production of Munch’s work. We learn, parenthetically, that the painter received news of his father’s unexpected death around the same time that he moved to Saint-Cloud in late 1889. We also learn, as an aside, that he left Paris to escape an “influenza outbreak” (p. 157). A minor detail when the book was published in 2019, it is now a tellingly significant one. The “Russian” or “Asiatic” flu that began in 1889 was the last of the major pandemics of the nineteenth century, killing a million people worldwide. The first French cases were diagnosed in employees of the Magasins du Louvre in early December 1889.[8] In the winter of 1890 when he painted *Night in Saint-Cloud*, Munch would have known the outlines of this unfolding history quite well. Of course, this historical context matters today in ways impossible to have imagined when *Illuminated Paris* first appeared. I am certain, for instance, that our appreciation of the cloistering and melancholy of Munch’s painting, its intimation of isolation and mortality, would take on a wholly different character if we knew that the dreaded “grippe” of 1889–1890 was, in fact, the first global coronavirus pandemic.[9] As with its 2019 genetic cousin, SARS-CoV-2, the respiratory virus seems to have moved from animals to humans, attacking “the nervous system, sparking remarkable cases of depression, psychosis and insomnia.”[10] Munch himself fell ill with rheumatic fever in 1890, but not until November, when he spent several months in a

hospital in Le Havre. The painting of Saint-Cloud thus does not depict in any straightforwardly biographical way the artist's own sickness, but it is surely, in some sense, about the conditions of living through a pandemic. The priority given to artificial illumination in the painting points to yet another twist in the context of the Russian flu of 1889–90. It is certainly within the realm of possibility that Munch's picture inflects knowledge of a curious theory circulating at the time, a theory that laid the blame for the global pandemic on a rather surprising source: electric light. On the last day of January 1890, the Paris edition of *The New York Herald* reported the belief that "the invention of electric light has been followed by the appearance of a microbe that employs its spare time in producing Russian influenza. The disease has raged chiefly in towns where the electric light is in common use, and has penetrated slowly and reluctantly into towns where the electric lamps are unknown."^[11] If *Illuminated Paris* were published today, perhaps this historical tidbit from the illumination discourse would have become a central element of a reading. It takes away nothing from the book's accomplishment that the context of the "influenza outbreak" and its bizarre relation to electric light do not appear in Clayson's analysis. Rather, it merely underlines the fact that art historical accounts always, inevitably rest on shifting judgements about the proper connections between a "social" history and the "aesthetic" objects about which we write.

In the various essays that constitute *Illuminated Paris*, Clayson's approach stands as a model of the continued viability of a critical social history of art. By contrast, some readers will probably want to emphasize her central chapter on caricatures as exemplary of a turn towards, if not entirely an embrace of, visual culture. This could be right. But I would contend, ultimately, that the strongest sections of the book are those that maintain a conviction that the historical past becomes most vivid to us through visually complex ("aesthetic") objects and, in turn, that such objects become most interesting to us when they can be shown to belong equally and inextricably to the past.

NOTES

[1] See "Responses to 'Questionnaire on Impressionism and the Social History of Art,'" *H-France Salon* Volume 9, issue 14, #2 (2017): 17-19.

[2] *Ibid.*, 17.

[3] *Ibid.*, 4.

[4] *Ibid.*, 9n.22.

[5] Clayson had made the emphasis on "visual culture" even more explicit in an earlier version of the title: *Electric Paris: The Visual Cultures of the City of Light in the Era of Thomas Edison*. See Hollis Clayson and André Dombrowski, eds., *Is Paris Still the Capital of the Nineteenth Century?: Essays on Art and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2016), xiii.

[6] See "Réverbère," *Dictionnaire de l'académie françoise*, 4th ed., vol. 2 (Paris: Bernard Brunet, 1762), 633.

[7] Kirk Varnedoe, *Gustave Caillebotte* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 214n.2.

On anachronism in Caillebotte, see Michael Marrinan, *Gustave Caillebotte: Painting the Paris of Naturalism, 1872-1887* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2016), 123.

[8] See “Faits divers,” *Le Temps*, Dec. 11, 1889, 2.

[9] See Leen Vijgen, et al., “Complete Genomic Sequence of Human Coronavirus OC43: Molecular Clock Analysis Suggests a Relatively Recent Zoonotic Coronavirus Transmission Event,” *Journal of Virology* 79:3 (January 2005): 1595–1604.

[10] Mark Honigsbaum, as quoted in Robin McKie, “Did a coronavirus cause the pandemic that killed Queen Victoria’s heir?,” *The Guardian*, May 31, 2020, available online:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/31/did-a-coronavirus-cause-the-pandemic-that-killed-queen-victorias-heir>

See also Honigsbaum, “The Great Dread: Cultural and Psychological Impacts and Responses to the ‘Russian’ Influenza in the United Kingdom, 1889-1893,” *Social History of Medicine* 23:2 (July 2010): 299–319. By way of comparison, see Pam Belluck, “As Body Fights, Virus Splinters Patients’ Minds,” *The New York Times*, June 29, 2020, A1, online version available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/28/health/coronavirus-delirium-hallucinations.html>

[11] “The Very Latest,” *The New York Herald* (Paris), Jan. 31, 1890, 2.

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