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book review of

Illuminated Paris: Essays on Art and Lighting in the Belle Époque by
Hollis Clayson

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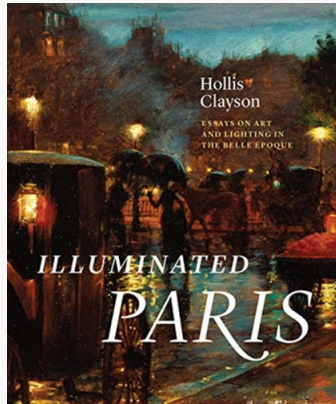
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Hollis Clayson,
Illuminated Paris: Essays on Art and Lighting in the Belle Époque.
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019.
248 pp.; 75 color and 32 b&w illus.; bibliography; index.
\$55
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Hollis Clayson is one of the best-known scholars working on the French nineteenth century; a new book from her is bound to be an event. The University of Chicago Press, Clayson's longtime publishers, have made *Illuminated Paris: Essays on Art and Lighting in the Belle Époque* an especially beautiful book. The many readers of *NCAW* familiar with Clayson's work will recognize characteristic traits in *Illuminated Paris*. Ambition in argument is certainly here; so too is a writing style never less than clear and always willing to be compelled (and often amused) by what a searching eye finds in the "fact-based visual arts" (3), whether those rewards appear on canvas, on the illustrated page, or—increasingly—on the printed sheet. Clayson's expository skill is of the essence to *Illuminated Paris*. While the historical span and subject matter of *Painted Love: Prostitution and French Art of the Impressionist Era* (1991) and *Paris in Despair: Art and Everyday Life under Siege (1870–71)* (2002), Clayson's first two books, can be summed up readily enough, the concerns of *Illuminated Paris* resist the same encapsulation. The contrasting concepts that guide each of its six chapters are *éclairage* (lighting), and *lumière* (light). According to Clayson, we haven't noticed the force of *éclairage* because it has been subsumed under *lumière* as a natural phenomenon (67).^[1] *Lumière* has been taken to encompass light that is artificial as well as light that proceeds from the sun or moon. In the process, *éclairage* has been thoroughly naturalized. It's "imperative" that *éclairage* (lighting) and *lumière* (light) "should be uncoupled" from each other if we are to understand the character of modernity's development in nineteenth-century Paris (3). *Éclairage* was a "principal characteristic" of this development (3).

A city "aglow with *éclairage*" generated an "illumination discourse" that gathered in an extraordinary range of artists, writers, and caricaturists (3). Throughout the book, oil on canvas cedes territory to claims from works on paper, and many works come from unfamiliar figures. Chronologically unfolding chapters take us from the outdoors in daylight into the illuminated night. "Off-duty" *réverbères* (single street lamps) looking "unexpectedly sensate and alert" in photographic portraits of these "sentinels" by Charles Marville—part of his long recording of the city's street furniture (1858–71)—open the book (18). By the sixth

chapter, we've moved indoors, and into a particularly private space at that. A room overlooking the Seine rented by a young Edward Munch became a retreat within the City of Light. There Munch painted "trapezoids of mottled blue-mauve light" rendering the *éclairage* cast by a nighttime window (171).

Illuminated Paris contends with some mighty preexisting images of Paris. Clayson invites us to "rummage through our mental Impressionism archive" (thereby assuming, by the way, a sophisticated reader). We find stalwarts in there (Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, Edgar Degas, Gustave Caillebotte [26]), and we know that their pictures deliver effects of daylight. [2] The stalwarts ignored the "artificially illuminated street, boulevard, or square" (26). Impressionism is overwhelmingly identified with *lumière*. Paris itself became aligned with *éclairage*. Yet its title—*La Ville Lumière*—goes back to the Enlightenment. *Éclairage* displaced *lumière* in the city's title starting in the mid-nineteenth century, abetted by a number of complex developments we tend to flatten into a seamless advance. But gaslight didn't retreat when the "new electric illuminations" appeared on streets as well as in homes (the latter much more slowly [3]). Different forms of *éclairage* shone at the same time, and—especially significant to Clayson's study—in the same places, indoors as well as outdoors. [3] She applauds the conservator and art historian Bruno Foucart's prescient alertness to *éclairage* but regrets his call for inventories: totting up lists of fixtures, old versus new (11–13). "Illumination discourse" summons instead an *éclairage* divided within itself. This alertness to the hybrid (gas and electric light shining at the same time) owes much—Clayson says so—to Jonathan Crary's account of modernity as dissonant. Remnants of "pre-capitalist life-worlds" linger in the situation Crary describes, just as gaslight lingered (6, 45). The "cruel" dazzle of arc lights generated nostalgia for the older jets, "insalubrious" and oxygen-sapping though their orange glow was (10, 41).

In *Illuminated Paris*, we're on terra cognita but many of the familiar signposts are missing. Wan daylight settles on Chapter 1, as the title indicates: "*Cherchez la lampe: Charles Marville, Gustave Caillebotte, and the Gas Lamppost.*" The discussion spells out how uninterested the Impressionists were in the effects of *éclairage*. That didn't stop them depicting the conveyors of *éclairage*. One representative is favored above all: the *réverbère* (the standing, isolated street lamp). We accompany the *réverbère* on its march into all corners of Haussmann's city, from the most fashionable to the bleakest. [4] This human-scale fixture turns out to be a July Monarchy antique. It can signal either a past that will soon be lost to view or appear as stranded on arrival in an underserved part of Haussmann's Paris. The second option is seen in a Marville photograph from 1877, the first in a famous canvas painted the same year: *Paris Street: Rainy Day* (1877) by Gustave Caillebotte. In the painting, a *réverbère* towers over all. Despite its prominence, "little has been said" by scholars about this "key 'figure'" in *Paris Street* (28). Thanks to Clayson, we notice that Caillebotte decided to paint it sap green (*réverbères* weren't this color). We notice how "rugged" and opaque are its glass surfaces (28). Caillebotte's "stagey image of the bourgeois social everyday in modernity" contrasts completely with Marville's tenderness-suffused portraits of individual *réverbères* (28).

In Chapter 2, "Losing the Moon: John Singer Sargent in the Garden du Luxembourg," the painter from the United States might seem to cling to the Impressionist aversion to the effects of *éclairage*. But those effects appear in two exceptionally arresting pictures painted by Sargent three years after Caillebotte gave late nineteenth-century French painting its

essential image of *anomie*. Each of Sargent's canvases depicts a view of a slowly emptying Luxembourg Gardens near closing time. Each scene lingers in a twilight harboring a full moon. Sargent sours these romantic ingredients. In a remarkable analysis, Clayson alerts us to no less than five sources of light in the two paintings. The range from off-stage Jablochhoff candles—the much-hated arc lights—to a background “gloaming” in which Clayson spots figures peering at dim newspapers (53). They're using the moon to read. Ultimately, Sargent paints a “brutally modernized” park (53). In a comment that reveals the deep research informing *Paris in Despair*, Clayson notes that the garden Sargent depicted is a place where Communards were cut down just nine years earlier. The “congenial” spirit that fellow countrymen Charles Courtney Curran and Childe Hassam instilled in their “outsider nocturnes” is far distant from Sargent's two disenchanting views of modernity (53, 41).

Chapter 3, “Bright Lights, Brilliant Wits: Electric Light Caricatured” can't be easily summarized; it amasses a broad range of evidence concerning the rise of *éclairage* in electric form. It leaves us in no doubt as to the significance of the 1881 International Electricity Exhibition (IEE) held in Paris. This “testing ground for incandescent lights”—Thomas Edison's carbon filament bulb was but one of four contenders—was heralded by contemporaries as “the harbinger of a ‘new material civilization’” (88, 83). *Éclairage* became international, even as the “genius of Menlo Park” became crucially its celebrity focus in the United States (57). Clayson discusses both informational illustrations and caricatures. On the inside pages and front covers of *La Caricature*, editor Albert Robida, along with fellow caricaturists Draner and Cham, showed how *éclairage* could be instrumentalized. Among their imaginings was a gadget providing heteronormative sexual surveillance (60–62; 92–95). Chapter 3 consults authorities on the social purposes and functions of humor (62). Mike Goode, for example, points out that comedy in the vein of Robida mobilizes stereotypes at every turn (95). I found the panoply of these caricatures a little dampening in its effect. This chapter's most valuable strand for me was discovering the important effect *éclairage* (and especially the IEE) had on the Salon and dealer-critic system. I was fascinated by how uneven, surprising, and much-commented upon (in writing and illustration alike) were *éclairage*'s initial forays into exhibition spaces. Clayson draws on contemporary assessments to show how the controversial arc lights brought “*douceur* (softness)” to painting but “cacophonous” colorism to marble sculpture (72).

Chapter 4 focuses on prints made by Edgar Degas and Mary Cassatt from 1879 to 1883 and is arguably the book's most important discussion. Clayson recommends abolishing the “hierarchy of medium” that keeps the history of print away from the mainstream of museum life and art-history teaching (101, 102). Her revisionism encompasses the well-worn title of Charles Baudelaire's late essay, “The Painter of Modern Life.”^[5] T.J. Clark modified part of it for his 1985 book on “the Art of Manet and His Followers” and the mix of titles—from painter to painting—devolved into a “placeholder for the Impressionist modernist camp” with oil on canvas the default medium (101). Prints in general and “Cassatt's and Degas's achievements in the graphic arts” in particular should now be central to our understanding of “nineteenth-century French modernism” (101). Clayson underlines how three decades of scholarship (by Michel Melot, Richard Brettell, Jay Clarke, and others) have demonstrated how significant an ethos of black-and-white was to the Impressionists. Clayson adds to these scholars' claims by capturing Cassatt's and Degas's breakthroughs in method (in series of works dating from 1879 to 1883) for illumination discourse. The gaslights always dominant in Degas's views of café-concert singers gleam because of circles left relatively

untouched on the plate. A worked-on plate is not necessarily a ferociously marked-up one. The café singers, like so many of Degas's figures, are starkly defined but half dissolved. How could they not be, buffeted as they are by low-set limelight and gas globes hovering above and beside them, like "moon eggs" (to borrow from Guy de Maupassant's description of arc lights (108–14)? The device essential to appreciation of Cassatt's works is the moderator lamp. Cassatt makes us familiar with its essential shape (globe atop a cloisonné base) but she doesn't pay any attention to the moderator lamp's finicky system of wicks and balances. Neither does she commit the sin of aligning globes with women's heads, sparing her figures from the morphological overlaps and dematerialization by gaslight that Degas's café singers fight against. For both artists, one printed sheet could remain unique. This was especially true of Cassatt, thanks to her command of an "unorthodox cuisine" for intaglio techniques (114).[6]

Chapter 5, "Outsider Nocturnes," removes a thick crust of condescension from the reputations of Curran, Hassam, and Maurice Prendergast, three painters from the "droves" who came from the United States to Paris, especially in the later nineteenth century (143). Clayson shows how their canvases don't belong in the interpretative equivalent of coach class. One of Curran's paintings was the inspiration for *Illuminated Paris*, and a detail from his *Paris at Night* (1889) appears on the book's jacket. It's an "outsider nocturne." Clayson coined this term to evoke the visitor's enthusiasm for the "artificially illuminated street, boulevard, or square." The "voluntary exile" of Curran, Hassam, and Prendergast spurred each artist to overcome the modernist experience of "disconnection." Estrangement, in Georg Simmel's classic diagnosis, wasn't beyond their capacity to experience, even if they were from the United States, and thus possessors of what Edith Wharton in a "bracing small book" from 1919 called "the freest minds in the world" (134). Clayson attributes the recuperative urge at work in *Paris at Night* to a desire Wharton identified in 1919—in a discussion of French society previously overlooked by art historians—as quintessentially "American": the desire for "a happy ending" (139). How does *Paris at Night* provide a "happy ending"? It's a painting "implacably" and "unrealistically dark" (138–39)? The blanket of night muffles any clash between classes to save visibility for the scene's sole markers of labor (a street vendor and a coachman [140, 139]).[7]

Clayson's final chapter, "Man at the Window: Edvard Munch in Saint-Cloud," concentrates on Munch's nightscapes from 1889. She turns first to Michael Fried's 1996 book on Edouard Manet, and quotes Fried's insight that "interiority and its 'absorptive worlds or cloisters'" are at the heart of the "thematic or spatial modernity of much nineteenth-century French painting" (160). "Room space," now under threat, also appears in T.J. Clark's 2013 book on Picasso. For Munch, however, as Clayson shows, *éclairage* animates the interior as it does for no other artist: light streaming in becomes the *mise-en-scène*. Earlier depictions of daylight rooms, Munch's included, pale by comparison. A window that becomes a "a wedge of artificial light" generates intensity of effect: "artificial light, sometimes electric, often stands for sex in these pictures" (158, 160, 162). Clayson's argument that these paintings deliver effects of liminality—Victor Turner's work is crucial here—sends us back to the dimming of the day discussed in the second chapter's analysis of Sargent's park views.

Munch does not provide *Illuminated Paris* with its last work. But I end with Clayson's emphasis on Munch's paintings of his room. It's vital to what I see as the book's achievement.

The interior makes an appearance in the first chapter's engagement with Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* via pictures of *éclairage* that remain unlit. Marville's daytime views of a *passage* drain away its illuminated, commodity-laden character, identified by Benjamin as generative of the movement from "a culture of production of one of consumption" (22). Clayson reminds us that the "arcade is one of only two key spatial topoi of the nineteenth century that [Benjamin] pinpointed"; the second is the interior (22). Marville's photographs of a *passage* unsettle because they lack *éclairage*. The observations of social historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch—quoted in Clayson's introduction to her book—are apt. The street in nineteenth-century Paris was bound to look like a room, he says. "Any artificially lit area out of doors" feels as though it's an "interior because it is marked off from the surrounding darkness as if by walls which run along the edges of the lit up area" (9). *Éclairage* gave Paris its modernity. *Illuminated Paris* leaves the reader in no doubt about this. Clayson's invocation of Schivelbusch's commentary also indicates how his writings from the 1980s are being revisited as the art history of the late nineteenth century moves away from mapping to worlds of perception and temporality that were weighed down increasingly by industrial time. What *Illuminated Paris* shows is that the interior isn't emblematic of modernity on account of its four solid walls set close together; *éclairage* brings us the feeling of room space in any setting, temporary though that experience is.

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Notes

[1] In chapter three, Clayson asks what is "artificial light" and examines the late nineteenth-century entry in the *Nouveau Larousse illustré* under "artificial." She finds there that "artificial" depends on "the transformation of nature," with lighting referred to as a "contraption" (67). I suspect that the reason that the book doesn't include dictionary definitions in its opening pages is because they would have expanded the "Introduction" to unwieldy proportions. *Nouveau Larousse illustré, Dictionnaire universel encyclopédique*, ed. Claude Augé (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1898–1904), 1:492.

[2] The development of photography from mid-century on is also in the mix here. Clayson points out that "close bond between modern art and light in France" is exemplified not only by the "innovative paintings eventually called Impressionist" but also by "photographs of the countryside and city." The camera's technical constraints, however, obliged photography's limitation to daylight. Clayson addresses the stages in this development in chapter one (11, 188, n. 15).

[3] A comparison can be made between *Illuminated Paris* and the section of Lynda Nead's *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets, and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) where the role of gaslight in the city's Cremorne Gardens is discussed.

[4] The *réverbère* also turns up in a *banlieu* which can be described as the most tattered corner of Haussmann's Paris. This lamp wilts at the center of Vincent van Gogh's *The Outskirts of Paris* (1886). This discussion of van Gogh's canvas includes the first of the book's reference to T.J. Clark's landmark study of Second-Empire and Third-Republic Paris. Clayson notes that van Gogh's painting does geographical and demographic duty in the chapter titled "The Environs of Paris" chapter (31–3).

[5] As Clayson points out, Baudelaire selected "the graphic artist Constantin Guys" as his title's "unlikely exemplar" (101). See an extended analysis of Baudelaire's choice in Marc Gotlieb, *The Plight of Emulation: Ernest Meissonier and French Salon Painting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 19–49.

[6] It was Lucien Pissarro who invoked the kitchen to describe the experimentation that began in 1879 (114).

[7] “The figures are all dark silhouettes indistinct in the gloom, with the exception of the fruit woman at right and the *cocher* (coachman), another worker, high up in the driver’s seat at far left” (139).