

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Sarah Sik

book review of

Evil by Design: The Creation and Marketing of the Femme Fatale by
Elizabeth K. Menon

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 6, no. 1 (Spring 2007)

Citation: Sarah Sik, book review of *Evil by Design: The Creation and Marketing of the Femme Fatale* by Elizabeth K. Menon, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2007), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring07/evil-by-design-the-creation-and-marketing-of-the-femme-fatale-by-elizabeth-menon>.

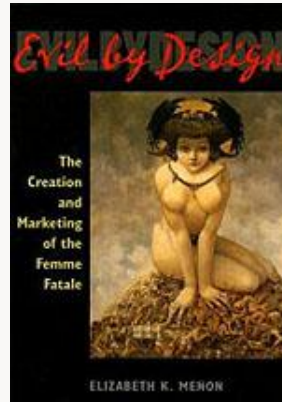
Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

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](#).



Evil by Design: The Creation and Marketing of the Femme Fatale

Elizabeth K. Menon

Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006

339 pages; indexed; 126 B & W illustrations

ISBN [Paperback]: 0252073231

ISBN [Hardcover]: 0252030834

\$30.00 [Paperback]

\$70.00 [Hardcover]

Charles Baudelaire, arguably the most potent French progenitor of modern verse, once mused: "The strange thing about woman—her pre-ordained fate—is that she is simultaneously the sin and the Hell that punishes it"(146). Baudelaire's conflicted relationships with the female sex were well documented in his poems, most notably in the cycles of *Les fleurs du mal* (1857) devoted to the "Black Venus," Jeanne Duval, and her foil, the "White Venus," Apollonie Sabatier.[1] The dichotomies Baudelaire invoked in these poems—of black and white, female and male, carnal and intellectual, attraction and repulsion, life and decay—were the linguistic ingredients of a putrid yet poetic bile upon which successive generations of symbolist writers and artists nursed.

Elizabeth K. Menon, assistant professor of art history at Butler University, contends in her book, *Evil by Design: The Creation and Marketing of the Femme Fatale*, that movements in the fine arts were often preceded, sometimes by decades, by similar trends in the literary arts, and argues that as mass print culture emerged in the nineteenth century, these ideas often were transfused through the medium of the popular press. Images of the femme fatale in the Salons of fin-de-siècle France, Menon asserts, "did not suddenly appear at the end of the century. Rather they were tested first within the popular realm before being assimilated into the fine arts of painting and sculpture" (3). Although there are numerous dramatic examples of the femme fatale in the fine art of the period from which to draw—most notably the lethal figure of the biblical temptress, Salomé, present in Salons of the 1870s and 80s, or the numerous incarnations of the title character of Gustave Flaubert's 1862 novel, *Salammbô*, manifest in the Salons of the 1880s and 90s—Menon chooses a disarmingly serene painting to illustrate the academic tradition for which she seeks to provide a broader cultural context. Menon's choice to begin the study with a discussion of the arch-academician William-Adolphe Bouguereau's *Temptation* (1880, Minneapolis Institute of Arts) is an

ingenious choice, which demonstrates, far better than the more obvious candidates suggested above, the sophisticated and insidious motif the fine arts inherited when it absorbed the construct of the femme fatale.

At first glance, the painting appears innocent and sentimental, as it depicts a young peasant woman and a small child sharing a seemingly tender moment in a pastoral retreat. Yet even at a purely visual level, ambiguities abound: Is the relationship between the two figures maternal or sisterly? Why is the apple the woman holds out the sole suggestion of a meal? Why is the baby nude while her older companion is clothed? Contextual analysis of the painting, Menon argues, reveals a far more complicated network of encoded symbols than is superficially apparent, visual symbols that had first metastasized in the popular press. Several of the themes Menon isolates for study at length in *Evil by Design* are evident in the enigmatic narrative Bouguereau suggests. The apple in the woman's hand, when considered in light of the title of the painting, *Temptation*, draws upon the persistent cultural categorization of French women as *les filles d'Eve* (the daughters of Eve), a theme Menon examines in chapter 1. Similarly, through the inclusion of a blooming white water lily and a smaller bud growing out of a mucky pond in the foreground, Bouguereau employed an established vocabulary of floral language, a symbolic tradition that Menon traces in chapter 5, appropriately entitled after Baudelaire's volume of poems, *Les fleurs du mal*. The oddly domineering size of the woman and child, Menon argues, can be linked to the interest male artists took in the legendary figure of the Amazon as women gained greater legal rights, a topic addressed in chapter 6, "La femme au pantin." Simultaneously, the serpentine position of the woman's reclining body suggests that she has taken on the nature of the devious snake, passing on the knowledge of evil to the daughters of Eve, a topic Menon treats in chapter 8, "Serpent Culture." As the fruit of a womb, whether it be that of the young woman of childbearing age depicted or of an unseen mother, the rosy-cheeked child also suggests the French preoccupation with female fertility in the period following the nationally emasculating Franco-Prussian war and subsequent disastrous drop in birth rates during the Third Republic, a theme which Menon examines in chapter 7, "Depopulation Demons."

In addition to the manner in which many of the graphically hostile themes Menon isolates for study in *Evil by Design* are sublimated in *Temptation*, the painting functions as a microcosm of the representational struggle she traces. Women, as Menon argues throughout the book, and focuses upon particularly in chapter 4, "Dangerous Beauty," were given the choice between such opposing roles of virtue or vice; wife or prostitute; virgin or carnal initiate. And as the male writer or artist absolved himself of responsibility for his inability or unwillingness to govern his passions, images of vice became strongly feminized. Through representation, Menon argues, men actively sought to control both women, as subjects, and culture, the realm in which representations circulated (5, 134-135). As Bouguereau put his brush to the canvas to produce a work of high culture, an intellectually elevated and artificial realm in which he could reproduce without copulating, the female figures he painted were inversely consigned to a closer relationship with the earth—to a serpentine recumbency in nature. It is at this juncture that the title of Menon's study becomes particularly relevant. While male artists and writers claimed to represent the natural position of woman—as a *fille d'Eve*, a womb, a cultivated flower, or a carnal beast—the cultural symbols that coalesced were anything but natural. *Evil by Design* captures not only the manmade nature of the many negative visions of femininity that circulated in the period which Menon studies, but argues, as the subtitle contends, that these injurious

images were consciously *created* and deliberately *marketed* to the cultural imagination through the engine of the popular press, and the (mostly) men who had access to it. The femme fatale, or evil woman, is thus understood in Menon's book not as an historical figure, such as the feminist or the New Woman, but as a coalescence and projection of male fears and desires.

To analyze the importance of images that proliferated in the popular press and among the smaller, yet culturally powerful, world of book and print collectors, Menon has conducted impressive archival and collection-based research. While Menon incorporates several examples of painting and decorative arts, the study is focused primarily on the graphic arts—examining illustrations drawn from such journals as *La Vie parisienne*, *Le Courrier français*, *Le Boulevardier*, *Le Journal amusant*, and *La Caricature*, but also treating fine-art prints, book illustrations, and watercolors. Menon demarcates the 1860s, a period coinciding with the rise of the Second Empire, as the beginning of her study, and terminates in 1914 with the onset of the First World War (7). Concurring with the established contention that the femme fatale is not a single concept (4), Menon arranges the study thematically, rather than chronologically or biographically, and groups the eight chapters of the book into three sections: "Genesis," "Marketing Temptation," and "Motifs of Evil." This review will focus on the effectiveness of these sections and upon the themes they encompass.

"Genesis"

The opening section of the book is appropriately placed and wittily entitled "Genesis," for its sole chapter is devoted to the subject of *Les filles d'Eve*. In establishing the conception of women as the daughters of Eve, Menon not only refers to the biblical account of creation and original sin found in the book of Genesis, but also traces the figurative genesis of a socio-religious motif that is fundamental to understanding many of the other mutations the femme fatale underwent. As the French feminist movement slowly gathered momentum in the nineteenth century, cultural interest in the figure of Eve also grew. The figure of Eve symbolized the natural role of woman as wife and mother, but also suggested that women were innately weak and prone to folly, able to be easily swayed, and capable of tempting men to follow them into peril. Menon carries this theme further by examining Pandora as a classical pendant to the biblical figure of Eve, looking specifically at the art of Gustav Adolphe Mossa. In both biblical and mythological accounts, Menon argues, Eve and Pandora were linked to the earth as symbols of fertility, and in both stories, female curiosity introduced evil to the world.

The irresistible temptation Eve posed to Adam once her curiosity had been satisfied was held out as sufficient reason to deny women access to rhetoric or political representation. Menon demonstrates that while Eve and her daughters were oftentimes envisioned as beautiful, yet simpleminded, divine creations, they were just as readily capable of acting as a seductive, satanic force. The figure of Eve thus became a symbol of man's susceptibility to sensual seduction, a sentiment Menon attributes to Marchef-Girard (22). Menon traces the debates of Eve's nature in theological and literary treatises which typically condemned her curiosity. Eve and her daughters were also at times defended, however, and Menon cites both the feminist response of Maria Deraismes, who argues that Eve's inquisitiveness "*cède à la curiosité scientifique*" [gave way to scientific curiosity], and the contemporary opinion of the feminist supporter, Jules Bois, that women's perceived foibles were not the product of

nature but of social conditioning (23). "Bois believed that in the realm of society and luxury," Menon writes, "the femme à la mode sank into increasing banality, causing her own destruction. He discussed this type of fille d'Eve as a product of patriarchal society" (32).

Menon also traces in this chapter the cultural contention that the source of feminine mischief (defined as that which exceeds gender and behavioral boundaries established by men) was often overwhelming boredom. Discussing a condensed pictorial history of neurasthenia published in *La Vie parisienne* shortly after the turn of the century, Menon points to the accompanying caption which crowned Eve, "l'éternelle malade" [the eternal neurotic], a condition that is diagnosed as a symptom of her boredom with the luxuriant dullness of Eden (24). The term, "fille d'Eve," Menon asserts, was introduced into modern French culture through a story by Honoré de Balzac that appeared in the late 1830s under the title *Une fille d'Eve*. Following the marriages of two sisters, the tale tells the story of the older sister's succumbing to the temptation of adultery when she becomes bored with her "well-regulated Eden" (28).

"Marketing Temptation"

As a disclaimer in her introduction, Menon states that her study is not intended to illuminate the entire menagerie of cultural forms that the *femme fatale* took, but that she specifically pursued the figure of the *Parisienne*, a feminine confection that Octave Uzanne deemed the "decadent refinement of the present race" (4). In the second section of her book, "Marketing Temptation," the subject of the modern Parisian woman comes more clearly into focus. A humorous quip of the period—that fashion appeared five minutes after Eve, when she complained to Adam that she "had nothing to wear"—bridges the transition between the topics of naked Edenic temptress and high-fashion siren (44-45). The long hair and simple fig leaf that constituted the natural adornment of Eve, however, is a far cry from the highly artificial contraptions of seduction worn by the *Parisienne*. Among the many effectively integrated quotes from primary sources of the period, Menon cites the reaction of Uzanne to the tempting spectacle of the *Parisienne* as she strolled along the city's boulevards:

Grâce à la Parisienne, la rue devient, à Paris, pour tout artiste et tout amoureux, le féérique Eden des désirs subites, des admirations foudroyantes, des aventures étranges. Le cœur y trébuche et y bondit à chaque pas; les yeux s'y délectent sans fin et la flânerie s'y acagnarde en de délicieuses sensations. L'homme qui sait y muser lentement et avec amour s'y retrempe à tout âge, rien qu'à regarder, admirer, flairer et écouter au passage ces jolies promeneuses à l'œil gai, au minois chiffonné. Son esprit amoureux chante d'éternelles aubades à toutes ces mignonnes créatures d'Eve qu'il ne connaître peut-être jamais, et ses sens y demeurent heureusement en éveil bien au delà de l'heure du couvre-feu et des crépuscules de l'âge (50).

[Thanks to the Parisienne, the streets of the capital have become, for every artist and lover, an enchanted Paradise of sudden desires, devastating strokes of passion, exotic adventures. At every step the heart leaps and misses a beat; the eyes find ceaseless sources of delight and the stroller drifts on a tide of delicious sensations. The man who can reflect slowly and fondly on these things can recapture their joys, whatever his age, merely by gazing at, admiring, sniffing, and listening to these pretty, happy looking passersby with their cute little faces. His love-struck spirit utters endless serenades to these darling daughters of Eve whom he will probably never get to

know, and his senses remain happily awake long beyond the hour when age should impose its curfews and its twilight.]

In chapter 2, "Artificial Paradise," Menon examines the figure of the Parisienne in relation to the modern department store, an "artificial paradise." In the age of the department store, Menon argues, the temptation was not the apple of knowledge but the specter of consumerism, a tempting vision of a high fashion existence so powerful that it was accused of being able to trump a woman's reproductive instincts in favor of her fashion funds (211). The graphic arts Menon examines from this period, however, suggests that the *Parisienne* was not only the temptress, but was also, like her "childish," greedy forebear, Eve, easily subjected to temptation. Menon discusses a journal illustration of this period in which a department store's door becomes the yawning jaws of Moloch, sucking women into its belly (58-60). An illustration from *La Vie parisienne* suggests that inside these temples of materialism, the impressionable *Parisienne* was fitted for lavish gowns, presented with a parade of luxury goods to decorate her home, and sidled up next to by the serpent of the modern age—the jeweler (60-61). The sexes were depicted as caught in a symbiotic spiral into decadence that was more easily blamed upon the woman as the visible consumer. As a counterpart to the feminine space of the department store, Menon discusses the appearance of the *Club des Femmes*, a social gathering place for women that was made possible particularly after the lifting of a ban, dating from the Jacobin era, that prevented groups of more than three women from convening (64). As these groups were also associated with further liberalizations of women's rights in 1881, this section could perhaps be more effectively associated with the imagery of giant women using their "doits de la femme" to torture hapless men, which Menon discusses in chapter 6, "La femme au pantin."

Chapter 3, "Decadent Addictions," deals with imagery of women as both the servers of addictive substances as well as the victims of inebriation, which men readily observed resulted in less sexually guarded states. Menon also discusses the use of the female form in the marketing of tobacco, a French industry which by 1890, through increased production and effective advertising, had sold in one year more cigarettes than had been produced in total between 1811 and 1887 (73). Both tobacco and alcohol (particularly aperitifs) were part of what Menon characterizes as "a culture of indulgence" that adopted ultimate signs of decadence through the consumption of substances that had no nutritive value, and which were in the opinion of scientists and reformers deleterious to the health of both the body and the pocket book (74). Menon cites Glondel's comment, "Les millions vont si vite par ce temps de prospérité et de fumerie générale!" (73) [Millions disappear so quickly in this time of prosperity when everybody smokes!] As men sought to absolve themselves of their own complicity in developing addictions, the figure of the seductive, irresistible woman provided an external focal point upon which to transfer blame. Absinthe was christened the green fairy, and in the graphic arts plumes of cigarette smoke intertwined with sensuous tendrils of hair in Mucha's *Job* poster or imitated the frilly patterns of a coyly upturned petticoat in Weiluc's well-known cover for the 20 October 1900 issue of *Le Frou-Frou* (78-80).

"Dangerous Beauty," the fourth chapter of the book and last contribution to the thematic study of "Marketing Temptation," concerns images of the marketing of the female body through prostitution. Drawing connections to vegetal metaphors as well as to the concern for controlling reproduction, themes discussed in subsequent chapters, Menon cites the opinion of Camille Mauclair that the prostitute "ne doit comporter aucune fécondité, et est

machiné pour s'emparer impérieusement du désir mâle' [must never bear fruit, and is engineered to make the uttermost of male desire]." (96) While I cannot bring myself fully to agree with the assertion made in the following chapter that characterizes both feminists and prostitutes as "powerful new women," Menon persuasively analyzes in "Dangerous Beauty" the male impulse not only to physically control the locations of legalized prostitutes, but also to visually categorize various types of prostitutes and their behavioral markers (127). The public, Menon suggests, ultimately desired an image of the prostitute as easily configured and expendable as the folded paper bird, called a Pajarita, which came to represent her. "One might also say that the Pajarita was cheap, delicate, and disposable," Menon argues, "all of which explains why it came to symbolize the cocotte" (121).

"Motifs of Evil"

The final section of *Evil by Design* deals most directly with the theme of the femme fatale. Menon begins this section with a study of the filtration of the themes of Baudelaire's poems, *Les fleurs du mal*, from which chapter 5 takes its title, into the realm of the graphic arts. In Baudelarian symbolism, Menon argues, flowers can connote beauty and pleasure, but through their fragile nature and short lives also serve as reminders of mortality (148). Menon traces the association of the female body with flowers from Eve's connection to the Garden of Eden, through the nineteenth-century construction of romantic floral symbolism, to the deflowering of the prostitute's body, particularly in the poems of Baudelaire and the imagery of Félicien Rops. The decay of the body as passion gives way to syphilis, a sexual disease with which Baudelaire was afflicted, Menon argues is reflected in the body of the female syphilitic, whose genitals take on the appearance of grotesque flowers (147). The fear of syphilis, particularly in the prostitute's body, contributed to the male desire to cultivate "bouquets of the boudoir" that could not escape the confines of their pots (137). To this effect, Menon cites a passage from Edouard de Pompéry's *La femme dans l'humanité, sa nature, son rôle et sa valeur sociale* (1864):

Comme les belles roses, les femmes ne peuvent éclore que quand la science et l'industrie de l'homme ont défriché le sol, purifié l'atmosphère et constitué un milieu favorable à l'épanouissement de la fleur humaine, quand l'homme lui-même est devenue digne de la cultiver et de la cueillir en ce nouvel Eden créé de ses mains (128-129).

[Like beautiful roses, women can only blossom when Man's know-how and labor have cultivated the soil, purified the atmosphere and established favorable conditions for the human flower to bloom in; when he has become worthy to grow it and pick it in this new Eden he has created with his own hands.]

Chapter 6 is among the most nuanced and innovative contributions of Menon's study. Entitled "La femme au pantin," Menon discusses the roll of doll play in gender training as well as the mounting critique of French fashion-plate dolls following the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1867 (169-170). Critics charged that these expensive dolls taught young girls not to be good mothers, but to be materialistic cocottes-in-training (170). Menon further discusses literary conceptions of the domesticated adult woman as a doll as well as the use of the phrase "Maison de poupées" [Dolls' House] as a metaphor for a brothel in a number of articles published in *La Vie parisienne* (176). The chapter is dominated visually, however, by the motif of the towering woman who frivolously toys with the miniature men she charms or captures. Menon interprets the size discrepancies as a symptom of the reinvigorated

interest in the figure of the Amazon warrior in response to the growing demand of women for legal rights. "Amazons," Menon notes, was a disdainful epithet for feminists (2). The giant woman here is also the consort of the devil. As Joséphin Péladan remarked in response to Rop's feminine fantasies, "l'homme est le pantin de la femme, et la femme est le pantin du diable" [man is the puppet of woman; she is the puppet of the devil] (195-196)."

Chapter 7, "Depopulation Demons," addresses the phenomenon of the fetus motif in graphic art and painting, and analyzes its underlying connection to France's spiraling birthrate. The need of the nation for a large marching army, one that would ultimately be pitted against Germany in the trenches of World War I, required French women to reproduce at a patriotic rate. Successful pregnancies furthermore had specific religious implication, Menon argues, in the redemption offered to the *filles d'Eve* through the pangs of childbirth (203). Menon discusses the perceived threat of both the *femme-homme*, who was feared would cause reproduction to halt altogether, as well as the decadent couple, who abort their offspring to pursue a fashionable life (204).

Joséphin Péladan once commented of the imagery of Félicien Rops : "Personne n'a exprimé comme lui, Eve et le serpent: Eve et le serpent, n'est-ce pas la moitié du monde et la moitié de l'art ?" [Nobody has ever portrayed Eve and the serpent like him. Eve and the serpent, isn't that half the story of both the world and art?]"(27). Menon perceptively picks up on the multifarious relationships that transpired between the fille d'Eve and the snake in visual culture of the period in chapter 8, "Serpent Culture." The phallic desires associated with the eternal Eve's fascination with the serpent as well as the suggestion that shape-shifting females are more animal than human, are seen in the ability of the fille d'Eve to charm the snake and even take the form of a snake itself. "What had originally been a dialogue between Eve and a snake," Menon asserts, "became a conspiracy between Eve and the devil" (227). The symbolism was further proliferated in visual culture, Menon argues, through the popularity of "serpentine accessories" (243). Not only did feather boas become popular in the late 1880s and 90s, but the emergence of art nouveau, with its interest in sinuous lines, also fostered the motif. Particularly in the realm of jewelry, the form of the open-mouthed snake could be tensile yet elegant, a feature Menon illustrates through the inclusion of a serpent brooch (1889-99) and serpent handbag (1901-03), both designed by René Lalique as well as the famous snake arm piece and ring that Alphonse Mucha and George Fouquet collaborated upon in 1899 for Sarah Bernhardt. The motif of the woman as a snake charmer, Menon argues, was furthermore promoted through the use of snake imagery in the performances of other celebrities of the era, including the "danse serpentine" of Loïe Fuller and the figure of Jane Avril entwined with a serpent in a poster by Toulouse-Lautrec (1899).

Conclusion

In this impressive investigation of the many cultural incarnations of the femme fatale in the visual and literary culture of France between 1860 and 1914, Elizabeth K. Menon has achieved a synthetic study that is pertinent to literary, historical, and art historical disciplines. Her contextual literary research adds a valuable dimension to the images that she discusses, allowing readers to observe the formation of a hostile cultural atmosphere in which Alexandre Dumas fils could write:

Never marry a girl of a mocking spirit. Raillery, with a woman, is a mark of hell.... [If you find later that] you have been duped by appearances or deceits; if you have associated your life with a creature unworthy of you;...if nothing can prevent her from prostituting your name with her body; if she cabins and confines you in your destined movement as man;...if the law, which has assumed the right to bind, has interdicted itself and pronounced itself impotent to release, then declare yourself in person, in the name of your Master, judge and executioner of this creature. She is not your wife, she is not even a woman; she was not in her conception divine, she is purely animal; she is the babooness of the land of Nod, she is the female of Cain: slay her!" (208-209)

Yet Menon traces not merely misogynistic passages, but also the feminine retorts which were shot in return. Menon quotes the response of Maria Deraismes in *Eve contre M. Dumas fils* (1872): "s'il te ruine, s'il arrive même à corrompre la pureté de ton sang, n'oublie pas que cet homme *souille le plan primordial, la conception divine*, qu'il est indigne de figurer au triangle; c'est le singe dont parle Darwin, c'est Cain en personne; TUELE, *n'hésite pas*" [if he ruins you, if he even manages to corrupt the purity of your blood, don't forget that this man *is defiling the primordial plan, the divine concept*, that he is unworthy to be part of the triangle; he is Darwin's ape, Cain in person; KILL HIM; *don't hesitate*]." (209)

Menon not only examines a wide array of images of the femme fatale within the context of the world of letters, but also incorporates research pertaining to scientific opinions of the time as well as contemporary theories of degeneration. This study thus not only analyzes how the femme fatale was visually constructed, but addresses the historical gender conflicts that gave rise to the fears, prejudices, and resentments that fueled the emergence of the femme fatale in the cultural imagination. *Evil by Design* constitutes a substantial contribution to the fields of study that endeavor to understand the architecture of gender relations in the past and present.

Sarah Sik
University of Minnesota
sikx0003[at]umn.edu

Notes

[1] Jonathan Culler. Introduction to: Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. xx.