

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Alison McQueen

book review of

Paris in Despair: Art and Everyday Life under Siege (1870-71) by
Hollis Clayson

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 3, no. 2 (Autumn 2004)

Citation: Alison McQueen, book review of *Paris in Despair: Art and Everyday Life under Siege (1870-71)* by Hollis Clayson, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 3, no. 2 (Autumn 2004), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn04/paris-in-despair-art-and-everyday-life-under-siege-1870-71-by-hollis-clayson>.

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](#).



Hollis Clayson

Paris in despair: Art and Everyday Life under Siege (1870-71)

University of Chicago Press, 2002

ISBN 0-226-10951-8 (cloth) 485 pages, 216 illustrations

\$55

Extensively researched and full of careful visual analysis, Hollis Clayson's recent book, *Paris in Despair: Art and Everyday Life under Siege (1870-71)*, is nineteenth-century scholarship at its best. Using a materialist approach, Clayson examines print media as the principle vehicle for communication and artistic expression during the Siege. Many of the works discussed did not circulate widely until years later, if at all, as in the case of several private sketchbooks. Clayson offers a thorough historical evaluation of the four-month period of the Prussian attack on Paris from 19 September 1870 to 28 January 1871, an event that has been under-examined among art historians. She seeks to provide a "Parisian artistic record" of the psychological and social consequences of starvation, freezing, disease, and fatalities endured by a secluded population of two million. Clayson focuses on artists working during the war and the changing modes of visual representation that emerged under the Siege.

This carefully structured book, divided into four parts and fifteen chapters, leads readers from an analysis of the social context of the Siege, through case studies of six artists, to the varied means of commemoration following the 133 days of the Commune and the establishment of the Third Republic. Part One, "Paris Under Siege," begins with "The War, the Artists, and the History of Art," contextualizing Clayson's interest in what Victor Hugo called "The Terrible Year." Indeed, this project grew out of her important book *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era* (1991) and Clayson's desire to unearth the origins of the fascination with female sexuality in France during the final three decades of the nineteenth century. Chapter Two, "The Binant Series and the Wartime Everyday," offers a careful analysis of the thirty-six works that comprised this little-known cycle of paintings commissioned by A. Binant as an entrepreneurial depiction of the Siege. Designed as a chronological history, thirteen artists facilitated Binant's production of patriotic images intended to engender civic pride despite defeat. Clayson makes excellent use of the series as a means to structure our understanding of complex, shifting politics and the vagaries of daily life for soldiers and civilians. The author includes a complete list (45-6) of the large-scale oil paintings, many produced as collaborative works, that Binant exhibited at the Durand-Ruel Galleries in the spring of 1871.

Part Two, "Trapped: The City Transformed," begins with Chapter Three, "Claustrophobia: *La Ville Lumière* Goes Dark," and an analysis of the discursive nature of social life in Paris when both gas lighting and boulevards shift in signification and are denied their status as markers of modernity. Most interesting is Clayson's analysis of "Chaos and Disfiguration" in which she examines the ethics of departing the city, the new demarcations in the city (such as twenty garbage dump sites), and the damage wrought by Prussian bombardment and shelling begun in January, 1871, which sent Parisians to live in underground caves. (There is considerable slippage throughout the book between the use of Prussian and German as terms of nationality and citizenship.) As the streets altered in meaning as a social stage, Clayson considers previously stable, gendered terms such as *La Parisienne* and *Le Flâneur*, demonstrating their multivalence through prints and the writings of Théophile Gautier and Edmond de Goncourt.

Chapter Four, "Everyone's a Soldier," offers a lively account of the fortified ramparts, the mobilization of troops, and the increasing democratization of the National Guard. The analysis of Edouard Detaille's *Combat at Villejuif, 19 September 1870* (92-97) is particularly evocative as "the spectacle of war" is transformed into a genre scene capturing the camaraderie and distanced sense of anticipation symptomatic of the early days of the Siege. Clayson's fascination with sartorial references is cogently articulated in this chapter through her discussion of the soldiers's uniforms, although such references become prosaic elsewhere in the book. Chapter Five, "Gender and Allegory in Flux," gives a thorough examination of representations of besieged Paris through and on the female body. Clayson's investigation of textual sources is engaging; particularly strong is her analysis of Juliette Lamber Adam's *Mes illusions et mes souffrances pendant le Siège de Paris* (published 1873 or later) and the dynamics of intersecting feminism, republicanism, and female social spaces Adam helped form. While Adam's sphere is defined as specifically bourgeois, the field hospital she established was notably inter-class and her writings emphasized her pride in emancipating women from domestic isolation. (126-7) Clayson also assesses the transformation of the allegory of Paris into the sign of a republican nation, and her important discussion of "Feminized Men" evinces the malleability of gender distinctions as allegory in wartime print imagery, particularly in the service of political critique. Despite a rough transition, Chapter Five ends with a fascinating analysis of *The Balloon* (1870) and *The Pigeon* (1871) as "The *Allegories Modernes* of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes." Clayson's socio-historical reading successfully posits Puvis's pendant paintings as the locus not only for his experiences as a member of the National Guard, but also as allegories of hope, conveyed through the hot air balloon and carrier pigeon that were emblematic modes of communication signifying liberation. The tradition-informed reading of Puvis's work as referencing Piero della Francesca's "stylized and rigidly silhouetted columnar character" and Géricault's "yearning gesture" (150-1) seem, however, out of character for the author and do not contribute to her analysis.

Not for the weak of stomach, Chapter Six, "The Food Crisis," examines images of an increasingly desperate population turning to ever more creative sources of nourishment. Paris, the famous capital of *cuisine* was quickly transformed into an abject city notorious for the consumption of rats and the favored elephants of the zoo, Castor and Pollux. The author demonstrates how food consumption became indicative of patriotism and perhaps the most representative demarcation of social strata. Clayson's resourcefulness in acquiring

visual sources is impressive here and, indeed, throughout the book. This chapter also considers works that reflect the rationing and resultant queues engulfing the decreasing number of stores offering provisions. Clayson's desire to read the queues as specifically female social spaces and representations of difference through social class is generally convincing although the emphasis on female bourgeois figures becomes an over-determined marker denoting partial authorial speech.

With Part Three, "The Artist's War," the book shifts focus to case studies of six artists chosen for the author's interest in how each reorganized their life during the war and produced art despite challenging conditions. Beginning with an introduction, "The Horizon of Response," Clayson studies five representations of artists including two portraits, two self-portraits, and one potential self-portrait. This short section frames the author's approach in the following chapters: an artist's work is an extension of their psychological and social experience of the Siege. Chapter Seven, "Gustave Courbet Saves the Louvre," situates the notorious counter-imperial painter as the head of the *Commission artistique pour la sauvegarde des musées nationaux* dedicated to the preservation of art including the exterior sculpture of the Louvre. This project brought Courbet into contact with Henri Lefuel, the official architect of the Louvre following the death of Louis Visconti, and, although not noted in the text, this collaboration demonstrates that not all artists who received significant imperial patronage became pariahs during the Siege. (203) Although Courbet can not be considered emblematic of typical artistic experiences in 1870-1, this chapter includes a fascinating discussion of the means by which works in the Louvre and the building itself survived.

Chapter Eight, "Edouard Manet: Restless Modernism," includes material that is among the most resonant in the book and also, unfortunately, underscores the author's biases to masculine war-time experiences. Manet's status is described as "well-off" and his position "patriotic" for remaining in the capital (211), and there is detailed interpretation of his extant war-time drawings of soldiers, his etching *Line in front of a butcher shop*, and two cityscape paintings. There is passing reference to Manet's servant, (209) but his privileged status is sanctioned with expectations of normalcy; he is even described as a "charming bourgeois artist" whereas the bourgeois status of unidentifiable female subjects is a continual source of social critique elsewhere in the text. (232) Berthe Morisot's position as a fellow artist and even wife of Manet's brother was, surprisingly, not a subject of greater interest. Clayson notes in her conclusion, "The Roads not Taken," that Morisot's position should be investigated (371), but while Manet's "inactivity, anxiety, and seclusion" (223) are validated as an heroic position and his pride of uniform is granted in-depth discussion, Morisot is described as an "anorexic" (an inappropriate term for temporary malnourishment) who "had difficulty painting" and "did not succeed in completing any art during the war." (371) Morisot is deemed a valuable resource when her letters discuss Manet, but greater examination of her situation would have enriched our understanding of the subject positions of women during the Siege, specifically Morisot as a heterosexual, who was neither considered head of a household nor vying for a military role like Bonheur.

Chapter Nine, "Henri Regnault: Wartime Orientalism," presents a convincing analysis of Regnault's "homo-social" relationship with fellow artist and soldier George Clairin. Clayson evaluates the significance of Regnault's artistic explorations in Spain and Morocco and considers the audiences of muscular male torsos in his work, specifically *Execution without*

trial under the Moorish kings of Grenada and Hassan and Namouna. Unexamined are the interracial implications of many of the proposed projections of Regnault's desire onto Moorish and North African men; this would have enriched the complexity of Clayson's important psychoanalytic reading of the works. Chapter Ten, "Jean-Alexandre-Joseph Falguière: Sculpting Resistance," focuses on the one sculptor to receive in-depth analysis and offers an excellent and detailed account of Falguière's snow statue *La Résistance* and the ephemeral *Musée de neige* (Gautier's term) situated at one of the city's bastions in December 1870. Contrasting the fame of this work with Falguière's inability to procure a post-war commission for a public monument discussed later in the book, Clayson offers a considered discussion of the artist's struggle to return to the subject of Resistance through his numerous reenactments in traditional media. Chapter Eleven, "Rosa Bonheur: A Manly *Animalier* Soldiering On," evaluates her unusual circumstances in opposition to "conventional" and "normative" femininity and again privileges soldiers's experiences, in this instance the situation of an artist living outside the immediate parameters of the besieged city who wanted to become a soldier but whose sex denied her the possibility. (284-5) Situating Bonheur as protected from attacks because of the popularity of her work among Prussian collectors, the principal painting considered in this chapter is *The Wounded Eagle* discussed below. Chapter Twelve, "Edgar Degas: Portraiture and Empathy," offers arguably the most problematic analyses of the book. In what can only be taken as the author's desire to situate Degas as transgressing the boundaries of social class and geographic borders within Paris, Clayson positions Degas as empathetic to working-class women through her examination of three works: *Woman with a Headband*, *A Young Woman with a White Headdress*, and *Woman at a Window*. Without sufficient evidence, this chapter offers a nearly fictionalized account of Degas's motivations to produce representations of "working women" as manifestations of his concern for their exposure to poverty and starvation.

Part Four, "Commemorating the Siege in the Aftermath of the Paris Commune," begins with Chapter Thirteen, "*La Place de la Concorde* in War and Peace," and provides a fascinating account of the means by which *The Statue of Strasbourg* became a locus for patriotic intervention through decorative embellishment. Degas's *Place de la Concorde* is also given due consideration, and particularly interesting is Clayson's analysis of the curious absence of *The Statue of Strasbourg* from the public space represented in Degas's painting, manifesting an "amnesiac valence" filled with personal meaning. Chapter Fourteen, "Two Retrospective *Concours*," considers the challenges of commemorating the devastating losses in France of 1870-71: it discusses the nation's attempts to commission a public sculpture at Courbevoie in 1879 as well as a program of history paintings for the office of the prefect in the new city hall in 1889. As noted above, Falguière lost to Ernest Barrias, whose *The defense of Paris* offered what Clayson aptly evaluates as both allegorical and realist in its emphasis on patriotism and the symbolic resonance of the Republic through the corporeality of crowned, female Paris. Destroyed during the Commune in May, 1871, the new city hall symbolized the triumph of Paris through a cycle executed by Adolphe Binnet. Although the walls are currently covered by tapestries, Clayson used extant oil sketches as the basis of her convincing examination of scenes including soldiers in trenches, a hot-air balloon, bombardment, ensuing care for the wounded and dead, ration lines, and famine. With this commission the reader is brought full circle to the Binant series with which the author began. Clayson demonstrates the tensions between official representations of the Siege that emphasized heroism and resolve and the daily-life experiences on which her research focused, eloquently revealing the complexities of civilian experience.

Paris in Despair is written for scholars with considerable knowledge of nineteenth-century French history and art. Indeed even specialists will note the absence of analysis of Second Empire international policies that led to the events discussed. Imperialist political agendas of Napoleon III and Eugénie are strikingly absent, lacunae that result in narrow interpretations in several instances. Negating the association of eagles and Napoleonic regimes, Clayson reads the representation of an eagle as exclusively a sign of Prussian imperialism. This denies the polyvalence of such symbols in France during the years bridging the Second Empire and Third Republic. In a detailed iconographic reading of a print such as "La Puce en colère" a narrow reading of the eagle as "German" does not coalesce with the balance of the imagery, particularly in the context of a "Musée des Souverains," where an eagle must be understood as a sign of French imperialism, specifically its reappropriation throughout the Second Empire regime. (140) In another instance, Clayson interprets Bonheur's painting "The Wounded Eagle" (c.1870) as a Prussian sign "in distress." (298) Although she later cites a letter in which Bonheur writes of the overthrow of Napoleon III, she misreads the eagle as an exclusively Prussian sign. (301) Bonheur's eagle could very well pictorialize her sense of Napoleon III, whom she admired, equally "in distress" and falling in the midst of flight during the same year the ex-emperor was imprisoned at Wilhelmshöhe and fled to exile in England in March, 1871. Bonheur's interpretation of an eagle must not be aligned with the discourse of anti-bonapartist caricatures simply to fulfill a scholar's desire to disavow imperialist tendencies evident through an artist's biography.

A serious impediment for the reader is the absence of a bibliography. As an authoritative account of the visual culture of the Siege, a comprehensive bibliography would have been both an important resource for scholars and a means to render accessible the considerable new resources Clayson has unearthed; the endnotes lack indications to the first citation of a publication and, thus, frustrate the engaged reader. Despite this unfortunate shortcoming, perhaps the product of the publisher rather than the author, Clayson's admirable study makes a significant contribution to the literature on nineteenth-century French art. Important for the discipline as a whole is Clayson's insight into the significance of war—from its psychological and domestic challenges to its effect on everyday life and patterns of patronage—as a point of rupture for artistic production.

Alison McQueen
Associate Professor of Art History
McMaster University
ajmcq[at]mcmaster.ca