

Hollis Clayson, *Illuminated Paris: Essays on Art and Lighting in the Belle Époque*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2019. x + 228 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN-13: 978-0-226-59386-9.

Review by Nancy Locke, The Pennsylvania State University

When Charles Baudelaire set the scene of a family in rags peering through the windows of a dazzling new café in Haussmann's Paris, he wrote about the gaslight that burned "with all the ardor of a début, and lighted with all its might the blinding whiteness of the walls." [1] The prose poem "Les yeux des pauvres" has often been invoked in social art histories of Paris; it helps make sense of paintings of poverty and itinerancy like Manet's *Old Musician*, as well as paintings of new café-concerts like *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*. In *Illuminated Paris: Essays on Art and Lighting in the Belle Époque*, Hollis Clayson looks at visual representations of the "aesthetics of light" as she considers the "bond between innovative art and light" (p. 3). In Baudelaire's poem, the gaslight became a point of attraction as well as a point of visual contact between the poor and a newly gentrified commercial space. As a subject, artificial illumination likewise allows Clayson to move analytically between public spaces in nineteenth-century Paris (still predominantly lighted by gas), those who populated such spaces, and the artists who represented the myriad experiences of lighting.

Although some interior subjects—notably the café, the café-concert, and the theater (including the opera and ballet) have been integral to social histories of Impressionism for decades, much of the scholarship has leaned on the Impressionist interest in ephemeral light effects to look critically at paintings executed out of doors. The novelty of Clayson's subject here, then, makes itself apparent. Indeed, the very contours of this series of case studies emerge as novel. Concentrating on the period from about 1860 to 1890, Clayson looks at a heterogeneous range of prints, photographs, and caricatures as well as paintings, and more than half of the painters who receive serious consideration are not French. The book bursts through boundaries that group objects together by medium; Clayson moves easily from photograph to painting, and her looking at prints ranges from the aesthetic to the social.

Clayson has made a name for herself not only as a social historian of art, but also as an art historian who scrutinizes and critiques the social historical method. A hallmark of her work has always been her interrogation of what it means to ask the questions she is asking. Clayson takes up a challenge posed by Bruno Foucart in 1988—to produce an "archaeology of representations of electricity" (p. 11). Foucart had called attention to the lack of knowledge, at the time, about whether the sconces in Manet's *Masked Ball at the Opera* were gas or electric. Even if Clayson wants to fill this gap in our knowledge, she points out that the question is "problematic": "It provides an unintended example of the kind of wrongheadedness that can threaten to shove a project like mine into the empirical or interpretative ditch—or both" (p. 12). As she explains, "knowing" the type of lighting in a particular space is "foundational, but not equivalent to understanding its painted representation" (p. 13). If one requirement of social art history demands that we ascertain the type of lighting used at the old rue Le Peletier opera house—and it was gas lighting—

then that is only a first step in producing an account of Manet's painting. It should also remain the task of the social art historian to recover the tone of Manet's painting in 1873—whether it should be seen as nostalgic, glamorizing, critical, or even a balancing act that embodies more than one attitude.

The history and analyses that follow never fall into either the empirical or the interpretative ditch. For every bit of cataloguing Clayson presents of the *réverbère* or gas streetlamp in a Gustave Caillebotte painting, the *japonisant* porcelain lamp body (*lampe à modérateur*) in a Mary Cassatt interior, or an illuminated Morris Column (advertising kiosk) in a Childe Hassam scene of a Paris street at night, she delves deeply into questions of tone and mood in the works of art. The nickname of Paris as the “City of Light” may have originated in the eighteenth century with the Enlightenment *philosophes*, but the nineteenth century took the name to heart with the installation of gaslights around the city.

In chapter one, “*Cherchez la lampe*,” Clayson considers a group of works that represent objects central to her study. When Charles Marville undertook the official photographic documentation of Paris streets slated for demolition, as well as progress in Haussmann's renovations of the city, he also amassed a body of photographs of lampposts and other *mobilier urbain* (urban furnishings). Clayson notes the “human scale” of these streetlamps in Marville's images (p. 17), and even claims, rightly, that the photographs “deserve to be regarded as portraits” due to their scale and highly individualized character (p. 18). Like the lamppost presiding over Gustave Caillebotte's *Paris Street: Rainy Day*, these streetlamps are unlit and seen in the daytime. “In Caillebotte's painting, the conspicuous and somewhat mysterious glaucous eye of the solitary, unlit streetlamp inflects the picture's otherwise largely consistent depictive and connotative messages,” she writes (p. 29). Productively comparing a Marville photograph of a street bordering quarries in the nineteenth arrondissement, c. 1877, and a Van Gogh painting of the *Outskirts of Paris*, Clayson looks at the lampposts in these kindred works. Van Gogh's gaslight appears to be the last gasp of Parisian *mobilier urbain* before the city gives way to muddy fields on the periphery. Marville, for Clayson, uses the lamppost “to stress the homeliness and the neglect of the pictured environment,” perhaps because we can glimpse the contrasts between old and new, picturesque and industrialized (p. 31).

The second chapter of *Illuminated Paris* literally sparkles with the myriad light sources making an appearance in John Singer Sargent's two versions of *In the Luxembourg Gardens*, 1879. Clayson deftly reads the twinkle of a star, the glow of a moon, the last glimmers of the setting sun, the orange balls of gas streetlamps along the boulevard Saint-Michel, the “displaced glare of the nearby Jablochkoff [electric-arc] lights,” and the tiny punctuation of the scene by the flicker of a lighted cigarette in the mouth of the foreground stroller (p. 46). Methodologically speaking, a key move for Clayson (and one I would like to applaud) is her treatment of the paintings as wagers or proposals by Sargent. Paintings are communicative and social acts. Clayson continues to be the kind of social art historian who goes beyond the documentation of what we are seeing in a painting, to query what is being said, and how the painting is saying it. In the case of

Sargent's Luxembourg paintings, they are ripostes to the usual treatment of Parisian nightlife in their refined evocation of crepuscular sociability.

Chapter three gives Clayson an opportunity to examine what she calls "illumination discourse" by analyzing a plethora of caricatures. In the course of this investigation, Clayson demonstrates the extent to which Parisians resisted the newfangled electric light bulb. In fact, in the book's conclusion, she reveals that she had expected her original project to narrate the victory of electric light over gas, but that the stories she found turned out to be more nuanced. The electric light introduced at the Salon of 1880 (the largest Salon in history, with 7,289 works) seemed so intrusive that it provoked the critic Jules Claretie to write that Salon exhibitions "in a few years, won't have any connection with art at all" (p. 76). Electric light also became politicized; Clayson tells us that Republicans favored electric lighting, as it facilitated the viewing of the Salon by workers who could only attend the exhibition at night. Even if many found the electric light of the time to be unflattering, commentators at the 1881 Exposition de l'Electricité saw in Edison's light "the promise of a rupture with an old method of lighting" and proclaimed: "henceforth looking at things will not be the same" (p. 88).

"Night Light on Paper: Illumination in the Prints of Mary Cassatt and Edgar Degas" both analyzes a body of intaglio prints by these artists and mounts an argument that prints belong in books on painting, especially when it comes to what is known as the "painting of modern life." Clayson's eye for the experimental and painterly techniques of these two artists—Cassatt in soft-ground etching, Degas in monotype as well as etching and aquatint—matches her eye for the lighting techniques that the two artists represented. Readers can truly follow her analysis of the soft lighting of "moon eggs"—gas globes—in a tiny Degas etching, as it is beautifully reproduced, about twice the size of the original (p. 109). In addition to prints, pastels are covered in this chapter. The brilliant lights striking the moldings of the Garnier Opéra in Degas' *La Loge*, 1880, also illuminated the face of a woman inclining her head over the rails. "What a study of the effects of light!" exclaimed the writer J.-K. Huysmans (p. 107). Cassatt, too, heightened the effects of artificial light in her theater interiors. "The tension that Cassatt engineered between the prim pink and aversive theater-goer, on one hand, and a lurid and glitzy public entertainment environment, on the other, is a conspicuous ideological dimension of the image," writes Clayson of a female figure in pink silhouetted against acid yellow-green lights (p. 116–117). Clayson attends to the ethical and political implications of Cassatt's theater—a setting that was both public and interior—as a space of leisure for upper-class women in nineteenth-century Paris.

Chapter five, "Outsider Nocturnes," on American artists Charles Courtney Curran and Childe Hassam, and chapter six, on Norwegian artist Edvard Munch's Parisian interiors, necessarily become transnational. If some Parisians began to disdain the telephone, the telegraph, and electric light as examples of "American utilitarianism" (in the words of Jules Claretie, p. 136), what was the view of foreign-born artists when it came to Paris at night? Clayson draws a contrast between the harsh glare of electric lights in Hassam's scenes of New York City at night, and the artist's many renditions of the more atmospheric gaslights of Paris streets. The quality and quantity of artificial light in a

Curran or Hassam allows Clayson to read a fashionable woman silhouetted against a Morris Column in one, or menaced by a man following her in another. Munch's moody evocations of a rectangle of moonlight falling across a floor foreshadow his later abstractions of pillars of reflected light.

Huysmans impugned the representation of light in Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*; he thought it looked too much like daylight. Perhaps Manet's treatment of the bar's combination of gaslight and electric light "blunt[ed] the club's tawdry edge by inadvertently softening its lights," reasons Clayson (p. 184). She shows us how quickly a consideration of lighting shades into one of morals: "Artificial light, sometimes electric, seen through the window often stands for sex in [Munch's] pictures" (p. 160). Clayson analyzes a fascinating caricature from 1880 that purports to show a fictitious "new and marvelous invention of Edison" (p. 60). "Le fidèlimètre," or Fidelity Meter, "commingled the resources of an electric sensor, photography, telegraphy, and the telephone" to help husbands keep tabs on wayward wives (p. 61). We see how quickly the new technology of electric light, like that of photography, could be seen as opening the door to a new variety of surveillance. *Illuminated Paris* provides more than the archaeology of representations of light that Foucart called for. Whether it is showing us a gaslight gleaming on a Paris street, a newfangled electric light glaring in the Folies-Bergère, or an oil lamp shining in a Cassatt sitting room, *Illuminated Paris* takes us from the technical history of artificial lighting in Paris to the moral topography of its representations.

## NOTES

[1] Charles Baudelaire, "The Eyes of the Poor," *Paris Spleen*, trans. Louise Varèse (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 52.

Nancy Locke  
The Pennsylvania State University  
nel3@psu.edu

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