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book review of

Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting by Ruth E. Iskin

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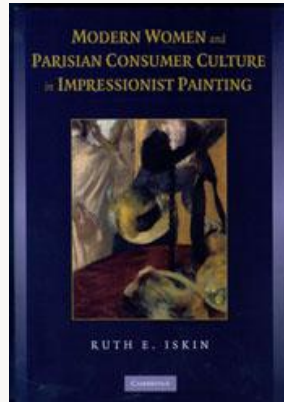
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Ruth E. Iskin

Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting

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As her title indicates, Ruth Iskin weaves many threads of inquiry into this work: modernity, women's participation in the public sphere through consumer culture, the proliferation of advertising images and product displays, and the implications of all these elements for Impressionist painting. What impresses this reader most is that despite the profusion of subject matters, the study is focused and streamlined. It is clearly productive to consider all of these subjects in relation to each other.

Iskin's stated objective is to study Impressionist paintings in terms of consumer culture and, in doing so, refine our understanding of women and representation in nineteenth-century Paris. In her introduction, "Impressionism, Consumer Culture and Modern Women," she describes the emerging imagery of mass consumption that bombarded Impressionist painters and other Paris residents throughout their daily life. She incorporates advertisements published in illustrated journals, the large, colorful posters papering the streets, the elaborate staging of actual commodities in shop windows, and exhibits in world expositions.

While clarifying that her project is not to cull source images for paintings from advertisements, Iskin demonstrates that the pervasive visual presence of marketing formed a major component of modern life to which painters responded. She also establishes that the increasing familiarity of Parisians with advertising and product displays affected the critical reception of Impressionist work. Among her examples, Iskin includes caricatures that mock Impressionist paintings for resembling the marketing of cheap, mass-produced commodities, such as a spoof of Degas' *Café Singer* (c. 1878) that presents the figure as a saleswoman hawking gloves. She also cites critics who disapprove of the inclusion of department-store goods in representations, such as the umbrellas in Caillebotte's *Paris, A Rainy Day* (1877). Such critics perceived unpleasant aesthetic similarities—such as a flatness or lack of modeling—between paintings and advertisements, tavern signs, wallpaper, and

cardboard heads used as hat mannequins. Iskin argues that critics who supported Impressionist paintings were also distasteful of consumer culture and worked to establish these paintings as aesthetically autonomous, or as high culture. She sees this as the start of a twentieth-century critical tradition that has ignored connections between consumer culture and avant-garde painting, even though such connections were apparent to a nineteenth-century audience.

Iskin also explores the ways in which nineteenth-century women experienced the consumer culture of Paris, as advertisements, boutiques, and department stores openly courted the gaze of female shoppers and art writing appealed to women as potential patrons of Impressionist paintings. She concludes her introduction by considering three works of Mary Cassatt that represent women as both active spectators and choreographers of their own public display: *In the Loge* (c. 1878), *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* (1879), and *Self-Portrait* (c. 1878).

In her second chapter, "Selling, Seduction and Soliciting the Eye," Iskin considers Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882). Moving beyond the familiar interpretation of this scene as one of sexual solicitation in which the male customer propositions the barmaid, Iskin instead emphasizes the central figure's role as a saleswoman of food and drink. She does this in part by focusing on the items arranged along the countertop, arguing that they evoke the emerging art of *étalage*, the careful staging of products in nineteenth-century department stores and world exhibitions. From there, the majority of the chapter is a complex discussion of looking and spectatorship, as Iskin argues that the modernity of this painting manifests through its representation and solicitation of multiple gazes. Although nineteenth-century politeness demanded that bourgeois women avoid eye contact with strangers, consumer culture encouraged them to look at advertisements, shop windows, and staged entertainments. Iskin points to the women spectators in the crowd that spans the mirror behind Manet's barmaid, a crowd that would have reflected the heterogeneous multitude standing before this painting at the Salon.

In her third chapter, "Degas's Dazzling Hat Shops and Artisanal Ateliers: Consumers, Milliners and Saleswomen," Iskin studies the portrayal of the fashion industry in paintings of hat boutiques. As with *Folies-Bergère*, Iskin shifts the interpretation away from sexual solicitation and the assumption that the *modistes* are clandestine prostitutes, noting that unlike in Degas's paintings of the ballet, there are no men with top hats represented in these boutiques, assessing women as potential partners. She instead emphasizes the portrayal of product displays and of the people creating and purchasing those products. Class plays a particularly strong role in this chapter with the observation that Degas adjusts compositions according to the role and social standing of the women represented, as well as the type of location depicted, such as a department store or upscale boutique.

Again Iskin proposes that nineteenth-century images solicit and represent multiple gazes, now analyzing the various roles women would play as entrepreneurs, employees, and consumers. With this line of inquiry, she references Laura Mulvey's theoretical model that has widely influenced feminist theories of representation and spectatorship, casting the gaze as active and masculine, directed towards passive, objectified, sexualized women.^[1] Iskin argues that this theoretical model does not give a complete account of nineteenth-

century visual culture, as various advertisements and Impressionist paintings represent female consumers as spectators who actively look at products, and at themselves, as they construct their expertly fashionable public personae. While recognizing the advantages of considering the nineteenth-century gaze in terms of women's agency, this reader is not convinced that the analysis should end there. Certainly Iskin has correctly identified instances in which women held positions of power and connoisseurship as entrepreneurs and bourgeois shoppers. Yet the fashion business is one that clearly capitalizes on the visibility of women who are evaluated in terms of beauty and desirability, and—as Iskin demonstrates in her final chapter—in terms of their success at embodying a gender role forwarded by French nationalism.

While the previous two chapters focus on interior scenes of consumer exchange, the next two move outdoors to urban sidewalks and country markets. In both chapters, Iskin contrasts the Impressionist painters with their fictitious counterpart, Zola's Claude Lantier. With "Inconspicuous Subversion: Parisian Consumer Culture in 1870s City Views," she studies the degree to which artists such as Manet and Caillebotte include the trappings of marketing in their portrayals of Paris streets, particularly focusing on large advertisement signs and shop windows illuminated with electricity. She notes that the Impressionists do not document the actual appearance of shop signs and window displays, or give a sense of the colorful advertising battles being fought through the profusion of posters. Instead, the artists downplay signs and storefronts by blurring letters, muting colors, and cropping advertisements with the edges of compositions. Iskin argues that this visual diminishment of advertisements and the like indicate that the Impressionists were ambivalent towards the consumer culture that grew rapidly around them.

In "Nature and Marketplace: Zola, Pissarro, and Caillebotte," Iskin examines representations of urban and rural markets in order to study three modernist responses to the consumer culture of Paris. She considers depictions of kitchen gardens as producing consumables for the city, as well as village market scenes that appear as foils to their Parisian counterparts. Iskin argues that Pissarro's compositions encourage viewers to identify with the women working the market counters, in contrast to Caillebotte's representation of the cultivated farm plot presented from a landowner's perspective, or his paintings of upscale urban markets depicted from the point of view of the selective shopper. Rather than presenting the piles of produce found in wholesale markets, Caillebotte fills his compositions with choice products, such as small quantities of fruit wrapped individually in tissue paper and arranged in neat display. Iskin concludes this chapter with a brief discussion of Manet's proposal for the murals at the Hôtel de Ville that, if executed as the artist described, would have portrayed the public life and consumer culture of Paris through such elements as markets, racetracks, and the railway system. She argues that Manet's proposal was an intentional challenge to the typical practice of incorporating academic allegory into official works of the Third Republic, as well as to Zola's stance that modernist painters were incapable of representing the commercial life of Paris.

In her final chapter, "The Chic Parisienne: A National Brand of French Fashion and Femininity," Iskin studies fashion plates, Impressionist paintings, and displays from the 1900 Exposition Universelle in which women are represented as metropolitan masters of dressing à la mode. Among the images presented, she includes the interesting case of *La*

Parisienne, a monumental statue positioned above the main gate of the Exposition. The sculpture is a female allegory of the Third Republic wearing an outfit designed by Jeanne Paquin, a designer who had reached an unprecedented level of success as a woman in the business of French haute couture. With this chapter, Iskin studies ways in which nineteenth-century taste entwined with a nationalism that boasted of the fashionable refinement of Parisian women and made it a patriotic duty to purchase French fashion. While vaunting French women as fashionably superior was clearly an advertising strategy directed towards international shoppers and tourists, Iskin also demonstrates how the notion of the chic Parisienne promoted colonial ambitions while constructing intersections of femininity and modernity within the framework of French nationalism.

In this last chapter, Iskin effectively demonstrates that the chic Parisienne was indeed an icon, ubiquitous in Impressionist paintings and in the mass media. She could develop her discussion of nationalism beyond the scope of colonialism, however, and consider other motivations for promoting the superiority of French taste and culture. The humiliating defeat by Prussia in 1870 and the subsequent civil war of the Commune devastated the country and produced lasting anxiety over France's decline as a military and economic power. As Paul Tucker has shown, this anxiety pervasively informed the critical reception of the arts, including Impressionist works, while the government charged artists with the task of reviving French spirits and displaying the genius of the nation.^[2] Introducing this historical context would strengthen Iskin's examination of the chic Parisienne's role within the context of nationalism and the formation of a modern French identity.

Throughout the book, Iskin supports her work with the analysis of advertisements and Impressionist paintings, excerpts from nineteenth-century novels—predominantly those of Emile Zola—and a broad range of nineteenth-century criticism that includes reactions to artworks, the Salon, café-concerts, fashion, and expositions staged in Paris. In doing so, she strikes an effective balance between her primary sources and theoretical approaches familiar in current scholarship. In many ways her book forms a strong complement to *The Painting of Modern Life*, in which T.J. Clark considers Impressionism through the framework of capitalism, shifting class identities, and the commercialization of leisure.^[3] Both Clark and Iskin focus on the pervasive influence of consumer culture on everyday life in Paris and on the representation of modernity, and each author devotes a chapter to *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* and the café-concert. While Clark notes the importance of department stores in the changing economic landscape, he gives most of his attention to Haussmannization, the evolution of the suburbs, popular entertainment, and the role of prostitution. Iskin, in contrast, sets center stage the proliferating shopping places and techniques employed to attract customers. In doing so, she continues Clark's project in a practical manner, studying the fundamental Parisian experience of class and capitalism through the extensive creation, marketing, and exchange of common products.

With her focus on fashion and consumer culture, Iskin intentionally gives gender a strong analytical role and addresses issues of women as spectators and agents in the modern public sphere. In doing so, she builds on observations made by Griselda Pollock in her essay “Modernity and the spaces of femininity.” Pollock convincingly argues that art historians such as Clark have forwarded a modernism based on an exclusively masculine viewpoint by perpetually casting the Impressionist painter as the flâneur, a privileged spectator with

unproblematic access to public space. Though the modern experience clearly differed between the sexes, the assumption of an all-pervasive bourgeois male perspective is of limited use to the study of female spectatorship and the artworks of women such as Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt.[4]

While Iskin's overall project answers Pollock's call to integrate an analysis of gender with that of class, she also directly responds to Pollock's interpretation of Cassatt's *In the Loge*.^[5] Iskin does not discount Pollock's interpretation that this painting represents the discomforts of a bourgeois woman's exposure to a compromising male gaze when out in public, a gaze reflected by the man in the upper background who stares simultaneously towards the main figure and the painting's viewer. She does, however, propose to complicate this interpretation by emphasizing that the central female figure is not merely a passive, visible object but an active spectator as well. In a move that parallels Pollock's own strategy, Iskin posits a female spectator for this painting who could experience the male gaze in the same way as the woman portrayed, "At the same time, however, she would be actually looking at the painting, thus occupying a modernized woman's position of spectatorship while contemplating the gendered social drama of looking" (29). Iskin points out that a male viewer of this painting also could identify with the female figure who, after all, dominates the composition. As she does repeatedly through the book, Iskin proposes a plurality of gazes in a public sphere where the politics of looking were in transition, stimulated by the growth of the urban crowd and the call for women to be active consumers.

With this project, Iskin frequently engages with well-known artworks. Instead of refuting familiar interpretations, however, she enhances current scholarship with additional historical context and analytical nuance. She enables readings that involve multiple perspectives and interests, so that readers may become rather like spectators in the heterogeneous crowd of the nineteenth-century Salon. Unfortunately all of the book's images are reproduced in black and white. As Iskin refrains from gratuitous descriptions—provided only as needed in support of analysis—this reader often wondered about the actual appearance of images. The lack of color was not a pronounced problem when considering widely-reproduced paintings, but was an issue with little-known advertisements and paintings from private collections. All in all, though, Iskin's well-researched work is a significant contribution to Impressionist studies. Her argument is clear and convincing, through both its practical nature and the wealth of support provided through primary sources and the paintings themselves. Moreover, her work strengthens our understanding of the daily life of nineteenth-century Parisians, making it easier to imagine the actual streets, stores, and exhibitions through which Impressionists moved. As Iskin demonstrates, these painters witnessed the rapid development of mass consumption, and knowing this development is critical to understanding the visual stimuli of the modern world with which Impressionist painters engaged.

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- [1] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 14-26.
- [2] Paul Tucker, "The First Impressionist Exhibition in Context," in *The New Painting: Impressionism 1874 - 1886*, Charles S. Moffett, ed. (Geneva: Burton and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1986), 93-117.
- [3] T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
- [4] Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the spaces of femininity," in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 50-90. There is a recent anthology devoted to the issue of the flâneur and women's experience of public space to which Iskin has contributed the essay, "The Flâneuse in French Fin-de-Siècle Posters: Advertising Images of Modern Women in Paris," in *The Invisible Flâneuse?: Gender, Public Space, and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough, eds. (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006).
- [5] Pollock refers to the painting as *At the opera*.