

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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Illuminated Paris comes in an attractive package certain to elicit envy from historians, accustomed as we are to sober publications in which the most sought after (or regretted) luxury is notes at the bottom of the page. We envy not just the abundant illustrations, many in color, not just the generous page size, but the coated paper, a requisite for good image quality but also sensual to the touch. Everything about the materiality of such a book bespeaks a hushed world of white-gloved art handlers, multi-volume catalogues, and, as John Berger put it in his biting 1972 critique of art history, “the unaccountable mystery of great wealth” [1]. Not all works of art history publish at this level, of course, and, those that do usually require some sort of subvention, in this case from the author’s own institution. Nor – to follow the proverb about books and covers – does such a package preclude intellectual seriousness or interdisciplinary ambition.

An eminent scholar with a distinguished publishing record, Hollis Clayson has been in conversation with historians and scholars of literature, gender, and much else since the publication of her first book in 1991. Her second in particular, on art made in Paris during the Terrible Year of 1870-71, is a work of history as well as of art history. [2] This interdisciplinary reach has its own genealogy, since Clayson received her graduate training at UCLA in the 1970s under the direction of T.J. Clark, one of the leading figures in the social history of art of the day. In one of his first books, Clark set out an ambitious program for this approach: “What I want to explain are the connecting links between artistic form, the available systems of visual representation, the current theories of art, other ideologies, social classes, and more general historical structures and processes.” He also declared baldly, “there can be no art history without other kinds of history.” [3] And yet, as Adrian Rifkin remarked in an essay published a decade later, “in Tim Clark’s work . . . in one way or another we are always left somewhere in the Louvre or, of late, in the Jeu de Paume.”[4] Taking the Louvre to include the whole panoply of French national collections, including the Orsay (which opened only in 1986 and took over the collections formerly housed at the Jeu de Paume) and the Bibliothèque Nationale, the repository for the national print collection, that observation also holds true for *Illuminated Paris*. If the book also bears traces of some of the radical ambition of the 1970s, its structure and scope make at least an implicit argument for the self-sufficiency of art history.

Clark’s own books tended to spin large themes around canonical artists – the title of his most recent, *Picasso and Truth* (2013), aptly sums it up. Most of his students, on the other hand, have tended to construct more focused topics that encompass multiple artists. The interest of these books to scholars in other disciplines devolves from the framing of the topic, from prostitution in Clayson’s first book to the problem of individualism versus group solidarity in Bridget Alsdorf’s *Fellow Men* to art’s ability to capture the changing sense of time in modernity in Marnin Young’s *Realism in the Age of Impressionism* [5]. In a refreshingly forthright conclusion to *Illuminated Paris*, Clayson reveals that she originally intended to write a book on art and the electrification of Paris, notably of its outdoor lighting, arguably another “big topic.” Her initial research, however, disclosed that the process of electrification took much longer than she had thought – the last gas lights did not disappear from Paris till after World War II.

Moreover, she found that “as electric light became more of a presence in late-century art practices, my interest in it flagged” (p. 178). Undaunted, Clayson decided to take as her subject artists’ responses to the hybridity of Parisian lighting in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, to consider the ways artists explored, came to terms with, and give form to the sometimes messy coexistence of gas, electric, and natural lighting.

If this is a somewhat more circumscribed subject than the original project, Clayson nonetheless offers a big social history (of art) hook, what she calls “illumination discourse” (p. 3 and *passim*), which she describes as “an altogether novel nexus of knowledge and belief that helped to mold the character of the City of Light” (p. 8). But those expecting, or dreading, accounts of lengthy debates about the promise and perils of electric lighting in the press or the Paris Conseil Municipal will be disappointed—or relieved. Illumination discourse does pop up from time to time in the book, but it usually comes in the form of a passing mention, for example in the explication of a witty caption to a cartoon by Albert Robida (p. 95). The reader learns fairly quickly, and unsurprisingly, that many Parisians found electric arc lighting at once impressive, in such early manifestations as the new Avenue de l’Opéra, and unpleasantly blinding. A fire caused by gas lighting in the Opéra Comique in 1887 led to a requirement that all Paris theatres install electric lighting, but Parisians with the means to install electricity in their own homes tended to find the incandescent bulb – given ample exposure at an 1881 International Exposition of Electricity held in the Palais de l’Industrie – unflattering. Clayson is an erudite guide to the various forms of lighting depicted in the works she discusses, and takes evident pride in tracking down, for example, the type of fixture known as an oil moderator lamp depicted in Mary Cassatt’s prints set in her own apartment.

With a chapter devoted to caricature, another to prints, and three to artists from abroad who were working in Paris – John Singer Sargent, a group of American painters, and Edvard Munch – *Illuminated Paris* can fairly claim a scope that goes beyond the usual Impressionist suspects. In chapter five, Clayson treats evening scenes by the Americans Childe Hassam and Charles Courtney Curran as “outsider nocturnes,” persuasively arguing that their romanticized versions of Paris by night offer veiled commentary on the rapid advance of displeasing electric arc light in the big cities of their home country. If the effort to understand the Americans’ brief study tours in terms of Edward Said’s concept of exile is strained, in the following chapter Clayson makes good use of threshold theory to interpret a group of twilight interiors that Munch painted during a six-month stay in Saint-Cloud, a suburb along the Seine on the city’s western edge, in 1890. The treatment of one picture in particular, *Night in Saint-Cloud* (fig. 6.1) as a “disquisition” (p. 171) on the clash between modernity and introspection makes a good case for the metaphorical importance of nocturnal illumination. It is, however, easier to grasp Munch’s formal strategies for conveying the effects of lighting than to see how, as a non-French speaker, he could have engaged with “the matrix of illumination discourse” (p. 173).

Given the nebulousness – another light-derived term – of “illumination discourse,” a great deal depends on the plausibility of Clayson’s reading of pictures. Do you think lamp posts resemble human beings? Does it make sense to understand the reflection of a rising moon (itself illuminated by the setting sun) in the ornamental basin of the Luxembourg Gardens as a displacement of electric lamplight indistinctly depicted on the Boulevard Saint Michel a good hundred meters away? Reasonable viewers can disagree, but much of Clayson’s argument in

chapters one and two rests on these and similar propositions. Clayson's choice of artists and examples also raises questions. In the conclusion, she characterizes the works she has selected as displaying "social and environmental compounds and composites, structures of indistinctness and multiplicity in the realms of technology and environment" (p. 178). The adjective "subtle" would not seem out of place in such a description, but in one of the last footnotes to the book Clayson justifies the omission of works by Seurat, whose famously gaslit *Parade de Cirque* (1888) seems imbued with these characteristics, on the basis of their "nonpareil subtlety" (p. 220 n15) as elucidated by Jonathan Crary. She dismisses (and does not illustrate) Pissarro's *Boulevard Montmartre at Night* (1897) as an "exception that proves the rule" (p. 26) of the Impressionists' overwhelming preference for daytime scenes. Yet elsewhere in this first chapter Clayson shows herself perfectly willing to contemplate and analyze works depicting streetlamps in daylight, as the majority of Pissarro's Boulevard Montmartre series do. Now that she has raised my attentiveness to what she calls street furniture, I would have liked her to explain a notable peculiarity of these scenes, which is that the electric arc lights, most likely Jablochhoff candles, seem to have been installed in the middle of the street, while those on one sidewalk seem to be gas lights. Such a discussion would have allowed her to comment in greater detail on the ways the most Leftist of the Impressionists chose to represent different kinds of lighting, surely not an irrelevant issue for her subject.

Indexing the limits of the book's interdisciplinarity, its subtitle refers to the period it covers – from 1860 to 1890 – as the "Belle Epoque." Historians more typically see the period described by this retrospective term as running from 1880 or even 1889 to the eve of World War I; one could certainly make the case for other dates, but the book does not even allude to recent historical scholarship on periodization [6]. Clayson simply presumes artists' awareness of contemporary debates over, and tropes of, artificial lighting of the time; the larger social and political stakes of these debates do not concern her. The book's goals as Clayson sets them out thus remain firmly within the bounds of mainstream art history: "to denaturalize *plein air* painting" as the central preoccupation of the Impressionists (p. 11) and, secondarily but still significantly, to elevate the place of print-making in Impressionism by making the print, not the *plein air painting*, "the *ur*-Impressionist object" (p. 105). These are perfectly honorable goals; the second, indeed, could be regarded as already achieved, since as Clayson rightly remarks, it comes "at a point of convergence of multiple historiographic threads" (p. 102). As for the first, we can hope that Clayson's lively prose and many insights will prompt others to follow in her footsteps and investigate other instances and aspects of *éclairage* in the age of Impressionism.

NOTES

[1] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986, orig. publ. 1972), p. 24. In the interests of full disclosure, I should acknowledge having had coated paper on two of my books and to having received support from my university for one. Also, Clayson and I share an editor at the University of Chicago Press.

[2] Hollis Clayson, *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Clayson, *Paris in Despair: Art and Everyday Life under Siege (1870-71)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[3] T.J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), p.12, p.18.

[4] Adrian Rifkin, "No Particular Thing to Mean," *Block 8* (1983): 36.

[5] T.J. Clark, *Picasso and Truth: From Cubism to Guernica* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Bridget Alsdorf, *Fellow Men: Fantin-Latour and the Problem of the Group in Nineteenth-Century French Painting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Marnin Young, *Realism in the Age of Impressionism: Painting and the Politics of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

[6] Notably Dominique Kalifa, *La véritable histoire de la "Belle Époque"* (Paris: Fayard, 2017).

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