

THE FEMALE IMPRESSIONIST AS FLÂNEUSE

Heather Thompson

Writer's comment: Professor McLeod's class on Impressionism was the first Art History class I'd taken, and I soon found the subject to be much more than the bewitching beauty of the posters I have on my apartment walls. Though I was previously entranced by French life of the late 19th century, the image of the *flâneur* walking the streets of Paris suddenly seemed inextricably linked to the "woman issue," something I had given little thought to. Writing this essay was my first attempt to grapple with gender issues in a paper, and to my surprise, I found the research addictive and interesting beyond my expectations. This combination of something old and something new urged me to consider art, gender relations, and society in a new and more complex light which has continued to give me food for thought and, I hope, a deeper understanding of the world we live in today.

- Heather Thompson

Instructor's comment: In Art History 183B: Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, students were given the choice of researching one of four suggested topics or selecting a subject of their own. The majority of the students in the class abided by the defined topics, but Heather was one of the few who energetically set out to devise a research project of her own. She was intrigued with the notion of the male artist-*flâneur* who strolled the newly widened boulevards of nineteenth-century Paris, while dispassionately observing life around him. In class I had discussed how female artists such as Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot were hampered by social constraints from walking around the City unchaperoned and, therefore, could only hope to become *flâneuses* of the domestic scene. Heather took this construct a step further by comparing their paintings with those of male artists and analyzing their relative responses to modernity.

- Dianne Macleod, *Art History*

It is virtually undisputed that the male *flâneur* is a recurrent motif in the paintings of certain male Impressionists (especially in Renoir, Degas, Manet, and Caillebotte). But that there is a type of female equivalent, a *flâneuse*, in Cassatt and Morisot has only recently been suggested by feminist art historians. Female painters in the late nineteenth century did not have the freedom to walk the streets, frequent the cafes, and impose their gaze upon Parisian life while simultaneously being respectable bourgeois women – they could never be the male *flâneur* who actively looks upon others, frequently making women into objects or shows of spectacle. Thus, the female *flâneuse* of this era is not merely a female *flâneur*; her matrix for viewing the world is wholly different from that of the *flâneur*, and she resembles him only in that they both look upon their modern lives, specifically the experience of viewing and/or being viewed, within the constructs of gender.

According to Tamar Garb, "There is no such thing as a simple 'pleasure in looking' The socially and psychically produced look, the non-innocent look of culture, has come to be known in contemporary theory as the 'gaze'" (222-223). For men, this has generally meant looking at women for their own pleasure, and for women, this has usually meant dealing with this dominating male gaze. My purpose in analyzing the *flâneuse* is neither to attack the *flâneur* for his gaze nor to perpetuate the flawed notion of irreconcilable separate spheres; rather, in analyzing the relations between the *flâneur* and the *flâneuse*, and identifying their similarities in light of their differences, I hope to contribute to a more complete understanding of gender and modernity in the late nineteenth century.

Baudelaire was the first to deeply examine modernity, the city, and the dandy/*flâneur*; his definition of modernity is well known as "that which is ephemeral, fugitive, contingent" (37). To be more specific, for Baudelaire, modernity is directly and necessarily linked to the city and its mass of humanity, as well as to a male conception of looking at and watching others in a detached and superior manner. Following in Baudelaire's tradition of modernity, from the late 1860's through the 1880's, the *flâneur* can be closely equated with the male Impressionist's vision and experience of Paris: he enters cafés and theaters, and he walks the streets and other public places where only well-to-do men can mingle, gaze, and maintain their respectability. Tamar Garb discusses how this gendered city heavily influenced the subjects of the Impressionist painters: "For men who identified with Charles Baudelaire's call for an art which represented the 'heroism of modern life,' the opera offered only one of a number of scenes of urban leisure which could be seen to embody the spirit of modernity. But for women it was one of the very few such subjects to which they had access. . . to the world of urban spectacle" (257-8). The opera

house was a unique arena where the public and the private, the male and the female, came together in a form of bourgeois leisure. The social interactions among the audience of the opera were often referred to as a spectacle by contemporaries. Few other places presented such an exciting mix of gender and spectacle as the opera house.

Garb's observation about women's more limited access to "urban spectacle" highlights the problems of finding a subject matter and an acknowledged space for the female painter of modern life. This is the central problem in dealing with gender and modernism: how to understand the female within the context of the dominantly male conception of modernity. Griselda Pollock aptly states that "sexuality, modernism or modernity cannot function as given categories to which we add women. That only identifies a partial and masculine viewpoint with the norm and confirms women as other and subsidiary" (56). This statement creates a foundation for establishing a separate matrix within which to understand the *flâneuse* as compared to the *flâneur*. For Pollock, this matrix is space – space as the location that the painting depicts, space as the structure of the painting, and space that takes into account the dominant sensations and perspective (i.e., color, touch, texture, line of vision, and proportion). Though all of these aspects of space are valid, I shall focus more closely on what female painters paint in contrast to the subjects of male painters, and how the female painter projects her gaze as a *flâneuse* in contrast to the projected gaze of the male artist/*flâneur*.

If the opera is a place which both male and female painters depict in their Impressionist paintings, then critiquing each gender's version can aid in defining what it means to be a *flâneur* or a *flâneuse*. A typical starting point is Renoir's *La Loge* from 1874. As Garb explains (224), the arrangement is a characteristic one: the beautiful woman in her décolleté is posed for all to see in front of her male companion who inconspicuously directs his gaze through opera glasses towards someone else in the opera seats, likely another woman seated as a spectacle to be viewed. The look in the woman's eyes is unfocused; she is not watching the performance, she does not seem introspective, and she is not engaged in conversation with anyone: "It is as though the carefully contrived lack of focus in the woman's eyes assures the viewer of the comfort of being able to stare without being observed" (225). Additionally, conventional symbols of sight in this painting indicate that the woman does not actively look or engage, but merely allows herself to be viewed. The fan which is associated with modesty and privacy is folded in her lap and her opera-glasses are unused and only complement the women's toilette (Garb 225, Biome 34-35). Renoir's painting *La Loge* is an excellent example of the male gaze of the *flâneur*, in the depiction of the woman, in the way the man behind her is looking at someone else, and in the way Renoir structures his painting to represent himself as a *flâneur*. What, then, would a *flâneuse* do differently in portraying a similar opera scene?

Cassatt's *Woman in Black at the Opera*, painted in 1879, five years after Renoir's *La Loge*, exemplifies the female *flâneuse* actively looking at something and rejecting the gaze of the *flâneur* who assumes that women exist primarily for his viewing pleasure. In this painting, the woman is pictured alone, and her clothing does not draw attention to her but rather masks her body and draws the viewers' attention to her face. This is the focal point of the painting: the woman peering intently through her opera-glasses (which are black and functional like her dress). In the distance a male, a *flâneur*, looks at the woman but because she is looking at something else, she is not receptive to, or perhaps even conscious of, this male gaze. She thus conveys the sense of herself as an actively engaged woman who exists independently of men and their objectifying gaze; she is an image of "empowerment and dignity" (Garb 264). This woman in black exists as a *flâneuse* who is also painted by a *flâneuse*—Cassatt. So, Cassatt's matrix of viewing as a *flâneuse* is different from Renoir's: unlike Renoir's fully painted frontal view of a spectacular woman, Cassatt's figure is presented in profile; whereas Renoir uses the space behind the woman to suggest her passivity, Cassatt uses the space in front of the woman and between the woman and the man looking at her to suggest an independent and active woman. The psychology of Cassatt's woman's intent gaze and stance contrasts with Renoir's woman's passive and undirected eyes and posture.

Another pair of paintings by Renoir and Cassatt again illustrates the differences between the *flâneur* and the *flâneuse* at the opera, the difference in their gazes, use of space and psychology to convey different impressions of how the woman in the painting is viewed. Renoir's *The First Outing* from 1876 is radically different from Cassatt's *Two Young Ladies in a Loge* painted a mere four years later. Renoir paints a fresh and beautiful young woman who is dazzled by the spectacle of the opera and its audience. Many members of the audience seem to be staring at her but she does not seem to realize that she is being watched in an objectifying manner. Thus, again like the lady in *La Loge*, the woman is open to the male gaze and is not shown to be actively looking at something else non-contingent on a male presence. This point becomes clearer when the painting is juxtaposed to Cassatt's *Two Young Ladies in a Loge*. This painting also features fresh young women, but the carefully modeled faces, postures, and the use of the shielding fan suggest an entirely different take on young women and how they see and are seen. Boime

comments: “although Pollock sees them as ‘stiff and formal,’ I see their dual gaze as guarantor of their own space, unperturbed by policing male eyes” (35). Though the girls are stiff and formal, this is because they are conscious of the “obvious frisson of appearing publicly in formal gowns and white gloves” (Rubin 233). But they do not appear to me to feel unperturbed by the male gaze; rather, they seem very conscious of it and threatened by it. This example differs from Cassatt’s other opera painting in that these girls are facing the male gaze and clearly conscious of it, but what is more important is that both these girls and the woman in black desire to reject that gaze and do not fall victim to being merely a spectacle for men to look at. As Garb phrases it, “both seek to seize for their female protagonists an active engaged look, a knowing, desiring gaze” (267). Cassatt’s girls, then, are not *flâneuses* in the sense of offering an active dominating gaze, but they support the vision of the painter/*flâneuse* in their non-acceptance of the *flâneur*’s gaze. The Renoir painting still stands in opposition to Cassatt’s as a product of a male *flâneur* looking upon the young girl without her knowledge or rejection of it.

But what about other places the male and female Impressionists depicted that can aid in contrasting the way the *flâneur* and the *flâneuse* are gendered and view women? As Boime points out, “Impressionists focus on scenes of everyday life, including themes of modern bourgeois leisure and family life, which opened a more inclusive window of opportunity for both men and women” (33). Yet, as one might guess, scenes of home or women resting and enjoying themselves are painted very differently depending on which sex is painting. It would be easy enough to claim that, in general, male artists painted street and café scenes like Caillebotte’s *Paris Street or Pont de l’Europe* and Degas’ *Place de la Concorde* and *Absinthe* where a male gaze is evident and dominant. One could support this by citing female artists’ paintings such as Morisot’s *The Cradle*, Cassatt’s *Mother About to Wash Her Sleepy Child*, and other such domestic paintings of mothers and children that do not include a male presence or standpoint. Yet, it is much more instructive to identify parallels within these differences, to understand that both male and female painters, who looked at their world as *flâneurs* and *flâneuses*, dealt with some similar subjects in different ways.

Therefore, let us look at Caillebotte’s *Young Man at His Window* and Morisot’s *The Artist’s Sister at a Window*; the subject matter is a balcony, a window, and each person’s relationship to this portal to the outside, public world. Not only is the subject matter similar, but it is conducive to analyzing gender relations, gazes, and spaces. Some basic differences are clear between the paintings: the man is looking out to the street, the woman ignores the open view and turns inward to her thoughts; the man assumes a dominant position in front of a detailed street scene (which implies a knowledge and mastery of the public arena) while the woman sits passively in front of very little street detail, indicating a lack of opportunity to know or see the public world. As Rubin observes, in Morisot’s painting, “the boundaries of [the female] world are suggested by the balcony railing and the cut-off view of buildings across the street” while Caillebotte’s painting “contrasts the searching gaze of the male, aimed at a woman crossing the street, with Edma’s reticence and introspection” (224-225). Not only do these contrasts illustrate gender spaces fairly simply, they introduce the problem of gaze. Caillebotte and the man at the window both act as a *flâneur* while Edma in Morisot’s painting is clearly not a *flâneuse*. But is Morisot a *flâneuse*? She is actively viewing someone else (Edma) and is excluding the male gaze and presence (no men are in the picture and no one looks into the widow from another window across the street). Perhaps, then, how the female painter looks and paints is more important than whether she actually depicts a *flâneuse* like herself in her paintings.

Two of Morisot’s other paintings support this theory: *Interior* and *Psyche* both illustrate women at home, wrapped up in their own thoughts, and unaware of anyone looking at them. This last quality alone could qualify Morisot as a *flâneuse*, but clearly the two women who pose as subjects are not *flâneuses*. In these and other paintings by Cassatt as well as Morisot, the female painter acts like a domestic *flâneur* who views women differently than the male public *flâneur* does: the women subjects may not necessarily be strong independent individuals, but they rarely display themselves unconscious of and/or accepting of a male gaze directed at them. As in Cassatt’s *Lydia Seated in a Loge*, the girl is aware of but actively reciprocating the gaze in an independent and happy manner. In Cassatt’s mother and child paintings, Cassatt may qualify more as a voyeur than a *flâneuse* because of the way the mother and child exist completely independent of men or the public, outside world.

This distinction between the *flâneuse* as a subject and as a painter brings us back to the question of what a *flâneuse* actually is and how she works within or parallel to modernity. Are Cassatt and Morisot *flâneuses* simply because they paint women from a nineteenth century female point of view? Is *flâneur* a male-only word which cannot even be transferred to a female gender? Does the fact that Morisot and Cassatt painted many other types of paintings detract from a claim that they are *flâneuses*? These are difficult questions which are not only contingent on the way people perceive gender relations, but on the very issue of what “modernity” actually is and what was so unique and revolutionary about the Impressionist artists and their paintings. If

we stay with the premise that we have been working with all along, we can define the *flâneuse* as a female who views actively and in a different framework than the male *flâneur*. She does so because she is a woman and is frequently trying to reject or adapt, for her own purposes, the typically powerful, dominating, objectifying male gaze. This is not to say that female painters did not objectify women in different ways, but that they, as *flâneuses*, were trying to come to terms, necessarily in a very different way from their male counterparts, with the male-dominated society and culture of late nineteenth-century Paris.

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