

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Amy Freund

book review of

The Painted Face: Portraits of Women in France, 1814-1914, by
Tamar Garb

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 7, no. 1 (Spring 2008)

Citation: Amy Freund, book review of *The Painted Face: Portraits of Women in France, 1814-1914*, by Tamar Garb, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2008), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring08/the-painted-face-portraits-of-women-in-france-1814-1914-by-tamar-garb>.

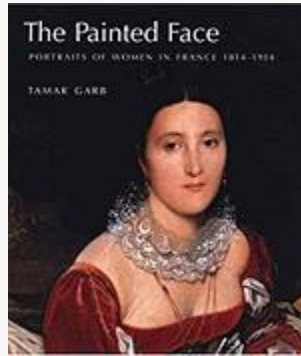
Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).



Tamar Garb

The Painted Face: Portraits of Women in France, 1814–1914

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007.

288 pp.; 140 b/w illustrations, 70 color illustrations.

Cloth: \$65.00

ISBN: 9780300111187

Painted portraiture is the pesky hanger-on of modernism. It lingers long after last call, refusing to go even as the chairs are put up on the tables. It's inconveniently pegged to retrograde notions of physical likeness, demanding imitation as well as (some would say instead of) intellectual and aesthetic judgment. The sitter, whether or not a paying customer, is likely to expect some role in the creation of the work of art in question, thus encroaching on artistic autonomy. And it never seems to take photography's hint that the day of the painted likeness is over and done.

As it turns out, though, the genre of portraiture is stubbornly central to modernist painting. It raises particularly pointed questions, for its commissioners, practitioners, and viewers, about individual and collective identity, the artist's engagement with the social and the political, and the relationship between the natural world and the strategies and materials of representation. The persistence of portraiture in the modern era has been the subject of a number of recent exhibitions and studies, including the exhibition catalogues for *The Mirror and the Mask: Portraiture in the Age of Picasso* (2007) and *Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from the 1920s* (2006), Catherine M. Soussloff's *The Subject in Art: Portraiture and the Birth of the Modern* (2006), John Klein's *Matisse Portraits* (2001), and Heather MacPherson's *The Modern Portrait in Nineteenth-Century France* (2001).^[1] Tamar Garb's book is at once more focused and more expansive than these accounts of portraiture and modernism: more focused, because her acute and intensely visual analysis is essentially based on six portraits of women, and more expansive, because her subject is modernism itself, and its relationship to the gendering of visual representation.

Garb's close attention to her six case study portraits—by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Edouard Manet, Mary Cassatt, Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso—defines the scope of her inquiry. This is not an account of the social practice of portraiture in the nineteenth century nor of the history of subjectivity; Garb does not discuss the motivations of commissioners or sitters, or the uses of portraiture outside the artist's studio or the public

exhibition. Nor is this book, strictly speaking, an account of female portraiture in nineteenth-century France. The earliest painting under consideration, Ingres's *Madame de Senonnes*, was painted in 1814, but Garb's consideration of it focuses on its reception, beginning in the 1850s when it emerges in the public imagination as an embodiment of the seductions of Ingres's practice, of female portraiture, and of Woman in general. The story told here is that of Realism and its discontents; the label "Impressionism" makes very few appearances, and portraits by artists such as Claude Monet or Auguste Renoir are not part of the narrative. Moreover, while Garb's focus on the specific qualities and problems of oil painting in the second half of the long nineteenth century pays off in her rich evocations of paint quality and formal experimentation, it excludes anything but glancing references to the impact of photography on portraiture, and on modernism more generally.

What Garb provides is dense and rewarding readings of particular pictures, bound together by a strong sense of the ways in which the individual artists' encounters with the female subject shaped larger notions of the means and ends of representation in late nineteenth-century France. She is particularly concerned with how the medium of oil paint is manipulated to recreate (or obliterate) the female face, and how the artist's touch, and thus his or her presence in the work, is made visible, both in the deployment of paint and in compositional choices. Garb makes use of a range of phenomenological and psychoanalytical theories to bolster her notion of touch, as well as her account of the relationship of male and female painters to their female sitters—Sigmund Freud, Julia Kristeva, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and André Green are among the theorists evoked. This theoretical material is often combined with evidence drawn from nineteenth-century material and visual culture, so that the specifics of mourning dress or smallpox vaccination are brought together with psychoanalytic theories of motherhood and sexual difference.

Garb's narrative takes the form of six chronologically ordered chapters, each focusing on a single painting. The essays are anchored by a prologue that proposes the analogy between cosmetics and oil paint as a means of understanding why female portraiture was such an important site for artistic experimentation. In the nineteenth century, Garb argues, *maquillage* came to stand for both Art and Woman: "In the female portrait, the efforts of make-up and the work of painting came together in the manifestation of the feminine." (12) The prologue is a neatly constructed and provocative essay that mobilizes caricature and hair-care advertisements alongside paintings to make its point. But it is, in some ways, make-up itself. The paint-cosmetics analogy reappears in helpful ways throughout the essays that follow, but it is not a consistent organizing principle; rather, it stands for Garb's more general interest in paint handling and its relationship to changing theories of representation.

The first chapter, on Ingres's *Madame de Senonnes*, is both a study of the artist's portrait practice and an account of how this 1814 painting came to stand for portraiture's capacity to solicit masculine fantasies of female sensuality. Garb's argument is anchored by a sustained visual analysis of the portrait that incorporates Ingres's Raphael-worship, and his delirious images of the master in the studio with his lover/model, as evidence of the conflation of erotic desire and the process of painting. *Madame de Senonnes*, Garb argues, was designed to facilitate male delectation of the female sitter; as a portrait, it attends to surfaces, not to the depiction of character or individuality (qualities that were mostly denied to women in any

case), and ends up as a celebration of oil paint's powers of illusionism, and of seduction. "Madame de Senonnes is a reflection of the desires of those who produce and consume her," she concludes; and "As such, she represents a project of externalization of an aspect of the self disguised in the garb of the other." (57).

Ingres's portrait, which stands for the traditions of female portraiture as a whole in Garb's argument, is thus less an image of its sitter than of its creator and its male viewers. This erasure, Garb points out, extended to the personal history of Madame de Senonnes herself. She was born Marie Marcoz, daughter of a prosperous Lyonnais draper, but for most of the nineteenth century, her bourgeois French identity was hidden behind a romantic but spurious identification as "la belle Transtévérine," a working-class Roman woman rescued from poverty by her aristocratic French lover. This mystification of Marcoz's identity, argues Garb, transformed her into an ethnic stereotype of Italian carnality, devoid of any specific biography and living only for love. Viewers conflated the sensuality of Ingres's depiction of her with the sensuality of oil paint itself, making the portrait into an allegory of masculine artistic dominance of the feminine material of the natural world.

But no portrait is solely the work of its author. By not crediting Marcoz with any agency in the creation of her portrait, Garb herself effectively reenacts the erasure of her identity. The denial of female agency is particularly striking because Garb juxtaposes the portrait of Madame de Senonnes with Ingres's contemporary portrait of Caroline Murat, queen of Naples and commissioner of the artist's *Grande Odalisque*—a woman whose motivations as a sitter and patron raise important questions about gender and the role of the viewer.

After examining the reception of the Ingres portrait by critics and writers in the second half of the nineteenth century, Garb turns to Manet's 1870 portrait of Eva Gonzalès, an artist herself and a daughter of an *haute-bourgeois* family. Garb reads Manet's portrait of Gonzalès at her easel as another example of female portraiture functioning as a projection of male desires. In this case, it's Manet who transforms a portrait of a female artist into a testament to his own artistic ambitions. Garb argues that these ambitions are registered not only in the clear indications of the artist's painterly "touch" (which distanced the portrait from the Ingresque licked surfaces of contemporary society portraiture) but in the canvas on Gonzalès's easel—a flower painting that has little to do with her actual oeuvre, but everything to do with Manet's own practice of still life. The portrait, according to Garb, fails as a convincing image of a female artist, but succeeds as a manifesto of Realism, an aesthetic that to contemporaries seemed antithetical to female portraiture:

Realism, with its commitment to 'truth' and 'objectivity', mobilized the aesthetics of mimesis in the interests of veracity, but in so doing risked opening women to unseemly scrutiny at the same time as revealing their physical imperfections and moral vulnerability (68).

If nineteenth-century female portraiture conventionally presented a smooth inviting body/paint surface to the desiring eye of the viewer, Realism's commitment to observation, objectivity, and the unconcealed mark of the artist produced portraits that disrupted desire. But, as Garb shows, such images of women still invited projection—at least on the part of the portraitist himself.

Garb's analysis of Manet's portrait of Gonzalès raises the same question of the sitter's agency as her discussion of *Madame de Senonnes*. Indeed, in this case the sitter was an artist herself as well as Manet's student. It seems impossible that she did not have some role in the formulation of her portrait. What were her stakes in the Realist project? Why did she participate in the construction of a portrait that disempowered her so radically?

Garb's next chapter, which looks at Mary Cassatt's 1878 and c. 1889 portraits of her mother, deals more directly with relationship between sitter and artist, and investigates how this interaction changes when the portraitist, as well as the sitter, is female. In Cassatt's portraits of her elderly mother, Garb argues, the portraitist creates an image of female selfhood that is individualized and intellectually engaged. The look trained on the sitter is not that of male desire, but of female melancholia—the gaze of a daughter on her fading mother/mentor. This discussion of representation and loss is structured by Garb's use of psychoanalytic theories about motherhood and mourning, and is convincingly supported by the visual and biographic evidence. However, the psychoanalytic approach, dictated by the mother/daughter relationship, limits this kind of deep psychic engagement between sitter and portraitist to a very specific set of circumstances—indeed Garb implies that, in a society that denied women's capacity for fully-realized subjectivity, such a sympathetic and psychically rich female portrait can only be an exceptional case.

The fourth chapter considers Cézanne's portraits of his wife from the early and mid-1890s. Garb argues that the pose of the sitter's hands, which lie idle in her lap or toy unconvincingly with a flower, focuses the viewer's attention on the relationship between vision and touch. Hands, according to Garb, symbolize the tactile nature of Cézanne's painting; their appearance seems "to place both femininity and painting on the side of touch, dramatizing the permeability and instability of subjects and objects and the contested capacity of paint to capture them." (142). The very idleness of Hortense Cézanne's hands, which gently touch each other or the flower she holds, contrasts with the purposefully grasping hands of conventional male portraiture, signifying the dependence of vision on sensation, and thus of the subject and the object. This emphasis on touch has an ethical component, disturbing the conventional polished paint surface that makes femininity into a spectacle, and eroding the boundaries between subject and object, artist and sitter. Garb marshals the work of Merleau-Ponty, D.H. Lawrence, and Gilles Deleuze on the ethics of sight and touch and on Cézanne's refusal of ocular seduction. The Cézanne chapter is the most text-based of the essays in Garb's book, and it is sometimes difficult to discern any productive erosion of the barriers between sitter and artist/viewer in the unresponsive and generic features of Hortense Cézanne.

The next chapter, on Picasso's images of women between 1906 and 1912, argues that Cubism further blurs the boundaries of the female body, and of the genre of portraiture. Picasso's *Ma Jolie*, a painting that only notionally portrays the artist's lover Eva Gouel but which inserts the phrase "Ma Jolie" onto the surface of the canvas, is the center of Garb's analysis of the Cubist portrait. Picasso's contemporary portraits of men, she argues, retained the minimal markers of individualized facial features and bodily identity required by nineteenth-century portraiture, but his portraits of women explode those conventions. The strongly visual argument of this chapter builds on and reinforces Garb's argument about Cézanne's attack on Realist conventions of gender. Rather than depicting gender as natural,

stable, and inherent in the individual, Picasso creates an unstable and permeable subject, in which individuality (and the traditional brief of portraiture) dissolves. Garb compares this vision of the self to the prose portraits composed by Gertrude Stein, who had sat to Picasso for her own portrait in 1906. (Garb credits Stein, alone among the female sitters she considers in this study, with participating in an intellectual exchange with her portraitist.) Picasso produces in *Ma Jolie* a "portrait" in which words are substituted for visual likeness; thus he engineers an escape from the scopophilic regime of nineteenth-century female portraiture and frees the female sitter from "the tyrannical dictates of conventionalized depiction." (209).

Garb's final chapter considers Matisse's *Portrait* of 1913, alongside other images of the artist's wife from the first fifteen years of the century, as evidence of the total defeat of the Realist mode of female portraiture. Garb makes a clever and effective connection between the conception and exhibition of *Portrait* and the national drama of the 1911 theft of the *Mona Lisa*. She notes that *Portrait*, with its flat grey mask of a face and its denial of bodily sensuality, puts the final nail in the coffin of the ideal of femininity, and of art, embodied by the missing *Mona Lisa*. The chapter, and the book as a whole, concludes with Picasso's 1914 *Portrait of a Girl*, a response to Matisse's *Portrait*. Returning to the analogy between cosmetics and paint developed in her prologue, the author reads Picasso's portrait as the ultimate exposé of the artificiality of the female portrait; he has eliminated the "weighty body of the Realist subject and the tactile intensity of the artist's trace," in favor of the free play of representation itself: "Now painting is made up on the surface" (250).

If female portraits distill ideas about Art and Woman, Matisse and Picasso expose both of those concepts as constructions, and liberate them from the chains of the past. Female portraiture thus emerges as a central battleground for modernist painting. But Garb's conclusion implicitly acknowledges that this moment of freedom, for the artist and the female subject, is short-lived. And how free is the female sitter if she has been, in essence, obliterated by her portrait? Perhaps the breakdown of the sitter/artist negotiation that traditionally shaped the look of a portrait was a necessary step for the liberation of modern subjectivity, and of the genre of portraiture itself. But Garb's focus on the artist's touch forecloses any investigation of the sitter's desires and motivations. Even when the sitter is a lover or family member, rather than a patron, she is complicit in her own picturing; indeed, it is the play between the particularity of the pictured self and general notions of femininity that makes these paintings so compelling, both for their creators and their viewers. A fuller account of the sitters' stake in the portraits Garb classifies as Realist would enrich her account of what happens when Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso evacuate the female subject of portraiture.

In her prologue, Garb clearly states that her study is not a survey or a social history (17). But in her efforts to place portraiture at the center of modernism, she tends to gloss over the history, and the specificity, of the genre. The problem of the relationship between paint handling, the picturing of the subject, and the nature of representation is an old one, and is operative in both male and female portraiture throughout the history of the portrait—we can see it being played out in the work of Rembrandt, Velasquez, and David, not to mention that of Leyster and Vigée-Lebrun. Garb gestures in several places in the book to the particularity of the historical and artistic situation in nineteenth-century France—the

association between femininity and commercial culture, for instance, figures prominently in the prologue. Further exploration of late nineteenth-century theories of gender and subjectivity would help elucidate how the strategies of representation deployed by the artists considered drew on, and subverted, popular notions of female selfhood—and would enrich an already compelling discussion of the relationship between representation and subjectivity.

As a Realist myself, forever focused on the materiality of my subject, I feel bound to comment on the physical beauty of Garb's book. It is a sumptuous object, fully Ingresque in its profusion of color reproductions—not only details of the most crucial paintings, but also color images in the margins of the text, full-page illustrations of paintings touched on only briefly, and even repetitions of plates that are discussed twice in two different parts of a single chapter. The text itself suffers from a few noticeable typographical errors—one on the first page of the prologue—and from some fact-checking problems, including a significant misdating of a signed and dated self-portrait of Hortense Haudebourt-Lescot. These problems, however, detract little from a book that makes an important contribution to both the study of modernism and the history of portraiture—a genre that never seems to go away, despite the best efforts of Garb's protagonists.

Amy Freund
Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow
Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts
a-freund[at]nga.gov

Notes

[1] Paloma Alarco and Malcolm Warner, *The Mirror and the Mask: Portraiture in the Age of Picasso*. Exh. cat. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007); Sabine Rewald, Ian Buruma, and Matthias Eberle, *Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from the 1920s*. Exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006); Catherine M. Soussloff, *The Subject in Art: Portraiture and the Birth of the Modern* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006); John Klein, *Matisse Portraits* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001); Heather MacPherson, *The Modern Portrait in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).